

CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

# Safeguarding Cultural Heritage for Sustainable Development

*Ananya Bhattacharya*



**With a population of approximately 1.2 billion, India is the world's largest democratic country with a rich cultural heritage enhanced by its diverse ethnic communities and their different ways of life.**

Although India's culture and cuisine are famous around the world, the contribution of the country's cultural heritage to sustainable development has not yet been explored to a full extent. In a country where roughly 8.1-11.3% of the population are living below the international poverty line, and huge wealth inequalities persist, strengthening the recognition of culture as a driver of sustainable development can play a pivotal role in addressing life challenges such as poverty, lack of education, access to health facilities, and the protection of rights of women, children and indigenous people.

Commonwealth Alumnus Ananya Bhattacharya, who completed a Master's in Sustainable Development, has been instrumental in advocating for the safeguarding of cultural heritage and promoting its use in addressing poverty, tackling inequalities, improving livelihoods, and supporting sustainable communities in India and beyond. Moreover, as the co-founder and director of Banglanatak dot com [a social enterprise working across India to promote inclusive sustainable development using culture-based approaches], she has successfully collaborated with arts and theatre groups to stage anti-trafficking-themed street plays to promote community-led action in preventing cross-border human trafficking.

Theatre has also been an effective tool and medium of communication used by Ananya and colleagues at Banglanatak to advocate for an end to child marriages, and in encouraging community dialogue around preventing child marriages and addressing other societal problems in India.



Building awareness through street theatre.



**Ananya Bhattacharya** was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship in 2003 to study for a Master of Arts Degree in Sustainable Development at Staffordshire University as a distance learner. She is the co-founder and director of Banglanatak dot com, a social enterprise working across India to promote inclusive sustainable development using culture-based approaches. At the heart of the organisation is the philosophy of promoting entrepreneurship by harmonising social, cultural, and economic values. Ananya has successfully implemented projects aimed at safeguarding India's intangible cultural heritage while simultaneously promoting the development of creative grassroots enterprises and cultural tourism. She is also strongly involved in international advocacy efforts to promote greater recognition of culture's contribution to sustainable development. Alongside this work, Ananya leads on initiatives aimed at preventing cross-border human trafficking and child marriages, while promoting the recognition and protection of the rights of women and children.

## Inclusion, Empowerment and Sustainability

Having worked as an electrical engineer in the information technology industry for several years, Ananya's longstanding passion for improving the livelihoods of low-income and marginalised communities in India gave her the impetus to start a new career as a development practitioner.

**'I am an electrical engineer, and I worked in IT in my previous phase of life. And at that time, if you had asked me, what is culture and development, I wouldn't have known. So, this whole journey of the last 20 years has been very inspiring for me. I've visited at least 35 countries and engaged in conversations on how to use culture for sustainable development.'**

In 2000, Ananya and her colleague, a Chevening Alumnus, co-founded Banglanatak dot com, a social enterprise in India that supports inclusive and sustainable development. As Director and Vice President of the organisation, she leads on projects, research and communications for development initiatives aimed at promoting culture-based livelihoods, cultural tourism, women's empowerment, and social inclusion. Using culture-based approaches for social communication such as theatre, art, and craft, Banglanatak targets low-income and marginalised communities, addressing local challenges such as poverty, lack of education, access to health facilities, and the protection of rights of women, children and indigenous<sup>1</sup> people.

To support this work, the Art for Life initiative was established in 2004, with the aim of promoting art as a source of livelihood and encouraging the use of neglected traditional skills to address marginalisation and poverty. As part of this flagship initiative, Ananya and colleagues have established successful ecosystems that support the revitalisation of cultural heritage while addressing poverty through the development of grassroots community-based cultural enterprises. The project promotes heritage, knowledge, and skills including traditional crafts, dance, poetry, songs, and weaving skills to generate income that supports local livelihoods while also safeguarding cultural identities.

