

Cultural perspectives on sustainable rural livelihoods

Situating cultural practices of marginal communities in India

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Making of a perspective

Engagements with issues around culture, development and identity among the Musahars, marginalization of Dalit muslims, research and documentation of folk performative traditions of dalits and efforts in reinvigoration of sufiyana qalam tradition with Mirs of Pugal have shaped a perspective of understanding and working with the marginal communities. In an effort towards dignified representation of Musahars, Deshkal has produced a small film in Hindi (*Beyond Imposed Identities*). Over the years Deshkal has collected songs of different rituals and various aspects of daily life and built up a collection of photographs and video footage concerning the Musahar community. In March 2005, Deshkal organised Rohi rang: the colours of desert at Delhi, the first live programme by the Mirs of Pugal region where they presented Sufiyana qalam as sung in their region. Work with the Mirs of Pugal of reinvigorating sufiyana qalam music has been an attempt to contribute to the resilience and tenacity of traditions of the Mirs in the harsh realities of the desert of western rajasthan. The Marfat initiative of listeners and singers has been a facilitator for disseminating the sufiyana qalam tradition of the Mir musicians from the Pugal region.

Interactions during the International Conference on “Culture Matters” have been a source of inspiration for sharpening perspectives on development from the margins. The present position paper is an attempt to articulate issues related to the cultural practices of the marginal as they are understood and pursued in development interventions of the State and NGOs in the context of sustainable rural livelihoods approaches. The paper is intended to foster a debate around the importance on integrating perspectives about margins and their cultural practices. This is to enlarge the conceptual and operative domain of the SL frameworks especially in the context of cultural practices and skills. And help us in identifying concrete strategies for ensuring dignity and autonomy of livelihood and cultural rights of marginal practitioners of culture.

I. Engaging with marginal perspectives

Last decade of the 20th century and the opening years of the new century have seen fairly significant articulations both in the mainstream development discourse as well as counter / alternative development discourses about the role and place of 'culture' vis-à-vis 'development', both of which are intensely contested and protean concepts. Many of these are symptomatic of the impasse that characterizes much of dominant development thinking and practice, especially as development reveals to be a 'much more complex undertaking'¹ than the hegemonic precepts of uni-linear economic growth. Other articulations, often referred to as alternatives / counter currents, represent coming to fruition of convictions that germinated as nascent beliefs in the robustness and regenerative capacities of local cultures. In fact, it is the nurturing of these embryonic but deeply committed engagements as opposed to the pretentious and repressive fallouts of the toxicity of the 'development project', that have made significant contributions in our understanding of culture as a set of representations and practices embedded in the material reality of the marginal communities. The making of these perspectives emphatically points to the need to learn from these concrete philosophies of life. In proposing the inextricable link between development as well being and culture as dignified worldviews at the fringes, these articulations point to the necessity of situating and engaging with the perspectives of the marginal communities in overcoming the reductive basis of development as growth.

In proclaiming this 'cultural dimension to development' there is an effort to liberate culture from '... the primordial trap, a mystical haze, or a source of hegemonic power'² and instead constitute a framework that urges for appreciation and participation of diverse local cultures in constituting a just and humane common future. The imperative necessity for this has been strengthened by the last two and a half decades of the experience of globalization and glocalization in many parts of the world. The reinvention of the development discourse around the importance of local cultures and their diversity seeks to give a new lease of life to the critical concerns of biospheric and ecological consciousness that have been marginalized by the aggressive management of the relation between environment and development as subservient to the ideals of material progress.

Of special significance in these deliberations on 'how culture matters' in development is that they strive to outline concrete policies and strategies for poverty alleviation by according focus to the need for deepening an understanding regarding the perspectives of the marginal communities, the 'subjects' of much of development. The importance of listening to and integrating the voices and aspirations of the poor and the marginal has assumed critical importance in the design and planning of what have been referred to as the 'new generation programmes of poverty reduction' by the WB and UN agencies, in their effort to understand 'social exclusion and inclusion and getting beyond "income poverty" to understand the other dimensions of poverty' as the World

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¹ President's Foreword in *Our Creative Diversity*, World Commission on Culture and Development, UNESCO, 1995, p.7

² Vijayendra Rao and Micheal Walton (ed) *Culture and Public Action*, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The World Bank, Indian Ed. Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004, p.3

Development Report 2000 puts it, in order to ensure 'the voice and participation of poor in decision making', to fight poverty 'with professionalism and passion'.³ This has given way to a context that encourages questions to expand the framework of constituting economically remunerative and socially empowering interventions for the poor by reconsidering the potential, autonomy, legitimacy and meaning of creative expressions and cultural traditions of the marginal in a holistic manner.

For a country like India, a veritable ancient civilization of the East, world's largest democracy, a predominantly rural and multi cultural society, that has more than 4000 communities differentiated traditionally by occupation or identified socio-culturally as distinct castes and tribes, with the historically marginal, socially excluded SCs/STs/DNTs comprising over 28% of India's population; where more than a quarter of the population continues to reel below the poverty line, an engagement with how culture matters in the well being of marginal communities holds immense importance. This assumes special significance in the context of the last two and a half decades dominated by liberalization and the retreat of the Indian welfare state that has seen sharpening of the glaring contrast between the culture of the rich and poor- the expansion of unbridled consumerism enslaving the expanding middle classes to luxury of things material as compared to the persistent state of penury and squalor the poor are condemned to.

The bewitching and grotesque displays, laden with desires and fantasies, simulating mechanized copies with a pace matched only by the rapacious appetite for devouring commodities transmogrified into visual symbols characterizes much of the cultural hubris of the rich. These dominant representations of culture claim exclusivity over the zone of aesthetics jealously proclaiming creativity as their own coveted domain annihilating, denigrating and co-opting the creative expressions of the marginal. This cultural logic is quite compatible with the cultural lexicon of the state which, having marshaled considerable sophistry since its inception in the heydays of Indian development planning, thrives on articulations of culture as heritage or creative expressions residing in art academies and galleries that are sanctified by the mandarins of culture well entrenched in the echelons of state power. In today's post industrial age, to complete the gismo of celebrating the rites of culture as an elitist inventory of luxury, of cultivated tastes and pristine heritage, these high priests are joined in by professionals and representatives of corporate industry and media syndicates.

In sharp contrast to this, the age old exquisite collective cultural traditions of performing arts and crafts of the marginal communities have either withered away into oblivion or exist boxed as permanent collections in museums or patronized as individual excellence awards to folk artists and the '...majority of them are doomed to survive amidst misery and debt'⁴. Thriving on the rhetoric of 'heritage' and 'welfare' many of these cultural traditions have been transmuted into casual wage earning and bare subsistence strategies as becomes evident in the manner in which these traditions are represented as commodities in the fairs and festivals that have proliferated in the urban spaces of metros, cities and even towns. Rather than basing themselves on ethical values of fair trade⁵, on dignified relations of equality among the customer and creator, most of these show-windows draw on a weird mix of neo-feudal and modern paternalistic attitudes that perpetuate unequal relations where the rural creators are promised a speck of security from an

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³ World Development Report 2000: Paying Attention to the Voice of the Poor By Frederick T. Temple, Global Policy Forum, www.globalpolicy.org, December 6, 1999

⁴ Ashoke Chatterjee, SEALS OF EXCELLENCE, SIGNS OF DESPAIR, Craft Council of India Newsletter, www.craftcouncilindia.org January 2006

The aesthetics of ecstatic tonalities and dexterous handwork of these bearers of living cultural traditions gets drowned in the shrill clamor of everyday survival as atomized beings, mere adjuncts to the derogatively titled unorganized or informal sector.

