



“Cultural Revival and Community Resilience: A Qualitative Study of Art, Migration, and Livelihoods in Almora, Uttarakhand

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Abstract

This study explores the interconnections between migration, cultural revival, and economic resilience in Almora, a hill district of Uttarakhand. The research adopts a qualitative approach, drawing from field visits, in-depth conversations with artisans, return migrants, women workers, and government officials, alongside participation in cultural practices and workshops. The findings reveal that Almora’s cultural traditions—such as Aipan painting, Pichoda weaving, and herbal tea making—are not merely preserved as heritage but are being actively reimagined as sources of livelihood. For many women, these practices provide income and independence, altering household dynamics. For return migrants, local produce and crafts have become the foundation of small enterprises, offering alternatives to urban migration.

The narratives collected emphasize that culture in Almora functions as more than symbolic memory; it is a living resource for survival, identity, and belonging. Community members repeatedly stressed that the loss of such traditions would mean the erosion of their identity. Yet, through revival and adaptation, culture is enabling both economic participation and emotional anchoring. The study concludes that Almora’s story demonstrates how tradition, when creatively sustained, can become the foundation of resilience and renewal in the hills.

Keywords: Cultural Economy, Kumaoni Identity, Return Migration, Livelihood.

1. Introduction :-

Almora, nestled in the scenic Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, is widely celebrated for its rich cultural heritage. From the delicate patterns of Aipan art adorning homes and temples to vibrant folk music, traditional festivals, and handicrafts, the district offers a living testimony to the region’s historical and cultural depth. These cultural practices are more than mere artistic expressions—they serve as vital markers of community identity, social cohesion, and

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intergenerational continuity. They embody the collective memory, beliefs, and values of the local population, creating a sense of belonging and pride among community members.

Despite its cultural richness, Almora faces significant socio-economic challenges. Over the past few decades, the region has witnessed rural-to-urban migration, particularly among its youth, who leave in search of better educational and employment opportunities. The push factors driving migration often include limited access to stable employment, small and fragmented agricultural landholdings,³

and a lack of industrial development in the region (Sharma, 2020). Simultaneously, the pull of urban centers—with promises of higher wages, modern amenities, and improved living standards—exacerbates the outflow of young talent. This pattern of migration not only affects household incomes but also erodes local knowledge systems, cultural practices, and community networks that are crucial for maintaining social cohesion.

Sociologists have long emphasized the role of culture as a social institution that shapes values, norms, and identities. Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) argued that shared cultural and ritual practices create solidarity within communities, enabling them to function cohesively. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) extended this idea by demonstrating how cultural capital, such as skills in traditional arts or crafts, can shape both social identity and economic opportunities. Globally, UNESCO (2003) has highlighted that intangible cultural heritage not only preserves social memory but also has tangible economic and social benefits, including fostering sustainable livelihoods and local development. Similarly, Appadurai (1996) emphasizes that in a globalized context, cultural practices are dynamic assets that can be leveraged for economic innovation, social cohesion, and identity affirmation. In the context of Almora, these concepts are particularly relevant, as traditional art forms like Aipan and folk music can serve simultaneously as vehicles of cultural expression and as potential sources of income.

The study of migration, too, offers insights into the socio-economic transformations affecting regions like Almora. Todaro (1969) and Harris & Todaro (1970) highlighted how migration decisions are often influenced by expected economic returns and social networks. Cultural and social factors, such as engagement in local art and community activities, can also act as non-economic incentives for individuals to remain in or return to their native regions. Recent



scholarship by Reyner (2024) further emphasizes that art is not only a reflection of society but also a transformative force: it challenges norms, fosters community participation, and can even shape economic structures by creating marketable cultural goods.

