

## Speaker Interview

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### **1. Please introduce yourself, your role, your organization and the project(s) you are presenting.**

I am an engineering graduate based in Kolkata, India. After working for ten years in software development, I began my journey as a social entrepreneur when I started banglanatak dot com in 2000.

Our flagship initiative is called Art for Life (AFL), which has evolved as a unique model on using intangible cultural heritage (ICH) for cultural development. AFL empowers communities to develop micro-economies based on traditional art and craft skills. It provides a success story and also a living case study in sustainable tourism. This initiative has earned us global recognition and accreditation from UNESCO, UNWTO and UN ECOSOC.

We have been working with 40,000 community artists in India. They were treated as 'unskilled labour' in the past, but our strategy of addressing 'village, artist and art' together has contributed to their socio-economic growth, brought back their lost pride, and motivated the next generation to continue safeguarding their art forms. Nine years ago we introduced village festivals celebrating their art forms, which have helped the sites evolve as cultural tourism destinations managed by the artists themselves. This is a good example of responsible tourism as an ally for ICH.

### **2. How can women and youth be empowered through cultural tourism and heritage protection?**

Women play a big role in any community, including in protecting ICH. Mostly they are involved at the back end of ICH activities, often because of the logistical challenges of looking after children at home. However, when the parameters are inclusive, the game changes. When we hold capacity-building programmes at their preferred times, or send

them to festivals and fairs when they are available, women come forward in numbers and take charge. When women take charge, progress tends to be stable with resources used properly and youth engagement improved.

Rather than thinking the usual way in India – of women as secondary stakeholders assisting men who take the lead in tourism activities – if we think of cultural tourism as an output of investment in people, then women and youth can be the flag-bearers of ICH and ICH-based tourism. In our work, 55% of employees are women and 70% of leaders are women. If women are involved in ICH, then they can also play an active role in ICH-based tourism, providing quality leadership including creating responsible tourism activities and motivating the next generation to take up traditional work.

### **3. Why is it crucial to ensure the right to decision-making of local communities with regards to tourism development?**

ICH belongs to local communities. If it doesn't bring socio-economic improvement and/or pride to communities, they will stop practicing it. ICH cannot be safeguarded by outsiders only through media unless it results in some benefit to communities. ICH -based tourism has to understand the heritage first, involve the practitioners in the core of it, and design tourism around it. Village visits need to define private and public space for visitors, design activities to engage visitors with communities, develop guides, and plan the hospitality and timing of visits as per the comfort of villagers. A village's carrying capacity also needs to be kept in mind.

We have seen that it takes time to evolve this kind of tourism. Infrastructure is certainly important, but in ICH-led tourism, ICH is the central focus and the approach needs to be to invest in people first. Thus involvement of local communities in designing and maintaining tourism is not a nice thing to do, but a must.

### **4. How can we ensure that increased tourism flows do not cause decontextualisation of cultural traditions?**

By keeping the ICH as a focus and giving time for the village and community to understand its importance, and earn the dividends of ICH-led tourism – chiefly, pride in their traditions. Tourism must not be the only focus. If it is then the chance of ignoring the needs of the community is high, which may spoil ICH and impact tourism too.

In India there is an art form called Patachitra, a form of traditional painting where natural colour is used. It is being practised in two villages across two states – Pingla in West Bengal and Raghurajpur in Odisha. In Odisha, the government has focused on tourism only; in Bengal we focused on ICH only. In Odisha now it is completely touristic; people don't use natural colours anymore and paint anything that sells. In West Bengal, Pingla village practices with natural colour only, participates in festivals across the world and hosts

its own annual village festival. Visitors come every day, but students also come to learn natural colour-making. I use this example to show that tourism diversification is fine, but the essence of ICH has to be kept in mind when expanding tourist activities.

