

**S2 E5**  
**Living Heritage**  
Transcript

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Hello and welcome to Material Memory. I'm your host, Nicole Kang Ferraiolo.

Cultural heritage can be a confusing term. It's often used to describe built structures or artifacts in museum collections. But it's also intangible things like language, proverbs, music and dance. It's what we wear, the food we eat, how we worship and come of age—things that are so fundamental, they're almost inseparable from our identities.

In this episode we'll think about how climate change affects intangible cultural heritage, which is also known as living heritage. Because intangible cultural practices are so specific to the communities they're based in, we thought that rather than take a broad view, we'd take a deeper dive into the intangible cultural heritage of a single country on the front lines of the climate crisis, in this case, Bangladesh. I spoke with Saiful Alam Chowdury, an investigative journalist turned media studies professor at the University of Dhaka, about what climate change means for living heritage in Bangladesh. We also discussed his research on the role of both social media and traditional media in keeping traditions alive.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** So, let's start by having you introduce yourself.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** My name is Saiful Alam Chowdhury and originally, I come from Bangladesh...

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** A quick note about audio quality. Like all of our episodes this season, this interview was done during the COVID-19 pandemic, with everyone recording from their DIY home set-ups. Saiful and I were both at home with our respective kids, so there's some background noise.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** ...I'm a faculty member of the University of Dhaka Department of Mass Communication and Journalism and doing my PhD at the University of Sussex on media and communications.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Before becoming an academic, Saiful was an investigative journalist.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** I got a first prize for investigative journalism, when actually I was a student. Then I worked for the highest circulated newspaper in Bangladesh, Prothom Alo. I was a journalist for more than 10 years, and I did a lot of reports on climate change, how people actually lost their homes. A lot of things in Bangladesh, people [are] affected by climate change.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** As many people know, Bangladesh is one of the countries that is most affected by the climate crisis.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** Bangladesh is a land which is vulnerable to climate changes, because there's a low elevation, high population density, and inadequate infrastructure, and an economy that is heavily, heavily reliant on farming.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** The impacts of climate change on the people who live there shouldn't be understated.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** By 2050, one in every seven people in Bangladesh will be displaced by climate change. That means up to 18 million people have to move because the sea level rise[s]. And the two thirds of Bangladesh is less than five meters above sea level. And 28% of the population of Bangladesh lives on the coast. So, they are in real danger.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Climate change wasn't Saiful's specialty as a journalist, even if it was the backdrop to his reporting. Saiful was probably best known for his work on Islamic Militants.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** I was the first reporter who report[ed] on the Islamic militants in Bangladesh. And in 2004, I did a report on how, Al Qaeda—you know Al Qaeda? — so how Al Qaeda and even especially Bin Laden and his two colleagues work[ed] once upon a time in Bangladesh, how they send money, how they could recruit the people.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** The story Saiful broke about Al Queda's training camps in Bangladesh won him accolades and awards but may have ultimately ended his career as an investigative journalist.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** For this report some Islamic militants actually declared the price of my head and my editor also. So, after that, they declared that my editors and one of my colleagues' price of heads. So, then in 2009, I formally left reporting and joined, as a faculty, the University of Dhaka.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** After leaving investigative journalism, Saiful joined the department of media studies at the University of Dhaka where he worked on media, politics, and culture. He eventually went on to pursue a PhD, but first did a second masters through ERASMUS, where he developed an interest in the relationship between media and intangible cultural heritage.

Saiful found that many people in Bangladesh, including those in the media, didn't understand what intangible cultural heritage was.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** Still, mainstream media doesn't know actually what is intangible cultural heritage. We know, actually, cultural heritage. OK fine. This is the building, it is long years ago established, and this is cultural heritage.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** And he found himself explaining it again and again.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** "Like what is intangible cultural heritage?" And I told him, intangible culture heritage means live. "Oh, live means television or live music—they're already broadcasting. So what?" No, not that, not like that.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** In an [article](#) Saiful co-wrote in 2018, he describes intangible cultural heritage as not "the cultural manifestation itself, but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next." According to [UNESCO](#), intangible cultural heritage is both traditional and contemporary. It's inclusive, representative, and based in communities. I like to think of intangible cultural heritage as the knowledge and practices we pass down to remind us who we are as a people.

