

Heritage Safeguarding and Governance Practices of Indigenous Communities of Nagaland

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Abstract

This paper explores how participatory approaches have been instrumental in safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of Nagaland, a region in northeast India known for its vibrant cultural diversity. Grounded in the principles of UNESCO's 2003 Convention, the safeguarding and documentation initiative led by Contact Base, supported by the German Consulate General Kolkata, illustrates how communities collectively engage in documenting, transmitting, managing, and innovating their cultural practices. The article demonstrates how inclusive, community-driven safeguarding strategies strengthen cultural identities, foster social cohesion, and contribute to sustainable development.

Introduction

Participation under the 2003 UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage means the full, free, and informed involvement of communities, groups, and individuals in the identification, safeguarding, management, and transmission of their intangible cultural heritage, with respect for their knowledge systems, values, and priorities. This paper shares how community participation is integrated, and implemented in the safeguarding efforts in Nagaland. The Contact Base initiative (May 2024- March 2025) focused on community led documentation, inventorying and heritage-sensitive promotion of the diverse ICH of the state. It was supported by the German Consulate General Kolkata under the German Cultural Preservation Fund. The project also supported documentation of community-centred, participatory models for safeguarding living heritage.

Nagaland is a culturally vibrant state of north-eastern India and is inhabited by 17 major indigenous communities together called the Nagas. Their lives, intertwined with the majestic mountains, undulating terrains, and lush forests, are as diverse as the flora and fauna that adorn the landscape. Their age-old traditions of weaving, basketry, architecture, food, music, dances, folklores, and festivals passed down through generations, are a testament to the enduring spirit of these fascinating people. The communities demonstrate how cultural rights, intergenerational transmission, and local knowledge systems can be activated through participatory methodologies.

Contact Base worked with the Konyak, Chakhesang, Ao, Angami, and Kuki communities in the districts of Mon, Mokokchung, Kohima, Dimapur, Phek, Chümoukedima, and Peren to build capacity of the community members to actively safeguard and promote their collective living heritage, which has been under threat of loss for some time. Gender aspects and youth engagement were explicitly addressed as critical dimensions of participation.

Community Participation in the Project

Nagaland's cultural landscape is deeply intertwined with its ecological setting. Practices in weaving, bamboo and cane work, music, food, and oral traditions reflect a sustainable

relationship with nature. However, modernization, market disconnect, and lack of recognition have posed challenges to the transmission of these practices. Against this backdrop, community participation in safeguarding has evolved as both a necessity and a right. The participatory model adopted emphasized ethical collaboration, consent-based storytelling, and inclusive representation. It positioned communities not as subjects of documentation but as active knowledge-holders and decision-makers. Participation was layered and context-specific, ranging from documentation and heritage education to cultural entrepreneurship and policy dialogue.

During ground-level documentation and inventorying of cultural traditions, several participatory workshops were conducted in Mon, Mokokchung, Longwa, Khonoma, Pfutsero, Kohima, Chümoukedima, Zapami etc. in partnership with community institutions and educational bodies. These workshops covered training in heritage documentation, digital storytelling, sustainable crafts, and cultural tourism. Community members—particularly youth and women—were trained to capture oral histories, music and dance, craft processes, and local festivals. Over 400 persons were engaged in mapping their intangible heritage—including songs, dances, festivals, food, textile motifs, and oral histories. Through digital storytelling and photo essays, communities reclaimed their narratives and contextualized their heritage.

Throughout the project workshops and meetings served as immersive learning experiences where communities shared about their heritage, built capacity and showcased their innovation. Cultural exchange workshops facilitated cross-cultural understanding and design collaboration. In such workshops renowned Indian designer and Norwegian basket maker facilitated design innovation labs with artisans using banana fibre, bamboo, and wood. The outcomes — products blending traditional motifs with contemporary design — were showcased at symposium and exhibitions in Dimapur and Kolkata.

