

Preservation and Documentation of Intangible Cultural Heritage: the Strategic Role of the Library and Information Science Professionals in Sri Lanka

Navaneethakrishnan , S¹

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to shed light on an area of librarianship which is not often talked about in Sri Lankan context i.e. safeguarding and documentation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The objective of this research is to emphasize on the need of a contribution of library profession in the process of safeguarding and documentation of ICH and to identify the strategic role of the Library and Information Science (LIS) Professionals in this regard. Based on descriptive analysis of literatures and current responsibilities of LIS professionals in Sri Lanka, this study outlines the need of national awareness on this topic through the identified new roles of LIS professionals. This study further emphasizes on the contribution of the national scheme for safeguarding and documentation of ICH in Sri Lanka based on international recommendations with the continuous support of our Library Professionals and National Library of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Preservation, LIS Professionals, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Preservation of cultural heritage has traditionally been dominated by the preservation of tangible forms of culture that represent communities' histories. In the last few years we have seen greater visibility and increased reforms of different initiatives in the field of preservation of cultural heritage carried out at local, national and international level. Impacts of these reforms on developing countries particularly on Sri Lanka have led paying an attention on the necessity of thinking according to the current trend.

Origin and Development of Preservation of Cultural Heritage

The cultural and natural heritage is among the priceless and irreplaceable assets, not only of each nation, but of humanity as a whole. UNESCO initiated the process of addressing on this issue in 1972 to ensure, as far as possible, the proper identification, protection,

¹ Assistant Librarian, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Email: ksnavan@yahoo.com

conservation and presentation of the world's heritage. Progressively, major efforts have been made in this respect, which justify and support the fieldwork and the creation of specialized systems of knowledge management. The following could be mentioned as milestones of such efforts taken at international level:

- Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO, 1972)
- UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO, 2001)
- Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage (UNESCO, 2003)
- UNDP Human Development Report (UNDP, 2004)
- Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005)

Although the scope of heritage, in general, is now agreed internationally to include 'tangible' and 'intangible' as well as 'environments', the finer terminology of 'heritage' has not been streamlined or standardized and thus no uniformity exists between countries. (Ahmad, 2006)

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this research is to shed light on an area of librarianship which is not often talked about in Sri Lankan context i.e. safeguarding and documentation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The objective of this research is to emphasize on the need of a contribution of library profession in the process of safeguarding and documentation of ICH and to identify the strategic role of the Library and Information Science Professionals in this regard.

Significance of the Study

Generally initiatives for safeguarding ICH might include identifying and documenting such heritage, research, safeguarding etc. In fact, the first step in safeguarding the ICH in a multicultural developing country is to identify those expressions and manifestations that can be considered as ICH and making a record, or inventory, of them. In Sri Lankan

context, it is true that an understanding of the ICH of different communities helps in intercultural dialogue, and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life.

Libraries can play a role in physically preserving some tangible items of different cultures in the world. Also they have an obligation to preserve the ICH. These might be objects, practices, representations, expressions, knowledge or skills. Whatever shape they take, these things form part of an ICH, which requires much needed attention of LIS professionals from Sri Lanka in order to safeguard them over the generations.

Defining Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines the ICH as the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills (including instruments, objects, artifacts, cultural spaces), that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. It may be expressed in a number of domains, including oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practice about nature, traditional craftsmanship etc. UNESCO stipulates that state parties are supposed to “take necessary measures to ensure safeguarding of the ICH in its territory.” These measures include identification of the ICH heritage that exists in its territory, adoption of appropriate policies, and promotion of education and so on. (UNESCO, 2003)

Literature review: Current issues on ICH

Conversations are going on regarding the ICH among the member states of UNESCO, such as Argentina, Austria, Benin, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Korea, Kuwait, Lithuania, Madagascar, Palestinian, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Romania, Spain and Zimbabwe.

The second review meeting on UNESCO’s global strategy for strengthening national capacities for safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage will be convened by the Intangible Cultural Heritage Section in Cusco, Peru, from 17 to 19 September 2013, following the first such meeting in Beijing, China, in November 2012. UNESCO continues its initiative to help

safeguard Nepal's intangible heritage conducting a workshop on preparing nominations to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List in Kathmandu which was from 16 to 20 September 2013. In India the first capacity building activity, a workshop on the Implementation of the 2003 Convention at the National Level was organized held in partnership with the Ministry of Culture and the Arts from 25-29 June 2012. Future capacity building workshops include a Workshop on Community-based Inventory to be held in 2013 and a Workshop on the Preparation of Nomination Files is being scheduled for 2014. (UNESCO, 2013)

Manesti, T. (2011) presents a rigorous critique and commentary to make specific recommendations on the first draft of National policy on South African Living Heritage published by the government of South Africa in 2009. Howell, D (2013) argues that Welsh intangible cultural heritage is an important, living component of contemporary Welsh culture and that UK ratification of the treaty, rather than being something that might be desired in Wales, should in fact be considered as a necessity.

Literature Review: Activities of Sri Lanka towards ICH

In recent decades alternative approaches led to re-thinking of the priorities and processes of preservation of the heritage of this nation particularly cultural, ethnical, linguistic and religious diversity of its people. Sri Lanka has a rich and diverse multi-cultural and linguistic heritage. Due to this socio – cultural background of the country we have had a vast variety of Intangible Cultural Heritage. It consists of the words the people use or the language they speak, the benefits they hold, values and virtues they cherish, habits they follow, rituals and practices that they enact and the ceremonies they observe. It also includes customs and tastes, attitudes and outlook in brief, feeling and thinking. (UNESCO, 2009)

In Sri Lankan Context, ICH preservation is not a new concept. Even prior to the UNESCO convention there were so many attempts in safeguarding the ICH. The Art Council of Ceylon was formed by Act No. 18 of 1952 with many objectives with regard to fine arts and crafts, which includes preservation as well. There are so many institutions at present having a responsibility towards documenting and archiving the ICH and the Department of

National Archives is the final place of deposit for the permanent preservation of such documentation (Wettasinghe, 2008).

