

Seeking Sustainable Heights in the Lives of Women Through *Aipan*: Case Study of Enactus IP College Initiative

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Abstract: India is home to a multitude of art forms. The rich cultural diversity of India lies at the very root of its existence. However, many of these art forms have either completely vanished into the unknown or are on the verge of extinction. This paper provides a brief account of one such art forms called, *Aipan*, a *Kumaoni* folk art practised in the North Indian state of Uttarakhand. This is discussed in the backdrop of ‘Project *Aipan*’, initiated by the Enactus team of Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi. Consisting of rhythmic geometrical patterns made of lines and dots, *Aipan* is traditionally made on *Geru* (an earthy-red surface) with white rice paste. It is practiced on special ceremonies and household rituals to evoke divine blessings. Project *Aipan* worked towards strengthening communities, bound by a common thread of hope fostered by collective entrepreneurial actions. Through this paper, an attempt is made to highlight the struggle to keep alive the *Aipan* art form and sustaining it for posterity. The role of women in this struggle is also highlighted, be it the *Kumaoni* women who have been the practitioners of this art form, or the women team of Enactus IPCW who took the charge of protecting this heritage.

Keywords: art forms, *Aipan*, development, culture, sustainability.

1. Introduction

Art defines India and its culture. Nature has always provided an inspiration to art. Even when there were no canvas to paint on, the earth became one, which provided artists of ancient times space to draw using fingers, twigs or any other tool that was available (Gupta, 2008). During his visit to India in late nineteenth century, Mark Twain was deeply fascinated with Indian culture. He opined,

“India is the cradle of human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition. Our most valuable and most constructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only” (1896). The manifestations of art in India can be seen in various forms of handicrafts, food, clothing etc. By looking at paintings or the *pallu* (veil) of a saree, one can identify if it is *Madhubani* painting (of Bihar) or a *patola* saree (of Gujrat) respectively. The names in the previous sentence not only connote the representation of art, but also display complete history and culture associated with it. It takes enormous time and effort to bring forth an art and this long process involved provides the edge and distinction to the Indian art. In comparison to the West in general, Indian art has valued its temporal component. Creativity or *srijnatamakta* as defined in India is process-oriented rather than product oriented (Sen, 2009). People in India and visitors from outside have admired such laborious effort and thus this helped the craftsmen to sustain their art through generations. However, with the progress towards ‘fast-moving’ lifestyle, one needs to take a break to appreciate art. This break from the onlooker is a motivation for the creator to continue with his/her passion and effort.

Several reasons have contributed to the near death of art forms in India. From the days of early civilization, human beings have believed in culture. Every society practiced one or the other form of art or craft. Despite rapid industrialization, rural communities have continued to be the flag bearers of our heritage traditions. Ironically, the developing and under-served rural population is actually the one still practicing the ancient cultures of the world. Today, the economy is technology based and art and culture is given less importance in this development. Craftsmen and skilled workers do not have adequate

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market access and with this they are bound to leave their traditional work. All this pushes the need to revisit such art forms so that they can be brought back to the lives of people' (IGNCA, n.d.). The entire sector that practices folk art is categorized in the unorganized sector. The entrepreneurs are choked by chronic poverty, social injustice and serious insecurities relating to health and education. The net result of these disabilities is that small scale entrepreneurs are forced to be at risk at all times due to the indigenous methods of producing artwork followed by them. With increasing urbanization, traditions and cultures are fast eroding. Urban aspirations for a convenient life and lack of livelihood opportunities in rural India are forcing people to migrate to cities. In the process of migration, ancient and traditional practices are either looked down upon as backward or are being forgotten (Shandiyā, 2014).

