

Revitalizing indigenous cultural heritage: strengthening resilience, viability, and conservation practices

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Introduction

Heritage and the history of a particular community or ethnic group is of extreme importance as it possesses a unique identity to keep their integrity. Heritage is regarded as the driver of development and encompasses various categories such as cultural, natural, tangible, intangible, mixed and heritage in times of conflict which are inherited from previous generations having a high universal, cultural, aesthetic, historic, scientific values and social significances. Cultural heritage is key to a community's resilient sense of identity. Each cultural heritage is embedded with intrinsic values and intellect, which help the present generation to return to its roots. The invaluable cultural legacy of a community has to be restored and transmitted to the future generations. Showcasing indigenous heritage and culture can further promote the diversity and harmony among different civilizations for its better conservation and management. Cultural heritage, in all its components, is a valuable, if not vital, factor for the reorganisation of our societies on the basis of dialogue between cultures, respect for identities and a feeling of belonging to a community of values (Sieber, 2018). Hence, it is very significant to safeguard the cultural, historical and natural assets – both in tangible and intangible form – to maintain the unique as

well as collective identity of a particular community.

The unique culture and history of a region having sufficient heritage value has to be conserved to continue the legacy to make the diverse communities and future generations more dynamic. Indigenous community and ethnic group usually reside in its original location having own historical distinctiveness, and they practice a traditional culture. Indigenous peoples are the holders of unique languages, knowledge systems and beliefs and they possess invaluable knowledge of practices for the sustainable management of natural resources (United Nations, 2025). It also encompasses differentiating practices, performances, expressions, skills, representations, traditions, spirituality etc. Indigenous cultural heritage properties are considered to be of local importance and value as they are the crucial elements of the identity of such communities with immense cultural significance. Indigenous communities possess a deep understanding of their local culture and traditions and have immense wisdom, emphasizing the need for unearthing underrepresented histories and making such practices accessible to the public.

When considering the frequent exclusion of indigenous peoples from World Heritage nomination processes, we can find that it is not surprising, for there is also often a lack of consideration of indigenous peoples' cultural heritage and cultural values in nomination documents (IWGIA, 2015). Unnoticed and unpreserved indigenous heritage eventually cease to exist and the community will lose its identities forever. Indigenous communities have to be empowered to safeguard their own histories and cultural heritage to reduce

the risk of disappearing. There are many indigenous communities itself which have vanished due to social, cultural, economic and technological changes. Furthermore, heritage is increasingly facing a number of challenges. The major causes of loss and damage to natural, cultural and built heritage are diagrammatically represented in Figure 1 in a cloud word format.

Safeguarding indigenous cultural heritage – concerns and strategies

Each heritage possesses very different problems and challenges at the regional, national and global levels, and some are common, which can be religious, cultural, societal, economic and political. Hence the importance of integrating them with indigenous approach can be single or multidirectional. When a State Party does not consider the indigenous cultural heritage of an area to have “outstanding universal value”, or sees no necessity for taking this possibility into account, indigenous heritage values are not given the attention and emphasis they deserve and require in terms of their protection (IWGIA, 2015). Conservation, awareness and community participation are the essential components of safeguarding the indigenous cultural heritage. Due to a lack of willingness and awareness to be engaged in heritage management, young generation struggles to establish self-motivation necessary for active participation in decision-making processes (Janković and Mihelić, 2018). Further it can lead to neglect or destruction of such heritage having a universal heritage value. It is also important for an indigenous community to recognise the cultural and economic benefits associated with their

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indigenous heritage for its long-term sustainability. If the indigenous community is able to identify the cultural and heritage value of that particular assets, it can be better protected and managed through planning policies and decisions. There are few approaches to promote heritage studies aiming to contribute to the awareness-raising of youth; however, the engagement of youth is still limited to informing or educating youth about the predominated heritage discourse (Wang *et al.*, 2017). Various strategies have to be developed to overcome these problems, which can be performed through documentation, research, training, teaching and learning, dissemination etc.

