

Heritage and Creative Enterprise

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Culture as livelihood

Culture is the expression of a society's aesthetic, moral and spiritual values. It transmits the heritage of the past and creates the heritage of the future. Although cultures themselves are dynamic, vibrant and evolving, they are fragile in the face of political, social and economic changes. Oral traditions and performing arts, which live on in the memory and daily life of rural and indigenous people are being obliterated by changes in lifestyle due to factors like industrialisation, globalisation, urbanisation and so on.

Loss of intangible heritage may lead to loss of identity for the people and to the breakdown of cultural systems. Safeguarding intangible heritage is thus an imperative in today's world. Developing creative enterprises based on cultural heritage again raises issues like authenticity and commodification. This may be addressed by making the artist community a key stakeholder in the process. This article describes a successful approach to developing community-led creative enterprises based on intangible heritage, which has been conceived, evolved and managed by [banglanatak dot com](http://www.banglanatak.com) (www.banglanatak.com).

Banglanatak dot com, a social enterprise in India, has

a mission to relieve poverty by using culture-based approaches. The organisation's vision is to synergise cultural and economic development leading not only to the preservation of cultural heritage and diversity, but also to facilitating the sustainable development of people. The flagship initiative of the organisation Making Art a Livelihood, initiated in 2004, aims at utilising the potential of a community's intangible heritage (ICH) - skills like performing arts and crafts - for creating opportunities for sustainable livelihoods.

Generating opportunities for adequate employment and income remains an unmet critical need, especially for poor and deprived people who lack formal education and the skills for conventional job markets. The following paragraphs describe how creative enterprises based on a community's cultural capital offer promising ways for safeguarding heritage and also for using a community's cultural capital as a financial asset.

Art forms of Bengal

The soil of Bengal is replete with cultural traditions which find their roots in its diverse communities, in their art forms as well as in different religious practices.

Banglanatak has worked with 3,200 folk artists performing six forms of Bengali folk art. Two of these are *Chau and Jhumur* - dance and song traditions of indigenous communities of the Chotonagpur plateau area. Purulia *Chau* is a vigorous form of martial dance and drama. Dazzling costumes, rhythmic drumming, powerful acrobatic movements and somersaults in the air make the dance a marvel to watch. *Jhumur* songs and dances are integral to the social practices and rituals of agrarian and artisan communities as well as those of forest dwellers. *Jhumur* songs are soulful manifestations of everyday struggles and tribulations. These common threads - human emotions like happiness, sorrow, love and loss - are woven soulfully into each performance which makes this folk form widely accepted among all sections of the society.

The third art form is *Patachitra*, the scroll paintings produced in the Medinipur region of Bengal. The painters called *Patuas or Chittrakars* (meaning artists), are a unique group of folk artists who are painters, lyricists, performers and singers all in one. They paint stories with brilliant natural colours on long scrolls and sing about them as they unfurl the scrolls.

Baul/Fakiri are mystical songs of Bengal which preach about universal brotherhood and celebrate humanity. *Baul* philosophy is influenced by Hindu *Bhakti* movements and Sufism.

Domni and *Gambhira* are social satires popular in the Malda region of Bengal. The performers use a wonderful mix of song, dance and satire to communicate the woes, concerns and worries of the common man.

A decade back, these art forms were languishing. They were losing their traditional audience. The young were not interested to learn them. Songs and dance styles were being lost and a living heritage was dying.

Building enterprises

Today, these folk artists make a living from their art. They are performers and painters and are engaged full time in training, developing products, documentation and performance. The artists have become entrepreneurs. They run enterprises collectively, offering a wide array of products and services based on their traditional heritage.

Involving the folk artist community in steering the revitalisation and rejuvenation process was the cornerstone of banglanatak's strategy. Two hundred and thirty-three self help groups were formed with 3,200 folk artists. Capacity building, documentation, marketing and promotional efforts revived and revitalised the six art forms and created a new meaning for the artists' communities. They are now leading their own development.

The artists are developing new ideas through innovation and transformation in line with market demands and trends. The *Chau* dancers who used to perform mythological tales in traditional productions running for three or four hours have now developed productions which last for just twenty to forty minutes. The folk singers select songs that relate to their audience. They are creating new ways of rendering traditional art forms and there is constant innovation and creativity.

The culture we have showcased is not static - it is the living heritage of the people. The communities are artistic in the modern sense. The *Chau* dancers are developing productions based on the works of Shakespeare and Tagore. The *Patachitra* painters are painting scrolls depicting the Tsunami and 9/11. *Domni* and *Gambhira* artists are using their drama to campaign for improved rural sanitation and to stop child marriages. They have become communication partners at the grass root level for local government and NGOs. The folk instrument players are jamming with jazz musicians. They have developed folk orchestras which appeal to urban youth. Active participation by the gurus who are the living heritage has ensured the protection of aspects of heritage and of the integrity of the cultural medium and message. Constant exchange and exposure to diverse cultural traditions has enabled innovations to be made. The artists have performed in folk festivals across India and even in China, the UK and Bangladesh, taking their art into the global arena.