'economy of tragic choices'⁶. The 'perennial potential' for development of Indian crafts 'remains only very partially tapped'. The millions of craftspeople who produce these goods "...truly get the 'short end of the stick' and most still struggle for the very basics of existence"⁷. The penchant for exhibitionism by high culture devours the living heritage of exquisite techniques of handmade objects, rustic and passionate renderings of folk songs and ballads while the issues of dignity of these marginal groups are often reduced to symbolic snippets and interludes from tales of drudgery faced by the rural artisans or performing artists. The aesthetics of ecstatic tonalities and dexterous handwork of these bearers of living cultural traditions gets drowned in the shrill clamor of everyday survival as atomized beings, mere adjuncts to the derogatively titled unorganized or informal sector.

The rhetoric of development as growth, at its aggressive best in setting up of export oriented enclaves of SEZs and Apparel Parks, provides scope for thriving of the 'guzzling and grabbing culture' of the dominant classes reducing marginal communities to a 'culture of silence' as they are doomed to grapple with delusions of entitlements to even basic necessities like health, food, education, etc. In the name of development, "...policies of developmental terrorism are being pursued", and the resulting high growth 'without a democratic content' "...does not reach the poor citizens who need to benefit the most out of this process of growth"⁸. The specter of gruesome miseries brought by recurrent disasters looms large on these vulnerable populations. Their eco-scapes, the sacred sites of cosmologies of regeneration, are subsumed by the machinations and greed of capital. The cultural roots of environmentalism of the rural poor, of those who are frontal victims of the violence of real and pseudo green revolutions, perils of large dams and the alarming spread of the tentacles of bio piracy, can be traced to regenerative practices and notions of co-existence with nature and the concerns of what has been called 'livelihoods ecology' are best understood as related to justice, ecological equity and security. This is radically different from much of environmental awareness of urban middle classes that exists either as grounded in dogmatic and arrogant scientism of the precepts of 'cult of wilderness' or 'gospel of eco-efficiency' or as post-materialist values of 'save ecology', 'consume organic products', etc. These often serve as silent legitimizing leitmotifs for the nefarious dispensations of the state-market combine as they churn out recipes for appropriation of natural resource regimes and dispossession of the communities of their rights and intimate ties with local ecologies.

The deeply ambivalent experience of this chasm raises many significant questions not only about the efficacy of the much pushed 'trickle down' theory of liberalization, that looks more and more as an empty abstraction to befuddle the basic issues of human well being, but also, about the premises and perspectives that have characterized much of our development planning and cultural policies in their articulations about culture and development of the marginal communities in India. The widening gulf between aspirations for luxury, machinations, greed, corruption, com-

⁵ Here a caveat of caution may be added regarding the use of the term fair trade. Although it does represent the values of dignity and economically ethical practices there is a need to develop a working definition of fair trade as it applies to the Indian context of the existence of crafts and craftspeople in India.

⁶Frederique Appfel-Marglin, 'The potential of Fair Trade for bio-cultural regeneration of marginalized groups in the South: The case of the Oro Verde Coffee Cooperative in Peru', Paper Presented at the International Conference, Culture Matters, Delhi October 13-15, Organised by Deshkal Society and IGNC, Delhi, 2006, p.17

⁷Maureen Liebl and Tirthankar Roy, *Handmade in India- Preliminary Analysis of Craft Producers and Crafts production In India Issues, Initiatives, Interventions*, Policy Sciences Centre, November 2000, World Bank, p. iv

⁸ Amit Bhaduri, 'The Imperative as an alternative', *SEMINAR* 582, February 2008, pp.74-81

placency in the mainstream and destitution, alienation, indignation, fatalistic cynicism at the margins not only points to the consolidation of an indigenous breed of exploiters, those who consistently subvert and annihilate cultural perspectives of the marginal but also speaks of the inability of the civil society groups and non-governmental organizations to incorporate the voices and perspectives of the marginal communities in their articulations about alternative processes and visions of human development.

It could be argued that this inability is partly related to the manner in which culture has been treated as an elite resource or at best as a 'mute variable' in planning of development interventions. It is necessary to understand culture not as a 'soft' or 'subsidiary' issue or a mute variable in tackling poverty towards ensuring well-being. This calls for engaging with the perspectives embedded in the cultural practices of the marginal in order to understand and integrate their notions of well being in our current development theory and practice. For this integration it is imperative to begin with a radical demystification of the framework of culture in relation to development, divesting it of its elitist garbs and pretensions and situating it as a dynamic contemporary reality of the marginal communities.

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II. Culture as heritage and Commerce of Culture

Before we go on to trace the contours of an emergent discourse on development as well being and the terrain practices of the marginal communities, it would not be inappropriate to briefly sketch the dominant assumptions and perspectives that shaped the discourse of the Indian state around culture as it originated in the formative context of birth of India as a nation. India's 'nationalist' intelligentsia in effecting the transition from a British colony to a nation-in-making imbibed the Keynesian postulate on the 'seminal necessity and effectiveness of public intervention in managing the economic system'. These ideas laid as Sukhamoy Chakravarty points out, "... the foundations of a 'strongly interventionist and reformist nation state', whose primary aim ... was acquisition of economic strength and ... grow much faster to bridge the initial gap of per capita income... to avoid neo-colonial domination"⁹.

In 'underdevelopment' as the cognitive foundation of signing a 'tryst with destiny', the Indian bourgeoisie had to invent traditions, forge symbols and construct creation myths for the new nation. The chosen few, especially those who as Kapila Vatsayan points out, "... went through the long, arduous and devious journey of being steeped in Western civilization only to travel back to their cultural roots, richer and deeper..."¹⁰ were entrusted with this task of crafting what could be presented and patronized as a legitimate version of Indian culture. This concern for creation of a package of national culture / past to ground Indian national identity inspired a rose coloured glasses approach that selectively drew from a repository of cultural continuity stretching back to five thousand years ago, was at ease in placating the feudal cultural paraphernalia of different princely states, duly acknowledged the debt of the colonial masters in their efforts at 'discovery of India', was cautious enough in creating meta-narratives of Indian history with syncretism and pluralism as key values, was astute enough in integrating Khadi as a nationalistic symbol and the living traditions of folk / tribal art / craft were appropriated as ethnographic curiosities or handicraft exotica in the national wonder cabinet that had foreign exchange value. Culture as heritage was to play an important role in foreign diplomacy, in representing the ethos of the uniqueness of Indian civilization in creating and maintaining relations with other countries.

With a sleight of hand, the cultural practices of the marginal who were as Kapila Vatsayan notes, 'mostly economically underprivileged and illiterate' and continued 'to make and live their culture through a body of tradition which had been handed down from generation to generation'¹¹ were sought to be tamed and subsumed in the soothing cultural narratives of the glorious flowering of regional and national heritage. The aim of the government "... was to bring culture and science to the educated, and education, social and economic welfare to the masses"¹². One could argue that this splintering of the needs for the educated (culture and science) and (welfare) for the masses went on to create a chasm that in a way contributed to nourishing of culture as a

⁹ Sukhamoy Chakravarty, *Writings on Development*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2000, p.51 & p.190

¹⁰ Kapila Malik Vatsyayan, *Some aspects of cultural policies in India*, UNESCO, Paris 1972, p.14

¹¹ *ibid.* p.15

¹² *ibid.* p.17

soft aesthetic hubris of the elite on the one hand and ignoring the contribution of the constitutive power of culture of the marginal in the shaping the processes of development.

