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Economic Empowerment Through GI Tagged Folk Art: Assessing the Livelihood Impact of Aipan Artisans in the Nainital District of the Uttarakhand Himalayas

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Abstract: This study investigates the economic empowerment of artisans practicing Aipan, a traditional and vibrant ritualistic folk-art form of the Kumaun region, and focused on artisans of Nainital district in Kumaon Himalayas. The research assesses the livelihood impact of the GI tag 'Aipan' art (a traditional local art of Kumaon). The study employs mixed-methods approach, it utilizes structured interviews with the respondent artisans and market analysis of Aipan art to evaluate the economic contributions of this art to respondent's household income, employment opportunities etc. Furthermore, the study also explores the challenges faced by respondents, which includes challenges to market access, availability of raw material, mechanism of fair pricing, and need for skill development among them. The study adopts both primary and secondary data for making it meaningful.

Keywords: GI Tag, Folk Art, Aipan Art, Uttarakhand, Himalayas, Economic Empowerment, Livelihood Impact.

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INTRODUCTION

Geographical indications (GI) are important intellectual property rights that identify goods with a specific geographical origin and possess qualities, reputation, or characteristics that are intrinsically attributable to that origin as per the kind of GI. These tags are granted by the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999 (IBEF.org). In most cases, GIs are based on traditional knowledge and craftsmanship, which aim at preserving the image of the product and therefore restricting the use of the name only to genuine producers from that area. This prevents the copy work of others from unethically passing those goods or items from another region to exploit popularity from the quality of those goods or items (Bhusan & Anand, 2022). This includes a variety of products, i.e., handicrafts, agricultural goods and industrial items, etc. These are different from Patent, Trademark or other IPR, in this protection is granted to a group of manufacturers from a particular geographical region (where that good was first originated) which depends on different determinants i.e., climate, topography, place of origin, human work of a particular geographical region or location (Moudgil, 2021).

Uttarakhand has proudly gained recognition with GI tags for 27 products, including an impressive 18 awarded in a single day, showcasing the state's

dedication to promoting its local goods and preserving its vibrant cultural heritage. The folk art under study is Aipan Art, which is of considerable ritualistic value to the Kumaun region in Uttarakhand. It is related to Hindu myths and rituals (Bhandari, n.d.). Traditionally, Aipan is drawn on the floor during festivals, religious functions, and special occasions. The drawing brings prosperity by warding off the ill effect and invoking blessings from God. Traditionally, Aipan features elaborate white patterns meticulously crafted using a paste of ground rice (Biswar) on a red ochre-painted (Geru) surface. (Negi *et al.*, 2016; Sharma *et al.*, 2021; Katiyar, 2023, Uttarakhand Aipan, n.d.). Designs may include patterns and motifs of geometric, floral, or symbolic significance, among them Saraswati Chowki, Lakshmi Yantra, and Durga Thapa. The GI tag in 2021 was a landmark recognition given to Aipan Art with the help of NABARD (Uttarakhand Aipan, n.d.) on account of its cultural significance and peculiar identity. Such recognition contributes vitally to the preservation of the art form itself and its promotion at a larger scale to eventually help the economic condition of its practitioners.

Significance of the Study

The study of Aipan art goes beyond the consideration of it as a form of artistic expression. Substantial information can be derived from it with respect to the cultural ethos of Kumaon, its traditions,

and the belief systems. This study adds to the greater realm of art history by elucidating an artistic heritage along with its significance in the prevailing currents of world art. And it is particularly here that the intrinsic value of the work comes into focus; at a time when traditional art may be exploited and neglected, it stands prominent in context to documentation and preservation of Aipan so as to carry its cultural identity and historical significance forward. Through technique, symbolism, and socio-economics it has got the possibility of inspiring some contemporary artists and researchers to appreciate fully some complexities of various artistic expressions. The dissemination and awareness of the study therefore may enhance the wider accessibility of Aipan art and consequently boost participation and research into this enthralling art and its potential to bring in sustainable economic development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature provides illuminating perspectives on the socio-economic potentialities of the traditional arts as well as the impacts of Geographical Indications.

An understanding of GI laws is framed more broadly by **Nair (2004)**, who discusses the historical evolution of GI laws through various international conventions, placing emphasis on the role of the TRIPS Agreement. She notes the dissonance between states in terms of interpreting and implementing the provisions across member states, thus presenting complexities in establishing uniform protection for products with GIs.

A direct study on the socio-economic impact of GIs is undertaken by **Vinayan (2012)**, who argues for their role in empowering the communities engaged in GI businesses. The study posits that the collective monopoly provided to such products by GI protection serves to enhance the value of the products of the region and catalyze their economic growth and poverty alleviation through access to niche markets. However, some hindrances to the effective implementation and marketing of GI products were cited by the researcher: insufficient infrastructure, low consumer awareness, and poor sales channels, thus qualifying a spectrum of constraints that may prevent realization of full potential.