Cultural revivalism has emerged as a strategy to counteract the dual challenges of migration and economic stagnation. Scholars like Smith (2006) and Kothari (2019) note that initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting cultural heritage—such as craft cooperatives, local festivals, and cultural tourism—can strengthen community identity while simultaneously generating livelihoods. In Almora, projects supporting Aipan artists, folk performers, and heritage tourism have started to demonstrate the interconnected benefits of cultural preservation: they reinforce a sense of pride and belonging, offer income opportunities, and encourage younger generations to engage with their heritage rather than seeking opportunities elsewhere.

2. Aim of Study:-

While migration in Uttarakhand and the broader Himalayan region has been well studied, less attention has been given to how cultural revival initiatives directly sustain livelihoods, reinforce social cohesion, and influence migration decisions. Understanding this nexus can illuminate alternative strategies for regional development that integrate culture and economy.

This research aims to explore the lived experiences of Almora's community members, artisans, and migrants to understand how cultural practices and art-based initiatives influence economic opportunities, social cohesion, and migration patterns.

3. Literature Review:-

1. Cultural Revivalism and Community Identity:

Cultural revivalism serves as a vital mechanism for preserving and promoting indigenous traditions, fostering a sense of community identity. In Almora, the resurgence of traditional art forms like Aipan—a ritualistic floor painting unique to the Kumaon region—has been instrumental in this process. Aipan art, practiced predominantly by women, has been integral to various ceremonies and rituals, symbolizing spiritual devotion and cultural continuity .

Recent initiatives, such as Minakriti The Aipan Project, have played a significant role in reviving this art form. Founded by Minakshi Khati in 2019, the project employs women from rural households in Kumaon, providing them with opportunities to produce and sell Aipan art, thereby contributing to both cultural preservation and economic empowerment.



2. Migration Patterns and Socio-Economic Impacts:

Migration from rural regions like Almora has been extensively studied, revealing complex socio-economic dynamics. Economic factors, including limited employment opportunities and declining agricultural yields, have been identified as primary drivers of out-migration.

Conversely, reverse migration is emerging as a significant trend. A study by the International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (2025) indicates that 45% of returnees in Almora express a desire to remain in villages, engaging in agriculture or small-scale industries. This phenomenon underscores the potential for rural revitalization through targeted interventions.

3. Economic Revitalization through Cultural Initiatives:

Economic revitalization in rural areas can be significantly influenced by cultural initiatives. The Times of India (2025) discusses how indigenous startups focusing on traditional knowledge systems, such as Ayurveda and handicrafts, are contributing to rural economic growth.

In Almora, the medicinal plant cultivation project in Hawalbagh block, supported by MGNREGA and GBPNIHE, aims to combat rural migration and revive hill agriculture. This initiative focuses on cultivating high-value medicinal plants, providing employment, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices

4. Art, Culture, and Economic Development:

The role of art and culture in stimulating economic development has been explored by various scholars. Tang (2024) examines how arts and culture contribute to village regeneration, enhancing economic efficiency and community well-being.

Additionally, Peng (2024) explores the impact of art festivals on rural revitalization in East Asia, highlighting the potential of cultural events in driving economic growth and community engagement

5. Tourism as a Catalyst for Economic Growth:

Tourism has been identified as a key driver of economic growth in rural areas. The ResearchGate (2025) study on hill tourism in Almora emphasizes the potential of local heritage and cultural attractions in generating employment and revenue.

Moreover, Pant (2025) investigates the capacity of rural tourism to mitigate migration in Uttarakhand, specifically focusing on Chamoli district. The study suggests that promoting rural tourism can create alternative livelihoods and reduce out-migration.



Research Gap:

While existing studies highlight the socio-economic drivers of migration and the general benefits of cultural initiatives, there is limited research on the specific ways in which cultural revivalism—particularly through art forms like Aipan—can simultaneously sustain livelihoods, reinforce community identity, and influence migration decisions in Almora. Most studies focus either on migration patterns or tourism-based economic interventions but rarely examine the intersection of cultural preservation, economic development, and rural resilience. Addressing this gap is essential to understanding how art and culture can serve as tools for sustainable socio-economic development and community revitalization in the region.

