

Research and Documentation as tools for sustaining ICH: Archives and Community Partnership – A case study from India

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An aspect of safeguarding that finds mention in the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, but often neglected if not ignored, in discussion and discourse, if not practice, is that of documentation and research.

According to the convention, research and documentation have a role in safeguarding in the following areas:

- capacity building among community members to support the documentation process;
- mobilizing existing documentation and audiovisual recordings for revitalization projects
- helping the communities concerned manage an archive of information about their ICH;
- encouraging people to document ICH elements associated with their communities, for example by interviewing practitioners and tradition bearers, and to disseminate the resulting information;
- helping the communities concerned have access to existing archived information about their ICH that has been compiled by others.

As scholars and institutions worldwide debate issues of globalisation, there is a movement among ethnomusicologists, anthropologists and other social scientists of focussing on the “local” in practice, perceptions and theories. There are also research initiatives that are based on a bottom up approach. All of these, underline the direction the Convention is taking with increasing emphasis on the community, nebulous as the definitions of it are, and the practitioners.

We find, however that the concept of safeguarding is most often linked to economic models of sustainability, and the emphasis on nominations is perhaps the most visible if not popular aspect of implementing the convention, bringing with it the necessity of creating national inventories. However research, documentation and archiving are not irrelevant in this process and can play an important role, and one that needs examination and discussion.

I would like to discuss here a limited perspective and a case study – not one encompassing all domains of intangible cultural heritage, from that of an ethnomusicology archive in India.

Among the agents of change are those who work for “safeguarding and preservation” cultural traditions – are archives and centres of documentation that function on the regional and national levels, who speak for the “dying cultures” and attempt to protect them. The process of

documentation and archiving itself is also an intervention in these traditions, often placing value on “authenticity” and tacitly giving credibility and support to the communities they document and the materials they record and preserve. In doing so we as archives also take on the role of custodians not only of the tapes and recordings, but become in some way spokespersons for the cultures we seek to safeguard.

The project that I intend to discuss here, carried out by the Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology in India supported by the Ford Foundation was in the nature of a pilot to attempt a model by which we aimed to reverse some of these trends by involving musicians and communities in the process of documentation and archiving as partners and not “informants” where they guided the process. However it can also be seen that many aspects of this project do connect with the community involvement as laid out in the Convention.

(To provide a short introduction, the Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology of the American Institute of Indian Studies (ARCE henceforth) was established in India in 1982 with a view to consolidating audio visual recordings related to Indian music and the study of ethnomusicology in India in a centralised location. This also included bringing to India collections which had been housed in archives in other parts of the world. The archival collections consists mainly of recordings voluntarily deposited, supported by commercial recordings and a library and serves as a research resource and research centre.)

The project “sites” were in Western Rajasthan and Goa. These are both states in Western India with musical traditions that are known, and where music is a large part of the image that is projected through tourism. However musician communities remain largely marginalised. Another factor for the choice of these communities lies in the social and cultural background. In Rajasthan the focus was on communities of hereditary professional musicians – the Manganiars and Langas who have an active and alive traditional patronage system. The Manganiars are Muslim and have Hindu patrons and thus sing of Hindu deities, and participate musically in the life cycle ceremonies of their patrons. In Goa, the long history of Portuguese colonisation and conversion has led to an intermingling of Christian and Hindu cultures, which is thus reflected through the music. In Goa the focus was on the community of the Gavdas, held to be the original inhabitants of Goa, parts of whom converted to Christianity, and some of these were reconverted to Hinduism around the 1920s. Thus the approach in Goa was carrying out case studies of villages of the Christian and Hindu Gavdas and the Nava Hindu Gavdas. In addition, the Goa project also included the genre called Mando, of the elite but now fairly marginalised Roman Catholic community. It included documentation of the traditional form as well as its current practice in competitions and festivals.

The Concerns that led up to the project

The project was the outcome of examining our role as archives – a space where scholars, users, practitioners and performers all connect. The nature of the archive as a space meant for scholarly research was changing in our perceptions as we involved ourselves in field research¹ and attempts to link performance and research².

Documentation and research as intervention

An awareness that these processes are interventions, however well-intentioned they may be led to an attempt to have the community and practitioners lead the documentation process, with the knowledge however that this may in turn raise issues leading to further research.

