

## HOW NOT TO COMMODIFY THE ARTS: EXEMPLARY ENTREPRENEURIAL PRACTICE FROM INDIA

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### KEYWORDS

*Creative Industries, Culture of Consumption, Arts Entrepreneurship, Commodification of Art, Multilingualism, Cultural Nationalism.*

### ABSTRACT

*This paper argues that there is a fundamental tension between culture and the market - a tension to which arts entrepreneurs must be sensitive in their efforts to develop a wider market for the arts. The idea of culture as a vital source of difference vanishes if it is valued solely as a commodity, since art markets privilege the tastes and preferences of consumers, not the specific significance that the arts have in their original context or for their creators. Far from protecting cultural diversity, the cultural industries encourage the marketing of art in a manner that can make it illegible to its producers, distort its true nature, and undermine its very purpose. Proposing a definition of arts entrepreneurship relevant to the Indian context, the paper goes on to describe three cases of entrepreneurial practice in India that engage the market while protecting artistic integrity.*

## CREATIVE INDUSTRIES AND THE ARTS

'Creative industries' is a term that is only eleven years old. Tony Blair's government established a Creative Industries Task Force in 1997 to develop this idea. The Task Force defined creative industries as comprising "those industries that have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property" (*Why cities* 2008, available from <<http://portal.unesco.org>>).

Burama K. Sagnia has written that "creative industries has been understood to include the following sub-sectors: the recording industry; music; performing arts; film and video; publishing; software and computer services; photography; art and antiquities market; radio, television and cable broadcasting industries; advertising; crafts; architecture; design; designer fashion; interactive leisure software; cultural heritage (tangible and intangible); tourism" (Sagnia 2005, p. 12, available from <<http://www.incd.net>>).

What this list indicates is that the creative industries and the arts industries are not coterminous; the former marks out a universe larger than and enfolding the latter.

## CULTURE IN THE MARKET

*The major challenges facing developing countries include the inadequacy of relevant cultural capacity to produce and circulate cultural goods and services in forms that can be readily consumed by developed countries...* (Ibid., p. 1)

For the purpose of the argument I will develop, "readily consumed" is the key phrase in this apparently harmless statement. We have all heard of the "Culture of Consumption", but here we are being introduced to "Culture as Consumable". The second idea, however, flows naturally from the first. In a culture of consumption, something has value only if it is consumable; so if culture is to have any value, it must come in a consumable form. In this scheme of things, it is inconceivable that the value of culture could be determined by anything other than the market.

In other words, culture as industry must largely disregard the fact that culture as practice, process, object or service might hold emotional, spiritual, metaphysical or symbolic meanings for its "owners" or authors, whether individuals or communities. Those meanings can be capitalised in the market only if they are shared by or can be effectively decoded for the targeted consumers.

No cultural consumable (performance, painting, craft object, textile, etc.) would be exportable from the developing world to the developed world if it did not feed tastes, preferences and even pre-conceptions in Europe, the United States and other "mature" markets. The cultural object or service must take a form that can be comprehended, appreciated and digested by the customer for whom it is intended. The form it must take to become "legible" to the consumer, however, may make it "illegible" to the producer. To subscribe to the consumer's universe of meaning, it might have to emigrate from the producer's universe of significance.

A simple example will elucidate what I mean: Imagine a producer community in India that creates objects intended for use entirely as part of a sacred ritual. Someone comes along and says, "These are beautiful objects. Let's take advantage of the opportunity that exists to sell them in the international market." As a result, these objects end up being bought by people for

decorative purposes (for instance, as wall hangings) or for functional reasons (for example, as ashtrays), and this increases income and employment among members of the producer community beyond anything they could ever have imagined. Happy ending, one might say.

But consider: the value and meaning that the buyers attach to those objects bear no relationship to the value and meaning that the producers ascribe to them. Indeed the producers might find the desacralisation of these objects by the market deeply perturbing and wrong. They must be ready to give up what they hold dear, to suffer cultural violation for economic gain. Were they an empowered community, our cultural entrepreneur might feel constrained to ask them: are you happy to forego cultural meaning and value to improve your economic conditions, and to what extent and in what circumstances?

What this example does is to draw our attention to the tension that exists between culture and market – a tension that anyone doing business in the cultural sector will need to negotiate and resolve. This tension is a complex one, and its full nature and implications will become clearer as we explore more sophisticated instances of the marketing of culture.