There are countless examples of living heritage in Bangladesh. The country is known for its ancient festivals, folk songs, and fabric traditions like jamdani weaving. And of course, there's the food.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** In Bangladesh, There are a lot of traditional food and preparations that can be also acknowledged as intangible cultural heritage. These food preparations have their own unique history, are endemic to a specific region, while being acknowledged across the country.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** It's important to remember that when we talk about cultural heritage in Bangladesh, we aren't just talking about one culture.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** There is a lot of cultural diversity, I mean, regarding ethnic groups. There are three Hill districts. There are 30 different ethnic groups in these three Hill areas, and they have different, different cultures. They have different cultural norms, values, traditions, festivals. This is the beauty of all Indian subcontinent countries.

**[Music]**

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Saiful isn't just trying to tell people what intangible cultural heritage exists in Bangladesh, he's trying to convince them why they need to care. And here he draws his lessons from history.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** There is a good example, you know. Once upon a time in British colonialism in Bangladesh, there is a famous cloth. It's called muslin. It's very famous. I mean, more than 20 feet [of] cloth you can put in a matchbox, this is so thin and so fine.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** I have two young children and until very recently, my home was brimming with muslin swaddle blankets. I can't imagine fitting one of these three-foot long blankets in a matchbox, let alone 20 feet of this fabric... But this legendary muslin from Bangladesh has a grim history.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** So, after 1857, the then-British government forced Bangladeshi farmers to plant the blue plant...

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** What we know as Indigo

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** ...for their clothing, but these farmers [were] actually against that time, weaving the muslin. The farmers who disagreed to plant blue, the British soldiers or the ruling party that time, they cut their farmers' hands. And after that, they didn't do the weaving, the muslin, and we lost the process actually.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Today no one knows how to replicate this muslin.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** Just two or three years earlier, Bangladesh government actually tried to revive the weaving process of the muslin, but still, scientists couldn't find the exact way. They're still researching. But we lost the whole generation, and we have no idea how they weave muslin of that time.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** I asked Saiful what he thought the biggest threats were to intangible cultural heritage in Bangladesh today, particularly to the *Baul* folk song tradition, known as *Baul Gaan*, that he studies. Without hesitating, he immediately responded: "poverty."

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** Poverty is one of the biggest problems, because the people who are practicing, like, some folk songs, they are really poor, and you can say they are hand to mouth. But the problem is that they don't get any money or any subsidy or any facility from the government, and not from any other organizations.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** People can't live on songs and will turn to other livelihoods if they can't make ends meet.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** Poverty forces many artists, musicians, craftsmen, and others to give up their long-practiced arts, from not only *Baul Gaan*, but puppetry, or other artistic abilities that they learned from their ancestors.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** The second threat Saiful identified is the one this podcast is focused on: climate change, which in Bangladesh often means displacement.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** These people, actually they are victims of displacement inland, because most of the artists and folk song artists, they are living in a riverbank. So, riverbank erosion is one of the primary causes of climate displacement inland; 50% of those now living in Bangladesh urban slums are there because they are forced to flee their rural homes as a result of the riverbank erosion.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** 50% of people living in the urban slums in Bangladesh are there because of environmental displacement! Yet erosion isn't the only factor displacing communities there. The third threat to living heritage that Saiful identified was religious extremism.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** Though Bangladesh is a secular country, if you see the demographic data of Bangladesh, almost 98% or 99% people are actually Muslims. But that is not the problem. Militancy and extremism, not only from the Muslim or Islam, but also other religions like Hindu or Buddhism. There, in every religion, there's some extremist people.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Extremism has threatened the dispersion of *Baul* singers and other artists.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** So, these extremist people, sometimes they actually forced to evacuate the artists from the land. So, the artists of *Baul Gaan*, they actually live mostly in Kushtia, the land of the founder of the *Baul Gaan*, Lalan. Some of the local people claim that this is anti-Islamic activities. So, they can't do that. They can't stay in that place. The government take quick actions in that time, and hopefully, thanks to God, that they can still live there.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** In this case, the government was able to intervene to protect the *Baul* singers, but traditional artists continue to face treats of extremism.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** So, some other places are very marginal and sometimes local people and local politicians, local extremist groups, they are combinedly so powerful, they forced the artists to leave their house, and leave their art practices, even, they forget that profession. I mean they come to Dhaka and it's really difficult to survive to practice their artwork.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Each of these reasons overlaps, amplifies, and intersects with each other. In many ways, our global climate reality finds its roots in the traumas of colonialism. And climate change has been described as a threat multiplier. It increases poverty and can intensify conflicts and violent extremism.