Galleries, libraries, archives and museums

Heritage resources have to be preserved as a historical record that can be referred to for teaching, learning, research and interpretations. Galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM) are memory institutions which play an invaluable role in the preservation and the protection of indigenous cultural heritage. Role of GLAM is pivotal in promoting and understanding of cultural heritage diversity at local level to large sections of the population and the access to data enabling them to understand the process through which the culture and traditions change, which is also significant for an intercultural approach. Local libraries can be a repository of printed and recorded materials such as contemporary books, periodicals, newspapers and electronic records to go deeper into indigenous culture and history and get the younger generation inspired. Documentation preserves the history of a cultural property and enable to provide a clear idea about its original structure, change over time and even loss thereby supporting restoration, regulation process and also reconstructing historic resources. Documentation, recordings and other forms of archiving provide both an opportunity, allowing modern communities to reconstitute “lost knowledge”, and a risk, where destruction of the document or archive threatens the possibility of future transmission or revival (Wilson and

Figure 1. A word cloud representing causes of loss and damage to heritage properties



Source(s): Compiled by authors

Ballard, 2017). Analysing, safeguarding and documenting the cultural heritage also support to avoid any dispute or conflict concerning its identity, ownership and ensuring the cultural sustainability which is very essential in the case of indigenous cultural heritage properties. The photographs, drawings, sketches, data, written descriptions, historical reports, recording of physical, spatial and visual data, etc. can be part of documentation. Need for identifying and registering the stolen cultural objects is also equally significant while safeguarding the traditional legacy. GLAM can support the indigenous community to deposit their legacy material in their archives and establish inventories, databases and catalogues.

Informatics approach

GLAM and cultural institutions use broad spectrum of tools, methods and techniques to record knowledge, arts, music and traditions and make them more accessible to provide rich cultural heritage experience to the targeted groups and greater access to the rich collections. There are many tools and techniques which are adopted in the cultural heritage sector as part of its architectural heritage improvement process to revive the lost glory. Digital

preservation is a long-lasting solution to threats such as decay, war, fire and flood and enables to secure the availability of useful resources for academicians of future generations (Moseti, 2016). Adopting modern tools like digitization, heritage building information modelling (HBIM), 3D Modelling (three-dimensional reconstruction, virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, etc. will help to document and virtually reconstruct to efficiently manage them. It can further enhance in improving the visitor's experience, reconstruction and exploration through its visual display. The conservation, restoration and reconstruction processes at different times of the cultural heritage artifact, buildings, monuments, etc. can be documented using informatics tools for its contextual understanding and also to attract and engage its users. Documentation of drawings, stock photos and images on various structures, remains, alteration works, design and architecture, wooden and stone versions, etc. of such structures existed at different periods and can be documented to better understand the transition. The metric dimensions such as 2D and 3D are to be recorded, documented and made visible to the

public so that the experts in the field can evaluate and offer their comments and also use it for educational, research, business opportunities and also to enhance the cultural tourism. Digital representation of plans, elevation measurements, topology, column, dimensions, architectural and interior designs available/proposed by various scholars can be documented and organized, providing access to the global community to research. Virtual exhibition of the historic representation of cultural heritage structures can be created to better understand the structure and traditions. Traditional and popular culture of the indigenous community can be exhibited through museums. Ornamentations, decorations, sculptures, tiles and vocabularies also can be documented and displayed. The digital heritage, which increases access to digital culture for its users and can have its own economic and social perspectives, hence can be a foundation for future conservation efforts.