Even from this one example, however, it should be clear that markets in one continent cannot easily accommodate the *singularity* of a culture from another continent. What they can absorb are the material forms it takes, which may or may not be distinctive. As the great folklorist, translator and poet, A.K. Ramanujan has observed:

*The languages and regions in India have... a large stock of shared folklore materials. Collections can be made of... tales common to widely separated and distant regions of the subcontinent. Yet these shared items may carry different meanings in different regions... This kind of variation in meaning is characteristic of cultural forms... You cannot predict meanings from forms, for the meaning of a sign is culturally and contextually assigned (Ramanujan 2004, p. xx).*

Ramanujan's point is that the same folk tale may be narrated in different cultures, but what makes it a characteristic part of any particular culture are the distinctive meanings ascribed to it in that culture. It is these associated meanings that give a culture its singularity, which render it *somebody's* culture as against *world* culture. World culture really represents the vanishing point of culture in the familiar sense of the term.

The rapidly internationalising "creative industries" project relies for its success on the potential of culture to be widely and easily traded and exchanged, to become available as commodity. There is an idea of culture that begins to vanish under the pressure of this project. It is the idea that culture is a vital source of difference – the very reason why, I would have thought, one might cherish it. As I have argued in an earlier paper (Vellani 2006a, pp. 38-44), culture is the source of difference between peoples because it is the basis for their respective ascription and production of value and meaning in the world. If people value something, they will normally aspire to acquire it for themselves. But it would be very odd to ask anyone whether they desired culture as they might desire a living wage, a clean environment or a secure future for their children. We do not pursue culture as we pursue happiness; rather culture determines the boundaries of what we might regard as a life worth pursuing. Culture cannot be industrialised however – unless it can be characterised as a good, which, like health and education, can be bought, sold, gifted, demanded and insured.

Sagnia claims that the creative industries protect cultural diversity:

*INCD (International Network for Cultural Diversity) has recognised that achieving greater cultural diversity also requires the development of... creative industries and more balance in the global exchange of goods and services (Sagnia 2005, p. 1, available from <<http://www.incd.net>>).*

*Because creative industries draw from the creative expressions of communities, based on the wealth of their historical and contemporary values and symbols, allowing them to narrate their own stories, project their images and share their own challenges and aspirations both among themselves as well as with those from other countries, support for the industries should be seen as an integral part of the protection and promotion of cultural diversity (Ibid., p. 12).*

If this claim seems dubious, it is not because the market, operating unchecked in the realm of culture, accelerates the homogenisation of culture (as some people have argued) but because the idea of culture, as I have characterised it, evaporates through the process of its commodification.

The limited ability of distanced markets to absorb the singularity of a culture, however, has not prevented cultural commodities from being branded as “singular but universal” and sold on that basis. But a culture’s singularity cannot be marketed unless it is packaged in a manner that the consumer can tolerate, accept and grasp. Such packaging, as we shall see, simplifies and distorts the singularity that the commodity purports to represent.

Take a recent example to project India’s singularity through theatre. In 2006, Tim Supple, one of the directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company, completed a production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in India with actors drawn from different parts of the country. The production was accorded a thunderous ovation when it opened in Stratford. Discussions after the trial run in India, however, revealed that critics and artists here were less enchanted by the production. It suffered, they said, from an excessive reliance on spectacle constructed on the basis of India’s rich store of movement forms. The production’s exoticisation of India, however, bothers me less than how it projects our multilingualism. When asked about the artistic point of having actors speaking in so many different languages, Supple replied that “rather than force his actors into a monolingual straightjacket, he had encouraged them to express themselves through their own tongues”. He added that India is a multilingual nation and that “a Shakespeare production should seek to reflect the time and place in which it is made with vivid honesty” (Billington 2006, available from <[www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)>).

Multilingualism is certainly one of India’s most peculiar and complex realities and a production that tries to reflect it deserves to be lauded. But what Supple’s production achieved at best was to indicate the *fact* that many languages are spoken in India. He would have needed to spend much longer than his three months in this country to grapple with the *phenomenon* of multilingualism in India. Only then would his production have reflected anything one could seriously describe as the particular realities of this country. There are many ways in which India’s multilingual realities can be explored meaningfully in performance. One might want to explore how our languages collide and interpenetrate—how and why, for instance, we shift from one language to another, sometimes in the same street, the same conversation, or even the same sentence! Or one might want to look at how, in moving from the domestic space to the public place, we also move from one form of a language to another. Or one might want to depict the emerging creolisation of language, such as is represented by Hinglish, and how advertising, MTV, soap operas and popular cinema in India reflect this linguistic phenomenon as well as contribute to its further growth. Or one might want to tackle how the politics of language has produced sub-nationalisms, posed a threat to cultural diversity and resulted in interminable border disputes between the states.