Changes in patronage

Among the most significant factors that can be perceived as risks and threats to music and performance as part of ICH are the changes, and in some cases the loss of traditional patronage. Patrons and traditional audiences know the repertoire and its intricacies and thus have an important role in safeguarding.

Shrinking traditional repertoire

As more and more practitioners perform on the urban stage, their knowledge of traditional repertoire does not need to be as extensive and thus it has been noticed that the younger generation tends to have a smaller repertoire.

Inadequate rights management

As an archive and part of the institutional network in India, it was observed that many institutions did not have rights management policies in place, which hampers attempts at dissemination, even when it is desired. Performers are also thus not always aware or confident of their rights.

Though India has performers right and provisions such as fair dealing in its Copyright Act, there is low awareness of rights issues.

Decontextualisation – traditional practices to art form, practitioners as artists, ritual to “item”.

In an effort to promote and safeguard ICH, many traditional forms are being promoted on the stage and in performances aimed at tourist audiences. This has provided financial support and success to genres which are meant for entertainment by professionals, but genres that are part of rituals and participatory in nature not only lose their context and meaning. These also typically do not succeed on the stage as they have little entertainment value out of the context of community participation. It thus in the long run can further erode a tradition.

There is also no attempt at providing contextual information to tourist audiences or to support such practices in the area where they exist and can be supported locally.

1 The Rajasthan Atlas Project. Publication Neuman, Daniel, Shubha Chaudhuri with Komal Kothari. Bards, Ballads and Boundaries : An ethnographic atlas of music traditions of West Rajasthan. 2005. Seagull Books.

2 Remembered Rhythms. A festival of diaspora and the music of India touring groups of three diasporic communities to seven cities around India with an ethnomusicologist, a seminar on the issues of how music is related to the issue of diaspora and a CD series. Shubha Chaudhuri and Anthony Seeger ed. Remembered Rhythms: Essays in music and diaspora. Seagull Books.

Role of State Competitions

Many states in India have started holding competitions to promote “folk culture”. These often lead to attempts to add features to enhance performance, and to creating stage performances out of ritual practices. In many cases, the performance of these, get limited to only the competition having no relevance or opportunity of practice outside the competitions.

Cultures as monoliths

India like many other countries has a wide range of traditions, religions, cults, and languages which create an active and vital fabric of culture. There is a great diversity even within areas and communities which is complex and defies generalisation. It was felt that this complexity and granularity was being overlooked and simplified in the public perception which needed to be challenged.

The Archives and Community Partnership Project : Aims and Objectives

Evolution of the archival space

Through this project we saw the change of archive as a scholarly academic space, to one that stepped out to involve the community and performers in the archiving process, and help create and sustain other archival collections.

Archiving with the community, bottom up documentation,

The aim of this project was to work and consult with the communities, asking them what they would like to archive of their traditions, instead of eliciting repertoire to support research agendas. It was also decided that copies of all recordings made as part of this project would be provided to the performers/community, and support movements for local archive.

Changing profile of users – performers and communities

In the last decade ARCE had several instances of performers wanting copies of their performances or events that they knew were in the archives. Several collectors also had asked ARCE to provide letters for performers and communities to validate the fact that the collections were in an archives in India to which the performers/communities would have access.

This project thus attempted to extend the user profile from researchers and academic use to performers and communities. ARCE has had a history of enabling performer access through its policies and agreements.

Rise of technology in rural areas

A project such as this would have not been meaningful if affordable digital technology had not made inroads into rural India. Most villages today have not only access to recording technologies, but as many were requesting copies, it was clear that musicians were open to using recordings to teach and preserve their traditions.

More than any other, the mobile phones have made inroads into rural India which has enabled a range of people to use digital technology.

Attempt at different models of dissemination /transmission

As all collections in ARCE are taken in under agreements that stipulate access, it has not always been possible to disseminate recordings freely. Therefore the aim of this project was to create a body of recordings with performer permissions so that they could be disseminated across a range of \ platforms.

These included use of broadcasting, the internet, publishing CDs, and using the mobile platform.

This has resulted in a CD Series based on archival recordings of musicians considered “iconic” by the community – “Master Musicians from the Archives”, a radio program on community radio, and an Android mobile application to support the CD series.

Each CD will be produced with detailed documentation, attempting to reach the global and local audiences. Texts and translations of the songs will also be included so as to help in learning and transmission 35% of the CDs are being given to the performers and community to be sold according to their wishes.