If the creation of a rubric of national culture was to provide the cultural basis for the emerging nation, espousing a 'developmental ideology' was equally crucial for the 'self definition of the post colonial state' as well as 'rule by consent in the liberal democracy'. This was achieved, as Partha Chatterjee argues, 'by forging a rhetorical unity between the will and sovereign powers of the state and the people-nation', by 'declaring a programme of economic development for the nation as synonymous with the well being of the people'¹³. The basis of development planning hinged on a consensus on a 'commodity centered approach' the chief aim of which was 'accumulation of capital' for launching rapid 'large scale industrialization'. As Chakravarty points out alluding to the specific context of the beginnings of Indian planning 'accumulation' had to be reconciled with 'legitimation' that is, in devising 'ways of avoiding the unnecessary rigors of industrial transition in so far as it affected the mass residents in India's villages'¹⁴.

Although a discussion on this aspect of legitimation of the state is outside the scope of our discussion, suffice it to say that a specific sector of Backward Classes was included from the first five year plan onwards to cater to what were identified as 'the special needs of Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Classes' to be taken care of by bureaucratic dispensations and political machinations of state welfare. Successive five year plans stressed that the 'the general development programmes should be so designed as to take care of the needs of Backward Classes'. The concept of Tribal Sub-Plan was introduced during the Fifth Plan and Special Component Plan for Scheduled Castes during the Sixth Plan to facilitate monitoring of development programmes for the benefit of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.¹⁵ Important poverty alleviation approaches of India's development planning from Community Development in the sixties and seventies to the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) of the nineties have accorded special consideration to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe families. Despite this it may be said that much of this process of development planning for the marginal and socially excluded has minimal relation with the way 'culture' is planned for in these 'rational mediations'. Rather than incorporate culture as a dynamic concept into the basic planning, much of this process has been marred by ambivalence, frustration and 'dialogue of the deaf' that characterizes most interactions between culture and development as they are generally understood.

A perusal of five- year plans suggests that 'culture' continued to be planned for as 'cultural heritage', which 'had to be promoted by drawing up plans for the preservations of monuments and sites of historic and national importance'¹⁶. This was to be complemented by the 'setting up of cultural institutions in the field of Archaeology, Anthropology, Ethnography, Archives, Libraries, Museums, Art Akademies etc'¹⁷. The foundations of cultural diplomacy were firmly laid by setting up of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations in the seventies. Since 1970's, culture as heritage was linked to education and attention was "...given to increasing the cultural awareness among the students by strengthening the cultural content of the curriculum at various stages of educa-

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¹³ Partha Chatterjee, 'Development Planning and the Indian State', in T.J. Byres (ed) *The State and Development Planning in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, pp.51-72

¹⁴ As Quoted in *ibid.* p. 60

¹⁵ See discussion in Section 2.1 Poverty Alleviation in Rural India : Programmes and Strategy, , 9th Five Year Plan (Vol-2), Gol, <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/welcome.html>

¹⁶ 3.12 ART AND CULTURE, 9th Five Year Plan (Vol-2), Gol, <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/welcome.html>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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tion..."¹⁸ to help in building up the cultural and social identity of the nation.

The overriding concerns informing discussions on constitutive as well as substantive aspects of our national cultural policy have focused mostly on 'values of pluralism' in their 'avowed concern for national identity' and 'public philosophy' as a support 'towards nation-building', lamented 'the absence of indigenous definitions' and inability to learn from 'models' of national cultures' of other countries, devised strategies to give 'national recognition' to 'unruly and fissionary regional' cultural expressions. Several review committees and panels have been set up to look into issues of 'state patronage and autonomy of cultural processes'¹⁹. Mostly inscribed in the elite domain of culture, 'narcissistic' artistic productions emanating from art academies tend to situate culture as an esoteric 'aesthetic quest of self realization', a 'matter of soul' rather than 'material sustenance'. Reflecting on the 'paradox of richest cultural traditions couched in poverty residing in remote rural areas', renowned culture activist Habib Tanvir warns of the 'appalling consequences of the urban-elitist orientation of India's cultural policy' that has promoted imitative creativity that 'apes the conventions of the West churning out pale copies of worn out western traditions'²⁰. Although different criticisms have been voiced regarding the failure of these academies and agencies, the ornamental pillars of India's cultural edifice, to sustain folk and tribal art. Few of them discuss on how to involve these communities in devising concrete policies and practices to foster the contemporary purposefulness of these living traditions. There has been little attempt to integrate the understanding these concrete philosophies of real life offer in understanding development as well-being.

The articulation of culture as heritage survives as a dominant refrain in development planning to this day. Most of the above mentioned issues around cultural policy have continued, although the defining context of much of the contemporary discussion is no longer of India as a 'nation-in-the-making' with a welfare ideal but a 'nation with many fragments' dominated by market culture. The Ministry of Culture, defining cultural heritage 'as a resource for growth and identity rooted in the past'²¹ floated the National Culture Fund in 1996 as an innovation in the patterns of funding for cultural issues primarily for protection of historical monuments in India. The approach paper of the eleventh five year plan mentions 'culture' as "...a very important integrating force' and stresses that 'conservation and promotional activities of cultural heritage call for ensuring dissemination of our composite culture, promote all regional languages, to sustain the folk and traditional art, and to maintain, document, research and propagate dissemination of the intangible cultural heritage'²².

What is interesting to note in these utterances regarding 'culture' is their supple identification with 'heritage' that metaphorically displaces 'culture' from practice rooted in present to the recesses of past as a grand repository of pompous memories. This preoccupation with past 'as a foreign country', as nostalgic feelings, as sentiment is quite characteristic of different projects on cultural heritage as becomes clear from their overt concern for the preservation and conservation of past, often de-linked with the contemporary realities and needs of the present. It is fairly commonplace that interventions on sustaining folk and traditional art, the 'living heritage' of marginal

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See the discussion in Joan L. Erdman, 'Who Should Speak for the Performing Arts? The Case of the Delhi Dancers', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2. (Summer, 1983), pp. 247-269.

²⁰ Habib Tanvir, 'Theatre Is in the Villages', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 2, No. 10. (May, 1974), pp. 32-41

²¹ National Culture Fund, 1996 http://asi.nic.in/ncf/NCF_Gazette%20Notification.pdf

²² *Towards faster and more inclusive growth, Approach paper of the Eleventh Five Year Plan*, Planning Commission, Gol, December 2006, p.65

communities, express themselves as emotive appeals for appreciating the rustic folk art forms / techniques, with the contemporary issues of dignified survival of the creators either conspicuously absent or at best according a semblance of token presence as they can be 'seen performing / creating' in museums of folk / tribal arts and crafts, the National Crafts Museum at Delhi being an important milestone in this upcoming trend in setting up museums of 'live objects'.

Here it may be pointed out in passing that this disjunction between the art form / technique and the creator could be traced back to colonial roots of our aesthetic appreciation wherein communities were categorized into objectified categories of caste / religion for subjugation and rule by 'ordering of difference' with their objects of art / creation metamorphosed as curiosities in the wonder cabinet of Oriental repositories. For our colonial rulers this 'unitary landscape of discourse and practice', constituted through '...a series of traveling and semi permanent exhibitions and fairs that picked up towards the later part of the nineteenth century...' ²³, was crucial in reinforcing a sense of all encompassing presence of the British empire. The post colonial Indian state inherited this politics of representation and rule through an 'amalgam of old practices with new imperatives' ²⁴ along with virtuoso impulse to collect and exhibit.

While communities were reified into administrative categories of rule, subjects of development welfare and political manipulation, they were seldom seen as human beings with creative potentials inherited orally through traditions that were generations old. What is unfortunate is that most attempts at documenting and constitution of knowledge on these performing communities are impelled by folkloristic concerns or ethnographic desires having colonial and pre colonial roots or sentimental nostalgic narratives about changing times from the idyllic and rustic rural landscape to urban metros, of tales of 'vanishing traditions' inscribed in tropes of inevitability of modernization. It is extremely rare to come across comprehensive data and discussion regarding artisans and other performing artists and their contemporary concerns. The need for the importance of census reports to give us a 'detailed and accurate demographic data, other relevant classifications about skills and traditions of performing artists (as well as those involved in activities related to the performing arts such as instrument makers)' has been expressed as being of seminal importance in 'planning any strategies that would benefit people in the cultural and creative industries'. As noted classic Indian music singer and cultural activist Shuba Mudgal says "If you are unaware of the number of people you are hoping to help, how can you even begin to think of ways and means to help them or create a better environment for them to work in..." ²⁵.

