

# INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE (ICH) AND NATURAL DISASTER IN BANGLADESH: EXISTING POLICIES AND STRATEGIES FOR SAFEGUARDING

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## Introduction

Bangladesh is a country with rich cultural diversity. It has a great deal of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which contributes to strengthening social beliefs, building resilience and recreation as well as economic development. Of the ICH of Bangladesh, four elements have already been added to UNESCO's Lists. Bangladesh, however, is one of the world's most vulnerable countries in terms of the adverse effects of disaster and climate change. Among other disasters, Bangladesh is the country most vulnerable to tropical cyclones and the sixth most vulnerable to flooding (BCCSAP 2009). Its unique geographical location makes the country more vulnerable to different natural disasters and climate change.

The country has a rich variety of ICH, but a number of ICH properties are under threat due to the effects of disaster and climate change. Presently, Bangladesh is implementing two important related conventions, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. Moreover, a newly prepared disaster-related plan, the National Plan for Disaster Management 2016–2020, is also at the implementation stage. Although disaster management is one of the most pressing issues in the country, few drawbacks exist at the policy level for safeguarding ICH against disaster and climate risk. Where the issues of safeguarding ICH from the effects of disaster and climate change are addressed, this is done so indiscriminately and indirectly in different related policies. For the effective management of disaster and safeguarding of ICH, it is essential to align these on a single platform.

Against this backdrop, this presentation mainly discusses the existing policies related to the safeguarding of ICH from disaster and climate risk and identifies gaps. In addition, the presentation emphasizes the scope of effective policy in this regard.

## Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a South Asian country with a rich thousand-year history of cultural diversity. The country has a distinguished history of protecting its culture against different aggressors, notably the Language Movement in 1952 and the Liberation War

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in 1971. Although there are numerous significant ICH properties in the country, the term ‘intangible cultural heritage’ is comparatively new and mostly used in the academic sphere (Khalid and Chowdhury 2016).

There are four eminent ICH elements of the country that are inscribed in UNESCO’s Representative List: the Baul Songs, an oral tradition which was inscribed in 2008; the Traditional Art of Jamdani Weaving, traditional craftsmanship inscribed in 2013; the Mangal Shovajatra on Pahela Baishakh (Rally for Hope held on the Bengali New Year’s Day), a festive event inscribed in 2016; and the Traditional Art of Shital Pati Weaving of Sylhet, traditional craftsmanship as well as knowledge and practice concerning nature and the universe inscribed in 2017. Other traditional knowledge, skills, craftsmanship and performing arts that are considered ICH also exist in the country, such as handloom weaving, traditional jewelry, pottery, bamboo and cane crafts, *nakshi katha* (stitching art), Jatra (local opera), etc.

### Disaster Profile of Bangladesh

According to OCHA (the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance), Bangladesh is the second most disaster-prone country in Asia and the Pacific. In 2012, 5.6 million people were affected by different disasters caused by natural hazards. As per the Disaster Risk Index (2017), which uses scores from 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 the highest), Bangladesh gets a score of 8.5 for earthquake risk, 10 for flood, 8.5 for tsunami, 7 for tropical cyclones, and 5.1 for drought. In 10 years from 2005 to 2015, a total of 46 million people were affected by disaster, and around 6,900 died due to floods, droughts, landslides and storms (OCHA 2015). Among the top 10 global disasters in terms of human fatalities, two occurred in Bangladesh: around 500,000 people died in two cyclones that occurred in 1970 and 1991 (Duryog Nivaran 2016).