Supple might be defended on the grounds that no production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could have adequately interpreted any of these aspects of what multilingualism really means in India. I am not sure that this is true. Over the last four centuries, Shakespeare's plays have supported a multiplicity of visions and meanings and depicted an astonishing range of social and political realities. But I will not labour this point because it is peripheral to my argument. I believe that Supple would have taken the window shopping route to portraying India's multilingualism even if he had been given ample opportunity to come to grips with its intricate realities. He knows his audiences well enough to know that they would have been bewildered by linguistic phenomena so far removed from the world in which they live. They would not have readily consumed a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that chose to grapple with such alien complexities of language production and politics. India is a noisy bazaar of interacting languages not a silent archipelago of isolated tongues, but Supple's production, for entirely understandable reasons, simplified this reality.

I would like to make clear that this is in no way intended as a specific attack on Supple: he is merely a victim of the logic imposed upon him by the limited ability of any market to embrace the singularities of the other. An Indian in his place, commissioned to produce a play of Shakespeare's for the U.K. market, would have had to do likewise. He would have had to suppress aspects of the realities around him, aspects that might carry great significance for him – or risk failure. Indeed, I will shortly describe how we in India have distorted cultural expression for the sake of consumers from elsewhere.

The massive diplomacy-through-culture initiative that the Indian Government unleashed on the world in the 1990s, coupled with the dramatic upswing in this country's economic fortunes, has generated widespread international interest in all aspects of Indian culture. Today, countless sites abroad are eager to show how India expresses itself in visuals and in performance. Does this not present a business opportunity waiting to be seized by anyone with entrepreneurial instincts in this country?

But it is an opportunity which will need to be seized with sensitivity. The international thirst for Indian cultural expression extends uncritically to pre-modern performance and ritual forms, some of which are very context-specific. The import and meaning of some of these forms are almost entirely derived from their community settings, and closely tied to rituals of worship, rites of passage, festivals, and the rhythms of life. Given prevailing market conditions, however, there will always be a temptation to present these modes of expression outside their native cultural arena in an altered form, making them fit for consumption by people from elsewhere.

This is a temptation that neither the Indian state nor private cultural bodies have been able to resist (Vellani 2003, pp. 362-63). For example, the Government of India presented Theyyam to audiences abroad as a dance form in the 1990s. Theyyam is in fact a ritual performative form of northern Kerala, through which gods, demons, epic characters, snakes, spirits, ancestors or heroes are invoked and worshipped to fulfill various human desires or avoid particular hazards and perils. Even local cultural groups in Kerala have now taken to describing Theyyam as a dance form. Such a description, by suggesting that Theyyam requires only spectators and not participants, facilitates its consumption by unsuspecting audiences from far and beyond. What it is about Theyyam that might be concealed by this new description, or lost in the new context in which it is presented, is passed over in silence. It then becomes reasonable for the audience to assume that it is witnessing a fairly faithful simulation of the original context of a Theyyam "performance". In such a presentation of Theyyam, the counterfeit parades as the real.

Nor has the temptation to misrepresent been avoided with respect to performance forms that are less context-sensitive. Phillip Zarrilli (1992, pp. 130-40) has described two initiatives undertaken by local cultural organisations in Kerala to create a new

style of Kathakali, the celebrated dance-drama form, for audiences from outside the state. The specific reinvention of Kathakali in both instances, Zarrilli suggests, is driven by a desire “to make Kathakali a ‘universally’ communicable art form (Ibid., p. 132)”. Thus, for example, realistic Western conventions of staging have been introduced, the use of language has been minimised, and the emotions of everyday life have been emphasised.

Zarrilli observes that “rather than attempting to ‘educate’ the new audience into received conventions and traditions”, the two makeovers of Kathakali “choose to alter and adapt the system itself to meet what they *think* the new audience wishes to see and appreciate” (Ibid., p. 135). In other words, both seek to enable new audiences to have *unmediated* access to Kathakali. And here again, the counterfeit supplants the real. (See Bharucha 1990, pp. 261-66, for an example of a systematic effort to reinvent and attract new audiences for Yakshagana, a traditional theatre form of the coastal region of the state of Karnataka.)