4. Methodology:-

Research Design:

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory design to examine the intersections of migration, cultural revival, and economic opportunities in Almora. The approach emphasizes understanding lived experiences and meanings attached to cultural practices, livelihoods, and community identity.

Sampling:

Purposive sampling ensured diverse perspectives relevant to the research objectives. Participants included:

- Local artisans (Aipan artists, handicraft workers)
- Community elders
- Migrants and return migrants
- NGO representatives involved in cultural revival
- Government officials from culture, tourism, and rural development departments

Data Collection :

1. Field Visits & Observations

- Visits to multiple Almora blocks (June–August 2024), attending cultural events, workshops, and artisan workspaces.
 - Field notes documented artisan techniques, community interactions, and cultural expressions.
 - Researcher engaged as both participant and observer to gain immersive insights while maintaining analytical distance.
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2. Informal & Semi-structured Interviews

- Conducted face-to-face interviews with artisans, migrants, and elders.
- Focused on migration patterns, cultural engagement, economic challenges, and perspectives on art revival.
- Small group discussions captured collective insights on culture, employment, and migration.

Data Analysis:

- Narrative and manual content analysis identified patterns, themes, and stories.
- Field observations and interview data were contextualized within Almora's socio-cultural and economic landscape.

This methodology emphasizes direct engagement with the field, providing rich, credible insights into the cultural and economic processes shaping the Almora community.

5. Findings:-

My fieldwork in Almora unfolded as a journey through people's lives, their art, their struggles, and their resilience. The hills carry not only stories of migration and loss but also of cultural revival, economic experiments, and the quiet strength of communities. What follows are snapshots from those encounters—stories that speak beyond statistics.

4.1 Revival of Cultural Practices: Aipan and Beyond:

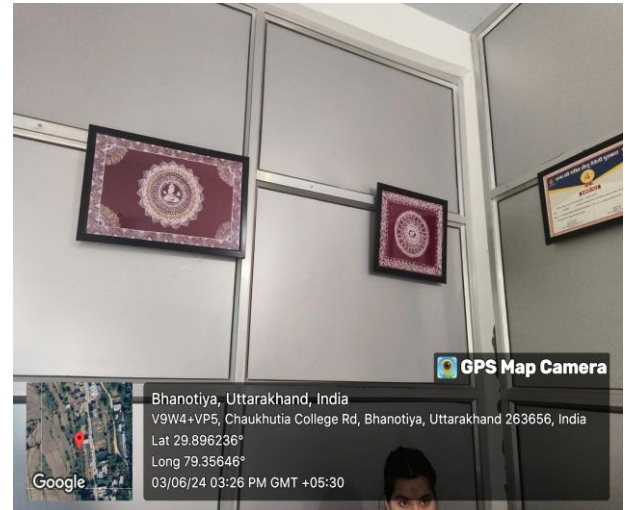
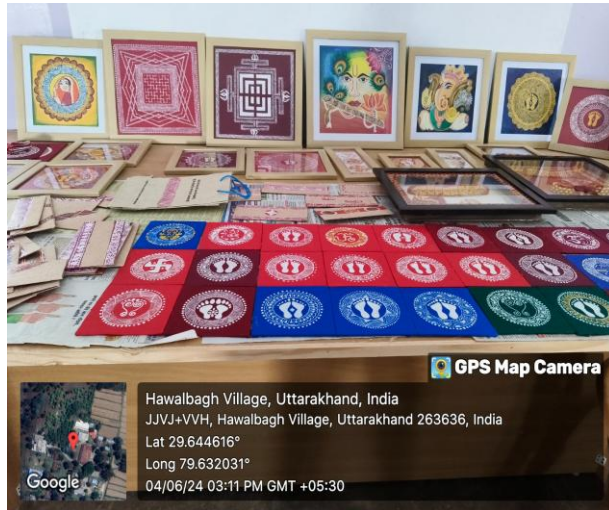
One afternoon, I found myself sitting on the floor with a group of women, their palms stained a deep red from natural dyes. With slow precision, they traced intricate Aipan patterns on pieces of cloth and wooden plates. The designs seemed to emerge as if guided by memory rather than effort—circles, dots, and lines that spoke a silent language of tradition.

