***Investing in People to Safeguard ICH – Linking Culture & Development***

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***Abstract***

Safeguarding ICH needs to look beyond research and documentation, building databases on art forms and creating awareness through one off festivals or made up landscapes in urban areas or suburbs where the artists and crafts persons are uprooted from their natural environment and engaged in demonstration. The paper shares examples from an initiative in India to emphasize on the need for investing in communities for revitalising their traditional skills and supporting promotion of community based creative enterprise including cultural tourism to safeguard ICH.

The Art for Life (AFL) initiative of banglanatak dot com (Contact Base), a social enterprise headquartered at Kolkata in India, aims at fostering an alternative pathway for development using cultural heritage as concrete means for improving people’s livelihoods and empowering local communities. Around fifteen languishing folk art forms have been revitalized. The initiative has led to improved income and quality of life for 5000 traditional artists. Non monetized outcomes include improved education of children, improved health and access to sanitation.

Capacity building of the ICH practitioners, documentation and dissemination, heritage education and awareness building and promotion of grass root creative enterprise have been the critical components of the safeguarding process. The outcome has been creation of an ecosystem facilitating social inclusion and sustainable development of marginalised communities.

Art for Life initiative demonstrated the potential of culture to evolve as a key catalyst in community led sustainable development. Once the community begets engagement and economic gains, gain pride and recognition, they protect, value and grow with their culture. For sustainable development, culture needs to be given its due recognition as assets for planning equitable economic growth, strengthening cultural pluralism and social cohesion, ensuring social, economic and environmental sustainability. For poverty alleviation, investment in culture thus needs to address skill development, promotion, capacity building of the artist communities, especially women, youth and minorities and creating enabling ecosystem for development of culture based enterprise.

***Investing in People to Safeguard ICH – Linking Culture & Development***

***Art for Life Initiative***

Contact Base, a social enterprise working across India under the trading style of banglanatak dot com, works with a mission of fostering pro-poor development using culture based approaches. In 2004 we commenced an initiative ‘Art for Life’ (AFL) targeting professionalizing traditional art skills as employable skills. We feel that poverty is caused due to lack of employable ‘skill’. While looking at rural poor and marginalized population of India, we see that their own traditional skills were neglected and thus created a disconnection, which caused a vicious cycle of disempowerment and poverty. Conventional path ways of development do not give cognition to traditional skills. A Baul singer may be illiterate but knows hundreds of songs. The ingenuity of Patua who may not be able to write but can create a song and framed animation of any story in a long scroll demands appreciation. In absence of social recognition, the communities give up their tradition in search for better income and social status. The alternatives offered to them are at best that of semi skilled labourers and this does not address the aspirations of youth.

AFL is based on the traditional skill of performing art and craft and has helped the beneficiaries to build rural grass-root art based enterprises and have also given recognition to their culture, community and villages. Skill, enterprise and recognition together are the drivers of development. We have worked with 5000 rural artistes in two eastern Indian states of West Bengal and Bihar. It gave very encouraging results and while analyzing result, we think this can also be explored to address poverty alleviation and skilling India and other developing countries to achieve sustainable development. A key outcome of AFL has been fostering of social inclusion. Commercial success and new livelihood opportunity motivated the youth to learn the tradition. The safeguarding process under AFL renewed community pride and strengthened their identity. We worked with 3200 folk artists in six districts of West Bengal since 2005. As of 2013, the following is the impact in West Bengal:

* Average monthly income of 3200 artists has gone up from 8 Euro in 2005 to 50 Euro in 2013, with 10% earning above 200 Euro per month.
* For 40% people, it is a primary livelihood, for another 40%, it’s an important secondary livelihood.
* The art forms are revived with increase in skill base and greater participation of youth and women. In Pingla, number of women Patachitra artists pursuing art as livelihood has gone up from 5 to 200+; in Purulia, 174 Chau teams perform on regular basis, whereas there were only 21 formal groups in 2004.
* Quality of life has improved, more artists have brick houses, toilets at home and enjoying land ownership.
* Value of education has improved with most of the beneficiary families (mostly illiterates) now sending children to school.
* 50 artists went International, 500 artists travelled to National festivals, 2500 participated at local ones.
* None of 5000 artists across West Bengal and Bihar has migrated from village to city.
* Average age of folk artist has gone down from above 40 to around 30 years – youth and women are participating.
* Traditional knowledge is safeguarded. Chau Groups have re-learnt the old steps from their Gurus, which have more appeal. Patachitra artists have realized that natural colours have more market value, and thus everyone uses it now.
* Marginalized villages evolve as cultural tourism destinations (Tourism Dept, GoWB have started promotion and support). All the village festivals created by us in 2009-10 have sustained, are now community owned/ managed.
* Women empowerment has been a key outcome. e.g. In Simri, Madhubani in Bihar, 300 girls and women painters have formed 3 enterprises and are enjoying regular income. This is helping them to pursue higher education and resist pressure of early marriage.

***Safeguarding Tasks***

The following section summarises the key steps of our Art for Life model.