What is being shown in the name of Theyyam and Kathakali in these two instances should make us all uneasy. In plain terms, the government in the one case and the cultural organisations in the other are deceiving their respective audiences. One might applaud the outfits in Kerala for their entrepreneurial spirit, but one can hardly commend them for stealing Kathakali’s brand equity to peddle something other than the original article. This kind of thieving becomes easy when no one can lay claim to Kathakali as their intellectual property. While one could argue that the art form is the inheritance of the traditional community that has borne and transmitted it across generations, such collective rights are notoriously hard to protect and enforce, although they are now recognised by the World Intellectual Property Organization.

I do not wish to suggest that the arts entrepreneur’s enthusiasm to exploit the burgeoning market for Indian culture should not extend to Kathakali and other such performance forms. What I am saying is that he should not take shortcuts. If he is keen to extend Kathakali’s reach, he must take responsibility for curating its performances properly, thereby enabling audiences to engage with and access the art form in its own terms. He must strive to create a market appropriate to the form, nurturing it through mediation, rather than accept the market as a given to which Kathakali must adjust and yield.

## **ARTIST IN THE MARKET**

So far I have spoken mostly about the tension between culture and market. But there is also a palpable disconnect between the individual contemporary or modern artist and the remote market. This is because the individual artist is normally *here*, while the market about which I speak is always *elsewhere*. An individual artist is *here* in the sense that her expression either springs from her inner reality or the reality around her, which she perceives and responds to in a particular way. Only if her work is thus rooted is it likely to carry credibility and significance in her milieu and for her immediate audience.

But contemporary artists, attracted by the possibility of entering markets far and beyond or seduced by a dominant discourse about art and culture have, in their work, been known to disregard their inner voice and ignore matters of great import in their society. Theatre artists in India, for example, once fell under the spell of a nationalist cultural ideology and the opportunity it offered for reaching audiences far removed from the context in which their theatre was created. The outcome of this State-sponsored experiment in cultural engineering is worth describing.

In the 1980s, the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Indian state agency for the promotion of the performing arts, began supporting directors to develop stage productions based on folk performance and ritual forms in their respective regions. It also organised

regional and national festivals to showcase those productions. Behind this aggressive promotion of the “theatre of the roots”, as it was called, lay the objective of inventing a “genuinely” Indian theatre, chasing away the “unfortunate” spell that Western dramaturgy had cast over it (see Bharucha 1990, pp. 266-70, for an insightful critique of the “theatre of the roots”). Unlike certain forms of music and dance, theatre had escaped the classicising and nationalising compulsions of the first half of the twentieth century. This is not surprising: language-based performances resist being co-opted by the politics of the nation and paraded as national art because they are not just local but also localised. They comment on, participate in and even act upon their immediate cultural, social and political milieu. Music and dance, on the other hand, were more amenable to being purged of their association with the lower castes, regional histories and local identities, and reconstructed as expressions of a shared national culture (Vellani 2006b, p. 61).

Those directors who constructed their artistic identities to accord with the norms of the “theatre of the roots” also benefited from the government’s partiality for representing and promoting their work at international festivals. Celebrating “Indian-ness” rather than engaging critically with India’s present-day realities, this theatre projected India as folksy and exotic, instead of as a society confronting the contradictions and strains of being tribal, feudal, modern and post-modern all at once.

By and large, the government’s intervention led, as one might expect, to empty experiments in form. After all, the expressive folk idioms that these mostly urban theatre directors were drawing upon carried meaning and significance in a world unconnected to their own. As a consequence, many theatre directors of a particular generation failed to explore or chose to suppress their inner artistic impulses to jump onto the nationalist bandwagon. If *they* had anything to say as artists it was left unsaid in their theatre. Instead they repeated a tired theatre formula, using and reusing a familiar range of techniques and conventions to retain their hold on a distant market for their products. Not surprisingly, some of them are celebrated nationally and internationally, but meet with indifference if not hostility in their own states because their work is seen as unrelated to local issues, concerns and realities (Vellani 2003, pp. 360-62).

The nationalist ideology and the market it opened up froze the art of these theatre directors. And in allowing their art to stagnate, they abandoned their calling, even what one might call their obligation as artists. They became participants in a celebration, instead of being critics of the status quo or visionaries of the future. Their art was not a source of renewal or mobilisation.