Shifting attention to the agricultural sector in Karnataka, the study presented by **Manjunatha (2016)** illustrates the need for geographical diversity and climatic diversity to encourage agricultural diversity and support local economies. While not explicitly about folk arts, this study highlights the importance of regional characters and their economic significance, a principle somewhere closer to the rationale existing behind GI tags for the protection of traditional crafts.

Gahlot et al. (2020) take this a step further, advocating the adoption of traditional Aipan designs in the textile field. They argue that the incorporation of folk

motifs in textile products not only serves to preserve the art form but also enlarges the design lexicon of the textile industry. The authors further argue for the possibility for the Uttarakhand migrant community to diversify their skill application in combinations with contemporary influences in textile dimensions that add value to this art and craft sector in the region.

Arya (2022) examines migration patterns in Uttarakhand and advocates traditional folk arts as a sustainable livelihood option for rural communities, with Aipan serving as a notable example. The increasing market demand for Aipan-inspired products like bags, cushion covers, and stoles has tremendous potential for income generation and sustainable livelihood development in rural communities. The author emphasizes the need further work in this direction for empowerment of rural people economically as well as for overall sustainable developmental peace in the area.

Singh et al. (2023) examine Geographical Indications in Uttarakhand, revealing that only eight items—primarily agricultural and handicraft products—have been registered as GI, representing merely 2.04% of India's total GI registrations. The study highlights the local population's lack of awareness regarding GI tagging and proposes government support to assist entrepreneurs in securing GI status for more indigenous products, such as Almora Bal Mithai and Yarsa Gambu.

While existing literature offers valuable perspectives on traditional arts and the GI framework, a more targeted empirical analysis is necessary to assess the specific economic impact of GI tagging on Aipan artisans in the study area.

While the reviewed literature provides valuable insights into the potential of traditional arts and how the GI tag works, a more focused empirical investigation is required to study the specific economic effects of the GI tag on Aipan artisans in the study region. This study aims to bridge this gap, focusing on tangible changes in income, access to markets, and livelihood security for Aipan artisans within a defined geography after GI recognition. Given that the study is based on a limited number of case studies (six), it acknowledges the preliminary exploratory aspect of this specific investigation and opens doors to extensive future studies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a case study approach which helps understand socio-economic and cultural implications of Aipan art through profound and contextually rich examination with particular reference to the study of the impact of the Geographical Indication (GI) on the lives and livelihoods of Aipan artisans in the study region.

(a) **Collection of data:** Primary data collected through scientifically constructed structured questionnaire

administered to Aipan artisans. The questionnaire incorporated critical aspects like the socio-economic profile, awareness, and understanding about GI, Aipan art production and sales details, any marketing strategy use, and benefit plus challenge perception through the GI tag. Interviews were undertaken through individual modes of interpreters.

Complementary secondary data were taken from genuine sources, including government records, and relevant academic research studies, as well as official websites concerned with Aipan art and Geographical Indications (GI tag).

(b) Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling technique employed to select active participants engaged in commercial production and sale of Aipan art. This ensured that the study dealt with those individuals whose experience and knowledge were relevant with regard to the research objectives, particularly with respect to the GI tag and how it impinges on their craft and livelihood. More importantly, this targeted sampling enhanced the possibility of gathering insightful information from artisans that could be conceptualised into the research questions. Moreover, the sample was also crafted with a mixture of age, education, and income levels due to Aipan art, type, and scale of production. This displayed with respect to the difference in experiences and perceptions of the Aipan artisan community in the Nainital district.

(c) Data Analysis Techniques: Quantitative data gathered through closed-ended questions in interview schedule were analysed employing descriptive statistical tools. The analysis aimed at summarizing the socio-economic profiles of the respondents, their Aipan art-derived income levels, and current market trends concerning sales and pricing. Qualitative data obtained from the open-ended question were subjected to a thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The analysis of six case studies provides a preliminary yet informative account of the demographic and socio-economic profile of Aipan artisans in the Nainital district. The mean age of the respondents was 36.66 years and shows that the bulk of this population consists of mid-aged artisans who are vigorously engaged in the craft. The average monthly income from Aipan art was ₹22,250.00 with a very high standard

deviation (₹14,330.91), thus indicating a very large variation in income distribution amongst the artisans surveyed. Most of the artisans surveyed (66.66 percent) are married, while as many as 83.33 percent of them report having been engaged in Aipan art for more than a decade, which points strongly to their longtime commitment to this trade with an established traditional value. Almost half of the respondents were involved in Aipan art for about 4-6 hours on a daily basis, while 66.6 percent also mentioned receiving payments directly from customers, either by means of online transfers or handicraft exhibitions, signifying some shift to direct market engagements. Moreover, there is a critical finding that less than one-fourth of their household income, on average, was actually contributed to by Aipan art, highlighting its role in incidental subsistence towards their financial upkeep.