I asked Saiful, what's being done currently to preserve intangible cultural heritage in Bangladesh.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** From 2009, [the] government in paper declared in the national cultural policy, that they want to do a lot of things to preserve and to maintain the history. But there is no inventory. There is no list. There is nobody who is responsible to protect this and that items.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Part of what protected the *Baul* singers from religious extremism was *Baul's* recognition as a treasured national art form. *Baul* songs were the first piece of intangible cultural heritage in Bangladesh officially recognized by UNESCO. Neglecting to recognize other generational traditions can put them at greater risk.

Cultural organizations inside and outside of Bangladesh are trying to protect cultural heritage, but living heritage continues to be left behind.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** When UNESCO started the program from 2003, I saw in Bangladesh some cultural organizations, they actually try to protect not only artists, but also the elements they are doing. But, you know, intangible cultural heritage all over the world, it is not so renowned. Because people bother about the structural cultural heritage, like buildings or other things, but they don't feel about the living heritage.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** UNESCO has been paying more attention to intangible cultural heritage in recent years, but in Bangladesh this has not resulted in sufficient resources to preserve it.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** The digitization process is very, very poor in Bangladesh. Not only Bangladesh. They don't have the proper knowledge of what, actually, digital media can do. Local NGOs or local cultural programs, they need money. Foreign NGOs or

foreign donors, they don't want to provide a lot of money for this purpose. That is the problem.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** While we wait for governments, funders, and cultural organizations to act to preserve living heritage, we lose more of it by the day.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** Lot(s) of *Baul* song artists already disappeared, displaced from the land, from the profession, because nobody takes productive actions. So that's why if *Baul* Song will lose all the singers, all the artists, then what will happen? It will happen like muslin.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** "Like muslin," which is to say, we may never get it back.

**[Music]**

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** In his research, Saiful has examined the role of both traditional and social media in promoting intangible cultural heritage. To understand the relationship between social media and living heritage in Bangladesh, it's important to first understand how social media is consumed there.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** Last five to seven years, you can imagine the growth rate of social media, especially Facebook. In USA or in Europe, Twitter is more famous, but not in Bangladesh. Even the YouTube is not so famous. So, people they have a smartphone, and they have a Facebook account. And the last national survey on media literacy, people told that as a first source, they consider Facebook.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** And the number of new Facebook users in Bangladesh is exploding right now.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** The Facebook consumer rate in Bangladesh is [the] same as the birth rate of Bangladesh. I mean, this is really high. So, in every minute, the amount of Facebook users newly in Bangladesh is the same as get born in Bangladesh.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** I asked Saiful whether he thought social media had a role to play in supporting intangible cultural heritage.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** Facebook can play a great role to disseminate. So, if we disseminate, then people will engage with this art and craft and they will come to preserve it when they realize this intangible cultural heritage is the national identity.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Saiful also thinks that mainstream media has a role to play in supporting intangible cultural heritage.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** Mainstream media, they have a big role because, according to Bangladeshi national media survey, most of the people, still now, they [consume] traditional mass media, like television and newspapers, rather than online.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Sometimes the media can have the power to change the very nature of intangible cultural heritage

