



Dappu musicians from Andhra Pradesh perform at the Kala Madhyam folk mela.

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Munira Sen began her work in media when she was 14 years old, scripting and anchoring music shows for All India Radio, going on to work in television and theater. Direct experience with these media prepared her for her role as executive director of Madhyam, a group focusing on the interface of communication, culture, media and development.

Madhyam's work has included producing docudramas and campaigns on violence against women, child sexual abuse, empowerment of women, dowry issues, HIV/AIDS and other issues faced by women, children and other marginalized social groups. The organization has produced films, journals and awareness campaigns and has used street theater and folk-art forms as media for social change. Workshops, seminars and training programs are also an important

part of their work. Increasingly, this has meant working in partnership with mainstream media outlets, a challenging development. As Munira explained in our online dialogue:

Being in Madhyam also meant creating partnerships with mainstream media in order to lobby for space for issues related to marginalized peoples like women, children, and tribals. Face-to-face interactions with electronic and print media personnel... was one way of conscientizing mainstream media practitioners on development issues. Actually coordinating two columns on legal and children's issues in the Times of India gave us insights into the marketing compulsions, ethics and changing character of the new globalized media markets.

This essay addresses a dialectical tension in the community cultural development field, pitting questions of market and self-sufficiency against those of preserving tradition. How is cultural tradition kept alive and renewed in a market-driven society? Madhyam is trying to find connections that would return support to indigenous artists, rather than consigning them to a choice between exploitation and starvation. Is there a legitimate role for cultural entrepreneurship that can actually advance cultural development? That is the question taken up in this essay.

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Cultural Entrepreneurship

FROM COSMOLOGY TO MARKET

by Munira Sen

India is a pluralistic, multicultural, multiethnic, multi-lingual nation-state housing one-eighth of the world's population. Poverty, modernization, caste and class, illiteracy, economic disparities, the status of women, population pressures and social ferment are only some of the issues which further complicate the complexities already existing within India. Any brief essay runs the risk of inaccuracy in generalizing about the complex nature of this country.

Much of my thinking on globalization has been influenced by the author Thomas Friedman.¹ As he sees it, in the dynamic of globalization we are witnessing the complex interaction between a new system and our old passions and aspirations. We find both the clash of civilizations and the homogenization of civilizations, both environmental disasters and amazing environmental rescues, both the triumph of market capitalism and a backlash against it. It's a complex drama where the final act has not been written.

The faceless phenomenon of globalization is assuming a distinct character in the Indian subcontinent as in every region of the world, further marginalizing already marginalized communities. Innovation replaces tradition. The present or future replaces the past. Nothing matters so much as what will come next, and what will come next can only arrive if what is here now gets overturned. The establishment of large chain supermarkets has caused small provision stores to close down. Reebok, Nike and others have pushed out over 200 leather tanneries in Tamil Nadu. Directly impinging on the folk artists who are the focus of my essay, Chinese goods are threatening our crafts markets.

¹Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (Anchor Books: New York, 2000).

While the response to globalization is likely to include protesting India's economic "liberalization" policies on street corners, that is not likely to result in sufficient change. The questions uppermost in one's mind are these: What do we do about it? How can we use this system of globalization, which is evidently here to stay, to benefit the most people while inflicting the least pain?

This is the supreme challenge for countries and individuals: to find a healthy balance between preserving a sense of identity, home and community while doing what it takes to survive within the globalization system. This essay deals with some of the questions and dilemmas faced by folk artists, craftspeople and Madhyam, the organization I direct, in addressing these issues in the field of culture and development.

Madhyam is a national development communications organization which uses culture and communication (both mainstream media and alternative folk media) as vehicles of change. In our long and colorful journey of 18 years, Madhyam has been producing communication materials such as films, posters, journals, outdoor publicity media and press campaigns to reinforce messages on children's rights, women's empowerment and HIV/AIDS to effect attitudinal change in urban Bangalore. At the policy level, Madhyam has used an advocacy approach with mainstream media, sensitizing them and lobbying to create more space for development issues related to marginalized communities.

