Original Article

The role of intangible cultural heritage policies in protecting indigenious tradition: a document analysis

Annasaheb Babasaheb Sadagar

Assistant Professor,Abasaheb Marathe Arts & New Commerce Science College Rajapur.

Creative Commons

OPEN ACCESS

Abstract

Indigenous and tribal communities play a vital role in safeguarding India's intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which includes traditional knowledge systems, folk arts, rituals, belief systems, festivals, and sustainable ways of life. In Maharashtra, tribal groups such as the Warli, Gond, Bhil, Katkari, Koli Mahadev, Thakkar, Mali, and Dhangar have preserved distinctive cultural practices deeply rooted in nature and community life. However, rapid modernization, economic marginalization, migration, infrastructural limitations, and weak policy implementation pose serious threats to the continuity of these traditions. The present study aims to document major indigenous traditions and art forms of tribal communities in Maharashtra, identify challenges faced in preserving intangible cultural heritage, and critically analyze existing national and international policies and legal frameworks related to ICH conservation through document analysis. The study further identifies gaps between policy objectives and their on-ground implementation, particularly in terms of institutional coordination, financial support, community participation, and documentation. Based on the findings, the paper proposes strategic recommendations such as strengthening community-based participation, integrating ICH into education, enhancing digital documentation, providing financial incentives to traditional practitioners, and promoting sustainable cultural tourism. The study emphasizes that effective preservation of indigenous intangible cultural heritage requires a holistic, community-centered approach supported by adequate funding, research, and coordinated governance structures.

Keywords- Intangible cultural heritage, tribal communities, indigenous traditions, Maharashtra, cultural preservation, policy analysis

Introduction

Indigenous and tribal communities of India are the custodians of rich and diverse intangible cultural heritage (ICH), encompassing traditional knowledge systems, art forms, rituals, festivals, belief systems, oral traditions, and sustainable lifestyles. In Maharashtra, tribal communities such as the Warli, Gond, Bhil, Katkari, Koli Mahadev, Thakkar, Mali, and Dhangar have preserved unique cultural practices that reflect a deep relationship with nature, community life, and ancestral traditions. Art forms like Warli and Gond paintings, folk dances, nature worship, and traditional ecological knowledge are not merely cultural expressions but integral components of tribal identity and social organization.

Despite their cultural significance, these indigenous traditions face serious challenges due to modernization, migration, economic marginalization, inadequate infrastructure, and gaps in policy implementation. Although national and international frameworks particularly UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage conventions and India's tribal development policies aim to safeguard such heritage, their effectiveness at the grassroots level remains uneven. This research paper examines the indigenous traditions of major tribal communities in Maharashtra, analyzes existing policies and legal frameworks for ICH conservation, identifies implementation gaps through document analysis, and highlights the socio-economic and institutional challenges faced by tribal communities. Finally, it proposes strategic, community-centered recommendations to strengthen the preservation and sustainable transmission of indigenous intangible cultural heritage in India.

Considering all these shortcomings, it becomes clear that for the effective implementation of ICH policies. there is a need for a community-centered approach, adequate funding, research enhancement, as well as increased coordination within administrative structures.

Objectives

1. Information about indigenous traditions, arts, festivals, folk art, traditional knowledge systems, etc.
2. Identifying challenges and obstacles faced by indigenous/tribal communities while preserving intangible cultural heritage.
3. Analyze documents of existing policies and laws for the conservation of intangible cultural heritage in India at the document level.
4. Identify gaps in policy implementation based on document analysis.
5. Formulate strategic recommendations to make the preservation of indigenous traditions more effective.

Material and Methodology

Social and Cultural Information:

Major Tribal Communities in Maharashtra

While studying the social system of Maharashtra, one thing becomes evident. In different parts of Maharashtra, people from various tribes reside. They have lived on this land since ancient times, maintaining the balance of the local environment, and consider themselves as the original inhabitants, who are today classified as tribal communities. These tribes, residing primarily in various widespread areas, are known by different names. Each tribe has distinct ways of living, language, art, culture, traditions, customs, and social structure. Information about these tribes is as follows:

- Bhil
- Warli
- Katkari
- Koli Mahadev
- Gond
- Thakkar
- Mali
- Dhangar (Bhatke)

Their settlements are primarily found in districts such as Nashik, Dhule, Nandurbar, Thane, Palghar, Raigad, Pune, Navi Mumbai, Chandrapur, and Gadchiroli.