1. Building and maintaining **inventory of the ICH practitioners** is a crucial step for realistic planning of interventions and also building community based institutions. Community participation was facilitated and this helped in identifying the leaders from the community and also built their ownership from the outset.
2. Core task for safeguarding is **developing and implementing comprehensive training and capacity building programmes for strengthening transmission of skills as well as building capacities for contemporary application of ICH elements.** The curriculum for training was evolved by the Gurus of the art form and not imposed from outside. Questions are often raised about the risk of loss of authenticity while catering to market demands. To address this collaborative workshops were facilitated between the practitioners of folk art and contemporary art and theatre directors, musicians, composers, new media artists and designers. This led to improved understanding of modern context and increased ability to innovate. Folk dancers and dramatists were trained on the nuances of performance on stage while singers learned use of mike.
3. **Multi cultural and multi regional exchange and collaboration** helped the traditional artists to understand modern audience and also led to development of new market and audience. Bauls and Fakirs are the Sufi singers of Bengal. Their philosophy of attaining the divine through universal love and brotherhood emerged in the seventeenth century unshackling the sanctions posed by a society stifled with superstitions, caste divisions, religious intolerance and malpractices. Festivals were used to promote their music and put them in the global Sufi map. Sufi Sutra, an international peace music festival, held at Kolkata, has seen participation of nineteen international and nine national teams in the past three years. The festival has connected the Bauls and Fakirs to the global audience. The wandering minstrels who hardly earned from their performance in 2005 now earn around 100 Euro per month.
4. **Promoting enterprise building and entrepreneurship** has been a key driver. Under AFL, artists’ collectives were trained in nuances of running a business, financial literacy, pricing of cultural products and even language training so that they can deal directly with market. The women at Naya for example learned spoken English so that they could explain their stories to visitors who did not know their language (Bengali). Chau dancers accustomed to nightlong performance of acrobatic masked dance learned to make short productions of 15 to 40 minutes duration and increased their repertoire by developing productions based on stories by Tagore and Shakespeare. Today they perform across India and have travelled to UK, Germany and Japan.
5. In India the traditional ICH bearers are mostly from deprived communities. They needed **support for costumes, musical instruments and accessories**.
6. The artists voiced the need for a place for practice and showcasing and resource centres were established in the villages with large number of ICH practitioners. These centres have now become the cornerstone for developing the area as a hub of creative industry based on ICH. The model of **developing artist villages as cultural hubs** is inherently more sustainable that artificial heritage parks or made up villages in city neighbourhood.
7. The importance of **documentation** of oral traditions and cultural expressions is well recognized and practiced. Unfortunately it often remains as a mere output rather than being used as a resource or means for education, awareness raising and capacity building. The folk singers documented more that 750 Baul and 500 Jhumur songs. CDs promoted not only music genres but also the artist villages.
8. Awareness raising and information programmes targeted reaching out to youth as well as regional, national and international markets. **Festivals regularly organized and with a fixed schedule**, have emerged as a powerful tool for **promotion and creating new audience**. Festivals are not just about staged performance. Successful festivals facilitate interaction with musicians, art lovers, art critics, researchers and academics and thereby open up new avenues, partnerships and give the practitioners new ideas.
9. Villages of scroll painters, Fakiri singers have emerged as **cultural tourism** destinations. This has helped to extend the benefit of culture based development to the larger village community and address migration from rural to urban areas. As for example, the annual festival POT Maya held is held at Naya village in the last week end of November since 2011. The festival has witnessed hundreds of tourists visiting and interacting with the artists. The visitors learn about making natural colour from flowers, leaves, bark and seeds. They paint mythological characters and tribal motifs. The village festivals as well as participation in festivals in other regions provided the artists and artisans opportunities to learn about market trends and demands. They created awareness about art forms which have suffered inattention for years. Village based cultural tourism extended opportunities to wider segment of ICH practitioners.

***Community led cultural tourism***

Issues of cultural appropriateness, authenticity, commoditization of culture, intellectual property rights, misappropriation of cultural assets, absence of scope for self determination by the communities, inappropriate use of cultural assets in tourism and marketing are the key concerns raised by the heritage sector w.r.t development of cultural tourism. Active involvement of the traditional practitioners and bearers of intangible cultural heritage is critical for promoting cultural tourism. Their involvement in the process of developing tourism products based on cultural expressions and aspects of heritage minimizes the risks of loss of authenticity and alteration of art forms for the sake of commercialization. Training community members is crucial for long term sustainability. Workshops were held with the community to sensitize them on potential as well as risks of tourism. The villagers were guided on managing tourist expectations and behavior. They were also trained on hygiene and waste management. The cradles of traditional culture are often geographically isolated and lack basic infrastructure like transportation, sanitation, accommodation, waste management etc. These villages were no exception. Development of tourism has caught attention of local governance and has led to improved infrastructure. The villages which were connected by ‘fair weather’ mud roads now enjoy all weather roads. Access to water and sanitation has improved.

***Culture as a driver of growth***

Our experience thus shows then if an eco-system can be developed around the ‘cultural skills’ of people, then the entire community can be alleviated from poverty. Safeguarding of intangible heritage forms as a means of livelihood has proven to become driver of local development. It creates opportunity for ‘unskilled daily labours’ to change identity to ‘artists’ and it motivates them to participate in development. Once the community begets engagement and economic gains, gain pride and recognition, they protect, value and grow with their culture. As a welcome corollary, one can also see that the success of micro-economies also tackle non-monetary issues like sanitation, education, women empowerment, marginalization and unsafe migration leading to human trafficking. Our findings are thus

*Culture → Skill → Enterprise → Resource generation → Sharing*

*Culture → Skill → Identity → Owning development charters→ Impact on MDGs*

*Culture → Recognition → Social Inclusion → Pride → Safeguarding→ Aspiration*

*Investment on Culture → Development of eco-system → Growth → Sustainable Development.*

Though culture is attributed to be a driver and an enabler for sustainable development, an unfortunate ground reality is the fact that culture is stilled treated in isolation, handled with 'nice to have' approach, is seen as 'expense' rather than 'investment' and thus, not linked to development policies and strategies. Systematic investment in people, addressing culture, will help in evidence building and dissemination of data on the impact of the culture on socio-economic development. There is a strong need to strengthen the advocacy through linking developmental indicators with cultural perspective, backed up by qualitative and quantitative outcomes, which will certainly help the post 2015 developmental planning and goal setting.