Above all, their work did not acknowledge the artist’s critical role in producing cognitive dissonance. Alok Rai, commenting on the lame efforts to memorialise his grandfather, the great novelist and short story writer, Munshi Premchand, who wrote incisively and damningly on the evil of untouchability, remarked:

*God knows untouchability did not disappear after the first stories appeared, but it became, in a fundamental sense, wrong – even in the eyes of those who practiced it. To produce such cognitive dissonance is to create the ground for social change* (Rai 2006).

To conclude this section, when contemporary artists fall prey to the temptation of trying deliberately to reach audiences that they cannot name or call their own, one is likely to find them turning away from their responsibility to their inner selves, from their responsibility to authenticating their own experience, and from their responsibility to people with whom they share a life. What, then, is left of the artist in them?

## ARTS ENTREPRENEUR IN THE MARKET

If I am right to think that the enterprise of fashioning a market for cultural and artistic expression at some remove from its site of creation will struggle to acknowledge a culture's singularity and runs the danger of compromising the artist's integrity, how does one mark out the arts entrepreneur's arena of operation and the terms on which he can grow his business? I shall attempt an answer to this question by referring to cases that I see as exemplifying "best practices" in arts entrepreneurship.

But first we must agree on a definition of the arts entrepreneur. The literature on arts entrepreneurship, unlike that on social entrepreneurship, is very thin, but here is a working definition proposed by J. Dennis Rich and Joseph S. Roberts:

*...arts entrepreneurship would be the process an artist engages in creating a business utilizing the skills and the artistic talent that the artist possesses. Or it would be the process a non-artist engages in creating a business utilizing the skills and artistic talent possessed by artists* (Rich and Roberts, n.d., p. 9, available from <<http://www.slu.edu>>).

I believe that this definition of the arts entrepreneur is too narrow for the Indian context. Note that it characterises the arts as the practice of an individual, though I do not think it intends to exclude the practice of a collection of individuals, such as that of a dance troupe. Note also how this location of the source of artistic expression in the creativity of the individual (or a collection of individuals) reminds us of the description of the creative industries that I cited earlier:

*Those industries that have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property* (*Why cities* 2008, available from <<http://portal.unesco.org>>).

Here again the anchoring idea is *individual* creativity, skill and talent. This should not surprise us: intellectual property has the most teeth, can be best protected and exploited, when an individual or a group of individuals can be identified as the possessor of that right. But how does one exploit intellectual property in countries like India, where so much of the cultural and artistic wealth is a common wealth and does not belong to any individual?

The cited definitions of creative industries and arts entrepreneurship express the same core idea because both of them originate in the West. These definitions are perfectly consistent with the nature and context of artistic production and reception in the USA and Europe. The industrial revolution displaced the arts from community in Western societies once and for all, leaving only the individual as the possible locus of art. What we recognise as modernism in art was born from this displacement. As Jean Baudrillard has put it:

*The aesthetic and critical charm of European culture came... – at least in the modern period – from the exile, physical or mental, of the great creators and the great works from their own societies. Culture does not translate the identity of a society, the immanence of a system of values* (Baudrillard 2008, available from <<http://www.egs.edu>>).

I believe that a wider definition of arts entrepreneurship will be more meaningful in the Indian context. In India, we need to think of arts entrepreneurs not only as people who do business using the skills and resources of the arts, but also as people

who use business skills or other resources to enrich and strengthen the field of the arts. And I think that we can embrace both these ideas if we build on current thinking about social entrepreneurship.

Social entrepreneurs have been described as people who adopt innovative approaches to social and other issues, most often by applying business skills to achieve some type of social goal or change. They innovate at two levels – in the manner in which they address social goals and in the way in which they ensure the financial sustainability of pursuing those social goals. For a social entrepreneur, generating profit is not the end; it is the means for creating social value.

Arts entrepreneurs might similarly be seen as people who create the material conditions for pursuing goals in the arts. Their objectives might be:

1. to create the conditions that enable them or an artistic group or a cultural community to pursue an artistic vision or practice, or/and
2. to strengthen and enrich the field of the arts (in one sector, discipline or as a whole) by
  - a. creating a more facilitative (policy, legislative, research or infrastructural) environment for arts practice, or/and
  - b. enhancing the value placed on the arts in other areas of human endeavour or in other sectors (education, business, social development).

This expanded definition of the arts entrepreneur better describes the three stories I will now present and discuss. These are stories of two institutions and one individual who have received support from the India Foundation for the Arts, a nationwide grant-making organisation that I lead. Their stories, I believe, will help us to understand both the limits and possibilities of entrepreneurship in the arts in India.