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** There's a lot of cultural national festivals in Bangladesh, and most of them have [a] long history. I mean more than 1,000 or 2,000 years, but [the] last 30 to 40 years, especially the last 20 years, media change[d] the tradition and the value of these cultural festivals. Like Bangalore New Year, this is so ancient a festival, this is actually started from the great Emperor Akbar, the Indian Emperor, but the tradition was different. So this happened because [the] media, they actually present where there is economy there is culture. Where there is money, there is culture. So, they don't represent actually how rural people celebrate the Bangalore New Year Festival; they represent how the five-star, luxurious hotel[s] celebrate.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Given the influence of traditional media in Bangladesh, I wanted to know how the media in Bangladesh was covering climate change.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** After 2010, [the] media will create awareness, especially television, but not in a systematic way. What [do] I mean [by a] systematic way? They actually do reporting when one cyclone or one climate disaster happened. So, they[re] actually reactive, not proactive, I should say. Bangladeshi media against the climate changes regarding building the awareness of people—they are mostly reacting.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Like in many countries, the reporting of climate change in Bangladesh is uneven in terms of whose story gets covered.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** All of the Bangladeshi media, TV channels or newspapers or online, they are based on Dhaka—Dhaka is the capital of Bangladesh. So, if one heavy storm is happening in Dhaka it got great coverage. But if 50 people died in the coastal area due to the cyclone or other things, sometimes it gets low coverage. So, this is the problem.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** These areas outside of the city centers are often homes to marginalized communities whose culture and livelihoods are most at risk.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** There are three Hill Districts in Bangladesh, and there are 13 different tribal nations actually living, and their fabric of culture and tradition is quite different from the mainland. But already one out of 13 tribal nations—already one



nation—is totally disappeared. They're displaced from the land because they were so marginal. We lost that total culture of that community and the traditions.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** People can't fight for what they don't know is at risk, and both the traditional media and social media can help to spread the word about communities and cultures that are threatened, and why it's important to protect them.

**[Music]**

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Living heritage is mortal, and unless we pass it on, it dies with us. There's work being done in Bangladesh to preserve cultural heritage in the face of climate change, but it isn't enough, particularly when it comes to intangible cultural heritage.

**Saiful Alam Chowdhury:** The problem is that intangible cultural heritage of Bangladesh are withering away as successive governments have failed to reckon with the significance in nation building. As soon as possible, Bangladesh should make a list. Bangladesh has at least hundred things of intangible cultural heritage. Everyone is doing his job, but at the end of the day, nothing happened. If you have a policy, but you don't have an organized body, you have nothing to gain.

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Saiful can't stress enough the importance of having a national inventory of Bangladesh's intangible cultural heritage, but that's just a first step. As he's suggested, we can also use media platforms to draw attention to living heritage under threat. We can develop preservation plans led by the affected communities and share resources so this heritage can be properly documented and preserved. And of course, we can and must take immediate action to reduce the global carbon footprint while pushing for policy agendas that respect marginalized people and reject echoes of colonialism.

But what does that look like in practice if you don't work for an organization like UNESCO or live in a community on the frontlines of the climate crisis? We'll be getting into that in the next episode of Material Memory with our guest Itza Carbajal, where we'll talk about anti-colonial models for transnational archiving, and what this looks like in a digital environment. We'll also discuss Itza's personal experience as someone displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and how that informed her climate activism today and her archival work with marginalized communities. We hope you'll join us.

**[Music]**

**Nicole Kang Ferraiolo:** Thank you to our guest Saiful Alam Chowdhury. You can learn more about Saiful's work on our website, [material-memory.clir.org](http://material-memory.clir.org). Saiful recommended

the *Baul* song we sampled, Milon hobe koto dine, with lyrics by Lalon and music by Anupam Roy, Babul Supriyo, and Satyaki Banerjee. You can find a link to the full version of this song on our website.

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