As we talked, one of the women smiled and told me,

”Pehle yeh sirf mandir aur pooja tak simit tha, ab duniya bhar ke log humara Aipan kharidte hain“ Her words carried both nostalgia and a sense of pride. What was once confined to the temple floor had now found its way into people's homes across regions—even beyond India. This transformation, she explained, gave them not only an income but also recognition.

Beside her sat a younger girl, carefully copying the patterns under her grandmother's guidance. She looked at me and said shyly that she wanted to keep this tradition alive, because yeh humari “ ”.pehchaan haiIn that moment, it became clear that Aipan was not just art. It was a thread linking past and present, memory and livelihood.

Through these hands, Aipan had moved beyond ritual—it had become a symbol of survival, continuity, and cultural pride.



4.2 Workshops and Herbal Tea Unit:

During my fieldwork, I visited an herbal tea processing unit, where the air carried the calming fragrance of tulsi and buransh. Inside, a group of women were sitting in quiet concentration—drying, packing, and carefully labeling the tea leaves. Each packet was handled not just as a product but almost as a symbol of their collective effort.

The supervisor explained that this initiative was started to provide a steady income source for local women who once had very limited opportunities. One woman, as she sealed a packet, shared with me in a soft voice: “Ab ghar chalane ke liye sirf pati par nirbhar nahi rehna padta.”

Her words struck me deeply. It was not just about earning money—it was about a subtle shift in household dynamics and self-worth. What seemed like small packets of tea carried within them the seeds of independence and dignity?

Later, in another workshop, I observed women making Pichoda—the traditional red-bordered cloth that holds a sacred place in Kumaoni rituals. The rhythmic sound of stitching filled the room, as the women embroidered borders with practiced hands. Watching them, it felt as if each thread carried both tradition and survival, weaving culture into livelihood. For these women, the Pichoda was more than ritual attire; it was a reminder that heritage itself could become a source of

empowerment. The act of creating it connected them to their ancestors, while simultaneously opening doors to new economic possibilities.



4.7 Migration and Return: A Story of Local Enterprise:

During my field visit, I met a man who had once migrated out of Almora in search of work. For years, he had lived in Haldwani, doing small jobs in shops and struggling with rising living costs. But after the pandemic, he decided to return to his village near Almora.

When I met him, he was standing proudly in his small shop where neatly packed jars of organic pickles, pulses, and grains were displayed. All of these products came directly from his family's fields. He told me with quiet confidence "Yeh sab jo aap dekh rahi ho, yeh kheton se hi hai. Hum logon ne paramparagat kheti ko fir se apnaya hai."

His shop was part of the **Pramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana** locally known as Krishi evam Krishak Kalyan. This government initiative had encouraged him to use traditional farming methods and provided support in packaging and marketing. With a smile, he said, "Sheher jaake

Jo milta tha, usse yahan kamai kam hai, par sukoon zyada hai. Ab apne gaon mein rehkar izzat ke saath apna kaam kar rahe hain.”

This encounter showed me how migration is not always a one-way journey. For some, returning home can open up new forms of livelihood that blend tradition with innovation. His story was not just about earning—it was about rediscovering belonging and giving meaning to local produce



**“Migration reversed: a shopkeeper
rebuilding life in Almora.”**

4.4 Voices from Government Officials:

During my field visits, I also had the opportunity to speak with several government officials in Almora, who offered insights into how culture, economy, and migration intersect at the policy level.

One officer spoke passionately about ongoing efforts to support local livelihoods while curbing out-migration. He mentioned initiatives under MGNREGA and rural development programs, highlighting projects that encourage traditional farming practices and small-scale enterprises. With a smile, His words reflected the balancing act of development in the hills: creating employment while preserving the fragile ecology.