It needs to be pointed out that the meta-discourse around culture as heritage does concern itself with development as welfare of the 'economically underprivileged' and 'illiterate' communities, at best only in a tangential manner. Development has been a by-product of what has been called 'commerce of culture' to refer to the exports of handicrafts that go hand in hand with the ideals of cultural diplomacy and market interests. To these were added other 'cultural products' created by the marginal communities notably the performing arts which the Festivals of India in the eighties placed on the anvil of cultural diplomacy.

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²³ Carol A. Breckenridge, 'The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting: India at World Fairs', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 31, No. 2. (Apr., 1989), pp. 195-216.

²⁴ Laura Dudley Jenkins, 'Another "People of India" Project: Colonial and National Anthropology', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 4. (Nov., 2003), pp. 1143-1170.

²⁵ Shuba Mudgal, Task Force on Cultural and Creative Industries: A discussion. Tuesday, June 6th, 2006 in Shuba's Blog **Discussion 1** <http://shubha.underscorerecords.info/>

It needs to be pointed out that the meta-discourse around culture as heritage does concern itself with development as welfare of the 'economically underprivileged' and 'illiterate' communities, at best only in a tangential manner, as a by product.

In a study in 1986 on the experience of Indian handicrafts, L.C.Jain and others argued that '...handicrafts contributed in good measure to the Idc exports...' ²⁶ and created an opportunity for employment among artisans who mostly came from social and religious groups and were associated with low social status and income are among the poorest. Since the beginnings of the 1970s, India's exports of handicrafts- excluding textiles rose from 4% to approximately 18%. Although the artisans 'make a contribution to the national economy that is not fully reflected in the nominal wages and earn foreign exchange at very little resource cost (the ratio is among the highest in Indian industries)' ²⁷, their '...basic needs like family earnings stabilization; medical expenses on which they incur substantial private costs; education; housing remain unfulfilled...' ²⁸. The two recurring concerns underlying the government's plans for this sector have been i) to increase rural employment; ii) to preserve the country's heritage. The objectives of planning for the artisanal sector are best articulated in the Report of the Task Force on Handicrafts for the VIII Plan: "the rationale ...of planning for development in this sector is the craftsman...it will be a travesty of planning if his interests, well being ...and needs are not properly taken into account..." ²⁹.

Neither assistance nor intervention has been lacking. The Government of India alone has poured tremendous amounts of funds into crafts development projects since the first years after Independence, and there are a large number of institutions, NGOs, private entrepreneurs and foreign agencies actively working on behalf of crafts and crafts producers. Unlike the Gandhian *weltanschung* that was jettisoned for its archaic baggage of self-reliance and technological backwardness, 'crafts as living heritage' was accorded importance. The crafts renaissance movement pioneered by Kamla Devi and others has undoubtedly been able to accomplish a great deal in our understanding and experience of craftsmanship and creativity of many rural craft traditions of our country. In fact this tale of Indian crafts is too well known.

Many development issues of the marginal remained largely fudged for these early craft activists, as convincing economic planners of the Planning Commission, trained in the economic policies applicable to industrial societies, of the needs and issues of the small scale and village industries was '...an uphill task' ³⁰. Here it needs to be reiterated that the splintering of craft as heritage from the concerns of development as welfare lie in the foundations of our development planning. This is reflected in the constitution of different Boards and Commissions for the promotion of crafts while the welfare of these artisans continue to be expressed as various combinations and prescriptions expressed as schemes and policies for empowerment of marginal communities, scattered as they are under various departments and ministries of the Indian state. That this rhetoric of welfare has been fairly delusionary is evident from the frequent lamentations by the savants of Indian craft development scenario about the trappings of 'heritage' and 'welfare' that the Indian crafts people and their traditions have been subject to for decades now perpetuating misery, debt and suicides among the rural artisans. Moreover it needs to be said that this rhetoric of welfare has largely remained located in the realm of thinking development from above. In fact

²⁶ L.C Jain, Cable and Weston, *The Commerce of Culture-Experience of Indian Handicrafts*, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, Lancer International, New Delhi, 1986, pp.14-15

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 124-125

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 223

²⁹ SRUTI, *India's Artisans- a status Report*, New Delhi, 1995, pp.

³⁰ Jasleen Dhamija, From then till now, June 2003, *India together*, www.indiatogether.org/2003/jun/eco-craftsnow.htm

³¹ Aditya Nigam, Rethinking the Unorganised Sector, *SOCIAL ACTION*, Vol.47, April-June 1997, pp.125-134, p.131

many argue that "...it is this very state centric approach to the problems of the small scale and artisanal production...has contributed to the crisis they are facing..."³¹ It needs to be mentioned that some headway has been achieved to improve the languishing scene of craft traditions where initiatives have been taken keeping in mind that "...protecting craft alone was not enough, but that the communities of craftspersons as creators of beautiful craft had to be taken care of, first and foremost"³². These exemplary work with the craftspeople emphatically point to the fact that the crisis is due 'less to their internal dynamic' and more to the fact that they have been 'formally subsumed under capital' that 'changes the very logic of for which production is carried on...for the 'needs of the larger market.'³³ There is a need to integrate the human dimension of the problem in making the craftspeople equal partners in the production, marketing of crafts, in deciding the government policy towards crafts.

That this rhetoric of development as welfare has been fairly delusionary is evident from the frequent lamentations by the savants of Indian craft development scenario about the trappings of 'heritage' and 'welfare'. It needs to be said that this rhetoric of welfare has largely remained confined to thinking development from above.

³² Sabita Radhakrishna , A way of life, *THE HINDU*, March 21, 1999 ; Rahul Ghai, *Woven Wonders of UMBVS- Securing Livelihoods and Dignity of the Marginalized in Thar*; **UMBVS**, Phalodi, December 2004

³³ Aditya Nigam, Rethinking the Unorganised Sector, **Op. Cit.**, pp 127-128

III. The emergent discourse on development as well being

The 'end of certitudes and opening of possibilities' on the frontiers of scientific research, particularly in particle physics, molecular biology and environmental sciences, have demonstrated the limits of the Cartesian rationality and the Newtonian paradigm that was deployed to legitimize the rapacious Baconian plunder of nature. These profound realizations on the cultural specificity of modern Western science have given way for dialogues with other cultural traditions in search for alternative basis for relation between humans and nature. The 'debunking of the arrogant absolutist reasoning' of the bi-polar ideologies of capitalism and socialism, their inability to extricate millions of people from human misery have made the notion of development, as economic growth and material progress grounded in the western Eurocentric vision, increasingly problematic. The pretentiousness of 'culture of development' has given way to a deepening of meditative engagements and dialogues with other cultural traditions, even those otherwise relegated to the peripheries, and has brought the concepts of inter-dependence, pluralism, spontaneity, creativity and cultural diversity back into discussion with new vigour, in a hope to find holistic and humane alternatives to development and well being.

