

Sustainable Development of Intangible Cultural Heritages of West Bengal Through Digital Media: A Study

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Abstract: *The rural areas of West Bengal, India, are home to a diverse range of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) practices that are inextricably linked to the social, cultural, and historical fabric of the region. These cultural heritages include folk music, dance, crafts, traditional play, and rituals, which have been passed down from generation to generation through oral traditions and performances. However, with the onslaught of globalization, urbanization, and modernization, these rural communities are facing significant challenges in promoting, preserving, and safeguarding their ICH practices. The recent pandemic (Covid-19) was one of the major threats for these ICHs and its communities depending on it. The use of digital media and technologies has further extended the scopes in safeguarding and promoting ICH practices. This research study will help to explore the diverse Intangible cultural heritages of Southern Part of West Bengal. After investigating the current situation and status of these cultural heritage traditions, this research will further explore the impact of digital media on sustainable development of these traditions. Lastly this research will highlight future possibilities and scopes of implementing advanced digital media, which can enhance the process of sustainable development in larger scale through museums, science centres and cultural centres.*

Key Words: *Digital Media, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Development, West Bengal.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The state of West Bengal, India is a land of diverse culture and traditions spreads across over 23 districts. The states are Kolkata, South 24 Paraganas, North 24 Paraganas, Howrah, Hoogly, Paschim Medinipur, Purba Medinipur, Jhargram, Bankura, Purulia, Nadia, Purba Bardhaman, Pashchim Bardhaman, Birbhum, Murshidabad, Malda, Dakshin Dinajpur, Uttar Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Kalimpong. Especially the rural part of these districts are the home of diverse cultures and traditions which passed down from generation to generation. From tribal people to local indigenous people of these areas carries the knowledge of local heritage and history of the certain traditions. These reflects in their traditional dances, songs, art and crafts and other traditional performances. Apart from agriculture, fishing the people of these area also make a living through their traditional practices as well. For an example, the 'Dokra Art' of Bikna, Bankura is a very significant 'Dokra' craft of the village which is the primary way of living of the people of the village by selling them to the visitors. Similarly for another example, a group of community people called 'Baul' of Shantiniketan, Birbhum, make a living by singing their traditional song from house to house or sometimes in any special occasion or any festive season. Whatever the visitors or listeners give them, they happily accept it, and they make a living out of it. These traditions are very common in the rural parts of West Bengal. These traditions are mainly done orally or performing them, which signifies them as a mode of intangibility. These cultural traditions can be also called 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' [1] as well as 'Living Heritage [2]'.

The 'Intangible cultural heritage' means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills- as well as the instruments, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith- that communities, groups and in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage [3]. 'The intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. It is manifested inter alia in following domains- oral traditions and expressions; including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, rituals, and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; traditional craftsmanship' [4].

The use of digital media has further extended the scope of museums, science centres and interpretation centres in safeguarding and showcasing these ICH practices. Digital media offers a plethora of opportunities by creating platforms for society to document, preserve, showcase, promote and disseminate ICH practices to a wider audience, including those who may not have the opportunity to experience them in their original context. Presentation and interpretation of these Intangible cultural heritages through museums can act as a bridge of cultural exchange in the society. Tjetjep Rohendi Rohidi in 2015, defines culture as a real condition, situation or context of space and time where civilization grows. He added, culture can act as a comprehensive system that consist of elements or universal subsystem which includes religion, language, race and social system, art, technology, knowledge, source of income or economy.

Digital is one of the latest technologies to preserve our culture and heritage. It is not only a way of preserving our culture and heritage, but it also provides an easy tool to archive the material as a reference for education for the coming generation. Preserving and archiving able to sustain the digitized resources [5]. However, with the advent of digital technology, the scope of museums has expanded beyond their physical boundaries. Digital media provides a unique opportunity to capture and preserve the intangible cultural heritage of South Bengal in a more accessible and sustainable manner.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: In UNESCO convention expert meeting, October 2003 ‘The Roles of Museums in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage’ discussion was conducted focusing on two major points which are focus on the future roles of museums, cultural centres, and science centres in safeguarding living heritage by considering two main questions: how can museums contribute to safeguarding living heritage, especially at the level of local communities? 2. How can museums contribute to the visibility of forms of living heritage [6]. Generally, the tangible cultures happen to be last much longer than intangible cultures based on the condition of the society it exists. With the rapid development of information technology, digitalization has gradually become the development trend of ICHs’ protection and dissemination due to its advantages of no destructiveness and wide dissemination [7]. “Urbanisation, commercialisation, and industrialisation have cut into the harmonious relationship formed by the long-term interaction between man and nature, destroying the ecological environment of ICHs, and the cultural space on which they depend is gradually disappearing, with many ICHs facing a crisis of survival. Then, there is the lack of localised excavation of ICHs” [8].

