

A bangali village in full bloom





In the northwest of Bangladesh, the Hindu village of Tikoil looks like a scene from a dream. Every mud house is covered in vivid motifs: flowers, birds, peacocks and swirling geometric patterns. Courtyards bloom with colour and even cattle sheds are adorned with designs. Known across the country as the Alpana Village, it has become a living gallery of rural imagination. The atmosphere is both intimate and theatrical, as if every wall and object has been claimed by creativity. For the people of Tikoil, painting is not a performance for outsiders, it is the simple act of creating beauty.



The homes of Tikoil are made not of brick and cement but of compacted earth and straw, a technique as old as the region itself. Mud houses, common in the highlands, are practical and resilient: cool in the blazing summers, warm in the winters, and surprisingly durable in storms during monsoon season. Against these humble earthen walls, Alpana paintings flourish. Rain washes them away; time fades them into dust. Each season, they are reborn.

No record tells exactly when Alpana painting began in the region. Elders say Hindu brides once placed three white dots on their walls during weddings, expanding them into floral motifs.

Over generations, those dots have blossomed into full-scale murals covering entire houses.

Christian families -like the one on the picture- adopted the custom too, painting for weddings and the New Year.

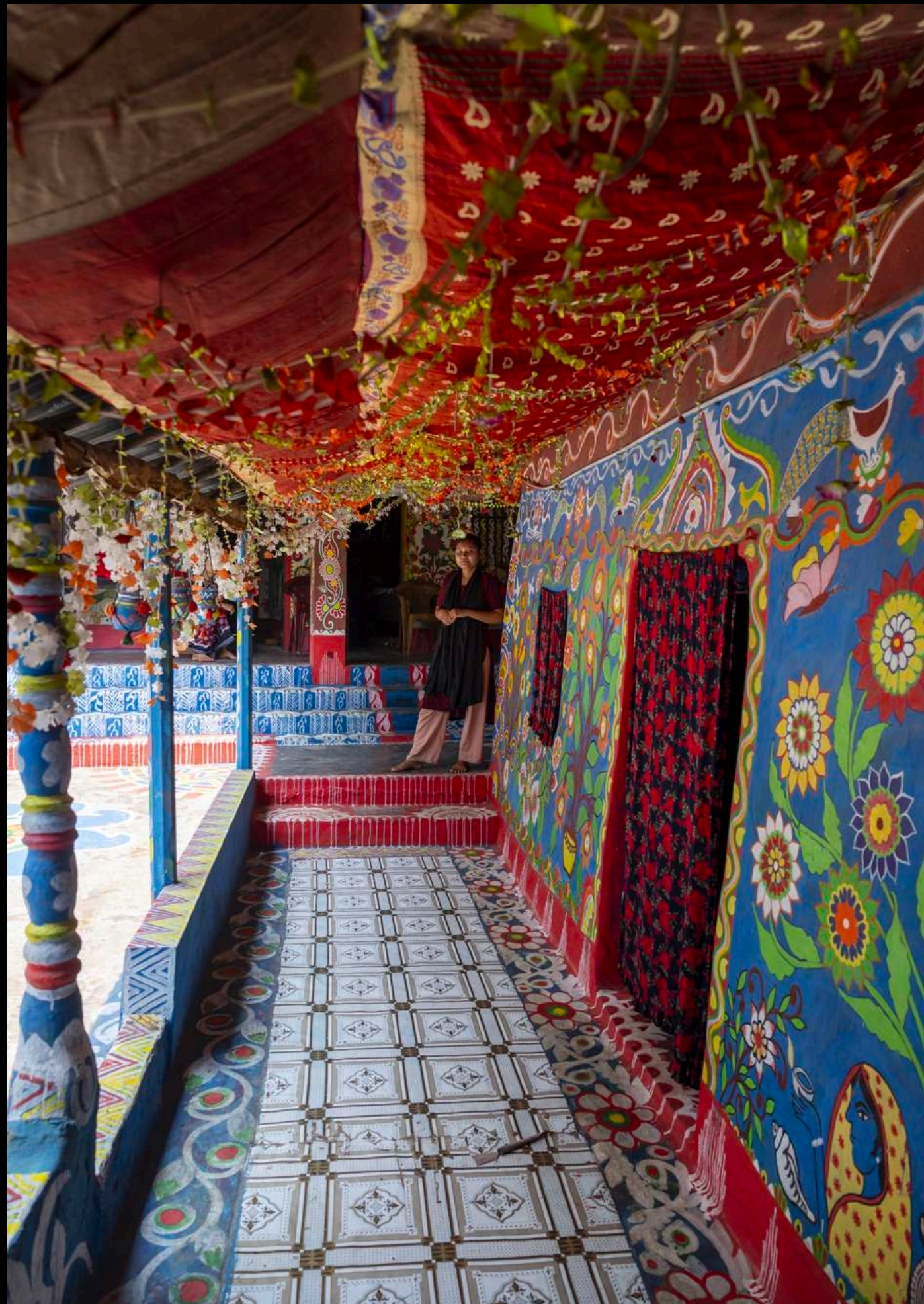


Inside the homes of Tikoil, the colours do not stop at the walls.

The painted motifs are interwoven with bright curtains swaying in the doorways and multicoloured clothes hanging from the ceilings to dry. Together, the layers of fabric and the intricate murals create an atmosphere that feels almost theatrical, as if every room were dressed for a celebration.

Patterns climb from the floors to the rafters, blending with textiles in a riot of hues that turns the most modest mud dwelling into a dazzling spectacle.