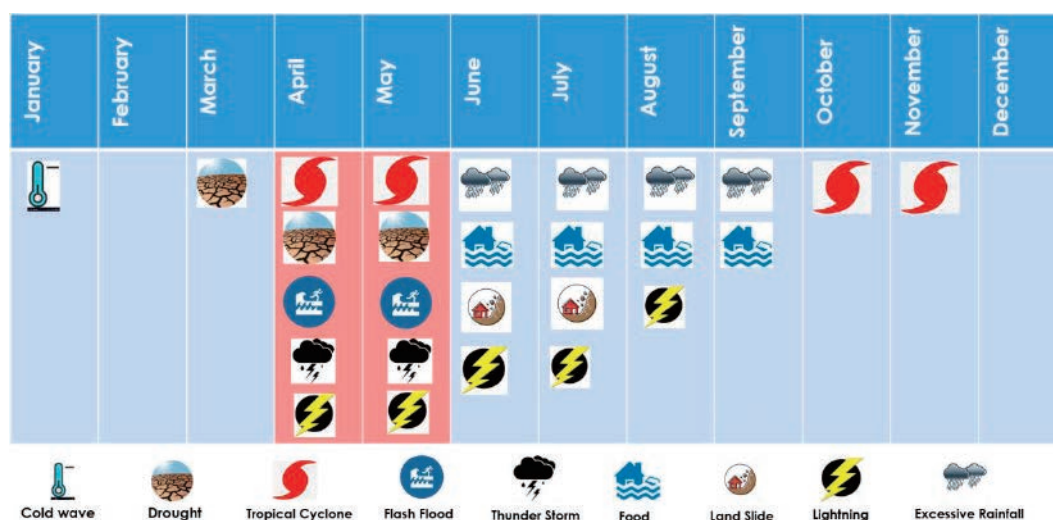
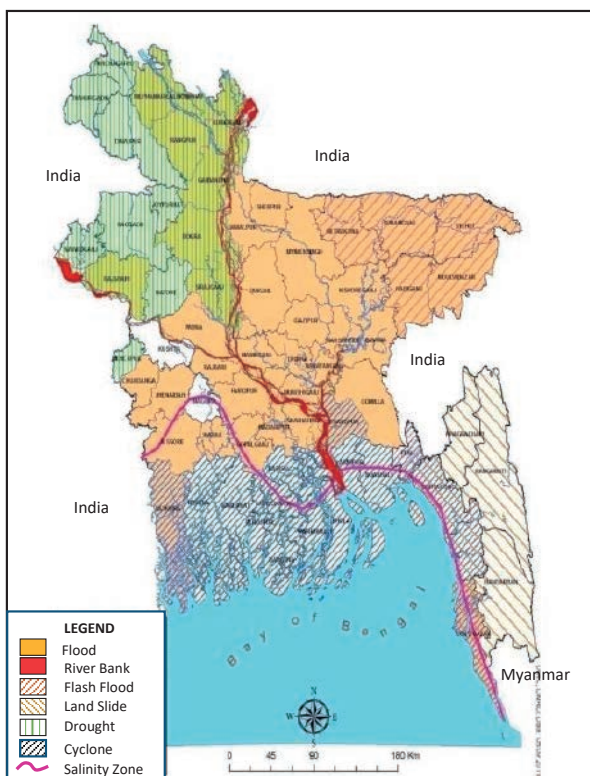


Figure 1 Disaster Calendar of Bangladesh.



**Figure 2** Multi-hazard map of Bangladesh. (Source: MoDMR 2015)

The main disasters affecting the country are floods (flash flooding and riverine flooding), tropical cyclones, droughts, landslides, riverbank erosion, storms, lightning, excessive rainfall and cold waves. As seen in Figure 1, which shows the disaster calendar of the country, the most vulnerable months are April and May in terms of the risks of different types of disasters. However, the vulnerable months are April–May and October–November for tropical cyclone threat and June–September due to the risk of flood. In the multi-hazard map (Figure 2), the south, southeast and southwest areas of Bangladesh are frequently affected by tropical cyclones. The southeast hilly areas are usually affected by landslides, northeastern areas are affected

by flash flooding, the central area and main river basins are affected by regular flooding, the north and north-central areas are affected by drought and both sides of the main rivers (shown in red) are affected by riverbank erosion.

In 1988 and 1998, there were severe riverine flooding events, and almost 60% of the land area of the country was flooded. In 1970 and 1991, two catastrophic cyclones with tidal surges devastated the coast and around 500,000 died. In 1973 and 1996, 681 and 700 people died due to tornadoes and northwesterly high winds. Due to riverbank erosion, 5% of the land area of the country has been damaged every year.