Local seats of learning and dissemination have been developed. Six folk art centres, built on land donated by the folk artists in six districts, have been equipped with musical instruments and print, digital documentation and communication facilities, and have become seats of learning, promotion and dissemination for the arts. People learn about the wealth of tribal folk culture and



Figure 1
Baul singers performing during the Ananda Utsav in London.
<http://banglanatak.com/>

their respect for cultural diversity is strengthened.

The dying oral traditions have been documented and recorded. Songs that were transmitted orally have been published in books and disseminated among all the folk artists. More than 1000 *Baul*, *Fakiri*, *Jhumur* and *Patachitra* songs have been recorded. Audio and video recordings have been published and promoted. Some of the CDs pertain to specific genres, some showcase the talent of a creative cluster residing in a particular village giving that community a tool for self promotion. Films have been made to document performances by the carriers of living heritage, thus creating a repository of dancing styles and songs for future reference. Extensive media coverage has also helped in reaching out to millions of people and gaining new audiences.

Heritage tourism

Community-led cultural tourism is being developed to create incentives for safeguarding heritage. Thriving cultural heritage, natural beauty and built heritage have been integrated into the cultural heritage tourism trails. The objective is to promote sustainable tourism as a means of promoting socio-economic development and also to bring about a system for the preservation of

heritage which otherwise will be lost to oblivion with the onslaught of modernisation. Heritage tourism trails, owned and managed by the folk artists, merge natural beauty, temples and ruined palaces, vibrant folk performances and fine local handicrafts to form one collage which gives a distinctive identity to the places and the people. The folk art heritage tourism trails offer visitors a unique opportunity to enjoy folk tradition in its myriad glories. Songs, dance, drama and traditional craftsmanship are experienced in their local context.

Tourists get an opportunity to enjoy the rustic charm of village life. The dwellings of indigenous people in Purulia, for example, are colourfully decorated with hand painted motifs. Tourists live a *Baul* experience in the villages at Nadia, celebrating life and nature in a musical environment. They are charmed by the host community's simplicity, hospitality, tranquillity and receptivity to other cultures. The rhythmic tunes and the messages of love and brotherhood always inspire.

The tourism trails promote community festivities and rituals replete with grandeur and pomp as destinations for tourists. Indigenous festivals reflect totemic beliefs, nature worshipping, the celebration of hunting, sowing, harvesting and of every aspect of human life. These

festivals highlight how performing arts are a way of life for the people and not one-off commercial events for a single audience. New festivals, like *Vasanta Utsav* at the site of a 6th century temple at Cheliama, are building up economic activity to serve tourists. Festivals for tourists have provided new ways and events to revitalise social functions which were being obliterated by the changing times. Visitors at Pot Maya at village Naya marvel at the colourful display of tapestry-telling stories ranging from traditional epics to the devastation caused by the Tsunami.

Owing to the constant creation of new products for tourists there are no stereotypes and many people visit the festivals repeatedly. The folk art centres facilitate interaction between the local community and the visitors whereby the tourists take back a piece of human history and the local people share their rich heritage. Tourists enjoy not only the final product but also the process - production, training, composing, designing, mask making and so on. There is complete absence of scripted performance.

With a lot of visitors coming over to the villages to stay and listen to or watch art at the folk art centres, the folk artists feel proud of what they do and have even taken

initiatives in developing 'home stay' based tourism. Heritage tourism has evolved as a truly participative and meaningful way of safeguarding intangible heritage through the communities themselves.

Community empowerment

An enabling environment of social inclusion has been fostered. Communities which were marginalised and impoverished now have renewed pride and confidence. They are transforming into grassroots social entrepreneurs working to address their own community's problems using their cultural capital. They have become agents for change in their communities.

The women who are earning money from their performances and craftwork enjoy a new social status. Their children are going to school. The artists and their families (over 9,500 individuals) now have health insurance. They also have sanitation and electricity at home. They are using mobiles. The *Chau* artists now no longer need to earn money in occupations that were hazardous to their health - like binding tobacco leaves. The average monthly income has increased from 10 to 20 USD per month to 60-70 USD with more than 20% of the people earning between 150-250 USD. Young people have



Figure 2
Purulia Chau dance.
<http://banglanatak.com/>



Figure 3
Tourists learning to paint Patachitra at the POT Maya festival in village of the Patuas.
<http://banglanatak.com/>

come forward to learn and practice their traditional arts and crafts. They are travelling across continents to exhibit their skills.

The process of skill transfer from one generation to the next has been renewed – though not necessarily within the family. Besides economic empowerment, the folk artists are now enjoying recognition by their communities. They used to be daily labourers, hawkers or farmers who used to sing and dance occasionally; today they are recognised and respected as artists. All these factors have made them the agents for change and development in their own communities. They are now more united and are overcoming the conflicts related to caste divisions.

The development of creative enterprise with the local community as a key stakeholder thus strengthens the community economically, socially and culturally. Festivals and tourism are developmental tools facilitating interaction and exchange. Interaction between hosts and the guests also fosters a spirit of universal brotherhood and is a small step towards a conflict-free world. 🇬🇧