Within the dominant development discourse of the UN-Breton Woods Institutions there has been an evolution in the articulation of their understanding of culture vis-à-vis poverty and the meaning of 'development' in what they have created / categorized as the LDCs or the 'Third World' countries. From a time when culture was reprimanded into oblivion in the post World War II rhetoric of economic reconstruction to a solemn and somewhat sombre admission of the UN report of the World Commission on Culture and Development (1995) that 'many development projects had failed because the importance of culture had been underestimated', testifies to the fact that 'culture', which is the 'soul of development', can 'no longer be ignored' and needs to be 'explicitly stated' in the notion of 'human development'³⁴. This calls for 'transcending economics', 'broadening' the notion of development that stood for uniformity based on western values and instead sees the hope for the future in acknowledging the 'creative diversity' of human cultures. It is not only a humbling revelation but a scathing remark about the limits of the West's system of values and its different versions of modernization that the 'Third World' has been subjected to for decades now.

In seeking to influence the 'economic fortress' of World Bank towards recognition of cultural variables, the World Bank (Culture and Poverty Group) at the turn of the 21st century advocates the need for a cultural lens in understanding development for 'illuminating hidden assets and defining a range of practices and institutions to address problems that the Bank could not otherwise resolve'³⁵, '...to educate the Bank audience and other development practitioners on the important roles culture can play, and why it should be integrated and explicitly supported in devel-

The pretentiousness of 'culture of development' has given way to a deepening of meditative engagements and dialogues with cultural traditions, even those otherwise relegated to the peripheries,

³⁴ President's Foreword in **Our Creative Diversity**, World Commission on Culture and Development, UNESCO, 1995, p.7

³⁵ Cited in Summary of Charles Kleymeyer Culture and Sustainable Development - A Framework for Action, Report of a Conference in 1999, World Bank, <http://topics.developmentgateway.org/culture>

opment assistance³⁶. It calls for pragmatic deepening of understanding of how culture matters for fostering liberative public action. Many international donor organizations like HIVOS are recognizing "...the importance of the link between culture and development"³⁷ and advocate 'grafting development activities on cultural context'³⁸. Policy groups like Network Cultures talk and 'embedding development in dynamic and diverse local cultures'³⁹.

One of the many paradoxes accompanying internationalization and globalization is that local peculiarities are now being emphasized more than before. The cultural policy of HIVOS (Netherlands) makes note of the '...increasing cultural heterogeneity along with globalization'⁴⁰. As the glittering digital phantasmagoria of Globalization weaves the bewitching edifice of the global village condemning everybody to the vicissitudes of stifling homogeneity, its alter-ego, - the belief in the possibility of another world thriving with robust local cultures, old and new, celebrating and nurturing the creative diversity of human kind- becomes ever immanent. The first World Culture Report of 1998 observes that 'questions linking culture, development and globalization are as pressing as the other vital questions about our common future'⁴¹.

As a response to the world wide debate the IGNC, the premier institution on culture in India organized a series of conferences "...not only to speak of the Interface of Cultural Identity and Development..." but as Kaplia Vatsyayan points out, "...to suggest positive strategies for integrating skills that could be understood by the term 'Indigenous Cultural Knowledge and Skills' into the processes and programs of what is called 'Development' "⁴². She further points that the experience of these conferences while bringing out the consensus on human beings could not be counted as 'economically disposable units' suggested that 'decentralization in planning', 'plurality of models', 'inclusiveness' need to form a necessary part in the discourse of sustainable development. A writer of repute and former Secretary to the Department of Culture, GoI, Sitikant Mahapatra notes that the key learning of the UNESCO World Decade for Cultural Development have been that "...traditional lifestyles are not necessarily anti-development and culture has an interface both with the economic goal of development, general welfare and quality of life...". Development he argues "...should not lead to unlimited consumerism that equates life with credit cards, rapid depletion of natural resources and endangers ecology", but rather should be a process that enables "...a well-worked web of relationships that is intimate and harmonious' and an 'ability to fulfill himself / herself as homo ludens, human being the player and not man the consumer or waste-maker'⁴³. Prof. Baidyanath Saraswati of the IGNC while advocating for an endogenous model of development, building on the ideas of Gandhiji, suggests a five fold programme that "...must begin with redefining development as a human project, rethinking universality in terms of the cosmological principle, re-strengthening swadeshi with the eternal rule of life, re-sanctifying human creativity

³⁶ Overview of Dutch-Supported program "Learning and Research on Culture and Poverty", Culture and Poverty, World Bank, January 2000

³⁷ Art and Culture Policy Document, HIVOS, December 2002, p.4

³⁸ Culture and Development, HIVOS's Cultural Policy, January 1995, p.2

³⁹ Network Cultures, Articles in Special Issue on Globalisation and Vitality of Cultures, NNNNo.31-32, 3 / 1998, and Special Issue on Economic Organisation and Local Cultures, No. 29-30, 7 / 1997, <http://www.networkcultures.net>

⁴⁰ Culture and Development, HIVOS's Cultural Policy, Op.Cit., p.3

⁴¹ Culture, Creativity and Markets, World Culture Report, 1998

⁴² Foreword by Kaplia Vatsyayan in Baidyanath Saraswati (Ed), *Integration of Endogenous Cultural Dimension into Development*, Culture and Development, Series No. 2, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Publ. D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd. New Delhi, 1998, p. vii

⁴³ Sitakant Mahapatra, Making world a better place to live in, *The Tribune*, November 20, 2004

Rather than relegating culture as a demeaning residual category, of little value (if not a hindrance) in economic progress, there has been an effort to put forth constructive and creative dimensions of culture as the end aim of development, understood as '...the flourishing of human existence in its several forms and whole...

and interpersonal relationships, and rededicating oneself to the laws of moral advancement with minimum material"⁴⁴.

It can be argued that one of the defining moments of this emergent discourse on 'culture' and 'development' in its attempt to move away from the hegemonic orthodoxy of seeing development exclusively in terms of economic growth has been a re-positioning of the understanding of culture, both as constitutive of development and as the embodied and dignified material reality of diverse communities who were hitherto sought to be modernized / civilized by the paternalistic precepts of the magic wand of the 'culture of development'. Rather than relegating culture as a demeaning residual category, of little value (if not a hindrance) in economic progress, or basing development policy and action on a restricted and elitist understanding of culture as high art / heritage, individual creativity there has been an effort to put forth the constructive and creative dimensions of culture as the end aim of development, understood as '...the flourishing of human existence in its several forms and whole and a growing acknowledgment of the need to embed 'development' in the dynamism of robust local cultures, etc.

The concepts of co-operation, wisdom and resilience of local ecological practices, traditional rights of cultures regarding their bio-wealth, the seminal importance of peoples' knowledge in preserving bio-diversity are recognized as central to what is referred to as the 'cultural dimension of environmental sustainability'. There is an increasing recognition of the important role of the collective creative expression of people, the need to enlarge the scope and meaning of cultural and creative industries (whether dealing in craft, music, etc) and advocate for opportunities of decentralized, dignified, self sustaining enterprise development as well as social engagement for the poor.

The implications of all these momentous articulations are far reaching, yet to be realized and are impregnated with a range of partial truths. They can be seen as a rhetorical reinvention of the cultural logic of late capitalism, deploying of a theory of obfuscation and mystification by the neo-liberal order driven by market culture, or as despairing doomsday revelations on the abysmal fate of the 'other' against the towering conceit of 'the development project', hence making a passionate plea for abandoning, subverting or boycotting the machinations of the monolithic of development or as vociferous evocations on the pressing need to transform the discourse of development from being based on principles of prescription and domination to one that nurtures dialogue between 'development' and its subject, especially the marginal communities.

Although these partial truths are widely divergent in their prognosis, they all tend to agree that culture with reference to development is a more inclusive and contested phenomenon than was understood earlier and as a consequence something that can no longer be ignored in our theorising and practice of development, especially with reference to marginal communities.