Another official discussed the role of tourism in cultural preservation. He explained how promoting local art forms like Aipan or community-led herbal products could not only generate income but also attract visitors to experience Almora’s unique cultural heritage. He remarked, ”.Culture yahan sirf virasat nahi, yeh local economy ka ek zariya bhi hai“

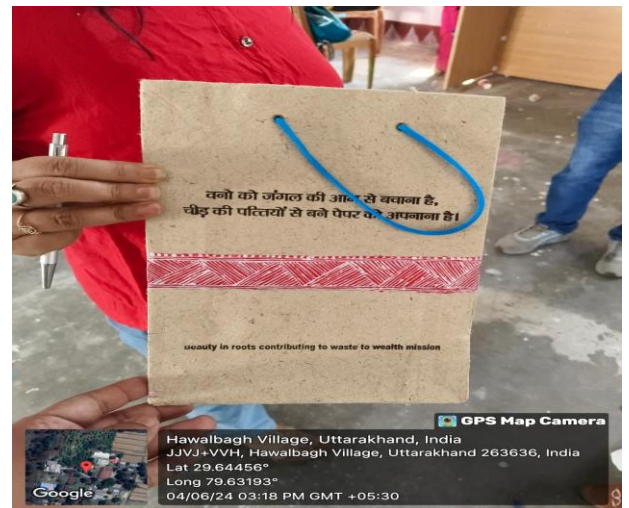
Through these conversations, it became clear that the state recognizes culture not merely as heritage, but as a living, dynamic resource—one that can provide economic opportunities, sustain traditions, and strengthen community identity. These perspectives added another dimension to what I observed on the ground, bridging policy vision with local realities.



“Government officials in dialogue: linking policy with cultural revival in Almora.”

4.5 Community, Identity, and a Living Economy

Across Almora, a consistent theme emerged from my conversations with artisans, migrants, and officials alike: a deep connection to Kumaoni identity. People expressed that if traditions like Aipan, Pichoda, and local festivals were lost, so too would their sense of belonging and community cohesion. What struck me most during my visits was how culture here is not just preserved—it is actively lived, practiced, and transformed into livelihoods. Women stitching Pichoda, artisans reviving Aipan, and tea makers blending local herbs were doing more than sustaining traditions; they were creating meaningful economic opportunities that allowed them independence and pride. These practices also fostered a sense of purpose and belonging, linking generations through shared cultural heritage. Even as migration continues to reshape the region, these efforts show that cultural revival can serve as both an anchor and a source of resilience, sustaining not only communities but also hope and identity across the hills.



“Community voices and initiatives that weave together tradition, economy, and identity.”



Discussion

The findings from Almora reveal a dynamic interplay between migration, cultural revival, and the local economy. The narratives of artisans, women engaged in Pichoda and herbal tea production, and returning migrants illustrate that culture in the hills is not merely a heritage to be preserved—it is a living, adaptive force that shapes livelihoods, social identity, and community cohesion.

Cultural practices such as Aipan and Pichoda serve dual purposes: they maintain a connection to Kumaoni heritage while providing economic opportunities. From a Bourdieuan perspective, these practices can be understood as forms of cultural capital. Women artisans transform symbolic knowledge embedded in traditional crafts into economic capital, demonstrating how cultural proficiency becomes a means of both identity formation and livelihood generation (Bourdieu, 1986; Throsby, 2001; Flew, 2012). Their work exemplifies how traditional arts are not only symbolic markers of community identity but also instruments of empowerment and resilience.

The study also highlights the role of cultural practices in reinforcing social cohesion, echoing Durkheim's insights on ritual and collective life. Community participation in cultural revival—through festivals, workshops, and collaborative artisan work—serves as a form of ritualized interaction, strengthening bonds among community members and fostering a shared sense of belonging. This demonstrates that rituals and cultural activities extend beyond heritage preservation; they actively create social solidarity and collective identity in Almora.