3. DISCUSSION:

In West Bengal, every district has distinct cultural traditions which differ from another one. From district to district with changing of people, language changes the tradition and culture, which signifies the diversity of the state. Especially in the rural areas due to the authenticity in traditions and cultures, the heritage of the tribe, community or area is much vibrant. Each of the cultural traditions represents the community, tribe, or area, which also represent them in the society. Especially the major traditions give them an identity to express and represent their heritage in global stage. In rural areas from festivals to daily rituals, every tradition can be considered as a cultural part of the community depending upon the significance. Some of the major cultural traditions of West Bengal which represent the community and its people as well as the area are described below.

- **Chau Mask Making, Charida, Purulia:** Charida is a village of 300-400 mask makers of the notable and famous dance of the region, Chau dance. The traditional Chau mask making started about nearly 150 years ago. At that time Baghmundi area was ruled by King Madan Mohan Singh Deo [9]. The Chau Mask making tradition has received Geographical Indication (GI) tag on 28 March 2018.
- **Wooden Doll making, Natungram, Purba Bardhaman:** Natungram is the village of wooden doll makers. By carving out a single piece of wood with the help of different kind of tools the artisans make the shape of dolls. These dolls represent ancient folklore and mythology characters of vibrant colours and distinctive ethnic style. The owl shaped doll is a major attraction of the artistry which also considered auspicious as the escort of the goddess of prosperity, Goddess *Lakshmi*. After the dolls are carved out from the wood they are painted and dried under the sun. Most of the dolls are mainly painted out from yellow colour which is recognisable in nature.
- **Baul Song, Santiniketan, Birbhum:** Birbhum is known as “The land of the brave” or Virbhumi. Birbhum is well known for its cultural heritage and natural beauty. It is also the prominence of Bauls. These group of people sing blissful songs [10] along with a musical instrument called ‘aktara’. The theme of their songs is mainly of nature, natural life, events of on daily life and religious also. Shola craft and Kantha embroidery. Group of people sit and perform the blissful song related to life and nature surrounded in the Baul village.
- **Dokra Art, Bikna, Bankura:** Near to Bankura township the Bikna village is located, which is a home of approximately 150-160 artists of Dokra art. ‘It is a wax technique of metal casting, which can be traced back to the Indus valley civilization almost 4500 years ago’ [11].