Madhyam's work involves a continuous process of learning and reflection, revisiting—and sometimes reinventing—ourselves at every crossroads in our organization's development. However, at our core, we always remain convinced that the key to addressing social inequity is people's empowerment: giving people access and control over resources, giving people choices and empowering them to make informed choices.

Today, our task is increasingly shaped by what is called globalization, which might best be explained through example.

Perhaps in the old days, reporters, businesspeople or engineers could get away with thinking of local readers, buyers and clients as their "market." But today, Planet Earth has supplanted all local markets through the global integration of technology, finance, trade and information in a way that influences wages, interest rates, living standards, job opportunities, war and culture around the world. This phenomenon called globalization may not explain everything, but its influence on almost everyone grows and spreads continuously. Therefore it is tremendously important for cultural workers to understand the forces that shape globalization.

We need to view the world through the lens of financial markets as well as culture and politics, for the walls between finance, trade, diplomacy and foreign relations are crumbling fast. Relationships between nations can no longer be

explained by the quest for power and geopolitical advantage, as if markets don't matter. And economics can no longer be explained solely with reference to markets, as if power and culture don't matter. In the same way, people's behavior cannot be explained just by culture and biology, as if technology doesn't matter. We also need to view the world through the lens of technology—from the Internet to satellite telecommunications—which is reshaping the ways both individuals and nations interact with one another.

As cultural workers, these new conditions call on us to change perspectives—to use these different lenses as different situations require—always understanding that it is the interaction of all of them together that is really defining international relations. Being a globalist is the only way to systematically connect the dots and thereby to find some order amidst the chaos.

Let me offer an instance of one of our first encounters with markets and multinationals. Madhyam was recently approached by an advertising agency with a global presence. We were asked to use our folk performing-art groups to help sell a new brand of tea to the rural market. As an added inducement, the ad agency argued, the tea is fortified with vitamins, which the Indian population direly lacks. When I resisted, they were prepared to negotiate: “You perform street theater focusing on the masses' need for vitamins,” they coaxed. “At the end of the play, we'll advertise the tea.”

We turned the proposition over in our minds, looking at it every which way. It was backed by a sound health survey on vitamin deficiency conducted by a reputable market-research organization. It would fulfill a health need of our people. It would contribute to Madhyam's financial sustainability, enabling us to continue assisting the field. Viewed in this light, profit is not a dirty word. Still we balked at the proposition.

While in theory we were ready to face markets, in practice we were stretched beyond our comfort zones by this proposition. Though we cannot prevent the “Coca-colaization” of culture, we certainly did not want to be instrumental in bringing it about. If development destroys local culture, then it is development not worth having. So our problem is how to assist in the economic empowerment of communities without exploitation and without complicity in the wrong kind of development.

Similarly, our work has put us in touch with the expanding problem of intellectual-property rights in the field of art and culture, which urgently needs to be addressed.

For example, I recently met Ghazi Khan and his group, who belong to a small village on the outskirts of Jaisalmer in Rajasthan. Their Rajasthani folk song “Nimooda” (“Lemon”) was appropriated by the Hindi film industry in Mumbai (Bombay). As a result, the film's music director was much celebrated

and the song made the top of the charts. Several agents, recording companies and artists made significant amounts of money. Needless to say, absolutely no royalty of any kind reached Ghazi Khan. Rupayan Sansthan, a local non-governmental organization, is currently working to redress the situation legally, but so far they are not making much headway. In much the same way, Warli and Madhubani tribal art is converted into designs printed onto T-shirts and bric-a-brac and sold for a huge profit, while the artists continue to live in penury, totally unaware of the market appreciation and profits that are going to middlemen. When tribal art is so easy to copy, how does one address the issue of intellectual-property rights?