⁴⁴ Introduction in Baidyanath Saraswati (Ed) *Interface of Cultural Identity and Development*, Culture and Development Series No. 1, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Publ. D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd. New Delhi, 1996

IV. Cultural practices of the marginal and Sustainable rural livelihoods

The discussion that follows is an attempt to understand the relevance of culture of the marginal communities understood as creative practices embedded in the material reality of everyday life with reference to interventions that adhere to the framework of 'sustainable livelihoods', a framework of people centric approaches that became popular in the late nineties and derives its legitimacy from the concept of human development.

First used in the Brundtland Report of 1987, the concept of sustainable livelihoods soon became the leitmotif of sustainable development. As DFID, one of the first proponents of the SL approach sees in it the possibility of promoting "...a more realistic understanding of poor people's livelihoods and the factors that shape them; building a policy and institutional environment that supports poor peoples livelihoods; support for development that builds on the strengths of poor people and provides them with opportunities to improve their livelihoods"⁴⁵. By the end of nineties SL frameworks were adopted by most development agencies like DFID, Oxfam, Action Aid, CARE, SCF, etc. It could be argued that an understanding of multi-dimensionality of causes and context specific-ness of poverty are two of the most critical contributions this framework has made as an advance over older understandings of poverty and ways of addressing it. The sustainable livelihoods approach as Robert Chambers delineates hinges "on the three interlinked concepts of capability, equity and sustainability..."⁴⁶. They further emphasize that at level of outcome "...a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base"⁴⁷. These approaches are also understood as a framework that bases itself on a pentagon of assets or types of "capital" namely, natural-, human-, financial-, physical-, and social-capital⁴⁸. People centered, holistic, responsive and participatory, multi-level, conducted in partnership, sustainable, dynamic have been identified as some of the key principles of the SL approach. Identified variously as women, dalits, tribals, small and marginal farmers, agricultural workers, craftspeople, performing artists, small fishermen, non-ocean fishermen, coolies, bonded labourers in brick kilns and mines, distress migrants, etc., have 'insecure livelihoods' with many of them having high vulnerabilities to disasters, are the prime beneficiaries of sustainable livelihoods programmes as implemented by the state as well as various development agencies.

We seek to ask questions about the manner in which cultural practices of the marginal are

⁴⁵ <http://www.livelihoods.org/SLdefn.html>

⁴⁶ Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway, Sustainable rural livelihoods: practical concepts for the 21st Century, *IDS Discussion Paper 296*, December 1991, Section 1.3, pp.3-5

⁴⁷ http://www.livelihoods.org/info/docs/Disp_Myths.doc

⁴⁸ The concept of different kinds of capital with reference to the SL frameworks was first developed by Ian Scoones. For a fuller elaboration see Ian Scoones, "Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Framework for Analysis," *IDS Working Paper No. 72*, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 1998.

The questions asked here are an effort to enlarge the conceptual and operative domain of the approaches of sustainable livelihoods with reference to the holism of the concept of livelihoods as embedded in the perspectives of the marginal communities, not understood as employment and enhancement of incomes alone but as dignified ways of life as well.

understood and worked upon in the analysis on skills and capabilities to secure livelihoods and empower the marginal communities. The questions asked here are an effort to enlarge the conceptual and operative domain of the approaches of sustainable livelihoods with reference to the holism of the concept of livelihoods as embedded in the perspectives of the marginal communities, not understood as employment and enhancement of incomes alone but as cultural codes and dignified ways of life as well.

Building on the recent formulations of the emergent discourse on well being we may humbly state that understanding how 'culture' matters in 'development' involves not only theoretically comprehending and appreciating the creative and constitutive dimensions of 'culture', as a 'fundamental attribute permeating human existence', but aligning / recasting our development practice with the realities and perspectives of marginal communities as well. Any realistic re-consideration on the role of 'culture' in 'development' has to do away with a lot of theoretical baggage that has bloated the concept and continues to be a real hindrance. It also necessitates transcending the elitist connotations of the term that perpetuate a more restricted definition of the term as well as give legitimacy to prescriptive top down development approaches that deploy the rhetoric of poverty, backwardness and marginality to condemn disparate and diverse communities as being mute and moronic recipients frozen in categories alien to them.

Marginality originates and is perpetuated by the interplay of culture, ideology and power ingeniously orchestrated by the state under close surveillance of its panoptic gaze and legitimized by dominant historical tropes. In this hegemonic discourse of 'development' marginal communities are often characterized by orality, illiteracy, chronic poverty and vulnerability, inaccessible fragile bio-physical habitats prone to disasters, restricted range of productive options, stagnant and obsolete (if not decadent) traditions, myth-religion-veneration of ancestors and nature, stigmatized low social status, ostracized identities, criminality and corruption, deeply entrenched insularity coupled with a stubbornness to change and deviant forms of belief and practice.

Here it needs to be remembered that marginal communities even as they are subjected to and internalize hegemonic perspectives produce a counter discourse. Many of these counter discourses situate marginality as a liberating condition in which the dominant norms / prescripts are viewed with forms of irony, distance and cynicism. These counter discourses are the sites for the expression of values of self esteem and dignity of the community collective as opposed to the other. They are localized and context specific knowledge systems of resilience and adaptability grounded in the ontology of practice understood as not only production and consumption but as regeneration as well.

It is these contestations, mediated through culture, that equip the marginal communities with the resources not only to refract, rework and at times subvert the homogenizing discourse of development but enable in them a 'capacity to aspire' as well. Restoring 'voices' of the marginal that lie in the interstices of these contestations, has to be the starting premise for any emancipatory engagement seeking to foster positive change and in resurrecting alternatives to 'development' among the marginal communities. Development as 'domination' ought to transform into 'development as dialogue' to make a transition from economic growth to well being.

:The articulation of a liberatory praxis around 'culture' warrants sensitivity and empathy to perspectives of the marginal communities, for whom culture is neither a luxury nor only a value but relates to the totality of all practices and experience embedded in the material reality of their everyday existence. In fact we prefer to use the term cultural practices rather than 'culture' alone

as it allows us to move beyond the restricted sense in which 'culture' is usually deployed- as 'high culture', 'heritage', 'individual excellence / creativity in art/ craft'- and bring into focus rustic and earthy notions of cultural practices as 'concrete and real philosophies of life' of not just individuals but better understood as belonging to communities as a whole. In fact it is this notion of community traditions that is sought to be invoked in many articulations of sustaining 'living heritage' of folk / tribal communities. But since most of these articulations predicate on an understanding of culture as heritage, and not as practice rooted in the material reality, they tend to ignore the holism and dynamism of these cultural creativities and end up freezing them in museum boxes or representing them as essentialized genres.

'Culture' as embedded in this context of 'practices' is the site of local knowledge based on and nurtured by everyday practices of communities. It is this epistemic inventory that is the source of resilience for survival- expressed differently as to inherit; to adapt / adopt invent- demonstrated by the local communities to negotiate new challenges of life. Such a perspective conceives of the relation between humans and nature as a complex web of inter-relationships, a 'community of beings' worldview- the fuller meaning of which is intelligible not only through rational cognitive abilities alone but through experience (having deep veneration and a ring of spirituality) as well-ecological practices in this worldview become bio-cultural regenerative practices in the genuine sense⁴⁹.

This positing of culture as cultural practice allows us to explore the deep connections between making / doing and being, a dimension so often missed out / obfuscated in many articulations of development. It enables us to open up space for the reconsideration of other relevant alternative notions of well being consonant and embedded in the holistic perspectives of the marginal communities. Such a perspective facilitates the posing of the contentious issues of validity of peoples' knowledge vs. state knowledge, production and ascription of meanings, ties between representations and practices as they apply to contexts of change and empowerment of marginal communities.