- **Wooden mask, Kushmandi, Dakshin Dinajpur:** Kushmandi is a block situated in Dakshin Dinajpur, which is famous for its Wooden Mask making. Specially the area of Mahishbathan in Kushmandi block the artisans make the wooden mask which use in traditional dance and festivals of the area.
- **Fakirs, Gorbhanga, Nadia:** Gorbhanga village of Nadia district is the home of Fakirs. They make soulful, melodious music in rural Bengal based on the daily life of people, nature, religious, their connection with them and other aspects of life. They are mostly open and free minded group of community. Some of the well-known Fakir and Musicians of the area are, Arman Fakir, Khaibar Fakir, Babu Fakir, Amirul Fakir.
- **Madur, Sabang, Paschim Medinipur:** Sabang in Paschim Medinipore is known for its making of 'Madur' tradition. Madur is an integral part of Bengali lifestyle. Women of the household weave delicate and intricate mats from sedge of Cyperus Pangorei plant. Using natural and vegetable colours these madurs are painting one its completed weaving. After that those mats are kept in sun for drying and later, they sell them to market and make living out of it.
- **Terracotta, Panchmura, Bankura:** Terracotta of Bankura is one of the first attempts of people at clay modelling that has been achieved perfection with time. Terracotta tradition of Panchmura had received GI tag on 28 November 2017. The village offers a wide range of terracotta products from animals to human models or objects as well as other household décor, jewelleryes, utilities. The simple yet dynamic terracotta artistry of Bankura has its origin in religious rituals and practices.
- **Shitalpati, Ghughumari, Cooch Bihar:** In the district of Cooch Bihar of West Bengal there is a village called Ghughumari, 20 min away from Cooch Bihar town, is famous for the 'Shitalpati' making. Shitalpati is simply said to be translated in English is 'Cool Mat'. A mat which keeps the sitting area cooler than normal mat. Around 3000 artists exist s in the village who make out of living by making these traditional mats [12]. The making of these mats involves slicing, processing, and weaving the cane fibres. Weaving very tightly together they give the mat shaped pattern and make designs on them. There is a folk-art centre in Ghughumari which also have a community museum on this traditional culture of Shitalpati making.
- **Chau Dance, Maldi, Purulia:** Purulia is a land of rich cultural heritage, vibrant people and full of natural beauty. The Chau Dance inscribed in the Representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Community by UNESCO in 2010 for its outstanding universal value and importance. It is a colourful, material mask dance of Eastern India. The performances, begin with Jhumur, which is called Pala and song followed by Shehnai. The dance represents mythological tales of Hindu culture. Nearly 6000 artists pursue this dance tradition in Purulia for livelihood and to contribute to traditions [12].
- **Banbibir Pala, Sundarban, South 24 Paragans:** Sundarban is a World Heritage Site declared by UNESCO in 1987, is renowned for its biodiversity, unique landscape, and its iconic mangrove forest. The 'Banbibir Pala' is a mythological play that revolves around the age-old conflict of a man and animal, which is done by the local performer on special occasions. Other local traditional songs and dances such as Jhumur are also a part of Sundarban's cultural heritage. There are more than 800 artists practicing the tradition of Bhatiyali, Jhumur and Banbibir Pala in the region [12].
- **Jalangi, Murshidabad, Village of Fakirs:** Jalangi, in the district of Murshidabad is a village of fakirs, who perform the Bengali 'Qawwali' song. These fakirs are free living and resides with nature and perform their traditional songs throughout the year. Visitors come to see them perform their traditional songs and spend time with them, interacting and to know about the heritage of the village as well as their life.
- **Basketry, Gajol, Malda:** Gajol or Gazole town in Malda district is known for the making of basketry our of bamboo and other fibre material of plants.
- **Kantha making tradition, Nanoor, Birbhum:** Kantha is an age-old weaving tradition where only women used to stitch together layers of old cloths with simple run stitch. Kantha as a craft is unique in ethnicity and tradition. The artwork includes beautiful flowers, animals, birds, trees in the designs. This village is also known for old terracotta temples of the Pala and Sena dynasty.
- **Patachitra tradition, Pingla, Paschim Medinipur:** Naya village in Pingla, Pschim Medinipore is the home of nearly about 255 Patachitra artists [12]. Patachitra is a unique oral-visual art form of scroll painting found only in Bengal. The artist, called Patuas are altogether painters, lyricists, and singers. They narrate the stories that they paint on the scrolls through their songs. The Patachitra is mainly known for its vibrant colours, heavy strokes and it's done on different kind of products like cloths, umbrellas, teapots etc. The colours which are used to colour the Patachitras are totally organic and eco-friendly. The themes of the paintings and the stories are maybe mythological tales, historical themes, social issues [13].
- **Dokra art, Dariyapur, Purba Bardhaman:** Dariyapur is famous for the unique Dokra craft. This is mainly anon-ferrous metal casting technique of making the unique craft. The craft making is dated back 120 years ago

in the area. It is a household craft in the village. These decorative arts are used to decorate homes as well as gifting as show pieces. Most of the Dokra art is in miniature form, which can be idol of mainly Hindu God and Goddess and other religious depictions [12].

Issues and Challenges of the Intangible Cultural Heritages of West Bengal: Most of these cultural traditions were almost unknown to the outside community not only the other parts of West Bengal but India as well. The boundaries of promotion of these traditional craft were limited to some areas due to non-promotion and media of supporting them. Due to past few years the artisans and craftsman of these communities facing some serious problems relating to the financial situations of their livelihood. First, due to the rapid growth of industrial machinery and duplication of art form the authenticity of the art was being abolished. The authentic art of making the above-mentioned crafts thus being reduced overtime.

Secondly the rise of market price in recent time is one of the main reasons which threaten the abolishment of some of the cultural traditions. With the rise of product, goods, and price of food, especially the household products the artisans are forced to quit their jobs and find for some different professional which can pay them higher than their traditional work. Although many of the older artisans, makers, and performers who are not able to work further in city areas sending their future generations to work in the cities. This also in some ways causing the break of traditional generation chain. The authenticity of those artistry and tradition thus couldn't be able to pass down to the future generations.

In recent time the COVID-19 pandemic also caused a greater threat to these Intangible Cultural Heritage and its industry. Due to the lockdown tourist couldn't be able to visit the areas and places. This caused a huge negative impact to the market of ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) industry. Because the main marketability of the arts is through the visitors and visitor centric audiences. Most likely to say the ICH industry is totally dependent on travel and tourism-based circumstances, where the visitors and travellers play the main part of the market buyers. The craftsman, artisans and the performers also couldn't travel to other places due to the lock down period and other restrictions, which affected their livelihood.

Fabrication is one of the major issues for these ICH industries. As stated earlier about the authenticity of the product, the fabrication of the same product is now being made in the factories and other places. The factory-made products are low cost to made and take less time to prepare. Selling those can make a huge profit for the seller. While in the other hand the authentic production of the arts is being highly affected by these circumstances. The buyer couldn't tell the originality until they visit the places where they were made. This type of situations is creating a bigger threat in the industry of ICH.