## **1. RANG VIDUSHAK**

I will first describe an effort that could have delivered more than it did, but we can learn as much from underachieving initiatives as we can from outright successes. There is a theatre organisation in Bhopal called Rang Vidushak, led by the theatre director and designer, Bansi Kaul. For three decades, Kaul has been driven by the idea of developing and rooting a contemporary Indian theatre in the impoverished hinterland of the Hindi belt – a theatre based on small-town sensibilities and everyday life. Rang Vidushak's actor training methods and performance style have been developed from ideas about the clown-narrator in Indian theatre, and storytelling forms, street gymnasts and the culture of wrestling in the region. Starting virtually from scratch, the group has not only created an extremely energetic, refined and distinctive idiom of theatre, its repertoire of productions circulates in all the Hindi-speaking states and even beyond. Rang Vidushak has also cultivated audiences in villages, small towns and big cities, bridging a rural-urban divide that few theatre groups manage to do.

How was all this achieved? Kaul's first thought was to harness for his theatre the raw energies of what he described as the idling "lumpen" youth in the Hindi region. Unemployed, and overcome by a sense of hopelessness about their future, they would end up wasting their energies on dubious activities, falling into bad ways. Kaul felt that his theatre would be serving a valuable social purpose by engaging such youth in creative and productive work, helping to give meaning to their lives and restoring their sense of self-worth. He chose to recruit young people from different states in the Hindi region, gave them a stipend and trained them to perform in his form of theatre.

Then he came up with a simple but truly innovative idea. Kaul encouraged the actors to seek opportunities for performing Rang Vidushak's productions in their respective home towns and surrounding areas. He promised them a fixed sum of money for every show they succeeded in procuring for the group. These amounts were accumulated in their names and paid out to them before they went home on their annual vacation. This resulted in a win-win situation. Rang Vidushak's theatre began to be seen across a vast cultural zone, the group's income from shows grew substantially, and the actors were happy with the additional money they were earning. To reduce the cost of touring with performances, and facilitate the staging of their work in rudimentary and ill-equipped spaces in small towns, the group mounted its plays without relying on heavy sets and complicated lighting. Instead they developed a mobile design philosophy based on vibrant costumes, the movement of actors and group composition.

Rang Vidushak's theatre appeals to children because it uses masks, colourful make-up and costumes, songs, slapstick and acrobatics. So the group started performing in government schools and working with the children of convicts, who were also in prison because they had nowhere else to go. The goodwill that they thus created in government circles persuaded state functionaries to allow them the use of a vacant storehouse in Bhopal. Here they conducted their rehearsals and training, gave intimate performances and kept their rapidly growing stock of costumes, lights and other stage materials. Kaul also got free access to a state-owned open air space, where the group held regular performances and an annual festival of plays for larger audiences. These cost-saving measures had an enormous impact on Rang Vidushak's economies. In addition, the group attracted grants from trusts and foundations. Furthermore, Kaul had the knack of mobilising the artistic and managerial capabilities of a wide circle of people, whom he held captive by his vision. Writers would script plays for the group, dancers would take classes with the actors, bankers and police officers would assume responsibility for administrative tasks. Much of this help came free of cost or for nominal payment, and it came from near and far.

I trust that I have said enough to establish that Bansi Kaul is a remarkable arts entrepreneur. Pursuing objective 1 above (and, to a lesser extent, 2b), he expanded the market for Rang Vidushak's theatre and diversified sources and forms of support to sustain the group's work. He identified opportunities to advance Rang Vidushak's mission and pursued them unrelentingly. He was not bound by common and familiar norms and ways of functioning in the theatre sector. He is noticeably good at networking. And he is skilled at doing more with less, at using scarce resources efficiently.

But a time came when Rang Vidushak needed to close the resource gap created by the gradual drying up of grants from trusts and foundations. This required the group to leverage the market in multiple ways. Interesting ideas were floated: for instance, selling cassettes of their theatre songs, masks and scrolls – all very popular with audiences – at their shows. Another thought was to create a series of short films of stories performed by silent clowns for television. Creating a wider range of marketable products – but products which are the natural outcome of the group's core expertise and interest – was clearly the best way forward for Rang Vidushak.

But these plans, which would have required the group to develop new capacities, remained on paper. Kaul appeared reluctant to move to the next level of growth. Why?

