

Enabling Rural Communities to Build Equality

India

Bates College

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Project Goals: To start a social enterprise that economically empowers women through the production of scarves out of hand-loom cotton saris to be resold in the United States. The business financially benefits anti-child labor programs in Kanchipuram, India.

This project has been funded entirely by the generous Davis grant, which has allowed the initiation of a sustainable social business with plans for big growth.

Changing a system of oppression is not the work of a single summer, especially when there is a cultural learning curve. The success of this project lies in the structural foundation it has built for a social business that is continually growing. This business holds the promise of a new global commodity chain based on transformation and empowerment of the workers rather than profit and subjugation.

The trip to India included three major goals: acclimation, investigation, and production. The first few days were spent adjusting to the the time zone, climate, and food. Next came a familiarization of the Rural Institute for Development Education (RIDE), the organization through which the scarf-production is facilitated. Relationship-building and overcoming communication barriers were focuses, as well as touring the area in order to view the effects of RIDE in the community. The organization was put under scrutiny to ensure its programs as successful as they appeared online. This investigation involved respectful questions to the founder of the organization, its employees, and members of the surrounding community. It was discovered that RIDE has a very strong presence in Kanchipuram and is esteemed for its many years of generous service to the community. The organization has transformed the hand-loom industry in Kanchipuram, which used to rely heavily on child labor, but has moved away from this reliance (from 40,000 child-laborers when the organization started to 4,000 in 2007). It was also discovered that the founder's family money has allowed RIDE to continue in times of economic distress, which has lent stability to the organization. Relationship-building with the women involved in the project was also a priority. Despite language barriers, enough communication was able to take place that the wages were agreed to be generous, and a certain level of familiarity with the women developed.

Production, the final phase of the trip, occurred within the last few days of the visit to RIDE. A total of 230 scarves were prepared for export to the US. This effort was quite enjoyable, including trips to sari shops to pick colors, help cutting the saris into scarf-sized pieces, and encouragement throughout the sewing and ironing process. A highlight of this process was playing American music for the women making the scarves, which they enjoyed immensely.

With this single order of scarves, a woman who ordinarily makes about \$50-55 per month made \$71 in just one week. Several other women played lesser roles but earned similarly substantial wages. A donation was made to RIDE with enough money to sponsor the transitional year of five children from child laborers to students in RIDE's Bridge School.

However, as mentioned previously, the success of the project came with the development of the brand, Sarifold, which continues to grow as a fashion company. After the two-week trip to India, the focus of the project shifted to the development of Sarifold and sales of scarves under this brand. Only 15 of the original scarves remain for sale today, and Sarifold has just made another order for scarves with a plan to order another 200 every few months.

Looking to the future and in concert with a critical study of the global commodity chain through the lenses of both Politics and Gender Studies, the hope for this project is to become a well-established ethical fashion company employing women in cooperative self-help groups across India (or perhaps the globe) and returning a portion of the profits to the co-ops to be used in a manner decided communally. This structure would encourage the further economic empowerment of women with the means to allocate funds to community-development project, micro-finance, or other culturally-relevant programs. It would also allow for expansion into communities in need other than Kanchipuram, and could set an example for other companies of a model in which the manufacturers of clothing are treated as people rather than machines.

Simply put, peace is the absence of violence. The definition becomes more interesting when the meaning of violence is examined. Physical violence is only the corporal manifestation of a system of oppression. The source of violence is the degradation, devaluation, or marginalization group of people, including deprivation from basic needs. A society where the poor have insufficient cultural agency to bring themselves out of poverty is one of systemic violence. A truly peaceful culture is one in which each member of society's basic human needs are taken care of so that its members can focus on self-actualization.

Sarifold is helping RIDE to fight the socially violent repercussions of India's legally retired caste system by empowering the poor from the lowest castes with tools for class mobility. Together, Sarifold and RIDE are also opposing the gender-discrimination that has placed women in compromising situations that have allowed for both physical and systemic violence.

This project has allowed for a more critical view of non-profits and social ventures. With an inside look into the temptations of exploitation for the purpose of profitable gain comes a greater skepticism of ventures marketed as good causes. After this project, it would be interesting to look at the global commodity chain for a product such as Tom's shoes, which are sold under the guise of a socially-minded business, but which almost certainly reinforce systemic oppression of the poor and exploitation of workers through their production, which is not fair trade certified.

This project has been and I hope will continue to be absolutely transformative in its expansion of my understanding of what it takes to initiate change in the world. I am optimistic about the ability of critical thinkers and doers to catalyze global shifts, but only to the extent that they question each element of the process so that there is no point in which they become complicit with the system of oppression they intend to fight.



Katherine Kerr (helper - left), Vasantha (seamstress - center), and Olivia Krishnaswami (Davis recipient - right).



Left: Children who are living without parents during one of RIDE's after-school programs. Right: One of Sarifold's sari-scarves on Olivia Krishnaswami.