Prior to establishing the Art for Life initiative, Ananya enrolled for a Master's Degree in Sustainable Development in 2003 [with the support of the Commonwealth Scholarship] to enhance her knowledge and skills in relation to developmental issues.

**'The scholarship helped me to understand what sustainable development is. Working for sustainable development of low-income and marginalised communities, I have been able to connect the theoretical framework [learned during the Scholarship] with what's happening on the ground.'**

Ananya's work with Banglanatak supports the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 2005 Convention promoting Cultural Diversity, which recognises the importance of cultural diversity and the role of indigenous communities in safeguarding and maintaining the intangible cultural heritage which contributes to sustainable development. Ananya was one of the founding members of the ICH NGO Forum accredited with the 2003 convention. She is also a member of the Global Coordination Committee for The UNESCO Convention of 2005, on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Through these platforms, she has successfully advocated for the recognition of culture for sustainable development, and culture for education to be included in the UNESCO convention.

**'Now these [UNESCO] conventions have included it [the agenda on culture for sustainable development]. So, we have operational directives which show how sustainability culture can be used.'**

Additionally, Ananya's activities contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which advocates for social, cultural, environmental and economic empowerment of communities.

**'When we set up our organisation in 2000, we said it [Banglanatak] was going to promote pro-poor growth. After the scholarship, my organisational mission has been reworded. I now describe our mission as fostering inclusive and sustainable development.'**

Following her studies in the UK, one of Ananya's priorities has been scaling up the Art for Life model to promote cultural heritage as a tool to support livelihoods and drive sustainable development. Banglanatak partnered with UNESCO to implement this model through the Rural Craft and Cultural Hub (RCCH) project which aimed at safeguarding and professionalising the traditional skills of the people of West Bengal and ensuring the viability of their art and craft enterprises. Additional support offered to project participants has included the facilitation of collaborations with national and international artists, as well as linking them to relevant government schemes that can support their practices and improve their socio-economic conditions. Ananya and her colleagues have also led efforts to sensitise the general population in West Bengal, and throughout India, on issues of Intangible Cultural Heritage by organising activities such as village festivals, cultural tours, and heritage education to attract wider audiences and demand.

1. Indigenous people in India consist of culturally distinct ethnic groups that are officially recognised as "Scheduled Tribes" according to Article 342 of the Constitution and declared by the president through a public notification.



Starting out with a pilot group of **3,000** participants engaging in performing arts activities, the model was then replicated to empower craftspeople through the Rural Craft Hub initiative supported by West Bengal's Department of Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises and Textiles (MSME&T) in collaboration with UNESCO New Delhi Art for Life. This project has since been expanded to benefit over **15,000** local people. Meanwhile, over **12,000** people are currently participating in the weaving and basketry sector and benefitting through improved market access and income. These activities have continued to be scaled up across West Bengal, now reaching approximately **50,000** people and resulting in improved livelihoods and rural tourism development across the state. A total of **20** villages have been targeted for development as destinations for cultural tourism.

'Over the years, in three states of India that we have worked in, we have brought more than **30,000** people out of poverty. So, people who did not earn more than USD10 per month in 2005, they are now earning an average of approximately USD200 a month, which is a lot in an Indian rural context.'

In addition to boosting commitment to developmental goals among these communities, increased earnings generated through art and craft activities have opened more opportunities for artisanal families. They have been able to invest more in the education of their children, and access improved health, and sanitation facilities. Moreover, these indigenous communities play a pivotal role in environmental protection due to their traditional knowledge of natural ecosystems, and how to manage them, and therefore have contributed to improving their local environment and quality of life.

Women who make diverse decorative items from Shola (pith) have been able to survive the vagaries of the Covid pandemic and two successive cyclones in the Sundarbans region owing to their successful micro enterprises and connections to national and international markets.

Through these positive initiatives, the youth have also been inspired to take pride in their traditions and cultural heritage, which are now closely safeguarded in these communities. With their identity strengthened, these previously marginalised communities have now gained wider recognition and respect in India. This has boosted demand for sales and created greater opportunities for performance in their own communities and further afield.