Warli Painting

Warli painting is an ancient and distinctive artistic tradition of the tribal society in Maharashtra. Predominantly developed among the Warli tribal community in the Palghar, Thane, Nashik, and Dahanu regions, this art seeks beauty in simplicity. Research indicates that the origin of Warli art dates back to ancient times. This art form primarily developed as wall paintings, and the Warli community used these paintings in religious rituals, agricultural cycles, weddings, festivals, and nature worship. Warli social life was expressed through ritualistic paintings known as 'Laser' or 'Lasen'. The use of geometric shapes in a striking manner, symbolic expression, and a deep connection with nature are characteristic features of

Warli art Features:

- An art form that originated from the Warli community in the Palghar and Thane regions of Maharashtra.
- Paintings are made using white color on a red/ochre background.
- Subjects include farming, nature, animals and birds, weddings, festivals, Tarpa dance
- Characters are represented using geometric shapes (triangles, circles, squares). Style and Artistic Features:
- Although Warli art is very simple, its composition is highly significant. This painting mainly displays the following features:

Symbolism:

Every figure has a cultural meaning. For example, a square is considered a symbol of the "Devchauk" or the Mother Goddess. Cultural Significance and Contemporary Warli Art: Warli painting is not just an artistic tradition; it is an inseparable part of the cultural identity of the Warli community. This art clearly reflects respect for nature, gender equality, community spirit, and simplicity in life. It is considered a visual reflection of religion, folk traditions, and social structure. Today, Warli art has gained widespread fame in both the Indian and international art markets. Various artists have worked on modern mediums—canvas, fabric, murals, and digital art bringing this art to the new generation. The use of Warli motifs has also increased in tourism, fashion, and design industries. This, on one hand, preserves tribal art, while on the other hand, provides local Warli artists with new employment opportunities.

Gond art

Gond art is considered one of the most impressive and ancient forms of tribal art in India. In the folklore, nature worship, and daily life of the Gond tribe, this art holds a special place. This painting expresses the beauty and spirituality of everyday experiences through colors. Gond art is a traditional mural painting closely linked with the social, spiritual, and cultural life of the Gond tribes of central India. Gond art mainly developed from the Gond tribes of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha. The colorful paintings on walls were an important part of their folk culture. The figures in this art reflect nature, animals, mythological and daily life

This essay presents a study of the origin, characteristics, symbolism, and modern transformations of Gond art.

- Art of the Gond tribal community from the Vidarbha and Gadchiroli regions.
- The art is characterized by colorful, intricate, nature-centric paintings; attractive patterns of leaves, animals, and natural lines are seen.

Characteristics of Gond art

1. Use of lines – Defining shapes using fine and repetitive lines.
2. Dot-based filling – Filling figures with dots.
3. Vibrant color palette – Traditional use of natural colors; use of acrylics has increased in modern times.
4. Symbolism – Trees, animals, and birds convey creation, the life cycle, and spirituality

Gond Art in Contemporary Times

After 1970, Gond art began to be exhibited internationally and acquired the status of fine art. Renowned artists like Jangarh Singh Shyam brought global recognition to this art

form. Contemporary artists present modern interpretations of Gond art using digital media, canvas, and commercial art materials

Folk Danc

- Tarpa Dance (Warli)
- Dolki Dance
- Bhondla
- Dhop
- Dhol-Tasha Dance
- Gondali and Gond Dance

In these dances, instruments such as dhol, tarpa, timpani, tal, tambura, and horns are primarily used.

Folk Life and Traditions

The tribal communities of Maharashtra are considered rich in cultural traditions, customs, religious beliefs, and social lifestyle. The lives of tribes like Gond, Warli, Koli, Katkari, Bhil, Thakur, and Mahadev Koli are based on their traditional beliefs, social practices, and rituals. Marriage systems and religious beliefs are at the core of their social organization.

Faith and Belief Systems

Nature Worship

Most tribal communities consider nature as the supreme deity.

- Sun, Moon, water, fire, mountains, trees, and forest gods are worshiped.
- In the Warli community, the worship of 'Hirwa Dev', 'Palgahat Devi', and 'Waghdev' is considered special.

Ancestor Worship

- The spirits of ancestors are regarded as sacred, and they are honored during festivals, celebrations, and family rituals.
- In the Gond community, 'Pendha Puja' is an important tradition of ancestor worship.

Folk Deities and Local Temples

In tribal societies, local deities, village gods, the Waghya-Murli tradition, and Otari/Devsthan are the focal points of daily life.