Nair (2000) has expressed sorrow for the near death of such art forms and especially that of *Chitrakam*, a *Gujrati* art form of decorating walls of houses with mirrors. According to her, very few Indian art forms are known and marketed in India and outside. She also informs that India has a rich tapestry of arts and crafts and that many of them have died out, and others are on the verge of extinction. Explaining the *Chitrakam* art form, she writes, "In the Kutch district of Gujarat, the poor, in a bid to enliven their homes, plaster small, circular pieces of mirror onto their doorways and windows; these rather crudely done pieces of art can be seen in most houses in Kutch. It is the menfolk who do it as women would rather, if it pays, do embroidery. The pieces of glass framed in doorways and windows are called *Chitrakam*". Such a splendid artwork has now died with passing years.

The Enactus students' team of Indraprastha College for Women (IPCW) made an attempt to revitalize the *Aipan* art form. Realising that art sustenance is possible only when artists have all that they need to lead a dignified life in their rural settings, a need to involve art in mainstream social business projects, and not just conventional charitable projects was felt. This led to the initiation of Project *Aipan* in 2014 and the creation of a marketing platform for this art form. The objective of this research based project was also to share the knowledge of *Aipan* art, to safeguard the interest of the artists engaged and to contribute to the protection and development of *Aipan* art form. The *Aipan* art form is peculiar of the *Kumaoni* people of the North Indian state of Uttarakhand. Scenic locales coupled with some of the most important centers of pilgrimage in India, this beautiful part of Uttarakhand has a bit of everything to offer to tourists. However, perhaps the most important contributor in popularizing

tourism in Uttarakhand is the state's rich culture, which is a fine blend of exoticism as well as philosophy. Often considered to be the heartland of Hindu culture, the culture of Uttarakhand is truly one of the most important tourist attractions of Uttarakhand.

Kumaon is one of the two administrative divisions of Uttarakhand (the other being Garhwal) and occupies an area of 21,035 sq km. It extends from the northern end of the Gangetic plains up to Tibet. *Aipan*, a folk art, has a special place in all *Kumaoni* homes. It has great social, cultural and religious significance. Interestingly, *Aipan* is known by different names and in different forms all over India, such as *Alpana* in Bengal, *Satiya* in Gujrat, *Rangoli* in Maharashtra, *Chowk pooran* in Uttar Pradesh, *Kolam* in South India, *Madne* in Rajasthan, *Arichan* in Bihar and *Bhuggul* in Andhra Pradesh (Mera Kumaon, n.d.). *Aipan* is a traditional folk art specifically made by women of Uttarakhand. This art is done on floor over brick red background (*geru*) with white paste made out of rice flour. Some of the famous *Aipan* motifs are *Saraswati Chowki*, *Chamunda Hast Chowki*, *Nav Durga Chowki*, *Jyoti Patta*, *Durga Thapa* and *Lakshmi Yantra* (eUttaranchal, 2003). It is believed that these motifs evoke divine power which brings good fortune and wards off evil (Tourism of India, n.d.). Consequently, *Aipan* is popularly drawn at places of worship, houses, and main entry doors of house and in front courtyards. Some of these artistic creations have great religious importance and these are drawn during particular religious ceremonies or auspicious occasions such as marriages, etc. Other artistic creations are for particular god/ goddess and a few for aesthetic appeal. *Kumaoni Aipan* painting has its unique identity that it is always made on empty walls and on the ground which is a symbol of fortune and fertility. *Aipan* art form is carried over generations and mothers pass it on to their daughters and daughters-in-law (Culture of Uttarakhand, n.d). However, owing to modernization, the *Aipan* art form is rapidly eroding. Large number of *Kumaonis*, who are born and brought up in cities outside Uttarakhand, may not even be familiar with it. Hence, the *Aipan* art form clearly needs revival and this was identified by Enactus IPCW as a challenge to protect and preserve this dying art form.

