

More than monuments



What The UNESCO Tag Means For World's Living Cultures

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April in India marks the transition from spring to summer, along with the onset of festivities such as Baisakhi, which further serves as the precursor for a lesser known festival – 'Ramman'. It is an annually celebrated 11-day religious festival and ritual theatre that is held in late April in the twin villages of Saloor-Dungra, Uttarakhand. The festival was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. Mira shared all of this with her father after tumbling down a rabbit hole on the topic of festivals, showing off her newly gained knowledge. What followed was an enlightening conversation about culture, identity, and global recognition. Let's be a fly on the wall and listen to what they have to say...

Dad: Unlike monuments made out of stone, intangible heritage is an evidence of a 'living culture' - things you cannot touch, but can pass on. Festivals, dances, food traditions, storytelling, rituals - all of them are 'living heritage' passed down through generations.

Mira: I know what intangible heritage is, but what's the list and why are they even making it in the first place?

Dad: Mira, you know there is so much being done to preserve monuments, but little to protect important intangible cultural heritages worldwide and ensure the

awareness of their significance. It is with this very aim that the list was established in 2008 when the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage took effect.

Mira: But compiling the intangible heritages of so many countries across the world must be a massive task. How are they even doing it?

Dad: An Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage has been formed the members of which are elected by State Parties meeting in a General Assembly.

Mira: This is so interesting. Do you know what exactly does this list entail?

Dad: As of 2010, the programme compiles three lists - the longer Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the shorter List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices. This year, Chhath Mahaparv has been nominated for UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list 2026-27.

Mira: But nominated means that it may or may not make it to the list, right?

Dad: Yes, that's right. But we do have a strong chance, given that last year, UNESCO officially recognised Diwali as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. At the 19th Intergovernmental Committee meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria, India had successfully nominated Diwali. UNESCO recognised its philoso-

phy - the victory of light over darkness and good over evil - and its shared rituals like lighting of diyas, creating rangoli, performing Lakshmi Puja, exchanging sweets, and coming together as families and communities.

Mira: Really! I did not know that. I am so proud of India.

Dad: Here's some more pride for thought then. Garba of Gujarat, Durga Puja, Kumbh Mela, Yoga, Chhau dance, vedic chanting, Ramlila, Kalbelia folk dances of Rajasthan are some other Indian intangible heritages on the list. India's first inscription was Kutiyattam theatre in 2001.

Mira: And what about other countries? Is Zumba also on the list?

Dad: I don't know about Zumba, but there are some very interesting inclusions as Japan's Kabuki, Mexico's Day of the Dead, Ghana's highlife music, Egypt's Koshary dish, and even Iceland's swimming pool culture. Since UNESCO's 2003 Convention, the list has grown from under 100 elements to over 660 across 127 countries.

Mira: I am sure it must be a big thing to make it to the list.

given that UNESCO is involved. But does becoming a part of the list help or is it just another paper recognition?

Dad: Well, it is not just paperwork. UNESCO recognition is an important tool to boost national prestige, attract tourism, and help preserve traditions that are threatened by urbanisation and globalisation. This global hype helps... it fills hotels, supports local artists, and brings money back into the country. Don't you remember how yoga's inscription in 2016 sparked global interest? So, this recognition also functions as soft power, helping countries tell their stories in a globalised world which often leads to cultural homogenisation.

Mira: I am sure UNESCO has some kind of rules for this list.

Dad: True. Every nomination is evaluated using five criteria, called R1 to R5. The tradition must fit the definition of intangible heritage, be actively practised, strengthen community identity, show human creativity, and promote mutual respect. Most importantly, communities themselves must agree to the nomination - this isn't culture imposed from the top.

Mira: Wow! What an intriguing way to preserve culture.

Dad: And what an intriguing conversation to have.