Migration patterns further complicate the socio-economic landscape. Many youth leave in search of higher-paying employment, consistent with the Harris-Todaro model, which posits that migration decisions are shaped by expected income differentials between rural and urban areas (Harris & Todaro, 1970). However, the experiences of return migrants who engage in local enterprises—such as marketing organic products under the Krishi evam Krishak Kalyan scheme—reveal an important deviation. These cases illustrate that migration can be strategically reoriented to introduce skills, innovation, and investment into rural communities, challenging the notion of permanent rural out-migration and highlighting the potential of return migration as a developmental resource (de Haas, 2010; Taylor, 1999).

Government initiatives and local policies emerge as critical enablers in this process. Programs supporting traditional farming, handicrafts, and rural tourism provide infrastructure, market access, and legitimacy to local efforts. These interventions amplify the capacity of cultural and



economic practices to sustain livelihoods, reinforcing the theoretical argument that symbolic and social forms of capital can be leveraged to generate tangible economic and social benefits.

Overall, the findings suggest that culture, economy, and identity in Almora are deeply interdependent. Cultural revival functions not merely as heritage preservation but as a living system that fosters social cohesion, strengthens economic resilience, and offers alternatives to outward migration. Linking these observations to Bourdieu, Durkheim, and Harris-Todaro highlights that traditional practices, social rituals, and migration decisions are mutually constitutive forces shaping the sustainability of rural communities.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the intersections of migration, cultural revival, and economic resilience in Almora, and it found that these elements are deeply connected. Migration has long shaped the region, yet what stands out is the way cultural practices are being revived and reimagined as responses to these changes. Traditions like Aipan painting, Pichoda weaving, and herbal tea making are not only markers of identity but also sources of livelihood and dignity.

Through conversations with artisans, return migrants, and community members, it became clear that culture here is not a static symbol of the past—it is a living, adaptive resource. Women who once had no income now stitch or paint for a living, and return migrants use local produce to build small enterprises. These everyday acts show how heritage and survival are woven together.

The findings also highlight a strong sense of belonging and identity. People repeatedly expressed that losing these traditions would mean losing a part of themselves. Yet, rather than fading, these practices are gaining new life in response to contemporary needs. The community's ability to adapt tradition into livelihood reflects resilience, creativity, and hope.

In the end, Almora's story is not just about migration or economic struggle—it is about renewal. It shows that culture, when lived and shared, can be both an anchor and a pathway forward. What emerges is a picture of a community that carries its past into the present, transforming art into economy, and heritage into continuity. Almora reminds us that tradition, far from being a relic, can remain a foundation for survival, identity, and collective strength in the modern world.

7. Suggestions and Policy Implications

Based on the findings, a few directions emerge for strengthening Almora's cultural economy and addressing migration challenges:



1. Support for Local Artisans and Women’s Collectives

- Providing easier access to credit, skill development, and marketing channels can help women engaged in Aipan, Pichoda, and local food production scale their work without losing authenticity.

2. Linking Culture with Tourism

- Initiatives that connect cultural products (such as herbal tea, organic pickles, or traditional textiles) with eco- and cultural-tourism can create sustainable income streams while promoting Almora as a cultural hub.

3. Encouraging Migrant Return Enterprises

- Special schemes for return migrants who wish to start small-scale businesses rooted in traditional agriculture or cultural products can reduce out-migration and inspire others to follow.

4. Community-Led Branding and Storytelling

- Marketing local products through collective branding (e.g., “Made in Almora”) and highlighting cultural narratives can increase their visibility in wider markets.

5. Integrated Policy Approach

- Government programs like MGNREGA, traditional farming schemes, and tourism initiatives should be aligned to strengthen the cultural economy rather than working in isolation.

By nurturing cultural revival not just as heritage but as an economic and identity resource, policymakers can make Almora—and similar hill regions—sites of both livelihood security and cultural continuity.

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