2. Interventions by Enactus IPCW

2.1 Methodology and Process

Enactus is an international, not-for-profit organisation that aims to harness the entrepreneurial skills of the youth to bring positive change, through community centred outreach (Enactus, n.d.). It enables entrepreneurial projects that are socially uplifting, economically viable

and environment friendly. The Enactus chapter of IPCW began in 2014 and initiated Project Aipan in November 2014. The Enactus students' team of the college surveyed a total of 100 individuals of *Kumaoni* origin living in Delhi, and found that only 38% could draw *Aipan* and still practiced it and only 22% of the individual surveyed knew the significance of the motifs. The rest of the surveyed individuals had no or little understanding of the *Aipan* art form. Further, lack of practical as well as theoretical knowledge about *Aipan* in its own community indicated an alarming situation. The intricate craftsmanship makes this art stand out but it clearly needed recognition for its survival. With a motive to preserve the *Aipan* art through entrepreneurial action, Enactus IPCW initiated Project *Aipan* with the dual objective of reviving the *Aipan* art form and for providing financial and social independence to the project beneficiaries. The strategy followed was to make the artists stakeholders in the business by imparting them necessary business skills. The project planned to imbibe leadership skills in the beneficiaries and create a self-sufficient work force so this skill could be passed on to other communities in the future.

The first step for reviving *Aipan* was to identify beneficiaries, *Aipan* artists who would benefit from the project's revenue model. For this, the Enactus IPCW students' team visited villages in *Kumaon* administrative division in Uttarakhand in December 2014. The interaction with locals, surveying of old temples and houses and a better understanding of *Kumaoni* culture was developed during this expedition. The team also conducted *Aipan* workshops for school students and rural womenfolk of *Kausani*, a hill station in Uttarakhand. During this ethnographic expedition, a 500 page long book on *Aipan* (Gyanodaya Publishers, Uttarakhand) was also collected which included information on the history of *Aipan* art and included more than 100 motifs and designs. Since most *Kumaoni* households have people living in cities, a list (name and contact details) was prepared of the people who have migrated to Delhi. Upon returning to Delhi, a total of 53 women from *Kumaon* (13 residing in *Timarpur* of North Delhi, 10 in Rohini area of North Delhi and 30 women residing in Almora district of Uttarakhand) aged between 26 and 50 years were identified. All the women belong to lower middle class stratum of the society and the 30 women from Almora are associated with *Cheli Aipan*, a training programme instituted by the Government in Almora, Uttarakhand.

2.2. Artist Training and Engagement

Project *Aipan* fulfilled its objectives by way of a 5-step model comprising training, creating, branding, selling, and sustaining.

a. Training: To ensure quality and finesse in production, the beneficiaries were provided with regular art trainings. The workshops augmented their skills; reduced the time taken to finish the products and increased the per hour return. Initially on an average, it took the women a week to complete a set of five envelopes. However, after the training, they could do so in one hour thereby increasing their income from this product on an average by 500%. Regular workshops were also conducted in order to impart art training, soft skills, financial literacy and marketing skills to the beneficiaries. The workshops improved the efficiency, confidence, communication skills and marketing skills of the women.

b. Creating: In the revenue based business model, raw materials was procured from inexpensive sources for which money was generated through various fundraisers. The procurement of raw materials was done by women themselves. The production was aimed to be year-round. With the help of art trainer Divya Lohiya from National Institute of Fashion Technology, the women artist learnt to work on different designs, using traditional *Aipan* designs on various media and products like bookmarks, diaries, note cards, jewellery boxes, pen stands, bags, wallets, wall hangings, cushion covers, envelopes, clay pots, etc. All paper stationery products were made with recycled paper, procured through year-round collection drives.

c. Branding: Once the products were created, they were packed with project branding, detailing the significance of the motifs in order to create awareness. To maintain operational efficiency, a coding system was also devised which helped keep track of the products made by individual woman artist.