The concept of sustainable livelihoods as used by the Indian state and different INGOS/ NGOs represents an advance over earlier approaches of poverty eradication in the manner in which it uses various participatory approaches to plan and monitor anti-poverty strategies. Most of the SL frameworks advocate the use of different participatory approaches to not only reach out to the marginal but involve the marginal as an active agent in the very constitution of development practice. An important dimension of these participatory approaches is the integration of issues of peoples' voices / knowledge and rights of marginal people in their articulation of 'empowering' communities'. Participatory approaches originated in the Indian voluntary sector in the mid-seventies as an articulation challenging the 'monopoly of knowledge' that was 'vested in the elites of the society' and informed the cognitive basis of much of top down development⁵⁰. By the 1980s the participatory approach had spread remarkably for designing locally appropriate development projects reinforcing the seminal importance of knowledge generated from below as forming the 'cognitive and phenomenological basis' of pursuance of 'development' as 'well-being', expressed

Integrating the perspectives of the marginal communities is a time taking long drawn out dialogic process and many experiential truths seem to get lost in the hurry of 'packing up' and 'collecting information' during participatory sessions with the community.

⁴⁹ For an excellent exposition of 'bio-cultural regeneration', see Frederique Appfel-Marglin, 'The potential of Fair Trade for bio-cultural regeneration of marginalized groups in the South: The case of the Oro Verde Coffee Cooperative in Peru', *Op. Cit.*, pp 6-9

⁵⁰ Rajesh Tandon (ed), *Participatory Research- Revisiting the Roots*, Mosaic Books, New Delhi, 2005, pp. vii-xiii

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p.x

In order that this passionate call for an engagement with the living cultural traditions does not degenerate into an elitist rhetoric, it requires transcending not only the dissipative bureaucratic dispensations but listening to and including the voices of the communities of rural creators as central to our planning processes.

forcefully in the much popular phraseology of not only 'whose reality counts' but 'who counts reality', "...became the key issue in the politics of development action"⁵¹.

If empowerment is about enabling people to develop their 'potential and capacities as agents of social change', culture must occupy a central place in development thinking and strategy. In this context it has been observed that much of the participatory approaches operate with what Anmol Vellani refers to as an 'exteriorized concept of empowerment'⁵², relegating culture as creative expression, to some intangible super structural variable, mute and fuzzy, and of marginal consequence in the prime task of not only generation of people based knowledge but even the embodiment of it. Over the years participation has become a new orthodoxy in development circles and these approaches have been often criticized as generating manipulative rather than representative knowledge of the communities for social action⁵³. Integrating and internalizing the perspectives of the marginal communities is a time taking long drawn out dialogic process and many experiential truths seem to get lost in the hurry of 'packing up' and 'collecting information' in various idiographic maps, charts and tables churned out during participatory sessions with the community. It has been experienced that these participatory sessions may generate a lot of 'empirical' information but are found wanting on the issue of perspective. The prior need to be deeply enmeshed in people-centric approaches to development has often been stressed as 'simply going through the motions of Sustainable livelihoods headings reduces the holistic perspective to a set of rules and render the approach ineffective'⁵⁴.

There is also a risk of understanding sustainable livelihoods as coterminous with generation of employment, articulated as more and more productive jobs and the need for the generation of new workplaces. This ideal of full employment, which received impetus after the VIIIth five year plan, apart from being a misfit to the reality of multifarious nature and material basis of livelihood options as pursued in the Indian rural reality, often eschews important concerns of equitable and sustainable natural resource use. This aggressive discourse on employment presents the question of rural employment as essentially one of lack of skills. If one sees the different poverty eradication schemes of the Govt it has been seen that the rural public works have generally been the most successful, providing out-of-season employment to large numbers of poor people, but 'have not involved any upgrading of skills'⁵⁵, according to a recent DFID-FAO estimate.

There is a growing body of positive experience of culturally sensitive development practice especially in interventions relating to land and water on building capacities and assets. Here it needs to be pointed out that the concept of skills is often taken to be coterminous to marketable skills with an understanding of market as a site of unequal exchanges, very often relegating cultural skills (rooted in tradition) to the background. These cultural skills, time tested livelihood and coping strategies of the vulnerable communities are not considered important enough to be developed into sustainable livelihood practices. Take for example several social groups of folk per-

⁵² Anmol Vellani, 'Development without Culture', India Foundation for the Arts, later published as 'Towards a Culture of Empowerment' in *The Contemporary Manager* (Volume 11, No. 2, August 15, 2006)

⁵³ For a discussion on the term participation, as it is commonly used in contemporary development theory and practice see Majid Rahnema, 'Participation', in Wolfgang Sachs, (ed), *The Development Dictionary*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2000, pp.155-175; See also Majid Rahnema, 'Participatory Action Research: The "Last temptation of Saint" Development, Alternatives', XV (1990), pp. 199-226

⁵⁴ Ludi Eva Rachel Slater, 'Using the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework to understand and tackle poverty', Briefing Note, March 2007, , www.poverty-wellbeing.net the platform on livelihoods, equity and empowerment

⁵⁵ DFID/FAO/ODI Strategic Programme for Information on Sustainable Livelihoods - India Country Component, Nov 2001, p.1

formers in western Rajasthan who have no option but to participate in ad hoc famine relief public works that involve digging earth, uprooting bushes, and other undignified kinds of human labour. This is a practice that goes on with increasing regularity orchestrated by the famine relief department as droughts become permanently inscribed on the face of western Rajasthan. When such cultural skills are taken into account, like in the case of embroidery traditions in villages of North Gujarat, Kutch and Western Rajasthan, they are subjected to rhythms of mass production that in fact lead to de-skilling, a displacement from tradition, its lived context and its representations. It has been seen that transforming cultural practices into economic strategies of wage earning may produce minimum wages for many but it leads to estrangement of labour and alienation of the artisans⁵⁶. As a response to this some projects have attempted to link local culture and creative skills with marketing and management know-how, as this has been identified as "...perhaps the most serious challenge facing cultural enterprises in India".⁵⁷ May be the inability of most of the craft SHG groups to evolve from being casual wage earning minimum wage workers into autonomous and decentralized representative institutions can be located in the work practices and control the creative producers are subject to in the unorganized informal sector.

The extent and manner of importance given to sustainable livelihoods in reconstruction phases in most disaster response cycles disaster response has brought to the fore several questions related to the impact of such interventions. The scope as well as frequency of these natural as well as man made disasters has intensified in the recent decades in India. These disasters have been seen to affect the marginal disproportionately higher than the other social groups. The objective of reducing vulnerabilities, often kick starting as a rapid emergency response, in disaster struck areas, has contributed to proliferation of practices of assessment, targeting, principles and objectives of programme design that often seem more justified given the head quarter driven exigencies and deluges of funding that are sought to be justified by the disaster situation and less by the principles and vision of people centric approaches. It has been experienced that several important issues relating to building capacities, basing interventions on community resilience and knowledge are bypassed in the drive to spend more and more and dump in the community tangible as well as intangible assets.

