

INDIA'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: A CIVILISATIONAL LEGACY TO THE WORLD

- Bhaswati Mukherjee

Background

India's intangible cultural heritage flows from her 5000 year old culture and civilisation. Dr. A.L. Basham, in his authoritative "Cultural History of India", has noted that "While there are four main cradles of civilisation which, moving from East to West, are China, India, the Fertile Crescent and the Mediterranean, specially Greece and Italy, India deserves a larger share of credit because she has deeply affected the cultural life of most of Asia. She has also extended her influence, directly and indirectly, to other parts of the World."

2. The civilisation that developed in the Valleys of our two great river systems, the Indus and the Ganges, although in a sharply demarcated geographical region due to the Himalayas, was complex, multi-faceted and was never an isolated civilisation. The notion that before the impact of European learning, science and technology, the 'East' including China and India changed little if at all, over the centuries is false and should be rejected. Indian civilisation has always been dynamic, not static. Settlers and traders came to India from the land and sea routes. India's isolation was never complete, from the most ancient times. This resulted in the development of a complex pattern of civilisation, demonstrated so clearly in the intangible art and cultural traditions ranging from Ancient to Modern India, whether in the dancing Buddhas of the Gandharva school of art which was strongly influenced by the Greeks, to the great tangible heritage seen in the temples of North and South India.

3. It is no surprise that India's diversity has inspired many writers to pen differing perceptions of the country's culture. These writings paint a complex and often conflicting picture of the culture of India. The best definition has been provided by **Dr. Amartya Sen** the Indian Nobel Laureate in Economics. According to him, the culture of modern India is a complex blend of its historical traditions, influences from the effects of colonialism over centuries and current Western culture - both collaterally and dialectically. Western writers usually neglect, in important ways, crucial aspects of Indian culture and traditions and its diversities. The deep-seated heterogeneity of Indian traditions, in different parts of India, is lost in these homogenised descriptions of India. India is not and can never be a homogenous culture. The best example is her intangible heritage.

4. A pen sketch on this subject cannot be complete without recalling E.H. Carr's chapter 1 on 'What is History'. Carr pointed out that facts do not speak for themselves. They speak only when the historian calls on them to speak. It is the historian who decides which fact to give and therefore the historian is necessarily selective. Thus Carr concludes that "History is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and past, a dynamic, dialectical process, which cannot be limited by mere empiricism or love of facts alone". This demonstrates the complexity of the task of interpreting this intangible heritage historically and in an objective manner.

5. It is clear that Intangible Cultural Heritage such as the Indian example, is difficult to explain or interpret, because of its complexity. Tangible heritage on the other hand, being more visible is much better understood. The best definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage is contained in the 2003 UNESCO Convention on ICH which defines it in a manner broad enough to include diverse experiences and expressions across the globe such as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognised as part of their cultural heritage”. This is an excellent definition of India’s great spiritual and cultural intangible heritage.

Definition of ICH

6. What is Intangible Cultural Heritage? Heritage does not end at monuments or collection of objects of arts. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendents, such as oral traditions, performing arts, religious and cultural festivals and traditional crafts. This Intangible Cultural Heritage, by its very nature, is fragile and needs protection and understanding since it is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalisation. Developing understanding of the ICH of different communities, such as in India, helps the process of an international, inter-cultural dialogue and promotes, in the long run, international peace and security.

7. ICH is best defined as:

- **Traditional, contemporary and living** at the same time, since it is a dynamic process;
- **Inclusive** since it contributes to social cohesion, encourages a sense of identity and helps to preserve communities and community life;
- **Representative** since it prospers on oral skills passed on from generation to generation;
- **Community based** since it can be defined as heritage only when it is recognised as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it.

ICH therefore, based on the above definition, is important not as a cultural manifestation as such but rather on the wealth of knowledge and skill that are transmitted through it from one generation to another. The social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge is as significant for developed countries as for developing countries.