d. Selling: Sale of finished products was facilitated through online and offline avenues. Online selling was facilitated by various e-retailing platforms such as Mile and Mile, India Crafts House, JabWeShop and E Malhar. Orders are also solicited through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Through these online portals, the *Aipan* products were made available all over India and purchase orders were received from Jaipur, Ajmer, Chandigarh and places in Himachal Pradesh, transcending geographical barriers. Offline selling of *Aipan* products was carried out through various stalls and exhibitions across Delhi (Fig.1). As of December 2017, Enactus IPCW was able to generate ₹2,30,580 revenue through successful sales of *Aipan* products.

e. Sustainability: To make this initiative sustainable, the entire process of procuring raw materials and production

was completely managed by the woman artists from the beginning. To ensure efficient utilization of resources, the women artists were provided training on how to procure cheap and durable raw materials. To fulfil the goal of transforming trainees into trainers, women artists were also provided opportunity to teach *Aipan* art form to over 70 students, which created greater awareness about the *Aipan* art form.



Figure 1. *Aipan* product at display during an exhibition in Delhi (Image by Dr. Govind Singh).

3. Discussion

The *Aipan* dying art form was given a boost for survival through the Enactus IPCW project discussed in this paper. A detailed analysis of the challenges faced by the women artist was carried out simultaneous to the implementation of the project. A key challenge was that of gender barriers and lack of exposure. While the women artist developed confidence during the project, a few gender based obstacles were found to be difficult to overcome. These included, a) hesitation to communicate with the opposite sex, b) inability to rise up against the dominance of the male family members resulting in lack of confidence, c) financial dependence on male members which meant that women were not given the same respect as men. Another obstacle in the successful implementation of the project was the lack of awareness of one's own culture in the women artists. Some of the *Kumaoni* women were unaware of the art form and its significance. This lack of awareness was especially prevalent in the younger members among the women artists selected. They failed to see its relevance in their day to day life and were hence, unable to foresee how this project and this art form could help in their development. Lack of inclusion and motivation was yet another obstacle. Traditionally, *Aipan*

was made by rich upper-class Brahmin women who used to decorate their households with *Aipan* during festivals. This made the art form exclusive to the upper-class Brahmins and made the project beneficiaries (women artists) apprehensive in taking on the initiative. From time to time, the women artists also lost confidence and questioned the self-sufficiency of this initiative. A key challenge was also to ensure that the selected women artists do not skip the training sessions.

The largest impact of the 'Project *Aipan*' can be evaluated by assessing the confidence level of the women artists engaged in the project. It was found that only 2 out of 15 women surveyed could face the camera before their engagement. However, after their involvement with the project, all of them took pride in sharing their success story and the changes brought about in their lives due to this project and the earnings it brought to them. These women artists are now also able to contribute to the education of their children in several ways. All these factors have led to an increase in their self-worth. These women artists now have greater self-esteem which has resulted in an improvement in their social standing. The women artists are now accepted as independent entrepreneurs with good marketing skills. Project *Aipan* is thus in compliance with four of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, viz. No Poverty, Gender Equality, Decent Work & Economic Growth and Reduced Inequalities. Project *Aipan* aims at reducing inequalities and poverty by employing women from weaker sections of the society and helping them make a significant addition to their household incomes. Project *Aipan* is working towards Gender Equality by employing rural women, educating them about their rights and helping them shape an identity independent of their male counterparts.

4. Conclusion

Enactus IPCW has witnessed many milestones being achieved during the implementation of 'Project *Aipan*'. The struggle to convert challenges to strength yielded positive outcomes. 'Project *Aipan*' could successfully rejuvenate a dying art form, empower its stakeholders and help preserve it for posterity. The project continues to work with women artists to assist them for achieving greater heights. Some ongoing objectives of the next phase of the project include opening an *Aipan* Store managed by women artists and further training and empowerment of the artists' folk.

The success story of 'Project *Aipan*' is also hoped to bring about a change of mindsets towards women empowerment and financial independence and equality

for all women. The hills of *Kumaon* echo with the sounds of change and revival. A bright beginning for these women entrepreneurs is just on the horizon.

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