'Right now, people are going to their [the previously marginalised communities] villages to see their festivals, their culture, and to learn about their art and craft. So, it is creating inclusion and it is creating cultural value. It is enriching the culture, and it is bringing economic value.'

An evaluation of the Art for Life initiative, conducted by an external agency assigned by UNESCO in 2019, revealed that up to 60% of participating artists have been women. The project has not only helped them to develop pride in their cultural heritage but has empowered them to have a stronger voice in their families and communities, along with supporting their economic development and mobility.

Ananya has also authored and published a book entitled: Contribution of Intangible Cultural Heritage to Sustainable Development in South Asia, demonstrating evidence of how NGOs, including Banglanatak, are contributing to sustainable development using the culture and development model in six South Asian countries. The Art for Life model has since been adopted by the State Government of West Bengal and they are currently collaborating with UNESCO on mainstreaming culture into state development planning and programming.



Visitors at a festival in Naya village listen to a storyteller.

'During my scholarship I was trained on sustainable development, and it has been extremely useful. A key achievement has been strengthening the recognition of culture as an enabler and driver of sustainable development.'

With financial assistance from the British Academy, and working with a team of researchers from Italy, France and the UK, Ananya has been instrumental in developing Heritage Sensitive Intellectual Property and Marketing Strategies (HIPAMS). A toolkit for sustainable development has been developed through the ICH NGO Forum. The toolkit can be used by communities, NGOs, and other stakeholders to refine their approaches to marketing heritage products and services, maximising benefits, mitigating risks, and safeguarding the heritage skills and knowledge in their communities.

## Arts and Education as Vehicles to Stop Human Trafficking

Apart from generating income and improving livelihoods, arts and culture has also been a key tool in India's campaign against human trafficking. Since 2005, Banglanatak has collaborated with arts and theatre groups to stage anti-trafficking-themed street plays, highlighting the need for community-led action to prevent human trafficking. Initiatives such as poster making, rallies, mimes, folk performances, and puppet shows were also used to promote awareness of this serious issue amongst the local communities.

Ananya has also played a key role in facilitating collaborations with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), resulting in the development of a regional strategy for prevention of cross border human trafficking in 2017. This strategy introduced a series of key measures to be taken to reduce vulnerability to human trafficking such as creating community awareness, developing data and information sharing for responsive action, and strengthening law enforcement. In line with this work, a 'Safe Borders: Blue Heart Campaign' was launched to prevent cross border human trafficking in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. As part of this campaign, audio stories, films and street plays were launched through the Swayangsiddha initiative [an initiative to encourage youth-led action and partnership to combat human trafficking] and led to increased cooperation between the local community, NGOs, and border security officers. Through this initiative almost **1,000** individuals were rescued from trafficking and over **3,000** traffickers were arrested.

In addition, youth workshops were organised to empower adolescents and mobilise youth-led action to stop human trafficking. Working in collaboration with the District Administration and police in West Bengal, students in local schools and colleges are being educated to increase their awareness of human, gender, and child rights. Youth have been mobilised to form groups that would take preventative action to combat human trafficking and child marriage in their respective communities. These youth groups have conducted campaigns using posters and street theatre to motivate their peers and communities to oppose child marriage.

## Girls not Brides: The Role of Theatre in Preventing Child Marriages

According to a 2019 UNICEF report, at least 1.5 million girls under the age of 18 years get married in India every year, making it home to the largest number of child brides in the world. Within India, the state of West Bengal has the highest incidence of girls aged between 15 and 19 years getting married. Marrying off young girls is a violation of their rights, as children, to education, health, and protection, while also exposing them to the risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse.

Ananya has been working with the government and UNICEF for more than a decade to develop agency of Indian adolescents to prevent child marriage and trafficking. In 2018-2019, Ananya and colleagues collaborated with the Ministry of Social Welfare, police, and UNICEF to reach out to more than 500 schools to encourage youth-led movements to create awareness around preventing child marriages. Plans for the street theatres to perform in schools, villages, fairs and during cultural programmes in the local communities are currently underway. Theatre has played a pivotal role in encouraging community dialogue around the issue of child marriages and other societal problems. As of 2019, the Swayangsiddha initiative had successfully prevented 200 child marriages.