According to W. Long (1983), entrepreneurs display three fundamental traits: they have a high tolerance for "uncertainty and risk", they have "complementary managerial competence" and they demonstrate "creative opportunism". Bansi Kaul has all these attributes but his managerial competence is limited to the range of options that Rang Vidushak had already explored. As a leader, he was disinclined to develop processes and products that relied on competencies he did not possess himself. He

was unwilling to take on people with the ability to help Rang Vidushak to engage the market in new ways. Why was he not ready to disturb the status quo?

We must remember that Kaul's worldview was bred in India's socialist era. This did not cause him to suffer from a subsidy mentality, as it might have. He believes in the value of independent action and in relying on one's own talents and resources. But he does suffer from an unacknowledged fear of the market's ability to compromise artistic integrity. The market can certainly have such an effect, as I have already argued, but not if one accesses it on terms that are consistent with one's artistic interests, skills and purpose. Beyond India's socialist past, however, we are also burdened by our feudalism, which has yet to be consigned to history. Kaul is unable to countenance the creation of functional areas with relatively independent authority in Rang Vidushak because he is too invested in a feudal mode of governance – one which promotes a culture of dependency on a father figure. He does not welcome the erosion of his control over the group in favour of greater democracy and wider ownership. In the end, his was a crisis of leadership. His mode of leading held the group back from entering a new phase of growth. Because he could not change, neither could Rang Vidushak.

## 2. DASTKAR ANDHRA

My next example is from Secunderabad, where Dastkar Andhra is based. Dastkar markets the cotton handloom products of textile producing communities in Andhra Pradesh – a perfectly straightforward enterprise, it would seem. But Dastkar apprehended that the weaver communities were getting alienated from their traditional knowledge base of designs, skills, materials and dyes because of their focus on meeting the demands of the market. The knowledge that remained alive was largely the knowledge required to execute the orders they were receiving.

This prompted Dastkar Andhra to begin retrieving and consolidating the traditional knowledge of textile fabrication. For this purpose, they accessed material available in archives and museums, and visited existing centres of handloom production. They then created sample books for their production centres, which served as reference points for the development of new designs. Prototypes of the new designs were produced and market-tested, leading finally to regular production and market integration. The direct result of this project was that sales from five production centres grew by nearly 40 per cent in one year after the project was completed.

This project was clearly more than just an attempt to arrest the dilution of the region's textile design identity by the forces of commercialisation. Dastkar needed to recover and transmit traditional textile knowledge to retain and expand its market. Resuscitating and building upon the fuller knowledge of the design repertoire was essential for the empowerment of the weaving communities, giving them the resources and flexibility to adapt to new market trends and demands. A continuing narrow and exclusive focus on the current call of the market would eventually have left the weavers with nothing to fall back on.

Arts entrepreneurs, in other words, would be ill-advised to allow their market exploitation of an arts practice to directly or indirectly erode its sources of inspiration and its cultural basis. But it would also be in their enlightened self-interest to seek to diminish or neutralise the potential of *other* forces and actions to degrade the arts practice in which they have invested. It used to be said that business should give back to communities that are the source of its wealth – because the health of those communities is good for the future of business in those communities. My suggestion is along the same lines: business in the

arts must protect those arts that are the source of its wealth – because what’s good for those arts is good for the future of business in those arts.

Suppose, however, that Dastkar was able to and therefore chose to grow its business without securing the larger knowledge and skills base of the weavers. In my view, this would be poor arts entrepreneurship, although it could not be faulted on economic grounds. I say this because arts entrepreneurs need to safeguard the art form on which their business is founded not only on grounds of long-term self-interest but also for reasons of ethics. This moral obligation derives from considerations to which I have already referred. When weavers are reduced to labourers working in a line to serve distant markets, they can suffer profound cultural loss. They may no longer be creating to express the cultural meanings they attach to their motifs, designs and colours. If their cultural knowledge is allowed to degrade, craftspeople will be left with no reason to create anew, and no basis for innovating – as they have always done – or for linking expression to self. They will then no longer be agents of *culture*.

There is an essential difference between business practice and arts practice. Business practice has a history, but it is not bound by it. Arts practice, by contrast, is *embedded* in a cultural history, to which it not only links up and makes reference, but from which it derives its legitimacy and coherence. Art expresses the human condition, but it can do so only by staying connected with multiple aspects – social, political, cultural and historical – of the context of its practice. The very purpose and dynamic of art is undermined when its future is left to be decided solely by the market.

