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ART FOR LIFE (AFL)

It was 2004 when we started experimenting with our alternative, culture-based development methodology — Art for Life (AFL). The target was to revive and revitalize marginalized folk arts and crafts traditions, thereby creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for rural artists and crafts persons through a three-pronged strategy — capacity-building, providing direct market linkages and facilitating exchanges and collaborations.

Over the last 13 years, we have worked with thousands of marginalized rural artists and crafts persons across multiple disciplines of folk traditions and myriad forms of cultural heritage, mainly in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. At present, we are working with 15,000 artists and crafts persons, representing over 20 forms of folk arts and crafts across the state through the AFL model.

Our AFL-based projects help rural artists and their families come out of the ‘below poverty level (BPL)’ category. Hundreds have travelled to different cities of India and overseas to participate in international fairs and festivals where their works and performances have opened up new horizons for Bengal’s folk arts and crafts.

In 2008, UNESCO evaluated our work and endorsed our AFL model.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZL73SCPBOsQ&feature=youtu.be>

In 2013, the Govt of West Bengal’s Department of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises & Textiles (MSME&T), launched the Rural Craft Hubs (RCH) project, in association with UNESCO, to create 10 Rural Craft Hubs (RCHs) covering 3,000 beneficiaries. We, as UNESCO partner, took charge of the project’s design and implementation. West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board (WBKVIB) provided hardware support. The project followed the Art for Life (AFL) model.

In September 2016, the ambit of RCH’s intervention was expanded by the Govt of West Bengal’s Department of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises & Textiles (MSME&T) — by including an additional 12,000 beneficiaries and targeting the creation of 15 Rural Craft and Cultural Hubs (RCCHs) in 16 districts of West Bengal — with the launch of the Rural Craft and Cultural Hubs (RCCH) project, in association with UNESCO. We are in charge of design and implementation and the West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board (WBKVIB) continues to provide hardware support. The RCCH project also is an example of the AFL model.

AFL — A 13-YEAR JOURNEY (2004 TO 2017)

It was 2004 when we started experimenting with our alternative, culture-based development methodology — Art for Life (AFL). The target was to revive and revitalize marginalized folk arts and crafts traditions, thereby creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for the rural artists and crafts persons through a three-pronged strategy — capacity-building, providing direct market linkages and facilitating exchanges and collaborations.

Between 2005 and 2009, we worked with some support from the EZCC (Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre) of the Government of India.

In 2008, UNESCO evaluated our work and endorsed our AFL model.

(Visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZL73SCPBOsQ&feature=youtu.be>)

Between 2009 and 2011, the European Union extended its support and we worked with 3,200 artists representing 6 art and craft forms of West Bengal — Baul-Fakiri in Nadia, Chau & Jhumur in Purulia, Jhumur in Bankura, Patachitra in East & West Medinipur, Gambhira & Domni in Malda.

In 2011, we got accredited by UNESCO Paris with Advisory Status to the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Committee of UNESCO 2003 Convention.

In 2013, the Govt of West Bengal's Department of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises & Textiles (MSME&T), launched the Rural Craft Hubs (RCH) project, in association with UNESCO, to create 10 Rural Craft Hubs (RCHs) covering 3,000 beneficiaries. We, as UNESCO partner, took charge of the project's design and implementation. West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board (WBKVIB) provided hardware support. The project followed the Art for Life (AFL) model.

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RURAL CRAFT HUBS (RCH)

In 2013, the Rural Craft Hubs (RCH) project was launched by the Department of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises & Textiles (MSME&T), Govt of West Bengal, in association with UNESCO to create 10 Rural Craft Hubs (RCHs) covering 3,000 beneficiaries. We at Contact Base (trading style banglanatak dot com), as UNESCO partner, took charge of design and implementation and West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board (WBKVIB) was given responsibility of the hardware part. The project followed Art for Life (AFL). The target was to revive and revitalize marginalized folk arts and crafts traditions, and create sustainable livelihood opportunities for the handicraft artists.