Madhyam's questions arise from 15 years of collaboration with local folk artists to adapt their work to new conditions. For example, working in the rural areas of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, Madhyam has for some time been using street theater and folk forms such as Therakoothu (traditional and popular theater blending music, dance and dialogue), Chhau (a masked dance form derived from martial arts), Jhummur (a dance associated with tea cultivation), Bihu (song and dance forms traditionally associated with seasonal festivals of Assam) and Burakatha (a form of folk theater incorporating ballads) as media vehicles to effect behavioral change at the grassroots level. We achieve this by weaving social messages into these forms and performing for rural audiences. Using the cultural idiom of the people has a powerful impact, embodying Madhyam's principle that "cultural action is social action." To complement these efforts, by lobbying for performance space on state-owned radio and television, we also organize groups of folk artists to assert their rights to land, housing, public pensions, status and recognition.

As a direct outcome of our work for the social empowerment of performing artists in rural areas, we at Madhyam began to see the potential in the folk paintings and handicrafts of the villages as a possible alternative basis for economic growth in response to the felt need of the people for economic empowerment and livelihood. Excited by the idea of stimulating economic development from within the culture, Madhyam added another dimension to our work, beginning to consider how alternative markets could address globalization's ominous trend of pushing small players out of markets. Our main strategy was to reposition folk paintings as art by organizing traveling exhibitions and executing mural art projects in homes and corporate offices. There is a historical-political dimension to our plan. When the British ruled India, they dismissed folk art, relegating it to the position of craft. As the expression of collective consciousness of the people rather than an individual sensibility, it did not fit into their definition of art. So our economic development scheme also addressed the way indigenous cultures are devalued by colonization.



The "Tree of Life," as depicted by a traditional Warli artisan.

We began by exhibiting the folk art of Bihar (Madhubani, a colorful art form that reflects images from the sacred epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharatha), Maharashtra (the work of Warli tribal artists, animists who execute lively scenes of cosmic harmony and village life through stick figures and ritualistic paintings in rice paste), Rajasthan (where Phad-Phad painters depict the epic of their folk hero Pabuji in strong and vibrant vegetable dyes as a large backdrop to a dance drama about Pabuji), West Bengal (the work of Patuas artists, roadside minstrels whose scroll paintings unfold a sacred tale or famous event sung in verse), Karnataka (using Chittara, a dying art form of Karnataka in which geometric motifs are symbolically painted in vegetable dyes) and Gujarat (where Pithora artists take a vow and paint vibrant horses in houses and stairwells to appease their gods).

Positioning folk painting as art was an important aim, but we wanted to go further, taking the next step in our program of presenting diverse elements of culture as a composite whole—folk life—and bringing it into the public domain. More recently, therefore, our work has expanded to include promotion and marketing of functional crafts such as metalware, leather, stoneware, bamboo and cane, hand-looms and other handcrafted products.

In indigenous communities, folk art is passed on from generation to generation, either orally or through imitation. Creations are generally not attributable to an individual painter. The art is continuously utilized and developed within the indigenous community, and it is central to the practice of religion, sometimes also serving as a vehicle for recorded history. Madhyam's interventions

in this arena are intended to give visibility to folk arts and artists, helping to reclaim space for folk art (as opposed to fine art or craft, two categories to which such work is often consigned); to help city dwellers to rediscover their roots and long forgotten traditions through encountering this work; and to stimulate development from within the culture, by creating income-generating opportunities for artists.

Entering into this project has raised challenges and dilemmas that are linked to globalization. For instance, there are two perspectives on the issue of commercialization of folk arts. One sees it as an assault: marketing strips this art of its sacred meanings, converting it into a product for sale, thereby diminishing indigenous people's identity. Others assert that folk arts, too, are living art forms that must grow, adapting to changing times, and that commercial use of this work can enhance a community's identity as well as its means of livelihood. We have adopted the latter view, seeking to strike a balance between protection and promotion through buyer education and active marketing.