The frequency of selling Aipan products varied from weekly or monthly to very seldom, which might peak during the festivals or tourist seasons. Fifty percent of the respondents considered Aipan art their primary profession, while the same percentage classified it as their secondary source of income. Traditional markets and tourist centers were the main marketing channels, indicating dependence on localized sales opportunities. The various challenges faced by Aipan artisans include difficulties in sourcing raw materials due to restricted access to the market along with the problem of low pricing for their items pre-GI. None of the respondents have sought help from formal resources like loans, grants, or subsidies due to the small nature of their businesses and a general unwillingness to incur any debt. This was also the case concerning any formal training programs directed toward strengthening their Aipan art skills.

An overwhelming majority (83.33 percent) of the respondents showed awareness towards the Geographical Indication (GI) tag for Aipan art. Optimistically, most of them believed that due to the GI tag, their products received fairer prices, while half also agreed that the GI tag increased their demand. There was a general optimism concerning Aipan art as a sustainable livelihood for the future. Suggestions for improvement from their end included better training programs, more government support, and the development of sales platforms. Besides, there were expectations of support by way of direct market linkages and awareness programs from the government or relevant organizations. These findings together emphasize the long-standing cultural and growing economic importance of Aipan art while also highlighting some major areas that need.

Table 1.0: Production and Economic Aspects of Aipan Art

S.No.	Aspect	Traditional Practice	Modern Adaptation/Challenges
1.	Raw Material	Locally Available Natural Products (Natural Red Clay (Geru) & Rice Powder (Biswar), Plain Cloth)	Acrylic & Enamel Paint, Paint Brush (Increased use due to market demand); Limited access to quality natural materials.
2.	Initial Investment	Minimum ₹500.00	Minimum ₹1000.00 (due to diverse materials)
3.	Income	Variable, often subsistence-based	Average ₹22,250.00 per month (significant disparity)
4.	Market	Local community, direct sales	Local Shops, National Fairs/Exhibitions, Online Platforms (Limited reach for many)
5.	Type of Products	Ritualistic Floor & Wall Painting	Painting on Cloths (Sarees, Suits, etc.), Handicraft Gift Items (Diversification for market)
6.	Mode of Payment Received	Primarily Cash	Direct from customer (Cash & Digital Transactions)
7.	Training	Traditionally from family ancestors	Lack of access to formal skill enhancement programs

Source: Primary Data

Case Studies

The individual case studies provide nuanced perspectives on the impact of the GI tag and the experiences of Aipan artisans:

Smt. Mamta Joshi: A post-graduate with a monthly Aipan income of ₹15,000.00 (less than 25 percent of household income). Aware of the GI tag through social media, she reports a positive impact on sales and pricing, selling decorative and handicraft items through exhibitions, local markets, and online platforms. She believes in the long-term sustainability of Aipan as a livelihood and notes the absence of intermediaries, with some promotional support from local authorities.

Kiran Tiwari: A post-doctoral degree holder earning ₹50,000.00 monthly from Aipan (25-50 percent of household income). Specializes in decorative and handicraft items using local and homemade materials. Aware of the GI tag via social media, she acknowledges its positive impact on sales and pricing, utilizing exhibitions, local markets, and online platforms. While seeing export potential and long-term sustainability, she identifies limited market access as a challenge and operates independently.

Shreya Jukaria: A post-graduate earning ₹10,000.00 monthly (less than 25 percent of household income) from decorative and handicraft Aipan using local materials. Aware of the GI tag through social media, she reports improved pricing and increased income post-GI tag. She sells through exhibitions, local markets, and online platforms, sees long-term potential, but faces limited market access and operates independently.

Balvender Kaur: A post-graduate earning ₹20,000.00 monthly (less than 25 percent of household income) from

decorative and handicraft Aipan using local materials. Aware of the GI tag via social media, she notes a significant income improvement due to better pricing. Selling through exhibitions, local markets, and online platforms, she sees export potential and long-term sustainability but struggles with limited market access and operates independently.

Ankita Bhandari: A post-graduate earning ₹15,000.00 monthly (less than 25 percent of household income) from decorative and handicraft Aipan using local materials. Unaware of the GI tag despite its positive impact on her income and fair pricing. She sells through exhibitions, local markets, and online platforms, sees export opportunities and long-term potential, and operates independently, highlighting a gap in awareness and support networks.

Manju Rautela: A post-graduate earning ₹40,000.00 monthly (less than 25 percent of household income) from decorative and handicraft Aipan using local materials. Unaware of the GI tag but has experienced positive changes in sales and pricing. She uses exhibitions, local markets, and online platforms, recognizes export potential and long-term sustainability, and operates independently, indicating a need for better dissemination of GI benefits and support structures.