Pedagogical approach

Cultural heritage has its own significance at local level and can be understood only by studying and learning from our common history. Educating and raising the awareness among the indigenous community is very significant, especially among the younger generation. Domesticating the lessons and curriculum and teaching the future generations the importance of their local culture and tradition can build an appreciation and respect towards them. Educational institutions have to highlight the importance of cultural heritage and educate the younger generations to foster the feeling of unity in diversity. The collaboration with the schools and promoting community-led initiatives allows the direct inclusion of students in knowing their cultural heritage through various activities. Creative expression on indigenous heritage through projects, seminars, workshops, public lectures, training programs, exchange of professionals and experts, drawing and storytelling competitions and presentations can enhance awareness to a great extent. Visiting monuments, built, natural and archaeological sites, art and historical sites, etc. in the locality can help the students to learn more about their local culture to make them understand the

significance of an intercultural approach. Knowledge, practices and traditions can also be learned through exploring the historical and cultural roots. Publications and mass media, both print and electronic, can be used for heritage education and can be included as pedagogical and integration tools in the education system along with the curriculum materials for learning and teaching about local historical, cultural and religious heritage. The younger generation has to be targeted considering the vitality and transmission of the cultural heritage elements to the future generations.

Community participation and collaborative approach

Local communities have to be actively involved in conserving and safeguarding their cultural heritage. Fostering connections with the local stakeholders, state agencies, national heritage bodies, international organisations, international communities, government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and media, GLAM will play a vital role in raising awareness about the indigenous heritage. Drawing upon collective memory and historical awareness, each community is responsible for identifying and managing its cultural heritage (Wibowo *et al.*, 2024). The indigenous community, local heritage professionals and activists are to be empowered to protect their invaluable records of everyday life, advocating for language preservation and to ensure the transmission of these traditions and deep connections to future generations, which can further acknowledge the uniqueness of indigenous heritage, which creates a linkage to regional and international agencies. Local population can also make a collaboration with those visiting the site from other countries to support research and skills that are to be transferred at local, national and global levels. This will make them proud of their past and influence them to protect their heritage.

Heritage protection policies and decision-making

Local authorities as well as the government and non-governmental organizations have equal responsibility in the protection and preservation of

local heritage, keeping its importance as cultural richness of a community as well as country. Any heritage preservation should ensure its sustainability, inclusiveness and should be beneficial to indigenous communities. Lack of awareness and community engagement can hinder understanding, preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. Introduction of legislation and policies is essential to legally protect from the exploitation by the commercial users and to strengthen community a sense of ownership and pride. Legislation supports controlling and preserving cultural heritage and also systematically record, properly conserved and stored. Effective participation in decision-making processes relating to cultural heritage is crucial for indigenous peoples, who are often the victims of both cultural and natural heritage protection policies that fail to take their rights and perspectives into consideration. (IWGIA, 2015). Strong commitment and contemporary international legislations are required to make the irreplaceable treasures of the past intact and connect them with the indigenous communities with responsibility. Establishment of an inventory system, which encompasses identifying and defining elements, is crucial as it is difficult to recover lost or stolen objects which are sometimes irreplaceable. Properties that are of cultural heritage value are to be recorded to know what one's resources are to effectively safeguard them. Heritage Registers can prioritise the elements based on its urgency to safeguard so that it can get national and international attention. They should contain information about all properties, as they can act as the keystone for heritage management and become an effective mechanism for providing protection from demolition, timely involvement of authorities and disaster mitigation.

Conclusion

The unique identity and traditions of a particular community have to be protected and preserved. The indigenous people and the local communities, being the core of our global heritage, continue to strive for recognition and revitalization and have to be educated on the importance of their

unique cultural heritage and the need for preserving them. More local cultural exchange programs can contribute immensely to the diversity and sustainable development of world civilizations and also in promoting peace and avoiding war and conflict at global level. Indigenous community involvement in preserving the indigenous heritage is very significant as it requires a local approach to protect and restore its cultural heritage. Their collaboration and knowledge sharing are vital. Indigenous communities' participation has to be ensured in the planning and implementation of conservation/safeguarding measures for cultural heritage. Community participation can further help them to revitalize and effectively safeguard their cultural heritage. Organizing community-based training program in identifying and documenting their own heritage will be an effective mechanism to empower them in the safeguarding efforts. Finally, sensitive research on indigenous communities is to be carried out and ethical protocols and policies have to be developed to effectively address the needs of indigenous community for defending and conserving their traditional environments, culture, monuments and knowledge.

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