So many attempts have been made to document intangible heritage of Sri Lankan Tamils and the most noteworthy aspect in the documentation of Sri Lankan Tamils was the Digital Image Library (DIL) which is the pilot project of Foundation for Library Awareness (FOLA) and the first digital image library in Sri Lanka. The DIL has documented considerable images of intangible heritage (FOLA, 2005).

In the above background safeguarding the ICH of our country has become a social and cultural need. Sri Lanka ratified the convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage in 2008. To reach this endeavor for safeguarding the ICH of the Sri Lanka, an island-wide national programme has been launched from the beginning of this year by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and National Heritage and the Department of Cultural affairs. Under this project, the director of the Department of Cultural Affairs has appointed an ICH working committee to undertake this valuable task.

Although there are a number of inventories on ICH scattered in various government departments and private institutions, there are few contributions to be made by library professionals to safeguard ICH and there is a need to consolidate various efforts at national level. UNESCO has supported the initial stages of developing a web portal on ICH restricted to data gathered by various government bodies and now with the support of UNESCO/Japan Funds-in-Trust, the capacities of concerned stakeholders will be further enhanced in the effective implementation of the 2003 convention, community-based inventorying, as well as in the preparation of nomination files.

Methodology

Basically exploratory research which is conducted to provide a better understanding of a situation is used in this study. Using exploratory research method, it is hoped to produce

hypotheses about what is going on in a particular situation. This study outlines the current practices of safeguarding and documentation of ICH at national and international level using the secondary data. Further descriptive research method also used to explain the identified responsibilities of LIS professionals in relation to Safeguarding and documentation of ICH in Sri Lanka and the need of national awareness in this regard.

Findings

Strategic role of Library Professionals

This study reveals that Library and Information Science Professionals in Sri Lanka has to play a vital role in safeguarding and documentation of ICH in Sri Lanka. Since these librarians serve divergent needs of users in their respective libraries, it is important that these professionals should be conversant with how to preserve and access relevant information, which are related to intangible cultural heritage of this nation. So they have to develop their skills to act in various roles accordingly. The following were identified as important roles of Library and Information Science Professionals in Sri Lanka.

LIS professionals may be at first information providers and reporters during the recording of social practices, rituals and festive events of our nation. They act as historians to identify and recognize the communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals as part of our ICH. They have to improve their skills to act as anthropologists to discover the oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the ICH.

They have a responsibility of giving commentaries on traditional craftsmanship of their respective community. In this situation they are commentators. Also they proceed as philosophers to understand and explain the knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe related to their readers or nation. They have to perform as artist to recognize and record an event related to performing arts of their respective community or nation. They have to improve themselves as policy makers to design research and practice, tries to identify and analyze case studies, embark on new design approaches, methodologies and tools for the intangible cultural heritage valorization.

Suggestions

It is absolutely imperative that continuing professional development of librarians should be given priority in the process of safeguarding of the ICH of our nation. This study further emphasizes on the contribution of the national scheme for safeguarding and documentation of ICH in Sri Lanka based on international recommendations with the continuous support of our library professionals and National Library of Sri Lanka.

References

- Ahmad, Y. (2006). The Scope and definitions of heritage: from tangible to intangible. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 12(3), 292–300.
- FOLA, (2005). *Living heritage of Sri Lankan Tamils: digital image library of Foundation for Library Awareness*. Retrieved from:
<http://jaffnaheritage.blogspot.com/search/label/customs%29>
- Howell, D. (2013). The intangible cultural heritage of Wales: a need for safeguarding? . *Intangible Heritage* , 8, 104-116.
- Manetsi, T. (2011.) Safeguarding intangible heritage in South Africa: a critique of the draft national policy on living heritage,6, 58-69.
- UNDP, (2004). *Human development report 2004: cultural liberty in today's diverse world*. Retrieved from: http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr04_complete.pdf. [Accessed on 20.07.2013].
- UNESCO, (1972). *Convention concerning the protection of world cultural and natural heritage*. Retrieved from : <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/convention-en.pdf>. [Accessed on 20.07.2013].
- UNESCO, (2001). *UNESCO universal declaration on cultural diversity*. Retrieved from: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001271/127160m.pdf>. [Accessed on 20.07.2013].
- UNESCO, (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. Retrieved from : <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf> [Accessed on 20.07.2013].

UNESCO, (2005). *Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions*. Retrieved from:
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001429/142919e.pdf> [Accessed on 26.07.2013].

UNESCO, (2009). *Case study report: Sri Lanka: a project of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in Sri Lanka: training course for safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (15-22 July 2009, Kyoto, Osaka and Nara JAPAN)*. Retrieved from:
http://www.accu.or.jp/ich/en/training/casestudy_pdf/09_10/case_study_report_srila_nka.pdf [Accessed on 20.09.2013].

UNESCO, (2013). *News*. Retrieved from: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/news> [Accessed on 20.09.2013].

Wettasinghe, S. (2008). Documenting and archiving the intangible heritage for knowledge Preservation. *'Knowledge Preservation and National Archives'*. *National Archives Week- Souvenir Nov. 2008*. (pp. 03-07). Colombo: National Archives.