In 3 years, RCH generated business worth over Rs 16 crore for the craft artists involved. WBKVIB developed six Folk Art Centres at villages (Bikna & Dariyapur for Dokra, Natungram for Wooden Doll, Kushmandi for Wooden Mask, Pingla for Patachitra and Ghughumari for Sitalpati), where one will see Community Museum and clean simple accommodation for tourists. With annual village fairs being organized in each of these hubs, the marginalized villages are now evolving as Cultural Tourism destinations.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPtFDRkzzQI&feature=youtu.be>

UNWTO endorsed this model of ICH-based Tourism in 2015 and showcased it as Best Practice of Sustainable and Responsible Tourism at ITB Berlin 2017.

In February 2016, a 14-member UNESCO External Consultation Team evaluated and assessed the progress of the RCH project after visiting the intervention villages and submitted a very positive report, highlighting the real on-ground changes in socio-economic situation and the engagement factor contributing to community happiness.

RURAL CRAFT AND CULTURAL HUBS (RCCH)

In September 2016, the ambit of RCH's intervention was expanded by the Govt of West Bengal's Department of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises & Textiles (MSME&T) — by including an additional 12,000 beneficiaries and targeting the creation of 15 Rural Craft and Cultural Hubs (RCCHs) in 16 districts of West Bengal — with the launch of the Rural Craft and Cultural Hubs (RCCH) project, in association with UNESCO. We remained in charge of design and implementation and the West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board (WBKVIB) continued to provide hardware support.

Till the beginning of April 2017, RCCH had provided exposure to 600 artists through various fairs & festivals, facilitated participation of 50 artists in exchange-collaboration events, scheduled international tours for 30 folk performing and handicraft artists (Lithuania in July, Sweden in August, Denmark in September).

We also prepared a Baseline Study Report and a Detailed Training Report in January 2017. The findings were discussed and evaluated at a state-level consultation in the end of March where 225 artists representing over 20 art and craft forms covered by the RCCH project participated.

Also under RCCH, 350 Baul songs, 200 Bhawaiya and 50 Jhumur songs were recorded till the end of March 2017, two albums containing some of these songs were released and 10 more were at different stages of completion.

Since December 2016, we are also organizing regular weekend cultural festivals at Biswa Bangla Haat in Rajarhat, providing regular performing opportunities to RCCH artists through programs, workshops, and exhibition-and-sale events. This window will, however, close on 16 April 2017 and resume on 6 October 2017.

Also under RCCH, Village Melas are being organized at regular intervals at RCCH hubs and other places, including tourist hubs. Altogether, 14 Village Melas were organized in FY 2016-17. Upcoming Melas include Darjeeling Folk Festival (April 5&6) and Bhawaiya Mela at Alipurduar (April 8&9).

A few interesting inclusions in the RCCH project:

- The Patachitra artists of Purulia have a historically distinct identity and style from that of their counterparts in Medinipur. But they live in extreme poverty and their art form is on the verge of extinction. We have included 50 Purulia Patachitra artists under the RCCH project and hope to make real changes on the ground.
- Puppetry in Bengal has a rich heritage and colorful history but the art form has fallen on bad times in the face of competition from myriad forms of modern entertainment. Till March 2017, we conducted 3 training programmes and arranged 30 shows for the

puppeteers. There are now 80 of them who are ready to take the next step forward. We have included them in the RCCH project and expect a real change in the ground situation in the coming months.

- Raibenshe — Bengal’s traditional, vibrant, martial arts-based dance form — is another heritage at the crossroads. We have included 17 Raibenshe groups under the RCCH project and expect visible progress in the near future.
- Another interesting entry in the RCCH list has been Sunderbans — where we have included Bhatiyali, Banbibir Pala and Jhumur dance. The culture of Sunderbans travelled to the place with migration from Bangladesh (Bhatiyali), Medinipur (Jatra Pala, which got converted to a local story and evolved as Banbibir Pala) and Chhotanagpur plateau (Jhumur songs and dance).