The project amplified its impact through global engagement. The launch of the website www.nagalandlivingheritage.com and a mobile application Explore Nagaland created visibility and connectivity. These tools have made local cultural offerings accessible to tourists and researchers, supporting decentralized heritage-based tourism. An international webinar titled “A Responsible Approach to Cultural Tourism” brought together tourism officials, indigenous leaders, and global experts. It addressed how equitable partnerships, policy frameworks, and ethical cultural consumption could support sustainable tourism. Symposiums and exhibitions at Dimapur and Kolkata created further engagement with artists, educators, designers, and youth at state and national levels. These consultations created a platform to share learnings, advocate for respectful cultural exchange, and celebrate community innovation. A key outcome was enabling new audiences to engage with Naga culture.

Participation Models

The following section shares effective models of community participation which were documented in the project.

A. Community led intergenerational learning spaces :

Among the Naga communities, the Morung has long served as a crucial institution for intergenerational learning, skill transmission, and community cohesion. Traditionally, the Morung functioned as a youth dormitory and training ground where unmarried boys were taught warfare, craftsmanship, cultural norms, and social responsibilities. It also acted as a village guard post. Parallel spaces existed for young women, where they learned about family roles, womanhood, and cultural practices. Though the original functions have faded with time, villages continue to preserve Morung structures, often richly carved with motifs reflecting ethnic identity and heritage. During the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, some Morungs have been revived as informal learning hubs. There are individual efforts like that of Vesao Phuzo who after his retirement from Government office, has set up a cultural centre at the Naga United Village to teach Chakhesang youth traditional songs and dances. He has constructed a wooden house in the traditional style, reimagining the Morung as a living space for cultural education and continuity.

B. Educational Institutions and Safeguarding Living Heritage: Educational institutions like Fazl Ali College in Mokokchung are playing a key role by supporting research and skills training. Fazl Ali college is the only institution offering honours degree in Ao language. While teaching in this department they realized that there is very little original text or documentation in Ao language and thus the college established a language translation centre. The college houses a small museum curated by the history department as part of their practical student project. Another unique initiative of Fazl Ali College is their Indigenous Skills Learning Centre, called Ketsangriju, established in 2021, where community craftspersons, masters, and experts are invited to train college youth in various traditional hand skills of basketry, weaving, etc.

C. Community Museums : Many villages have created community-run museums that preserve heritage while fostering memory, education, and tourism. Zapami, a Chakhesang village in the Pfutsero sub-division of Nagaland's Phek district, is one example. The village is recognized as a Heritage Village for its vibrant cultural landscape. Known as the traditional home of nettle fibre weaving—a rare practice still alive today—Zapami takes great pride in its living traditions. Motivated by a desire to conserve their cultural legacy, the Village Council established a heritage museum showcasing around 350 objects contributed by local families. The museum offers visitors a deep insight into Chakhesang life, with exhibits ranging from traditional weaponry, farming tools, weaving implements, and kitchenware, to rice beer vats, musical instruments, and ancestral textiles. It also features World War II memorabilia, models of traditional homes, and wrestling arenas—highlighting the community's connection to their past. The museum stands as a powerful symbol of the community's dedication to safeguarding and celebrating their cultural identity.

D. Community led Heritage Governance and Tourism : Community based organizations manage heritage textiles, curated museums, and oversee GI protections—ensuring

cultural authority remained with the community. Chakhesang Women Welfare Society (CWWS) is an organization that works towards the betterment of Chakhesang women. In every Naga household women are in charge of the household work like weaving, agriculture, and money management. CWWS has created a network of all the community women's bodies and SHGs for leading and carrying out various development activities. CWWS also manages three operational units in its premises - a weaving unit, a tailoring unit and a food processing unit. Through these initiatives the organization is providing livelihood to women weavers, artisans, as well as to farmers producing indigenous varieties of crops. They have also curated a museum to preserve their traditional textiles along with the ones which have been registered under GI. The weavers are encouraged to work on diversified products and designs created by CWWS. They make products like bags, cushion covers, mekhlas (wrapped skirts), shawls, yardage, etc. Their initiative of a systematic method of verifying the authenticity of GI products and ensuring the cultural rights of the Chakhesang weavers through protection of their indigenous designs is praiseworthy. CWWS has a Chakhesang GI Committee and a Chakhesang Attire Committee which need to get approvals for GI products from Chakhesang Attire Regulatory Board under the Chakhesang People's Organization - the apex community body.

