Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Case Study from Nepal

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Introduction
Man and culture are inseparable and considered being the two sides of the same coin. One does not exist without the other. Man is a social being possessing culture, which determines the way of life including general behavior of an individual. The cultural innovation was the most remarkable mechanism that led man to more and more complex setting to adapt to the new environment. In fact, culture maintains order, balance with nature and natural as well as supernatural forces through their disposition, feelings, attitudes and morals as well as in significant forms, which they give to material objects.

Simply defined, intangible cultural heritage refers to that package of cultural asset that man has created and maintained in the forms of values, norms, cultural tradition, beliefs, knowledge and range of activities that often provide meaning and substance to human life. Representing extreme variations of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, the intangible cultural asset produces a spectacular identity of a nation, which makes an astounding spectacle of the over all psyche and sentiments of entire communities residing in that nation. In fact, intangible culture is the soul of all that we see in tangible form of the culture. It can be pretty easy to conserve a temple or a palace but to conserve the real meaning of the temple, we should also conserve the festivals, processions, music dance and other rituals associated with it.

Need of preserving intangible cultural heritage
The intangible heritage including the traditional knowledge system contains many positive and productive elements that are really invaluable for the entire humanity. Despite its significant role to integrate the society and enhance the sense of ownership to the concerned people and culture, intangible heritage faces serious threats for its existence. In some parts of the world fast pace of modernization has been taking toll on it. The danger also comes from the rapid process of globalisation, homogenization, and pervading influence of western culture. There is even more critical situation facing intangible culture: the intense pressure of adopting the cultural framework of ruling class elite within.

Each human community has developed its own ways of life to satisfy human needs through the process of interacting with specific environment and the universe throughout the centuries. These processes provide living communities with a sense of continuity with
previous generations and are important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and creativity of humanity. There are many challenging factors that are quickly bringing permanent changes in the present day, and every one of us should be primarily concerned with the preservation of human cultural inheritance in its multiplicity of forms and manifestations. There is thus an urgent need to preserve intangible heritage in order to contribute to the development of mankind.

The Nepalese Context for Intangible Cultural Heritage
Nepal has remained a land of diverse people and culture consisting of more than hundred ethnic and caste groups. Hence it is a multilingual country, where more than 92 languages and dialects are spoken. The diverse natural environments have been the contributing factors to initiate a plethora of living cultures, which are unique to Nepal. The various cultural and religious groups which form the Nepali nation, have within the general sphere of a common outlook on life, their special spheres of living and thinking which they are not prepared to give up at any cost. With this backdrop, Nepal possesses rich heritage of intangible culture colored by different groups of people throughout the centuries by means of slow, unceasing process of selection and growth leading to complexity.

With the supporting role of UNESCO, various programs have been launched by the government of Nepal for the preservation of intangible heritage over the last few years. The last four five year plans of the country have recognized the importance of cultural heritage and have outlined, however briefly, the need to preserve both the material/tangible and intangible cultures of the country. The World Heritage Committee (WHC) has listed several cultural as well as natural sites as heritage sites. There are few in the agenda of the future. There is also plan to recognize the value of cultural diversity and need to preserve it for national unity, integrity and progress.

Both the government of Nepal and the UNESCO/Nepal has recently engaged themselves separately in preparing a comprehensive list of the tangible/intangible cultural heritage of Nepal. Such a list will facilitate proper valuation, research/publication and preservation plan of these heritages in the years ahead. Various studies on unwritten languages, oral traditions and folk performing arts have arrived out by native and foreign scholars. After documenting the location and nature of intangible cultural heritage, more works to preserve them is required to be planned.

Making inventory of intangible cultural heritage of two development regions in Nepal-Eastern and Far Western- has been completed. Soon, listing in the remaining three regions will also be commenced, depending on availability of resources. After the completion of listing, the government has planned to complete research and study of the heritage and the third phase will be devoted on actual preservation.

Project for safeguarding the performing arts
Besides making inventory of the intangible heritage, the Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentry Affairs and Culture of Government of Nepal is devoted to get involved in preserving the important performing arts, that are endangered or face the risk of disappearance because of financial constraints and other factors caused by modernization and changing lifestyles. The Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentry Affairs and Culture has been involved in the task of preserving various
intangible heritage of the country. The author of this paper is focused one of the most interesting performing arts that has come within the purview of the Government of Nepal for its preservation and continuity.

Brief introduction to the performing art to be preserved
This is a case study from Pokhara, a central seat of Western Development Region of Nepal situated on the lap of lovely Machhapuchre and Annapurna Himalayas. The Newar community has retained many of the traditional festivas and dances that were brought to Pokhara by the first immigrants from Kathmandu Valley. Among them, the Bhairav dance is speciality of Pokhara observed by both Hindu and Buddhist Newars in the town. Accordingly, Newars from distant towns, like Gorkha, Baglung and Tansen, also come here to witness the dance. This dance also attracts large segments of population irrespective of caste and creed from around the hills.