Problem Faced by the Respondents in their Business

A major overarching problem noted throughout the case studies is the 'limited market access' for their GI-tagged Aipan products. The GI tag bestows recognition and authenticity; this alone does not guarantee wider market access and consumer demand. Artisans often experience hurdles in accessing larger regional, national, and international markets.

CONCLUSION

The present study is a valuable cursory assessment of the socio-economic impact of the Geographical Indication (GI) tag on Aipan artisans within the Nainital district of the Uttarakhand Himalayas. The findings indicate the community's established connection to its traditional art form, with a vast majority demonstrating an awareness of the GI tag and its positive effects on price and to a slightly lesser extent, demand for their Aipan artwork. From the case studies, a varying income-generating potential was gleaned, with Aipan art usually being an important supplementary income for the families. An active move toward wider market access is portrayed through diversified marketing channels, including online ones. The artisans are, however, positive about the sustainability of Aipan over time as a source of livelihood, along with the possibilities of exporting because of the GI recognition.

However, so many conundrums still loom ahead. Limited market access has continued to be one of the salient barriers to the holistic economic empowerment of Aipan artisans. The absence of strong artisan networks or cooperatives will further divide individual practitioners and hinder their capacity to deal with market challenges collectively and access adequate financial resources to take on skill development programs. If the GI tag succeeds in favorably imbuing the product with recognition and price considerations, its potential for significant economic advancement and livelihood diversification remains largely untapped. It is evident that they have different levels of awareness on the benefit and implications of the GI tag, which calls for better dissemination of information and more support from relevant agencies. In the end, while the GI tag has been a giant leap toward recognizing and protecting the unique heritage of Aipan art, it now needs to be translated into direct and sustainable economic gains for the custodians-artisans.

SUGGESTIONS

Some suggestions that can be a valuable input and helping one for framing policy regarding the artisans are as –

(1) Sustaining an Environment in Support of Culture:

This environment should include resource centers with libraries, documentation centers, and planning centers, both at the regional and national levels. Community resource centers or structures can be established where artisans can come to find all that they require under one roof. Setting up region specific resource centers, strengthening and establishing Artisan Collectives and Cooperatives will facilitate the formation of Aipan artisan cooperatives or collectives. These organizations will provide a platform for collective bargaining, improved market access, shared resources, skill

development initiatives, and the creation of unified branding and marketing strategies.

(2) Enhance Market Access and Linkages:

- a) **Develop E-commerce Platforms:** Supporting artisans in establishing and managing their online presence through dedicated e-commerce platforms that cater specifically to GI-tagged Aipan products.
- b) **Organize and Promote Exhibitions and Craft Fairs:** By increasing participation in regional, national, and international exhibitions and craft fairs will provide direct market access and exposure to a wider customer base.
- c) **Enhancing Linkages with Tourism Industry:** Collaboration with the tourism sector in Uttarakhand can promote Aipan art as a unique local souvenir, creating direct sales opportunities at tourist destinations.
- d) **Exploring Government Procurement Channels:** By advocating for the inclusion of GI-tagged Aipan products in government procurement programs for gifts and cultural items can promote the artisans and this traditional art.

(3) Implement Targeted Skill Development and Training Programs:

Workshops and training programs on -

- a) **Advanced Aipan Techniques and Design Innovation:** Developing novel designs to attract broader markets besides the preservation of tradition design forms, development of Business Management and Entrepreneurship Skills i.e., financial literacy, marketing, branding, packaging, online selling, etc. and ensuring that Aipan products meet quality standards for wider market acceptance will make their market broad.
- b) **Improve Awareness and Understanding of GI Benefits:** By conducting awareness campaigns and workshops to impart knowledge to the artisans on the complete benefits and implications of the GI tag, especially in terms of market protectiveness, pricing, and branding, in language and manner that is accessible to the local populace can be helpful for artisans.
- c) **Facilitate Access to Financial Assistance:** Facilitating access to credit, subsidies, and grants custom-designed for traditional artisans and micro-enterprises. Encourage financial institutions to design products specifically suited to the needs of Aipan artisans.

(4) Support Sourcing Raw Materials and Sustainability:

- a) **Sustainable Sourcing Established Networks:** Creating solid and sustainable supply chains of traditional raw materials can help the artisans to prote their work effectively.
- b) **Promotes Eco-friendly Alternatives:** By seeking and provide training where possible on use of

sustainable and eco-friendly alternative materials without compromising the authenticity of the artform.

If the stakeholders implement the suggestions in a collaborative manner, the Aipan artisans can economically empower themselves while preserving this unique cultural heritage with future vibrancy in the Uttarakhand Himalayas.

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