### Major Risk to ICH Due to Disaster

Displacement is one of the major risks for ICH in Bangladesh, and the main causes of displacement are the direct and indirect effects of disasters, notably, tropical cyclones, tidal surges and riverbank erosion. ICH is strongly linked to the community or society in a specific geographic area or natural environment. When a community of people is displaced from its familiar environmental settings, its ICH is also lost or disappears. A recent study found that 236 upazilas (sub-districts) are affected by tidal floods and cyclones, and among the affected population, 64% are displaced locally and 27% are displaced to other areas of the country including the city of Dhaka. Moreover, 179 upazilas are affected by riverbank erosion, and 26% of the affected population is displaced to different areas of the country including Dhaka (Displacement Solution, 2012).

## **Policy Issues**

The three government ministries and their agencies that are most concerned with ICH and disaster-related policies and strategy issues are the Ministry of Cultural Affairs (MoCA), the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR) and the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC). Presently, a number of policies, plans and strategies exist to protect ICH against the risk of disaster; however, the majority of policies, plans and strategies only broadly address the issue, noting that ICH should be protected from disasters.

The National Culture Policy 2006 emphasizes the need to take actions for safeguarding culture, and to take necessary steps to promote it. Moreover, the policy also stresses the need to take necessary steps to properly disseminate the national culture as part of national development, while preserving tribal culture.

The National Disaster Management Policy 2015 has been developed based on the Disaster Management Act of 2012 (Section 19), aligned with the National Disaster Management Plan 2011–2015 and Standing Order on Disaster 2010 (Revised). In the objectives of this policy, the issue of safeguarding ICH has been addressed, encouraging readiness and mitigation-related programs aligned with local-level knowledge, culture and values. The Bangladesh Climate Change Strategies and Action Plan 2009 (BCCASP) also indirectly address ICH. Among the six pillars of this strategy, pillar 1 (Food Security, Social Protection and Health) mentions the protection of livelihoods in ecologically fragile areas and pillar 4 (Research and Knowledge Management) encourages the monitoring of internal and external migrations of adversely impacted populations as well as providing support to them for capacity building in the new environment. The Country Investment Plan for Environment, Forestry and Climate Change 2016–2021 (EFCC-CIP) also emphasizes community-based co-management and eco-system-based adaptation.

The 7th Five Year Plan (2016–2020) directly mentions the issue of safeguarding ICH. The plan emphasizes that many ICH elements like literature, language, arts, performing arts, music and other domains of ICH are at risk and careful attention is needed for their restoration, preservation and digitalization.

## **Gaps, Requirements and Recommendations**

Although there are a number of policies addressing the safeguarding and promotion of ICH at different levels (directly or indirectly), there are no dedicated policies or strategies to safeguard ICH from disaster risk. A complete inventory of ICH at the national level is a primary requirement for such safeguarding, but such an inventory has not even been completed. It is also required to take necessary steps for the proper implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (SFDRR) and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003).

A detailed, national-level policy and planning analysis has to be conducted to identify

the policy gaps and requirements as well as to prepare an action plan for safeguarding ICH, especially from disaster risk. Harmonizing among related ministries and departments (MoCA, MoDMR and MoEFCC) would be also helpful in developing plans for safeguarding ICH from disasters. A certain gap also exists at the awareness level of ICH, especially in terms of disaster risk and safeguarding issues. For this reason, more efforts in the field of ICH, including ICH-related education programs and campaigns for awareness would be required.

In this respect, it should be noted that the UNESCO Dhaka Office, Bangladesh Shilpokala Academy and the Ministry of Cultural Affairs (MoCA) are currently implementing a three-year project titled ‘Strengthening National Capacities for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage for Sustainable Development in Bangladesh (2016–2019)’. Several training sessions on ‘Community-based intangible cultural heritage inventorying’ and the ‘Capacity building training workshop on ICH nomination’ have been completed.

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