## Women's Empowerment: Violence Against Women and Girls Must Stop!

As part of their broader work on empowering women, Banglanatak in collaboration with UN Women have taken action to develop and implement initiatives that are aimed at preventing violence against women and girls, as well as strengthening their access to essential services. Between 2019 and 2020, Ananya and colleagues adapted and extended a flagship UN Women programme called 'Prevention and Access to Essential Services to end Violence against Women and Girls', implementing it in six tea estates of Udalguri district. The women and girls of this district, which is known for tea production and as a popular tourist destination, suffer rampant gender-based violence, sexual abuse, and harassment, most of which goes unreported. Ananya and colleagues have worked closely with the members of Women's Safety Collectives known as 'Jungu Clubs', formed by UN Women for preventing violence against women and girls. They have provided training on different forms of violence, women's rights, and the roles of different stakeholders in preventing gender-based violence. In addition, safety audits were conducted in the tea estates to improve safety conditions in the workplace.

A total of 62 Jungu Club members received training, and members went on to share this knowledge with over 4,200 people in the local communities through the medium of skits, local festivals, and community meetings. Ananya and her team also trained over 300 adolescents and youths on issues of gender, and children's rights. These included 41 young girls from the tea estates who received further training on careers and soft skills to ensure that they can access the education and resources needed to become self-sufficient. Other groups who received training included 41 teachers, 5 doctors and 248 parents, who were sensitised on gender and violence issues in the gardens. Moreover, a total of 15 estate managers were trained on gender-responsive planning. In schools, a responsiveness review of the education curriculum was carried out to address gender issues.

Through the initiative on Prevention and Access to Essential Services to end Violence against Women and Girls, a total of **14,500** people were reached across the six tea estates of Udalguri district, and **60,000** people were reached digitally between 2019 and 2020.

Other tools used to strengthen outreach and awareness around gender violence included interactive theatre, a film discussing positive masculinity, animations on good parenting and gender equality, and audio stories highlighting incidences of violence, and how women can seek help and protect themselves.

These interventions collectively reached over **7,100** people. The model is now being rolled out in tea estates in two states of India as part of the Women Safety Accelerator Fund project.

## The Future of Banglanatak

Over the past two decades under Ananya's expert leadership, Banglanatak has grown into a well-established and uniquely placed culture and development organisation.

'The principles of equity and environmental sustainability are the bedrocks of my work. My work has led to development of working models of developing agency of women and youth in steering their development and promoting peace and diversity and use of traditional skills in art and craft to develop livelihood and boost local economy.'

To ensure its long-term sustainability, Ananya is currently working towards developing the next generation of leaders for the organisation and implementing the Art for Life model in other countries that face similar challenges to India, such as poverty and marginalisation, yet are rich in traditional art and culture. To expand the initiative in this way, she will require additional funding, as well as support and cooperation from local communities, local governments, and other stakeholders.

'We are doing a lot of advocacies with forums like UNESCO, UN Women and UNDP. Women's empowerment is not just about STEM, there's a whole sector of creative industry. Women in all communities across the world bear traditions and can find employment or entrepreneurship opportunities from this. They are the ones who know the songs, they are the ones who know the weaving. If we can put more investment in culture, then we can jump start the economies in different parts of the world.'

As evidenced by her work with Banglanatak, Ananya insists that a creative economy can open a lot of opportunities for self-employment, as well as entrepreneurship. She intends to continue developing international networks with civil society organisations working on culture and development to scale up her project in India, and to influence other countries to follow suit.

### More about Ananya Bhattacharya's work

[www.banglanatak.com](http://www.banglanatak.com)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUD19C1nbyQ>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6al-qyo\\_Ag](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6al-qyo_Ag)

<http://hipamsindia.org/research-output/toolkits/>

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