This does not mean embracing all commercial opportunities. Several schools and design establishments have approached us, requesting workshops through which they might learn folk-art forms directly from rural artists. We have strongly resisted such proposals, respecting the folk artists' belief that their skills and knowledge should vest only within their own families and communities. Although our attitude may seem protectionist, given the potentially huge market that exists for folk art, we are convinced that its ownership and ensuing profits should lie with the rightful community of artists.

One initiative seems to strike the proper balance: our project called Rediscover Your Roots. Since folk art originated on the walls of the huts of rural India, Madhyam is currently promoting the same concept for urban areas. Reception rooms of offices, living rooms, columns, pillars and hotels have been our canvas, and corporations, architects and interior designers our patrons. While working with them has been a new and exciting experience, it has also constantly forced us to grapple with new issues the market throws up.

For example, an information-technology (IT) company wanted to commission the depiction of an "IT-village" in Madhubani. We decided to ask the artists how they felt about such a project. Shanti Devi and her son, Vijay Kumar Jha, said this: "Our paintings are thematic. Krishna Ras symbolizes love; Khobar symbolizes marriage. However, there is one festival—namely Dev Uthan Ekdasi—for which we draw pictures of household belongings such as the radio and TV. Even then, we do this as part of our tradition and culture. We won't mind drawing computers because it brings in the money, but our heart is not in such work." One can clearly see that under the conditions of impoverishment afflicting rural folk artists, financial compulsions must often override artists' struggle to retain cultural meanings.

²Jaya Jaitly, *Vishwakarma's Children* (Institute of Social Science and Concept Publishing Company: New Delhi, 2001), p. 142.

³*Madhyam* journal (Vol. 15, No. 2, Bangalore, India), p. 4.

Consider our experience in handicrafts. Crafts are the clearest reflection of a nation's cultural heritage, but the socioeconomic status and respect accorded to the communities that produce them is not commensurate. A sample study was conducted by Jaya Jaitly² with 114 artisans from the hand-loom weaving, pottery, cane and bamboo work, durrie (carpet) weaving, leather, metal casting and woodworking sectors. The survey revealed that 42 percent were members of the backward castes (such as Yadavs, Kurmis and Jats), 24 percent belonged to scheduled castes (castes and tribes associated with the practice of "untouchability" stemming from ritual pollution, now covered by the "Prevention of Atrocities Act") and 34 percent to other castes from the intermediate and upper-caste sectors.

In the craft communities living in rural areas, the assets of a family usually consist of a bicycle, a transistor radio, some cooking vessels and equipment. Another category of artisans may possess a small plot of land and some cows. Twenty percent of the families surveyed owned assets of less than Rs. 25,000 (\$500 U.S.); 2 percent had assets valued between Rs. 25,000 and Rs. 49,000 (\$1,000 U.S.); 10 percent possessed assets worth Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 75,000 (\$1,500 U.S.); 39 percent had assets valued over Rs. 100,000 (\$2,000 U.S.). The assets of the others could not be ascertained.

Access to finance, scarcity of raw materials, inability to invest in machinery and better technology and lack of marketing opportunities are some of the main constraints that craftspeople face. Having taken on the challenge of creating economic opportunities through alternative markets, Madhyam must grapple with challenging questions. For example, Jaya Jaitly has described the process of the creation of craft as follows:

Man's mind creates concepts and his hand creates objects. If one sees a craftsman at work one can observe the spiritual process of linking the power of the individual inner self to the movements of the hands, to the needs of the community and the larger web of society, to connect with the world and the cosmos. What is unique about craft is the manner in which the craftsman places the creativity of the entire self into community art performed for community service.³

In light of this perspective, certain questions gain added significance: How can the spiritual nature of this creative process be related to economic development? Craftspeople are often seen either as bearers of tradition or as skilled labor that can be tapped for its potential in nation building. But what those of us working in this field need to cultivate is an integrated understanding of heritage and commerce, to comprehend the very real challenges it presents. What is tradition? What can be changed and adapted to markets, and what

Work by traditional artists is offered for sale at the Kala Madhyam folk *mela*.



cannot? Is it feasible to professionalize craft? For example, few craftspeople factor in the cost of their time when calculating the price of their work, yet this is widely acknowledged as a sound marketing principle. Can and should we introduce it? How can we preserve the raw material needed for craft, for example, the bamboo forests which are fast disappearing? What are the bench marks of quality? How do we educate and mold consumers' taste toward crafts?