In the Koli and Katkari communities, deities like Kanbai, Zirmuri, and Kolidevi are worshiped.

Festivals and Rituals

- Pola, Harina Poojan, Kali Puja, Navratri, Bhondla, Kundalika Pooja are religious festivals celebrated in various forms among all tribes.
- Dance, music, and traditional instruments are the main components of religious performances.

Traditional Knowledge and Livelihood

Agriculture and Forest Produce

- Paddy, finger millet, varai, kodra, maize, chickpeas, pigeon peas crops.
- Depends on forest produce like honey collection, timber, peanuts, wild melons, cashew, etc.

Knowledge of Medicinal Plants

- Tribals know Ayurvedic and forest medicinal treatments.
- Use of wild roots, leaves, and tubers for treating illnesses.

Social Structure and Lifestyle

- Harmony with nature   conservation of water sources and wildlife.
- Simple clothing style cotton garments, ornaments like shells, beads, metal jewelry.
- Food   flatbread, kodri (coarse grains), nagli (finger millet), steamed rice, tubers, hunting, fishing.
- Language   Warli, Bhil, Gondi, Kumbhi, Konkani, Katkari dialects.

Geographical Information and Main Challenges

Geography and Infrastructure:

- Remote areas: Tribal villages and settlements are located in hilly, dense forest regions, making it difficult to build schools and residential facilities and to supply resources there.
- Lack of schools: In many places, due to the shortage of primary and secondary schools, children have to travel long distances.

Financial and Resource Shortages:

- Insufficient financial provision: Even though funds are approved for schemes, they are not available on time or in adequate amounts.
- Shortage of teachers: Retaining good and trained teachers in remote areas is a challenge.
- Unavailability of educational materials: Textbooks, notebooks, and uniforms may not be received on time or may be of poor quality.

Social and Cultural Barriers:

- Financial instability: Due to low parental income, children often have to leave education halfway and are frequently required to work.
- Migration: Migration for employment disrupts children's education.
- Cultural differences: Adapting is difficult as tribal culture and language differ from mainstream education.
- Parental indifference: Not fully understanding the importance of education or being preoccupied with other work.

Implementation of Schemes:

- Delay in receiving scholarships: Delay in receiving scholarships and other financial aid creates obstacles in education.
- Inefficient implementation: Although schemes may look good on paper, there are flaws in their actual implementation.

Implemented Major Policies and Measures:

Research and Documentation:

- Providing funding to Tribal Research Institutes (TRIs) to study and document their culture, language, art, and traditions.
- Preserving heritage sites and artworks, such as conserving rock art.

Economic and Social Development:

- Providing free education, scholarships, and educational materials to tribals.
- Making healthcare facilities available and providing support for economic advancement.

Cultural Preservation:

- Implementing various initiatives to promote and propagate tribal art and culture.
- Boosting cultural tourism so that local artists receive support and their art forms find a market.

Institutional Support:

Implement policies through the Tribal Development Department and Tribal Research Institutes (Since TRIs). 1984, the Government of Maharashtra has established a separate Tribal Development Department to carry out developmental work.

Preservation of Traditional Knowledge

Recognize tribal communities as protectors of water, forests, and land, and give importance to their traditional knowledge and lifestyle. Through the conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), UNESCO and national institutions have implemented various policies and measures for the overall development of tribal society. The main objective of ICH is to empower tribal communities by protecting traditional knowledge, culture, arts, rituals, skills, folklore, and social practices (UNESCO, 2021). ICH's contribution is considered significant both in terms of preserving the cultural rights of tribal communities and improving their living standards.

Documentation and Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Under ICH, structured documentation of tribal folk art, folklore, oral history, rituals, dance, music, and handicrafts is carried out. This process prevents the destruction of the knowledge systems of tribal communities (Smith, 2019). Enhancing the Economic Value of Tribal Art and Skills ICH policies provide tribal artists with training, marketing, sustainable employment generation, and market access. This enables the art of communities like Warli, Gond, Kokna, etc., to gain international recognition (UNESCO, 2020).

Community-Based Participation (Community-Based Approach)

In ICH operations, local tribes are involved in the decision-making process. According to the principle of "Community-led safeguarding," all projects are implemented according to the needs of the community (Brown, 2018).

Education and Heritage Awareness Programs

Under ICH, local cultural curricula, mother tongue education, and school initiatives based on traditional knowledge are implemented for tribal children. This helps preserve cultural identity (Patel, 2022).