Even the floors are decorated, leaving visitors with the uneasy feeling that every step risks treading on a work of art.





The art is inseparable from the land. Red comes from clay, white from rice powder, green from leaves, blues and yellows from fruits or seeds. Preparing pigments can take days, soaking and straining leaves or grinding grains into powder. The process is painstaking, but it anchors Alpana in its environment. The impermanence of these natural colours is both their weakness and their strength. When the rains come, entire walls are washed clean. But this fragility ensures renewal. Each monsoon is an invitation to paint again, to invent new designs, to keep the tradition alive through practice.

Not every Alpana in Tikoil blooms with flowers or birds. Many walls carry geometric motifs, painted with the same steady hand and imagination. Behind this villager, a wall is covered in scalloped arcs, layered in precise rows like waves or scales. The repetition creates a rhythm that is both mathematical and poetic, transforming bare mud into a tapestry of order and harmony.

Such geometric designs show the versatility of Alpana: it is not only an art of nature but also of abstraction, where symmetry and balance become part of daily life. For the artists, these shapes are no less meaningful — they embody patience, discipline and a sense of timeless continuity.





For farming families in Bangladesh, the peacock is more than decoration. Its brilliant feathers symbolise beauty and abundance, while in local tradition it also stands for fertility, protection and prosperity. Painted on mud walls, it becomes a hopeful emblem, a reminder that rural life, like the peacock's plumage, can renew itself with every season..



The wall can be a vivid chronicle of village life. Scenes unfold like a storybook: women drawing water from a pump, farmers leading oxen to plough the fields, cattle grazing under trees, and a man steering a cart pulled by bulls. These images are not abstract decoration — they mirror the reality of daily life in Tikoil where most families are farmers. Agriculture is central to survival here: cattle provide milk and plough the land, women carry the responsibility of collecting water and food, and harvests dictate the rhythm of the year. Villagers celebrate their own work and honour the cycle of farming that sustains them.



The walls also reflect political issues: Ela Mitra stands in front of Jatiyo Sriti Shoudho National Martyrs Memorial. She was a social activist and communist leader, who played a pivotal role in championing the rights of farmers in the region where Alpana flourished. In the 1950s she organised peasant movements, encouraging rural communities to resist exploitation. She shared their struggles and daily lives. Her advocacy was not only political but cultural, helping to protect practices like Alpana as part of the fabric of rural dignity.



In Tikoil, the Alpana tradition extends indoors: even the bedrooms are decorated with intricate patterns, their mud walls alive with colour. Visitors are often surprised to be welcomed into such private spaces, but villagers show no embarrassment. Instead, they take pride in displaying the artistry of their everyday lives. For them, Alpana is not something to be hidden away but shared openly as part of their identity. In the village, beauty is inseparable from hospitality.



The paintings are truly everywhere. Step into a home in Tikoil and you will find Alpana not only on the bedroom walls and across the neat clay courtyards, but also in the kitchens which glow with floral motifs beside clay stoves. Nothing is considered too ordinary to deserve decoration. For the villagers, Alpana is not a performance reserved only for festivals; it is a way of making every corner of life more beautiful, of surrounding the routines of cooking, worship and work with colour and imagination..



Today, the Alpana practice is universal in Tikoil. Women, particularly brides and mothers, carry the craft, passing it to their daughters not through instruction but through repetition. "When I was a child, I watched my mother painting on the wall. Then she let me draw small birds. As I grew older, I began to paint flowers, and now I decorate my own walls and even my own bedroom without my mother's help." says this young villager.



Even the cattle sheds in Tikoil are covered with Alpana motifs, their mud walls painted with the same care as family homes. For the villagers, animals are not merely assets but companions in daily survival, providing milk, labour and, in many cases, dowry wealth. Decorating their shelters is seen as an act of respect, a way of honouring the creatures on which rural life depends. Bright patterns of flowers and trees climb across stalls, turning utilitarian spaces into places of dignity. In Alpana Village, beauty is not confined to humans: it extends to the animals that sustain them..

On the occasion of the Bengali New Year, Berger Paints Bangladesh Limited, the country's leading manufacturer, launched a TV advert set in Tikoil. It celebrated the village's artistry while offering a solution: synthetic paints that could make Alpana last far longer, resisting rain and sun rays.

To Berger, it was a win-win. To the villagers, and to many beyond, it sounded like a threat to the very soul of the art. Within hours of the advert's release, criticism erupted online.

Critics also point out that Bangladesh already struggles with widespread exposure to chemicals, from pesticides in the fields to pollutants in water and air.

Many illnesses in rural areas are linked to this toxic burden. Introducing synthetic paints into Alpana, they argue, only adds another layer to a public health problem the country has yet to resolve.





Not all villagers oppose synthetic paints outright. Some young women admit that chemical colours are tempting because they are cheaper and quicker than preparing natural pigments. Grinding rice into powder or soaking leaves for days takes time and resources they do not always have. When farming, childcare and household work consume their days, the prospect of a mural that survives the monsoon can feel less like betrayal and more like relief. The tension between heritage and survival runs through every brushstroke: the pride of tradition against the pressures of poverty.



The hindu women who paint do not see Alpana as a way to earn a living, but as a duty to beauty, community and tradition. Visitors who step inside their homes are often invited to sign a guest book, where an expression of wonder is valued far more than a donation. "We're happy to see visitors taking so many pictures!" this resident explains. No one will hassle you for money, even though it would be easy to do so in a place whose unique beauty could so readily attract tourists. Commerce is not the purpose of covering walls in colour. The purpose is pride and the simple act of painting itself.



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