

India love: when Harvard and Tata Trusts joined hands for survival of artistic traditions

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 Ayesha Banerjee (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/ayesha-banerjee>)
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Harvard South Asia Institute team members with women weavers in Mandapeta, Andhra Pradesh.

If you thought there was no one to worry about women in rural areas working on looms, straining their backs and hands because of the long hours spent at work, you could be wrong. Today, innovators are coming forward with ergonomic loom designs which prevent health problems. That's not all. From tribals in remote areas of Odisha to leather craftsmen from a dusty outpost in Rajasthan, Indians from every sphere are aspiring to better their lives and those of others around them. A recent project by the Harvard University South Asia Institute (SAI) and Tata Trusts has also ensured they get adequate support to step on the path of continuous improvement.

The 18-month project, Livelihood Creation in India, focused on rural livelihood creation in the handicrafts and handloom sectors; educational, social and economic empowerment of women; and science and technology-based social entrepreneurship. About 125 organisations from across 15 states were selected. Need-based capacity building and strengthening workshops were also conducted in 2016 with 100 participating NGOs, and 20 webinars involving Harvard faculty and subject experts from India. Social innovation grants of Rs 50 lakh were finally given to 16 organisations.

Speaking to HT Education on the eve of Republic Day, Dr Shashank Shah, visiting scholar, Harvard Business School and project director and fellow, SAI, who led the project, said livelihood creation was necessary in India. By 2050, out of the global population of 9.7 billion, India's population would touch 1.7 billion. Despite the demographic dividend, "the pressure of feeding those mouths, empowering those hands and filling those minds is going to be enormous and if that's not done in a focused, constructive way, the outcome is going to be very negative," he warned.

Innovation in Tradition, a published work on the project by Shah, Mukti Khaire, faculty, chair, Rural Livelihood Creation in the Indian Crafts Sector and Kundan Madireddy, project manager - also from SAI - highlights the positives for the crafts sector. Quoting various sources it said production of handicrafts was (after agriculture) the largest source of income among India's rural populations. An estimated 11.65 million Indians were engaged in craft production in 2013, a number which was expected to grow to 13.93 million in 2017 and 17.79 million by 2022. "Sustainability development in the craft sector will play a major role in the future. Global powerhouse China has identified two sectors, information technology and craft, which would help future growth. Survival of India's tradition of art and craft was critical as it helped the environment by reducing carbon footprint, improved rural self-sufficiency and checked migration," Shah said.

This was a time to be optimistic. Talking about his travels to every corner of the country as part of the project and for his additional research work on corporate social responsibility, Shah said villagers, especially women, he had met, inspired him with their optimism. They were starting businesses, taking small loans and using them to raise poultry and cattle, to make handicraft products. "They are using that money to send their children to engineering colleges. Change will happen through these individuals - pessimism is not the way. We need to recommit ourselves to the purpose for which India became a republic," he said.

The industry in future would not be able to absorb the 280 million people joining the workforce by 2050. "We have to create jobs at a phenomenal rate to maintain this level of growth." Humans were also being replaced by robots and artificial intelligence in an increasingly automated corporate world. That was why the discourse on livelihood creation was vital, he said.

Despite its advantages, a thriving democracy and freedoms enjoyed by the press and public institutions, India had baggage. "We have a history of 700 years of colonial rule. Disasters like the Famine of Bengal in the 1940s, which wiped out one-third of Bengal's population, has affected our way of thinking. Now personal and basic expectations come first - it's first self and then help. Though our philosophy of Vasudev Kutumbakam (the world is a family) is very evolved our baggage makes it difficult to practice it. In the 70 years of independence for about 45 years we were under heavily centralised licence raj, socialistic rule with personal levels of taxation as high as 97.5%. In 25 years India has risen to be the third largest economy in the world by purchasing power parity in comparison with GDP, after US and China. This (advantages of growth) needs to pan out to the rest of the society and has to be done in a balanced way. Social change is not like manufacturing a product with a machine. It has to happen from the bottom up, not through the top-down approach of the government or corporates," Shah added.

Philanthropic organisations such as Tata Trusts - which work in several areas of community development - and Srinivasan Services Trust of TVS Group - Sundaram Clayton Limited - which had empowered four lakh women through the self-help route - would also be critical in ensuring the survival and sustainability of communities in the future, he said.