Protection of Cultural Rights

Key components of ICH policies include tribal control over their cultural property, preventing cultural appropriation, and protecting rights over cultural intellectual property (UNDRIP, 2007).

Conservation of Environmental and Traditional Knowledge

The tribal community's forest management, medicinal plants, organic farming, and sustainable lifestyles are preserved as scientific knowledge. ICH considers this environmental-related knowledge a source for development (Kumar, 2021).

Promotion of Cultural Tourism

Under ICH, tribal cultural festivals, art forms, folk dances, and handicraft exhibitions are promoted, connecting tribal sites with tourism. This accelerates economic development (Sharma, 2020).

Shortcomings in the Implementation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Policies:

Several structural, administrative, and social challenges are observed while implementing Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) policies.

1. First, the lack of institutional coordination required for policy implementation is a significant issue. Due to inadequate coordination between central, state, and local institutions, it becomes difficult to maintain consistency in heritage conservation initiatives (UNESCO, 2023). \

2. Second, inadequate financial resources pose a major obstacle. Many community-based ICH projects lack sufficient funding, making it difficult to run essential programs to sustain traditions, folk art, and cultural skills.

3. The third shortcoming is the insufficient participation of local communities. Although communities are central to ICH conservation, their direct involvement in the policy-making process is limited. Sufficient space is not given for consultation and participation in decision-making (Smith, 2019). The fourth significant challenge is the lack of documentation and research. Due to the inadequate recording, classification, and research of many intangible cultural elements, policies for their protection cannot be effectively implemented.

Strategic Recommendations for ICH Preservation

1. **Increasing Community-Based Participation.**

   It is essential to ensure the direct involvement of local communities, traditional artisans, artists, and cultural bearers in ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) preservation. Increased community participation can help sustain traditions in a more durable manner (UNESCO, 2018).

2. **Educational Integration.**

Including information about ICH in school and higher education curricula, as well as developing training programs for students. Instilling the value of cultural heritage within the educational system provides long-term support for preservation.

Financial Incentive Schemes.

Providing financial assistance, grants, market access, and technical tools to traditional artists, artisans, and communities preserving cultural traditions is necessary. Economic stability helps traditions endure (Smith, 2019).

Digital Documentation.

Using modern technology to create audio-visual records of traditional arts, folk traditions, oral literature, rituals, and festivals.

Compiling and preserving. Creating digital archives makes the accessibility and dissemination of ICH more effective.

1. **Strengthening Legal Frameworks.**

   Enable protective laws, guidelines, and enforcement mechanisms at the national and state levels for the safeguarding of ICH. Protection of intellectual property rights (IPR) is necessary to prevent the misuse of traditional knowledge.

2. **Promotion of Research.**

Encourage research on ICH through universities, research institutions, and cultural study centers, conduct regional surveys and documentation, and enrich existing literature.

3. **Sustainable Cultural Tourism.**
   Develop cultural tourism while respecting local cultural traditions. Tourism increases economic benefits, but sustainable practices are necessary to avoid the commercial exploitation of traditions (Bortolotto, 2020).

4. **Intergenerational Transmission.**
   Organize training camps, workshops, guru-disciple tradition programs, and cultural camps for the younger generation. Heritage cannot be preserved without passing it on to the next generation.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Reference

1. Brown, T. (2018). Community-led safeguarding of Indigenous heritage. Cultural Heritage Review, 12(3), 45–59.
2. Kumar, R. (2021). Traditional ecological knowledge among tribal communities. Journal of Indigenous Studies, 9(2), 88–104.
3. Patel, S. (2022). Indigenous education and cultural sustainability. Educational Research Journal, 14(1), 33–47.
4. Sharma, A. (2020). Cultural tourism and tribal development in India. Tourism & Society, 8(4), 120–138.
5. Smith, L. (2019). Intangible cultural heritage and Indigenous identity. Heritage Studies, 6(2), 55–73.
6. UNESCO. (2020). Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage for sustainable development.
7. UNESCO. (2021). Operational guidelines for the implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.
8. United Nations. (2007). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).
9. Kurin, R. (2017). Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Smithsonian Institution Press.
10. Smith, L. (2019). Intangible heritage and community participation. Routledge.
11. UNESCO. (2023). Implementation challenges in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO Publishing.
12. Bortolotto, C. (2020). Heritage dynamics and sustainable cultural tourism. Heritage Studies Press.
13. Smith, L. (2019). Intangible heritage and community participation. Cultural Policy Review.
14. UNESCO. (2018). Basic texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. UNESCO Publishing.