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India on world's heritage stage

By Ananda Shankar Jayant | Published: 13th August 2016 10:00 PM | Last Updated: 13th August 2016 10:38 AM

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Nalanda Mahavihara

Good news often comes in threes. Nalanda Mahavihara, Bihar; Khangchendzonga National Park, Sikkim; and Le Corbusier Capitol Complex, Chandigarh—the three Indian sites have been inscribed recently in UNESCO's World Heritage Site, taking India's total to 35.

If July 2016 brought this home, December 2015 saw Varanasi and Jaipur inscribed into the UNESCO's Creative Cities Network, under the charter of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), meriting a tweet from the PM himself.

Five UNESCO inscriptions for India in about eight months! Historic! Culture Minister Mahesh Sharma and his ministry deserve our congratulations.



The UNESCO defines ICH as practices, expressions, knowledge, skills, etc. transmitted and inherited over generations—living traditions that define identity, and cultural diversity, a collective cultural memory. In India, every few square kilometres mark deep changes in food, clothing, dialect, customs, etc.—all engaging and enveloping the individual and the

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society that sustain him. Much of this is handed down orally; vertically through traditions and horizontally through social customs of the village or town that the individual belongs to, thereby making cultural heritage, the warp and weft, the intangible civilisational thread that binds this nation.

With globalisation and movement of communities in search of livelihood, this fragile cultural heritage is slowly fading away as people absorb and partake of global cultures, seeking to blend in even as we forget and disregard our myriad cultural strands.

This is where the UNESCO mission of the ICH, under the Ministry of Culture, mandated to keep alive and safeguard this inheritance through documentation, digitisation, knowledge transfer and transmission, acquires importance.

In December 2015, Varanasi became the first Indian city to join a network of 16 cities, that mean music to the world (Adelaide, Liverpool etc), while Jaipur joined the field of crafts and folk arts. Almost every city in India can stake a claim to the Creative Cities Network. Already the ICH mission is looking at Chennai, Mumbai and Lucknow for music, film and gastronomy, respectively.

What do these inscriptions envisage? A sense of pride of one's cultural heritage, ownership by stakeholders and civic society, international recognition, inbound cultural tourism and economic inflow, and more importantly a continuation of the cultural traditions, sustaining communities dependent on these skills.

Further, UNESCO's representative list of the ICH of humanity includes Vedic chanting, Kutiyattam, Ramlila, Navroz, Buddhist chanting etc., while we await results of India's submissions for yoga and Kumbh Mela.

While the ministry's future plans include creating a cultural inventory and cultural mapping, it would be prudent to undertake a detailed digitisation and documentation project, to record for posterity, the many nuggets of culture that define us. My own priorities would be non-economic artistry: wedding songs in communities, lullabies, kolam etc., to be shared across platforms as open source to access cultural inheritance. A cultural Wikipedia of our precious oral and living culture is the need of the hour.

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