

Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Sri Lanka: Insights from a Systematic Literature Review

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According to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)-2003, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) refers to the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and the tools, artifacts and cultural venues associated with them, social groups, and in some cases individuals, recognize as part of their cultural heritage. Current concerns globally for loss of diverse ICH reflects the risk to traditional means of living, knowledge, and modes of expression resulting from globalization, urbanization, climate change, migrations, displacements and other processes. The threat to the ICH is most often reported as the loss of knowledge and the fear of it being forgotten due to lack of practice or not being transmitted to the new generation. UNESCO has pointed out that some components of ICH could disappear without appropriate safeguarding measures. In the Sri Lankan context as well, the potential for its loss has been identified. This systematic review analyzed the scholarly literature on safeguarding Sri Lankan ICH, with the objective of identifying challenges, implementation of hurdles, providing recommendations to improve safeguarding and recognizing research gaps. The majority of Sri Lankan studies on ICH had focused on identification and documentation, with limited attention given to safeguarding concerns. Thus, out of the publications between 2003- 2024 on ICH in Sri Lanka, 30 sources including journal articles, conference papers, and institutional reports that highlighted safeguarding issues, suggestions and research gaps were examined. Through thematic analysis employed in this review, governance and institutional limitations, community and generational challenges, knowledge and capacity deficiencies, outside influences, environmental and behavioral impacts, and safeguarding restrictions were identified as the key themes in recurring challenges in safeguarding ICH in Sri Lanka. The key suggestions identified to overcome barriers and ensure better safeguarding were; policy and institutional support, education and awareness, community and cultural involvement, innovation and technology, documentation and inventory, sustainable tourism and research, capacity building of library professionals. The review emphasizes the need for further research on minority cultures, multidisciplinary approaches, contemporary preservation techniques, knowledge transfer, and efficacy of policies. It concludes that Sri Lanka's ICH can be raised internationally by reviving lost customs, improving research, and expanding national and UNESCO ICH listings.

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