Impact of Digital Media in sustainable development of ICH: In this 21st century the digital technology and media playing a greater role in transforming our lives. From waking up in the morning to bed at night, almost every work there is impact of digitization. Similarly, there is huge role present in the sustainability of ICH industry of digitization and its media. In last 5-10 years the digital media had changed the way of interpretation of these cultural and traditional Intangible Heritages to the society. In the Technologically developed foreign countries this impact is much even greater. India also taking various way to sustain the diverse ICHs in every possible way of the country through the digital media. In this context the current situation of the ICH industry of West Bengal is much in better shape than what it was before in 5 years back. The digital media helped the ICH industry to survive in various ways. Whether it is from Government initiative or private, the digital media is playing a major part in saving the ICH and its community.

- Among the recent initiatives the application called Google Art & Culture playing in huge role as a digital media platform. Every single person now a days uses the smart phone, any art and culture enthusiastic person or who have a keen interest in the cultural traditions this app can act a great option for gathering information in interactive way. Online exhibition is created for the general people to visit and watch for free. Through the app the Cultural Heritages of the rural parts of West Bengal are being exhibited online. From providing detailed information to pictures and videos, every possible interpretation is done for the presentation of most of these cultures of West Bengal. Not only West Bengal, India but also the people over the globe can access through it and get information about these ICH of West Bengal. This helping the industry to grow in wider audiences.
- Digital posters, photos on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other networks also act as promotion and information provider for these ICH. For an example- in Facebook a page called 'Rural craft and Cultural hubs', government initiative on a regular basis post posters about the current event, future events, and other cultural related status to aware the general people. This helps in huge promotion of the Ich industry of West Bengal. Also, the performances and other acts time to time displayed in the social media as video form to make it more engaging for the watchers.

- Among the most advanced technology used in the digital media platform is the augmented reality. Through the previously mentioned application Google Art & Culture, the augmented reality can also be used to experience life size image through mobile phone. This is one of the major examples of promoting the ICH industry. For an Example- if a person wants to buy a 'Patachitra', the person can access the app by opening it and with the help of mobile camera he can point out in his room and the image of the Patachitra can be seen in the person's room with its actual size. The application mainly captures the topography of the room, then analysing the rooms area the actual size of the object is shown in the area. Someone who wants to buy desired objects can have a clear idea how the object will look in the room and can order it or buy them personally.
- YouTube is one of the major platforms of delivering the news and information about certain topic in video form. Now-a-days from independent creator to organisations all use the platform to create videos and publicly post them. This helps in greater cause of publicity of the ICH industry of West Bengal. For example-someone travelled the village Notungram, Purba Medinipur and made a video about the making of wooden dolls and the cultural traditions and livelihood of the village people. This will somehow promote the business and create a unique image into the mind of art enthusiastic about this cultural tradition. The more the visitor will visit the place, the opportunity of the growing of the ICH industry will increase.
- Digital libraries (Example- National Digital Library), Digital Archives, digital documents are also type of digital media, helping in storage of information about these cultural heritages. The recent studies, research, surveys are being stored as digital document through them for future use. Also, digital books in pdf format made available for the readers, distributing information and knowledge about the rich cultural heritage of West Bengal.
- Movies and tv shows are one of the valuable sources for delivering information and messages. Short films, documentary films, motion films are a mode of digital representation to show the current situations, issues, and other aspects of the cultural heritages. One of the significant examples can be said as a reference, is the Oscar winning documentary film 'The Elephant Whispers' in the year 2023. The film features the cultural tradition of Elephant caring in Mudumalai National Park, Tamil Nadu. The bond of elephant and human is beautifully shown in the film. This heritage cultural tradition is dated back to hundred years old in Tamil Nadu. After this film's global recognition visitors from over the globe come to visit every week the area and its people. Before that the culture hardly known to the outside world. Here the movie acted as a digital media to promote and represent the Intangible cultural Heritage of the community as well as the area.
- Television is a common digital media where, through new channels and through cultural programmes the latest news of different aspect is being delivered in every household. Back in the days where there were only a few news channels covering a vast amount of news was quite a challenge for them. In present time there are a variety of new channels which providing a plethora of news and advertisement on the cultural heritages of rural areas of West Bengal. This helping in promotion of the ICH industry to grow and expand in a way to sustainable development.

5. CONCLUSION:

These Intangible Cultural Heritage of West Bengal is an asset that needs to be preserved for future generations. Organisation, whether government or private can play a crucial role in safeguarding and promoting them. This research article suggests that digital media can be a much greater platform to sustain the intangible cultural heritage of South Bengal. The research also emphasizes the importance of working closely with local communities to capture and preserve their intangible cultural heritage. Keeping alive these living heritage and its traditional value can also help to protect the communities' identities in the society as well. Through the promotion and sustainable development of these tribal groups, communities can help to create a better future.

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