The danger is that in helping folk arts transform from process to product—from cosmology to the marketplace—their significance can be lost, and mere commodities are presented. How do we as mediators help to preserve the significance of these forms? Contextualizing every craft with background information on craftspeople's socioeconomic conditions and processes of creation is one way we can add value to the consumer's understanding and also boost sales. We find ourselves torn between economic and cultural considerations: these artists need sales income even to subsist, sometimes forcing them into compromises driven by economic necessity. Ways of doing things—marketing crafts and working with craftspeople—will need some rethinking if adequate answers are to be found. The younger consumer whose head is filled with glitzy images of multinational company products must be won over by the charm and potential of craft. If we succeed in reaching a more sophisticated, demanding customer, will craft work need redesigning, new packaging and new forms of promotion?



Notun Dis Gushti,
Madhyam's folk group
from Assam, performs
at a folk *mela*.

These difficulties are further compounded by the fact that the government departments set up for handicraft promotion in India are gradually withdrawing from this sector as the world paradigm shifts from a labor economy to a knowledge society. As a result, 25 million craftspeople need to find alternative models of marketing. One such idea is to create alternative marketing venues based on the village *haat* (village market) concept. A fairly successful Delhi *haat* created by Jaya Jaitly in collaboration with the Delhi state government already exists.

Madhyam, in collaboration with other like-minded institutions, proposes to set up a similar *haat*, an upgraded city version of the traditional rural *haat* which can be seen in myriad forms across the country on any day of the week. Traditional village markets always wear a festive air, naturally and unselfconsciously celebrating cultural diversity. What is innovative about our idea is that it will be a synergistic blend of folk songs, folk dances, folk art, folk food, drama and craft which will showcase folk life and bring it into the public domain. Madhyam has tested this concept through its large annual *mela* (carnival) called Kalamadhyam. We have seen the crowds swell and the earnings of the craftspeople grow substantially with each passing year, leading us to see cultural entrepreneurship as the way forward in a time of revival of folk life and folk art.

Our *haat* will be a meeting place, encouraging face-to-face contact and exchange between urban and rural India. We see it as an opportunity for cultural tourism. It will also empower impoverished artisan groups both

financially and socially. It will help urban city slickers to rediscover their roots. And finally it will give visibility to the cultural expressions of *dalit* (marginalized) groups. Here's how it will work:

Producer groups of artisans will exhibit their indigenous art and craft products on a rotating basis. This will enable village artisan-to-consumer direct marketing, thereby eliminating the middleman. Madhyam plans to maintain a plot of land equipped with low-cost, low-technology stalls built along rustic lines. The entire effect would be that of a traditional village. A small multipurpose theater would be built as a venue for marketing workshops for artisans as well as workshops to educate consumers on folk-art products. The walls would function as a folk-art gallery. The center of the *haat* area would be earmarked for folk songs, dance and drama performances.

We expect 1,000 families of artists and craftspeople to gain exposure to the market annually. The results should give them additional resources for raw materials, helping to sustain them for as much as half of each year, during the six months they are not bound to return to their traditional agricultural occupations. This model of cultural entrepreneurship is, we believe, self-sufficient, sustainable and culturally appropriate, as it doesn't change or impose upon the lifestyles of the people. As conceived, its special strengths include involving people's participation at every level, so that the participants are the owners and stakeholders. It supports individual entrepreneurship and yet it is collective in nature.

This is only one model of cultural entrepreneurship as a response to the forces of globalization. The challenges ahead seem Herculean, but every step in the right direction helps to cover the "journey of a thousand miles" toward trade justice and social equity.