

Crafting Peace: An Artisans' Collective for Empowering Widows and Destitute Women of Vrindavan, India

Submitted by Katie Walter, Class of '09

Introduction: Fewer than one third of the residents of Vrindavan, India have regular work.¹ Of those who do, many make less than a dollar a day.² Destitute widows pour into the town, either in observance of centuries-old religious and societal prescriptions or because their families, unwilling or unable to support them, have abandoned them here.³ Rural families attempting to escape the abject poverty that confronts them in the countryside migrate to Vrindavan as well. The high volume of tourists and pilgrims visiting the town creates a perception of economic opportunity, but a privileged few have already laid claim to the market for visitors' goods and services, leaving no room for newcomers to secure living incomes.⁴ My Project for Peace has been conceptualized to help Vrindavan's widows and female immigrants as well as other members of the community who have absolutely no viable means of supporting themselves.

My project is called Vrindaban ka Gaurav, or, "Glory of Vrindavan" (VKG). It involves the creation of an artisans' collective for the production and marketing of poshak, a needlepoint handicraft traditionally made by women in the Vrindavan area.⁵ I will spend June, July and August of 2009 in Delhi and Vrindavan establishing the groundwork for the project and initiating its implementation.

Significance: The crucial role of poverty reduction in achieving peace is well known and has been emphasized in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. According to the United Nations Development Programme's 2003 Human Development Report, "The need to eradicate poverty does not compete with the need to make the world more secure. On the contrary, eradicating poverty should contribute to a safer world." Ole Danbolt Mjøs, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, articulated similar statements in his 2006 speech presenting the Nobel Peace Prize to microcredit pioneer Muhammad Yunus. These assertions are strengthened by research demonstrating a correlation between higher per capita incomes and peace.⁶

Gender equality is also a key component of peace. The exploitation and degraded conditions of Vrindavan's ever-growing population of widows has been addressed in a report by UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women.⁷ Achieving income generation for these and other impoverished women of Vrindavan will aid in achieving UN Millennium Development Goal number three: promote gender equality and empower women. According to the UN campaign webpage for this goal, "Poverty has a woman's face. Global prosperity and peace will only be achieved once all the world's people are empowered to order their own lives and provide for themselves and their families... Every single Goal is directly related to women's rights, and societies were [sic] women are not afforded equal rights as men can never achieve development in a sustainable manner."⁸

Timeline: First, I will spend three weeks in Delhi working with Dastkar, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that optimizes incomes for traditional artisans by assisting them in the design, development and marketing of their products. I will provide volunteer services while learning about successful schemes implemented by Dastkar. With Dastkar's help, I will conceptualize a variety of marketable products that incorporate poshak work, identify markets for poshak products and devise ways to promote the products to merchants and vendors. Promotion strategies will include presence on the Internet, promotional mailings with product samples and information about the collective, creation of a recognizable logo and participation in Dastkar's artisans' exhibitions.

Next, the project moves to Vrindavan, where I will partner with Food for Life Vrindavan (FFLV), an NGO that has been assisting Vrindavan's poorest residents for over 10 years. FFLV already has access to prospective poshak trainers as well as an extensive community network that includes current and prospective poshak workers. Additionally, FFLV is contributing office and training space for VKG. My stay here will include volunteering at the FFLV charity school in my

¹ Ministry of Home Affairs, "Data from the 2001 Census, including cities, villages and towns (Provisional)." Census of India. 16 Aug 2008. Government of India. 15 Dec 2008 <<http://www.censusindia.net/results/town.php?stad=A&state5=999>>;

² Food for Life Vrindavan, "Poverty Stats." Food for Life Vrindavan. 15 Jan 2009. Food for Life Vrindavan. 15 Jan 2009 <<http://www.fflvindavan.org/index.php?S=1&Folder=25>>.

³ The town is therefore known as the "city of widows", with widows making up more than 25 percent of Vrindavan's total population of around 56,000 (Owen, Margaret. United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded. New York: Division for the Advancement of Women/DESA, 2001. ; Indian Census, 2001).

⁴ Vrindavan is also known as "the city of 5,000 temples;" visitors to Vrindavan outnumber the local population at an average of 13:1 every month (Banerjee, Dr. Uttam. Government of India. Department of Agriculture and Regional Planning. Ecocity Development Plan for Vrindavan Ecozone. Kharagpur: Indian Institute of Technology, 2004). For corruption and criminal activity in the tourist trade, see Chikermame, Gautam. "Vrindavan: in Step With Krishna." Outlook India. 15 Jan 2009. Outlook Traveller. 15 Jan 2009 <<http://traveller.outlookindia.com/destination.aspx?id=703>>.

⁵ More information about poshak is included as an enclosure.

⁶ Humphreys, Macartan and Ashutosh Varshney. "Violent Conflict and the Millennium Development Goals: Diagnosis and Recommendations." Prepared for the meeting of the Millennium Development Goals Poverty Task Force Workshop, Bangkok. Jun 2004. 15 Jan 2009 < www.columbia.edu/~mh2245/papers1/HV.pdf>.