Festivals such as Holi : A Case Study of ICH

8. Holi’s historical origins date back to pre-Christian times. Paganism and Pagan festivals, based on pre-Christian rituals and ‘Bacchus’ traditions were frowned upon by the earliest Christians and soon disappeared. Only the Christian mistletoe traditions have survived. Similarly, the rituals of Holi date back to the earliest times based on social traditions. Hindu rituals, myths and legends came later. Religious and cultural festivals, such as Holi, express the heart of the people, reflecting their culture and identity. Several of the world’s best known festivals exist in India. Many of them are rooted in India’s diverse culture and civilisation. Thus the historic origins of Holi, originally known as ‘*Holika*’, find

detailed description in India's earliest religious epics and works such as Jamini's *Purvamimamsa-Sutras* and *Kathaka-Grhya-Sutras*. Eminent Indian historians believe that Holi was celebrated by Aryans who came to India from Central Asia in 5000 BC. Thus, Holi existed several centuries before Christ. There are also many references to Holi in India's ancient archaeological remains.

9. Since ICH is a dynamic process, the meaning of the Festival has changed over the years. It also has different manifestations in different parts of India. Even these myths and legends are diverse and reflect India's fascinating intangible heritage. All over India, the festival celebrates the victory of good over evil and also the triumph of devotion to God.

10. Holi is thus linked with folklore and folk culture and binds communities together. One example is the Chhau dance. This dance form is a tradition from the Eastern part of India, specially Bihar, which enacts episodes from the Epics, including Mahabharata and Ramayana, local folklore and abstract themes. Its three distinct styles hail from the regions of Seraikella, Purulia and Mayurbhanj, in Eastern India. Chhau dance is intimately connected to regional festivals, notably the spring festival Chaitra Parva. Its origin is traceable to indigenous forms of dance and martial practices. Its vocabulary of movement includes mock combat techniques, stylized gaits of birds and animals and movements modelled on the chores of village housewives. It represents a transitional stage in the development of unsophisticated forms of folk dance to highly stylised forms. The Chhau is one of the earliest indigenous form of dances in India. These practices demonstrate that in India, living continuity with the past, is an important criterion for its heritage. These folk cultures, therefore, are part of India's age-old intangible cultural heritage.

Some Concluding Reflections

11. In India, we are the repository of an astounding wealth of living patterns and modes of heritage. With about 1400 dialects and 18 officially recognized languages, several religions, various styles of art, architecture, literature, music and dance, and several lifestyle patterns, India represents the largest democracy with a seamless picture of diversity in unity, perhaps unparalleled anywhere in the world.

12. Through a history of changing settlements and political power, India's living cultural heritage was shaped by centuries of adaptation, re-creation and co-existence. The intangible cultural heritage of India finds expression in the ideas, practices, beliefs and values shared by communities across long stretches of time, and form part of the collective memory of the nation. India's physical, ethnic and linguistic variety is as staggering as its cultural pluralism, which exists in a framework of interconnectedness. In some instances, its cultural heritage is expressed as pan-Indian traditions not confined to a particular locality, genre or category, but as multiple forms, levels and versions inter-linked yet independent from one another. Underlying the diversity of India's heritage is the continuity of its civilization from the earliest times to the present and of the later additions by different influences.

13. In concluding, it may be pertinent to recall that Swami Vivekananda had said:

“If anyone dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and culture, I pity him from the bottom of my heart and point out that upon the banner of every religion and culture will soon be written in spite of resistance, “Help and not Fight; Assimilation and not Destruction; Harmony and Peace and not Dissension”.

This symbolises what India brings to the world, its living intangible heritage which is its global civilisational heritage. This heritage would help to maintain a cultural and civilizational dialogue between peoples and societies and cultures. This in its turn would be a powerful lever for renewing the international community's strategy towards development and peace.

*[Bhaswati Mukherjee is
a former diplomat was Permanent Representative of India to UNESCO (2004-2010).]*