*(*See RCH At A Glance and RCCH At A Glance)*

SUR JAHAN

World Peace Music Festival ‘Sur Jahan’ (earlier known as Sufi Sutra) was first held in Kolkata in 2011. Till its seventh edition in Kolkata and its third edition in Goa in February 2017, the festival has seen the participation of teams from 22 countries and 12 states of India. The slogan of Sur Jahan is ‘Music for Peace, Music for All’. The main objectives of this annual festival are the creation of a platform for cultural exchange and dialogue, and spreading and enhancing cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

Right from its first edition, international and national teams participate in daytime cultural workshops and evening concerts. Held in the first weekend of February in Kolkata, Sur Jahan is now a permanent fixture in the city’s cultural calendar and is fast gaining popularity in Goa. The celebrations create a carnival-like atmosphere, complete with stalls of rural handicrafts artists, thematic exhibitions and workshops, alongside the music fest.

The Exchange Workshops help create future opportunities of collaboration among the participating groups and artists, leading to an integration of cultures and a vibrant assimilation of various music genres. The festival ends with members of all the participating teams coming together to jam and create a unique melodious crescendo.

AKHRA @ BAITANIK: A CULTURAL RENDEZVOUS

In December 2011, we introduced a homely cultural space at Baitanik on Elgin Road in Kolkata — a place resplendent with the memories of Soumendranath Tagore. We named it Akhra. A part of Baitanik was expanded into the cultural space for events in the weekends.

The idea was to use the space to host budding artists as well as well-known ones, give them exposure to art genres from across the world, and create new audiences for the various art forms. Today, it has emerged as a well-known and popular interactive platform for artists and eager audiences. Since its inception, Akhra has been an open platform for understanding heritage in the present day context and providing a linkage between rural traditional cultures and urban ways of life. The space is an intimate one and showcases folk music, traditional craft exhibitions, films, album launches, and theatre with urban and rural artists. Since it is a free space, it plays a pertinent role in promoting artists and creating new audiences.

Akhra witnesses different types of cultural performances where rural folk artists share stage with urban performers to create magical moments that overwhelm the audience. Apart from this, rural handicraft artists also showcase their works here. People from different walks of life enjoy the cultural rendezvous. In fact, several Kolkatans, including youngsters, now look forward to weekends at Akhra.

RCH AT A GLANCE

| Sr No. | Handicrafts | District | HUB |
|---------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------|
| 1 | Sitalpati | Coochbehar | Ghughumari |
| 2 | Wooden Mask | Dakshin Dinajpur | Kushmandi |
| 3 | Kantha | Birbhum | Nanoor |
| 4 | Clay Doll | Nadia | Ghurni |
| 5 | Wooden Doll | Bardhaman | Natungram |
| 6 | Chau Mask | Purulia | Charida |
| 7 | Terracotta | Bankura | Panchmura |
| 8 | Patachitra | West Midnapore | Pingla |
| 9 | Madur | East Midnapore | Bhagabanpur |
| 10 | Dokra | Bankura | Bikna |
| | | Burdwan | Dariapur |

RCCH AT A GLANCE

| SL No | Arts/Crafts | Districts |
|-------|----------------------|--|
| 1 | Darjeeling Folk Arts | Darjeeling |
| 2 | Darjeeling Cane | Darjeeling |
| 3 | Bhawaiya | Alipurduar/Coochbehar |
| 4 | Baul | Bankura,Birbhum,Bardhaman,Murshidabad,Nadia |
| 5 | Mora | Bankura,Birbhum,Bardhaman, |
| 6 | Bamboo Work | Bankura, Bardhaman, Murshidabad,Malda,Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur |
| 7 | Bhatiyali | North 24 Pgs, south 24 Pgs |
| 8 | Bonbibir Pala | North 24 Pgs, south 24 Pgs |
| 9 | Chau Dance | Purulia |
| 10 | Dhokra Mat | Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur |
| 11 | Domni | Malda |
| 12 | Folk Instrument | Bankura, Purulia, Bardhaman, Birbhum, Nadia |
| 13 | Gombhira | Malda |
| 14 | Jhumur | Bankura, Purulia, Bardhaman |
| 15 | Khon | Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur |
| 16 | Mukha | Dakshin Dinajpur |
| 17 | Patachitra | Purulia, Purba Medinipur, Paschim Medinipur |
| 18 | Pottery | Uttar Dinajpur, North 24 Parganas |
| 19 | Raibenshe | Birbhum, Bardhaman, Murshidabad |
| 20 | Shola | Bardhaman |
| 21 | Puppetry | Nadia, Bankura |
| 22 | Tribal Handloom | Purulia |