⁷ Rai, Usha. United Nations Development Fund for Women - UNIFEM. Spirituality, Poverty, Charity Brings Widows to Vrindavan. New Delhi: Guild of Service, 2007.

⁸ Millennium Campaign. "Goal #3 Gender Equity." End Poverty 2015. 15 Jan 2009. United Nations Millennium Campaign. 15 Jan 2009 <<http://endpoverty2015.org/goals/gender-equity>>.

free time.

In Vrindavan, I will share knowledge gained from my training with Dastkar with the primary staff members of the collective: the project coordinator and poshak trainers. The project coordinator will provide overall guidance for the collective by overseeing daily operations; conducting training; documenting and promoting the collective via its blog and promotional mailings; editing and maintaining worker profiles; processing orders; managing the budget and identifying prospective vendors and markets. Poshak trainers will assist the project coordinator. Dastkar and the project coordinator will provide poshak trainers with ongoing education in product development strategies, management skills and marketing techniques. Destitute Vrindavan women will be taught how to create poshak products via monthly training. Monthly collective-wide meetings will also be held to address issues and concerns and involve poshak workers in the product innovation and marketing processes. A group of regular buyers will be established after the fifth week in Vrindavan.⁹ At this point, community mobilizers will inform the Vrindavan community about VKG. These mobilizers will win the trust and support of current poshak workers afraid of endangering what little income they currently gain from their work.¹⁰ Community mobilizers will also collect information about poshak workers to share on the collective's blog. The remaining time will be spent expanding and deepening the production, activities and sales of the collective.

Viability and Sustainability, Personal Qualifications: Dastkar, FFLV and others I have spoken to about my project have expressed enthusiasm and assured me of its viability and sustainability. My experience in India and in Vrindavan in particular will help me to implement the project successfully, as will my extensive retail management experience. FFLV is committed to perpetuating the project after its initial setup and Dastkar has agreed to include VKG products in its artisans' bazaars and exhibitions that take place several times a year. Since all of my lodging is provided for free in both Delhi and Vrindavan, nearly all grant funding will go toward coordinator and trainers' wages, training sessions, packaging supplies and initial poshak materials to create a solid foundation for the VKG Collective. After its first year of implementation, VKG should be able to cover its own operating expenses and employee wages.

Interaction With The Lewis & Clark College (LC) Community: George Austin, Communication Professor and LC India Overseas Program leader for Fall 2009, has added Vrindavan to the India program's itinerary with the intention of visiting VKG. Professor Austin and I have also discussed the possibility of a lecture to the LC India Overseas students in Delhi after the completion of my project. VKG has the potential to become a regular stop for the LC India program, creating an enduring link between the LC Community and the socio-economic development of Vrindavan.

Outcomes: Uttar Pradesh is India's most populous state. It is also the state with the second-lowest per capita income and the lowest Human Development Index.¹¹ Vrindavan itself has myriad problems, 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.¹² VKG will facilitate greater security for those most egregiously affected by these circumstances, namely widows and poor housewives. These women will help to expand the poshak market and educate one another about it. Incomes will be generated and strengthened and lifelong skills and knowledge will be acquired. More will be able to secure basic needs such as food and shelter, while gender inequality in Vrindavan will be mitigated. Consequently, stability and dignity will be engendered in the lives of Vrindavan's poor so that they may contribute to an overall environment of peace.

Enclosures (7)

⁹ I have already established a rapport with an online merchant who is interested in carrying VKG products. Please see addendum from Art & Culture Presentations, Inc.

¹⁰ I came up with my Project for Peace idea while editing family profiles for children attending FFLV's charity school in Vrindavan last August. 75% of the students' parents make less than a dollar a day. Some parents do poshak work, but local merchants often exploit them by paying extremely low wages, even by Vrindavan's standards. This exploitation led me to consider the possibility of creating a collective to improve the livelihoods of these people and others without incomes given a sufficient market for poshak items.

¹¹ "Per head income: UP, Bihar, MP at bottom," Express India. 21 Jan 2008. Indian Express. 16 Jan 2009 <<http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/Per-head-income-UP-Bihar-MP-at-bottom/263915/>>; Talha, Kulsum. "UNICEF India - Child Protection." UNICEF.org/india. 15 Jan 2009. United Nations Children's Fund - UNICEF. 16 Jan 2009 <http://www.unicef.org/india/child_protection_2800.htm>. "The HDI – human development index – is a summary composite index that measures a country's average achievements in three basic aspects of human development: health, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. Health is measured by life expectancy at birth; knowledge is measured by a combination of the adult literacy rate and the combined primary, secondary, and tertiary gross enrolment ratio; and standard of living by GDP per capita (PPP US\$)" ("Human Development Index (HDI) - Human Development Reports (UNDP). UNDP.org. 12 Jan 2009. United Nations Development Programme. 16 Jan 2009 <<http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/indices/hdi/question,68,en.html>>).

¹² 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. Apr 1998. Friends of Vrindavan UK. 16 Jan 2009 <<http://www.fov.org.uk/india/report.html>>.