This is a complicated and costly dance: as many as sixty people required for a full scale performance, and the costumes are also expensive. It is believed that the traditional songs of Bhairav dance are preserved from the time of Ranjit Malla, the last king of Bhaktapur of medieval Nepal. But this dance was brought to Pokhara by Jita Ram from Ragainas of Gorkha district who was believed to be an official during the period of king Ranjit Malla. Then the dance dates back more than two hundred years.

Bhairav essentially means ‘a vigorous and dangerous form’; it is also one of the hundred incarnation of lord Shiva, and in this incarnation Lord Shiva takes the form of Bhairav and perform a furious dance locally known as tandab nritya to safeguard a community from unforeseen disasters, diseases and natural hazards. It is performed according to Tantric conventions but uses folk and devotional songs. In this dance, there are 12 dancers, 8 singers, 8 musicians, one director, and many helpers. Before starting the dancing, the promised things should be carefully offered. It is said that even the missing of a small thing would annoy the gods (dancers) and would be in a trance. It is even said that the dancer(s) in trance can pinpoint what was promised and what was missing. Such dancer in trance should be pacified before another round proceeds. It takes about 6-7 hours to complete the dance. From the next day, the Bhairav dance is performed in the premises of Ganesh temple, Bindabasini temple and the courtyard of the guru, the head of the bhairat guthi, respectively. It lasts for a period of more than one month performing dances in different host family in the town. After completing the dance, Bhairav is worshipped and it is closer another 12 years (now it takes place every six years).

Objectives of the project
The Bhairav dance of Pokhara as a typical performing art in the region is almost on the verge of extinction, largely because of lacking financial support and increasing influence of modern lifestyle in the young generation. These factors seem to have compelled many performers to be aloof from this traditional culture. Keeping this in mind, the project main focus was to keep continuity of the Bhairav dance in the town of Pokhara.

The first objective of the project was to provide the financial support on the part of the government sector and seek regular source of income in order to perform the Bhairav dance within a period of specified intervals.
The second objective was to motivate the young generation to take part in the performing art and increase awareness in the culture with a sense of continuity with previous generations which is also important to cultural identity.

**Methods of project implementation**

There is a community trust called **bhairab guthi** led by an influential member of the Newar community in order to manage and handle the Bhairav dance regularly. For years, Sarbagya Man Pradhanang, an oldest gentleman from the Newar community has been handling the dance as a director and as the head of the **guthi**. Incidentally, the writer of this paper had also interviewed with the head of the **bhairav guthi** regarding the preservation of the dance. The **guthi** is entirely responsible to manage expenses, dress and ornamen, masks, musical instruments, direction and training for the performers etc. This way, the **bhairav guthi** plays an important role for the observance of the dance and reservation and continuity of this outstanding performing art in Pokhara.

The Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture of the Government of Nepal first initiated an interaction program with the members of Bhairav **guthi** in Pokhara. Sharing ideas and opinion for the preservation and continuity of the Bhairav dance in the town, the project declared to provide financial support and deposit the amount in the name of Bhairav **guthi** as a ‘permanent fund’ that means the **guthi** can use only the yearly interest of the fund for the management of Bhairav dance every six year.

The project also initiated some concrete program in order to increase cultural awareness among the carrier and bearers of the age old tradition. For this, there is a workshop once a year participated by the academic scholars, community and **guthi** members, professionals, and other participants interested in the field concerned. The scholarly papers presented in the workshop will be published in the book form that includes various faces of Bhairav dance and also serves as a documentation of the performing art.

**Outcomes of the project**

With the financial support of the government and regular source of income through bank interest, the Bhairav **guthi** is highly encouraged to handle the entire management of the Bhairav dance in a regular basis. Thus, the preservation and continuity of the Bhairav dance is now well secured.

The young generation of the Newar community as a carrier and bearer of the age old tradition is being motivated by the scholarly opinion shared in the workshop conducted by the **guthi** once a year. The socio-cultural and economic impact made by the Bhairav dance for the promotion of market economy and urbanization of the town are being realized among the Newar community in the town. In this way, the project has played a role model in creating cultural awareness in the concerned population in order to safeguarding the performing art in the town.

**Conclusion**

The Bhairav dance as one of the most typical performing art with age old tradition in Pokhara deserves outstanding features in terms of social and cultural harmony among the Pokhara
population. This tradition was in the verge of extinct because of financial constraints and various factors caused by modernization. Now, with the support of the government of Nepal, this unique performing art is revitalized.

The importance of ICH must be recognized by the general public and the expertise as well. The people who are the bearers and performers of the performing art are the true guardians of the cultural heritage. Community participation in safeguarding such heritage not only help local people to appreciate the remarkable legacy of the past, but also teach them how to participate actively in promoting them, and by doing so contribute to a better common future.

Cultural education through workshops and seminars in the concerned population is another mode of preserving ICH of this category. Promotion of cultural awareness leading to cultural ownership is the need of the day. Once this happens, the people themselves will take interest in preservation.

Heritage preservation is an expensive job. The government should have to make an effective budgetary plan for the preservation of ICH in the country. Sometimes a small contribution from the part of government can carry a good result to preserve the intangible heritage. the project of safeguarding the Bhairav dance of Pokhara, Nepal is a good example here to mention.

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