ARCE collaborated with Rupayan Sansthan¹, a regional archive and research centre in Rajasthan to hold training camps for Manganiar children, involving senior musicians who had participated actively in the documentation process.

Another means of empowering musicians, contextualizing and recognizing the music has been through a website www.music-community.in which contains a directory of musicians with their specialty and contact information, photographs, audio and video clips.

Recordings have been and are in the process of being made available on the Smithsonian Globalsound platform where advance royalties were paid.

Need for the archive to take a proactive role in rights management

Sharing Recordings Rights and Revenue

An archive based on voluntarily deposit from collectors, researchers and performers and provides access to these constituencies as well is very well situated to take a proactive role in rights management, dealing with rights of practitioners, researchers, the archives, as well as access policies. It was felt that this project would provide an opportunity to elicit issues of rights and ownership from practitioners and communities, instead of applying top down measures relying only on the law and an understanding of ethical and moral rights framed by researchers.

The performers and communities were given copies of all recordings over which they have complete rights and gives them the freedom to use them as they please, commercially or otherwise, with no obligations to ARCE. However ARCE would not make commercial use of the materials without negotiation and agreement.

- Share recordings, rights and revenue
- Elicit rights perceptions with musician communities
- Involve NGOs and commercial agencies in the area
- Identify non financial parameters for inclusion in agreements
- Create a scale of payments based on kinds of use
- Formulate oral agreements as well as written agreements
- Create terms for sharing rights with archives
- Assure performer and community access

Capacity building on the local level

A project that relied on recording as means of documentation and research for the communities involved would be useful only if members of the communities were involved in the process. To this end, training workshops and internships were provided so that all recording was done by local documentation teams comprising of local institutions as well as members of the community.

Create economic models to extend gains beyond traditional patronage

An aspect of this initiative was also to attempt to develop some economic models and dissemination strategies. This would not only provide some financial support, but also be done to reinforce traditions and accord respect and recognition. There was also needed to understand the nature of traditional patronage and its current status. The respect and recognition are important aspects as musician communities are largely marginalized especially in the areas that were under the ambit of this project.

Community archives

There was an intention to support existing community archives or assist in creating them. This has succeeded with support to an archive of the Manganiar Lok Sangeet Sansthan, providing equipment and training as well guidance and mentoring.

Why community? from a research viewpoint

Though community involvement is stressed in the 2003 Convention and supports the concept of working through the community, on a purely research and documentation basis, some of the factors for choosing this approach was based on the following factors:

Ethnographic literature

Ethnographic literature in India, historically uses the caste and tribes, and linguistic groups – hence community as a basis and thus pointed the way by providing historical background.

Hereditary professional and roles related to music and other forms of ICH in India

Many musical traditions and other forms of ICH are based on hereditary roles linked to community and relationships between communities. Examples of the Rajasthan communities described earlier are an example where Manganiars have Rajputs as patrons, or Langas have the community called Sindhi Sipahi as patrons.

The practice of music in every day life is also largely defined by community, according to ethnographic literature, and the project provided an opportunity to investigate this further.

Ownership of musical traditions

From prior knowledge of field work and literature surveys, it appeared that the traditional sense of ownership around musical and performance traditions were also based on community.

Questions:

Though the project managed to meet most of its goals and objectives, some questions needed to be asked.

To what extent was the community involved? To what extent was this an intervention from ARCE?

This was a mixed experience, ranging from a strong concern that the community needed to document to cooperating to not feeling they were willing to cooperate need for documentation and safeguarding. In this case, one has to question the role played by ARCE – as to what extent it was an intervention that was beneficial and helped towards safeguarding. It is perhaps difficult to gauge this in a short time to see what the long term implications are. There is a reinforcement and encouragement when the community feels there is interest from outside the community.

It is not easy to gauge to what extent the effect lasts, or when it would start being felt, of a short term project such as three years of active involvement.

We also faced the issue of dealing with a community who is not interested in the process of documenting their ICH, or who do not wish to go further with it. Though continuing to work there would have been of interest for purposes of research, we had to move away from the process of documentation once the community did not express an interest though they were willing to cooperate for our sake. That is a hard decision but one that has to be negotiated once the decision is taken that it is a community led project.