Khonoma, a village nestled near Kohima, stands as another powerful illustration of how indigenous wisdom and collective leadership can blend environmental care with cultural preservation. Once famed as a "warrior settlement" for its defiance against British rule, the village proudly safeguards its legacy through the upkeep of Khuda Fort—an emblem of courage and historical memory. Faced with ecological decline from past hunting habits, the community launched the Khonoma Nature Conservation and Tragopan Sanctuary (KNCTS) in 1998. This locally governed reserve has become a pioneering example of grassroots conservation, protecting rare species like Blyth's Tragopan and revitalizing native ecosystems. Strict community-imposed bans on hunting and deforestation support this effort, alongside sustainable farming, composting, and forest care. Designated as Asia's first Green Village, Khonoma now welcomes cultural and eco-tourists to experience its green ethos—through forest treks, birding, and craft-based heritage trails. Visitors buy local craft and condiments by paying money in drop boxes in trust based roadside shops and play ancient games carved into stone, all revealing a community rooted in tradition, resilience, and trust.

E. Cultural enterprise and Entrepreneurship : People across the state, especially youth and women, have set up businesses exemplifying how storytelling and entrepreneurship intersect. Their efforts preserve heritage through books, homestays, tours, craft innovations and culinary ventures. Equipping communities to manage exposure and market shifts has also built resilience. Youth-led documentation has emerged as a powerful vehicle for ICH preservation. Phejin Konyak, great-granddaughter of a headhunter, authored *The Last of the Tattooed Headhunters* and runs a homestay-gallery that showcases Konyak traditions. The safeguarding initiative has spurred innovation. AjunglaJamir, founder of Nagabowl Express, promotes Naga cuisine such as Axone (fermented soybean) and bamboo shoots while training youth from underprivileged backgrounds in culinary skills. Craft enterprises exemplify how through co-creation,

artisans collaborate with designers to reimagine their crafts without compromising cultural meaning.

Ethical Considerations and Challenges

Safeguarding projects need to address ethical questions around representation, respect, equitable participation and sustainability. The challenge of representation vs. reduction needs to ensure that cultural practices are not misrepresented or reduced to “tourist spectacles”. This requires careful community led curation and consent-based storytelling. The project focused on building awareness on respect for local values and meanings. Documentation of textile colour, pattern, symbols, and motifs need to share on the intrinsic meanings or ritual significance and limits to commercial reproduction. Community-led verification through bodies like the Chakhesang Attire Committee is a good practice for addressing these concerns. To ensure gender balance and generational inclusion, the project foregrounded women weavers, youth entrepreneurs, and senior custodians in its activities and panel discussions in knowledge forums. The webinar and the symposiums provided valuable policy and academic perspectives. UN Tourism’s Igor Stefanovic emphasized aligning tourism initiatives with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Legal safeguards, infrastructure support, and benefit-sharing frameworks are crucial. Examples from Europe and Latin America demonstrated how shared authorship and community leadership in tourism and design are essential for respectful engagement. A key takeaway was that tourism must support—not replace—community practices and knowledge systems.

Conclusion

The initiative thus exemplifies the principles of the 2003 Convention in action. By centring communities as knowledge-holders, creators, and rights-holders, the initiative goes beyond preservation to foster dignity, innovation, and sustainability. The region’s experience demonstrates that participatory safeguarding is not a technical exercise but an ethical commitment to cultural justice. A key learning is that safeguarding intangible heritage is most sustainable when it is community-led, institutionally supported, and globally connected. By weaving together local memory, design innovation, and policy dialogue, this initiative offers a replicable model for effective community participation for respectful and inclusive heritage preservation.

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