

Crafting Peace: An Artisans' Collective for Empowering Widows and Destitute Women of Vrindavan, India
India
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This project consisted of establishing a women's traditional embroidery collective to create living incomes for destitute widows and single mothers in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, India. The success of the project, called Vrindaban ka Gaurav, or, "Glory of Vrindavan" (VKG), required that I identify a group of women both willing and able to learn traditional embroidery techniques, identify marketable products and designs incorporating these techniques, and successfully market products on an international level.

Of these three tasks, the first was the most difficult. Summers are particularly hot in Uttar Pradesh, grinding all but the most necessary work to a halt. Most NGO administrators were out of town, limiting my access to those most in need of livelihoods. Additionally, on the day before my arrival in Vrindavan to work on the project, the woman who had been hired as the coordinator for the collective had a falling out with my partner NGO.

Despite these difficulties, a social worker at my partner NGO took on the job of coordinating the collective. She was very enthusiastic about the opportunities it would give to local women. The NGO's preexisting sewing center was naturally and seamlessly merged with the embroidery collective, making production a smooth process in which all of the women could participate.

An aspect of my project that was not made clear to me until I arrived in Vrindavan was that the embroidery work that most women currently used to eke out a living was not of the same caliber as what I had previously seen and thus used to conceptualize the VKG product line. Men and sometimes children traditionally did the most beautiful and detailed embroidery work, which was used to create clothing for temple deity statues. Thankfully, some men from a local workshop were more than happy to teach their skills to the women in the collective.

The women express a great deal of pride in their work. The idea that product designs express the prominent stories of Vrindavan's local culture worked exceptionally well; discussions about local stories and design ideas garnered universal participation. Furthermore, these designs were successfully incorporated into marketable products. The collective is already receiving orders and making money from its line of yoga and meditation products that I developed.

The online marketing scheme for the collective has also been a success in generating orders and creating interest in the collective and its individual artisans. The www.vkgposhak.com website acts not only as a storefront, but also a means by which the artisans and those who purchase their products can communicate with and learn about one another. The focus on individual artisans allows current and prospective customers to see exactly whom they are helping and how their support translates into tangible positive change in artisans' lives.

There are currently ten women producing work in the VKG artisans' collective, with several more taking training classes. These women are all single mothers who have either been widowed or abandoned by their husbands and who had no other means of employment before joining VKG. The collective has helped them to cover their regular monthly bills and enabled them to send their children to school. The increasing number of orders being placed with the collective means that increasingly more women will be invited to participate in this project. I plan to continue working with VKG as I complete Fulbright research in Vrindavan over the coming year, further increasing its capacity for future growth and long-term sustainability.

Additionally, the Lewis & Clark College India Overseas program is incorporating a visit to VKG into its regular journey from Delhi to Agra. This will make more students aware of the difficulties currently being faced in areas like Vrindavan, including deforestation and overdevelopment of real estate; water security and solid waste management issues; health issues from water-borne illnesses, unemployment and poor overall public infrastructure.¹ They can then see what VKG is doing to help destitute single mothers and widows, a group most egregiously affected by these difficulties. Lewis & Clark's 2010 Gender Studies Symposium also plans to feature the VKG story and market items that VKG will create exclusively for this annual event.

My definition of peace is a state in which harmony between individuals and communities is achieved through a universal perception of security. Security is the absence of a perceived threat to one's life or livelihood. Threats need not be issued by outside persons or groups; they can also arise from one's possible inability to meet day-to-day needs. In order to obtain the security that is so essential in achieving peace, there must be understanding within and between communities and opportunities must exist for people to meet their basic needs.

The VKG artisans' collective works to create security for not only the women who participate in the collective, but also other members of the society, international consumers of VKG products, and Lewis & Clark Students. Vrindavan's destitute women are empowered to meet the basic needs of their children and themselves. This empowerment mitigates gender inequality and brings awareness to other women about the need to have income earning capabilities in the event that they themselves are widowed or abandoned. The international dialogue component of the VKG marketing scheme allows VKG artisans to interact with their customers, bringing perspective and understanding to both groups of people. Lewis & Clark College's involvement in the project engenders a similar two-way dialogue. Students experience a deeper and better-contextualized sense of what it means to be a global citizen, better enabling them to initiate and participate in their own various future undertakings meant to create lasting security and peace.

This project has given me first-hand insight into the lives of those who live in communities where charity work is common. Cooperation towards progressive growth is difficult to come by because most charity initiatives either give handouts or immediately bribe local people to participate. There is a culture of maximizing the immediate benefits to be gained from such initiatives and ignoring the longer-term issue of sustainable livelihood. Working on and completing this project has served to strengthen my belief that social entrepreneurship and micro credit are the keys to achieving sustainable livelihoods, truly ameliorating poverty and subsequently engendering security and peace. The people involved in this project had a personal stake in it from the beginning including participation in product design, responsibility to the artisan group, and receiving pay that was commensurate to the amount of work completed. As a result, these women are no longer passive recipients of hand outs, but instead the architects of their own livelihoods and household security – a security of both life and mind gained through international interaction that cannot help but have a positive impact on larger local and global publics.

¹ Banerjee, Dr. Uttam. Government of India. Department of Agriculture and Regional Planning. Ecocity Development Plan for Vrindavan Ecozone. Kharagpur: Indian Institute of Technology, 2004; Nash, Joshua. "Independent Report." [FOV.org.uk](http://www.fov.org.uk). Apr 1998. Friends of Vrindavan UK. 16 Jan 2009 <<http://www.fov.org.uk/india/report.html>>.