Although cultural capital is conceived as part of capability, one of the key concepts on which the sustainable livelihoods approach is based, in practice, it has been often observed that "...the implications of the role of culture on capability have not been fully appreciated"⁵⁸. Sustainable livelihoods frameworks do not explicitly integrate the exploration of cultural variables, such as worldviews, beliefs, traditions and the historical experiences that shape people's livelihoods⁵⁹. Cultural practices are not easy raw material to be tailored to market needs. At the same time there is a critical need to engage with the realm of the 'intangible assets of our living cultural heritage'

⁵⁶ Refer to discussion in Rahul Ghai "Embroidery (*Bharat*) traditions and Women Casual Labour in Barmer", *EXCHANGES*, Action Aid, September, 1997

⁵⁷ Ashoke Chatterjee, *KALARAKSHA VIDHYALAYA, Bhuj, 2005-2007: An Evaluation Report*, UNESCO's "Capacity Building for Cultural Enterprises Programme"(Artists in Development II) Funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 2007, p.5

⁵⁸ Vijayendra Rao and Micheal Walton (ed) *Culture and Public Action*, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The World Bank, Indian Ed. Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004, p.48

⁵⁹ For a discussion on these aspects, see Carney Diana *Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches: Progress and Possibilities of Change*, DFID, London, 2004

¹ Rajeev Sethi, Towards a national policy, *SEMINAR*, Also see Rajeev Sethi in an Interview with Rashme Sehgal "Creative and cultural industries have the largest growth potential", *InfoChange News & Features*, September 2006, www.infochange.com; Rajeev Sethi, Support the creative self-empowered, *The Hindu*, Thursday, Nov 24, 2005

'Culture' as embedded in this context of 'practices' is the site of local knowledge based on and nurtured by everyday practices of communities. It is this epistemic inventory that is the source of resilience for survival- expressed differently as to inherit; to adapt / adopt invent- demonstrated by the local communities to negotiate new challenges of life.

and its 'incredibly diverse service providers' in a manner as culture doyen Rajjev Sethi argues 'to benefit the more than 250 million craftspeople in India in a meaningful and transformatory manner'⁶⁰.

In order that this passionate call for an engagement with the living cultural traditions does not degenerate into an elitist rhetoric, it requires transcending not only the dissipative bureaucratic dispensations but listening to and including the voices of the communities of rural creators as central to our planning processes.

The rationale of the present paper is precisely to ask questions concerning this much required re-positioning of 'culture' vis-à-vis 'sustainable livelihoods' in the light of experience and perspective of the 'marginal communities'. This embodied culture of material life evinces stirrings that compel us to transcend hegemonic constructs and blinkered visions to unshackle a perspective of the marginal communities that predicates on cultural practices playing a critical role in not only sustaining life with its associated values of self esteem, dignity, interdependence not only among humans but with nature as well.

A radical demystification of the framework for culture necessitates asking questions like what constitutes and reinvigorates creativity as a community practice, how is it related not only to enhancing incomes and opening market opportunities but equally to notions of well being, dignity and happiness; what are the processes that need to be followed for integrating the voices of the rural creators in constituting decentralized and self sustaining cultural / creative industries that situate their existence not as subservient to the logics of elite perspectives and market but to perspectives of realization of self rooted in local tradition and community; what is the potential and legitimacy of the meanings inherent in the cultural practices of the rural creators in not only generating knowledge from below but embodying it to constitute and represent empowering processes and institutions; advocating for the inclusion of oral testimony and voices of the marginal in understanding and constituting development practices and policies; how can the reality of multiple options of the livelihoods cycle of the marginal communities in the rural areas be understood in a holistic manner to facilitate planning of interventions that have an integrative rather than a dissipative logic, trying to move away from simplistic ways of seeing reality of the marginal as divided into on farm and non-farm categories; how can the concepts of resilience, interdependence and diversity inherent in the holism of sustainable livelihoods approach be integrated into our development practice with reference to the marginal communities.

V. Issues for the future

The issues chosen are among the most prominent in contemporary development theory and practice in India. They are frequently confronted with in efforts to engage with improving the lives of the marginal communities. Primarily concerned with the cultural practices of the marginal as dignified representations and development as well-being the issues range from the need to understand alternative indicators of well being to exploring ways of facilitating policies dealing with culture and development action, institutional frameworks and rules of governance for the participation of poor by according significance to perspectives of the marginal communities in India.

- Role of cultural policies and institutions in India with special reference to the rights and creative practices of the marginal communities of craftspeople and folk performers
- Inclusion of cultural skills especially folk performing arts in the design and criterion for selection of poverty eradication and employment schemes for the BPL
- Constituting economically remunerative, decentralized and dignified livelihoods options based on cultural traditions / creative expressions of marginal communities

It would not be inappropriate to mention a few things about the process that Deshkal wishes to follow in this on going journey to understand the role of the dimension of culture understood here as cultural practices of the marginal communities in contributing to development as well being. Following are some of the chief objectives of the future processes of consultation at the national as well as regional level:References:

- **Fostering dialogue** among a range of stakeholders on the constitutive and creative dimensions of cultural practices of the marginal communities to enlarge the conceptual and operative domain of approaches of sustainable livelihoods and poverty alleviation
- **Facilitate analysis** on cultural policies and cultural institutions in India with special reference to the basic rights and autonomy of aesthetic potentials of the marginal performing communities
- **Explore program strategies** for creation of economically fair and socially empowering sustainable livelihoods building upon cultural skills and traditions of communities, especially craftspeople and folk performing artists

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Rahul Ghai is an independent development processes facilitator and researcher. He has worked with the URMUL Trust a federation of NGOs working in the interiors of western Rajasthan. Work in the initial years involved setting up of Arid Zone Environmental Research and Resource Centre (AZERC) as an in-house R&D wing of the Trust. With the members of community organizations and NGOs he has conducted studies on the impact of drought and the IGNP canal on the people of desert, especially marginal communities and pastoralists. Rahul took to independent development facilitation work in 2002 and has worked in facilitating reviews and planning exercises for development and disaster response programmes of international organizations like Oxfam, Plan International, Tearfund and grass root NGOs and community organizations. As part of Marfat, an initiative of Sufi music listeners, have been working with the Mirs, a community of hereditary musicians from Pugal, Bikaner to reinvigorate their tradition of sufiyana qalam. For the past year and a half, Rahul has been involved with Deshkal Society in exploring dimensions of cultural perspectives on sustainable rural livelihoods for marginal communities. He can be contacted at rahulconsult@gmail.com.

Sanjay Kumar is a researcher, developmental practitioner and Secretary of Deshkal Society that was formed in 1995. He has been involved in the advocacy of issues like cultural rights, social empowerment of untouchable communities and land rights. The main thrust of Deshkal Society has been on knowledge-based activism among the marginalized groups, with a view to enhance their competence and capacity and facilitate democratic participation in mainstream knowledge structures. Sanjay has jointly edited three books on untouchable communities, multiple voices and marginality in Indian context: *Asserting Voices: Changing Culture, Identity and Livelihood of the Musahars in the Gangetic Plains*; *Dalit Studies in Higher Education: Vision and Challenges*; and *Marginalisation of Dalit Muslims in India* and has also published several research articles on untouchable communities, land rights and the labouring classes. He is one of the key facilitators of the Deshkal programme on Culture and Development. Under this programme one of the major activities has been an international workshop on Culture Matters, the select proceedings of which are coming in a forthcoming book titled: *Understanding Development from the Perspective of the Margins* (OUP) of which Sanjay is one of the co-editors. Currently, Sanjay is engaged in developing processes of alternative pedagogy for Children from the perspectives of the marginal communities. He can be contacted at desh13@rediffmail.com.

Future Programmes

Consultations

- With stakeholders and marginal communities at regional levels to better understand the local context and identify issues and strategies for facilitating an improved quality of life
- National Consultation on “Contributions of cultural practices of the marginal communities in realising Development as well being”

Development Action

- Project on developing social entrepreneurial skills among women of the Mushar Community
- Development of alternative pedagogy for Children from the perspectives of the marginal communities

Publications

Forthcoming Books:

- Rethinking Development from the Margins (from OUP)
- School Education, Pluarlism and Marginality: A Comparative Perspective (from Routledge)

Proposed:

- Case Studies on socially stigmatized pig rearing Musahar community in Bihar and subaltern sufi musicians of Muslim communities like Mirs of Pugal.

For more details about Deshkal programmes please see www.deshkalindia.com



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