Challenges and Lessons learned

Implications of exposure to research and researchers

There was an appreciable difference in the participation with the research and documentation process from communities who had been exposed to researchers in the past. There was an understanding of the benefits that such a process can provide, and recognition of the use of recordings for teaching their children. For instance, as the project progressed, musicians asked for copies of the interviews and discussions as well so as to be able to recall the issues at a later date. The reaction of those who had not been exposed to research was more varied ranging from curiosity and bewilderment to cooperation, but did not lead to active leadership in the limited experience of this project. However the community archive initiative came from a community – the Manganiars who have been researched and recorded and have been exposed

to archives. This provided the incentive for a young musician to begin a systematic collection and the desire to conduct research on his own community.

Similarly, a young Gavda student of sociology worked on her own community and grew to be a research assistant on the project.

Community as a unit for research and documentation

There were many challenges in working with a community led initiative. The many complexities of identifying representation/leadership has been much discussed and debated and remains an important issue. Representation of a community for purposes of ICH can and tend to be very different from the administrative or political. They are not always easy to figure out to an outsider. Space also has to be made within the research to accommodate varying perspectives, shared traditions and ownership and the fact that there are likely to be groups and subgroups within communities, which challenge the already complex notion of a community.

Perceptions of rights and ownership

There is also the Individual vs. Community perspective in many places, and as far as rights are concerned, the intersection of individual and community rights and ownership is a complex and sometimes contradictory one.

We also faced difficulties in obtaining signed permissions in certain cases, where people were not comfortable with signing – especially for what may be considered community rather than individual performances.

Need for long term involvement for “Community led” initiatives

The many layers and complexities of dealing with communities as a basis for research and documentation demands long term involvement. Glib assertions of building trust and relationships cannot be achieved over a few weeks and months. Thus it is important to empower and build capacity within a community if the aim is safeguarding.

Learning about consensus and roles

Building consensus about the practices and performances and the complexities of traditional roles is demanding and not always transparent to the outsider.

Research Implications

Though a project aimed at community based documentation, it is perhaps useful to also look at the issues that emerged from the viewpoint of an ethnomusicology research project.

Definition of genres by community and practitioners based on context and purpose

Approaching documentation from the perspective of the community and practitioners, revealed the various ways in which are genres are conceptualized, and also provided an insight into what factors or features are considered important and critical within the community.

How repertoire identifies a community

Music and performance genres are certainly an important part of the identity of a community. The issue of community repertoire is complex and needs more than superficial attention, as repertoire is sometimes highly specific to a community, is shared totally or partially, carries ownership issues in some cases, and not in others. In discussing repertoire to be recorded by the communities, this issue often provided a direction.

Rights perceptions of communities

There are rights which are ceremonial or ritual, that may or may not extend to the stage, there are rights linked to payments as well as those that may be acceptable as individual. With the urban stage emerging as a growing platform, and recordings being sold, this is an aspect that is undergoing great change, as performance and practice move out of the traditional contexts.

Pluralism in practice: syncretic practices as negotiation

As the project Archives and Community Partnership was dealing with pluralistic and syncretic traditions it provided an opportunity to understand these practices on the ground and to what extent they reveal the way these manifest in daily practice. What is considered pluralistic is often rooted in the history of conversion, and of how communities negotiate co existence of religious and cultural differences.

Impact of tourism

This is an aspect that could not fully be investigated within this project as it involves an independent study. However though the impact of tourism cannot be under estimated, the local and daily practice of music and related ICH seems to be in parallel with tourism and its related performances. There is an awareness in communities about the compromises made for tourist performances and that it does not affect the practice within the tradition.

Outcomes Quandaries & Conclusions

Many aspects of this project have met with some success, in the documentation with community involvement, collaboration and guidance. We had limited success in capacity building in the communities. However there was sufficient reason to believe that the very process of documentation and research does reinforce the belief and conviction in communities to practice their ICH. The fact that it is considered worth researching does encourage, but the process of being involved in the documentation process brings back memories, raises issues to be discussed and even can open the way to new directions.

To be effective as a tool for safeguarding, research initiatives need to connect with performance in terms of providing appropriate fora, and connect to issues of sustainability. Research and documentation also have the potential to provide directions here which are not only based on financial parameters of safeguarding but based on an understanding of the cultural and social factors and to creating safeguarding within and by the community.

As the globalized and urban stage is becoming a reality, and its influencing an erosion of

traditional forms of ICH, researchers can have a role in contextualization of such forms, and participate in raising awareness and sensitizing of audiences, so that public performance need not result in the lowering of artistic and cultural integrity.

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