Ashoka (*Selection Criteria* n.d., available from <[www.ashoka.org](http://www.ashoka.org)>) has defined four core criteria that candidates for its fellowship in social entrepreneurship must satisfy: creativity, entrepreneurial quality, social impact of the idea, and ethical fibre. By stressing that an arts entrepreneur needs to work with a sense of responsibility to the field, I too have invoked the question of ethics. I would prefer, though, to emphasise not the arts entrepreneur’s ethical fibre, but the ethics of what she does or achieves. This has the advantage of alerting her to the importance of assessing the cultural impact of her market-driven initiatives. The International Network for Cultural Diversity defines cultural impact assessment as:

*A process for identifying, predicting, evaluating and communicating the probable effects of a current or proposed development policy or action on the cultural life, institutions and resources of communities, then integrating the findings and conclusions into the planning and decision-making process, with a view to mitigating adverse impacts and enhancing positive outcomes* (Sagnia 2005, p. 45, available from <<http://www.incd.net>>).

If, in this definition, “current or proposed development policy or action on the cultural life, institutions and resources of communities” is replaced by “current or proposed business enterprise in the arts on the cultural life, institutions and resources of the concerned arts communities”, cultural impact assessment is in effect what Dastkar Andhra did.

The National Centre for Social Entrepreneurs (2001, p. 5, available from <[www.ediblestrategies.com](http://www.ediblestrategies.com)>) has marked the difference between for-profit entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs in the following way:

**FOR-PROFIT ENTREPRENEURS**

Strength is in personal skills,  
knowledge and energy

Focus on short-term  
financial gain

No limit on type or scope  
of ideas/ventures

Profit is an end

Profit pocketed and/or  
distributed to shareholders

Risk personal and/or investor  
assets

Be in charge of their own destiny  
rather than depending on an  
employer

**SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS**

Strength is in the organization's  
collective wisdom and experience

Focus on building long-term  
capacity of the organization

Ideas/ventures based on  
organization's core competencies  
and mission

Profit is a means

Profit plowed back into  
organization to do more mission

Risk organization's assets, image and  
public trust

Enable nonprofit to be in charge of  
its own destiny rather than  
depending on funders.

The position I have taken, however, implies that one of the characteristics assigned to social entrepreneurs in the table above needs restating to be applicable to arts entrepreneurs. The ideas and ventures of arts entrepreneurs are not just based on their mission; they are also limited by the nature of the arena in which they operate. Or, if you like, their mission itself is constrained by what it takes to do right by the sector in which they work.

What I am proposing, in other words, is an ecological understanding of entrepreneurship in the arts. Both expediency and ethics support this idea. On the one hand, arts entrepreneurs must grasp that the long-term sustainability of their business in the arts rests on nurturing the source from which such business derives its opportunities. On the other hand, they must acknowledge that they also have an obligation to protect the basis and integrity of the art on which their economic advancement is predicated.

**3. NAVJOT ALTAF**

We will now travel to Kondagaon in Bastar District, Chhattisgarh. Navjot Altaf, a visual artist from Mumbai, has spent almost a decade living in Kondagaon. There she has established an artists' residency with a group of rural wood carvers and bell metal sculptors. Altaf epitomises an arts entrepreneur who is creating a market that respects these producers of culture as artists rather than as artisans. In the process, she is challenging the terms on which the existing markets have functioned, treating these artists as no better than manual workers, repeatedly producing the same narrow range of products for faraway customers.

The residency released these carvers and sculptors from the pressure to produce for existing contractors. They were free to create at their own pace, interact with each other, reflect on the sources of their creativity, and undertake study tours in the region of their culture. At the end of every year, the work produced by the artists' commune is carefully curated and sold collectively through an art gallery. The funds they raise partly sustain the residency for another year.

Even before the economics of this collective had stabilised, the team began to look around to see how their art could intervene productively in the immediate surroundings, which had been culturally degraded by a combination of forces – insensitive educational policies, which had alienated schoolchildren from their own culture, and market forces of the kind this team was challenging, which had done likewise for the whole community. They started by conducting arts education workshops in schools, which drew upon local stories, legends and expression in the arts. Their aim was to address the shortcomings in the formal education that children were receiving in government schools. They then built *pillagudis* (children’s playhouses) in a few villages, which were designed and constructed with the help of the local community, including the children. These *pillagudis* helped to regularise the team’s arts education work. They are attractive spaces where children now gather to play and exercise their imagination.

Next, the team collaborated with village communities to build structures around the *nalpar* (the site of the community tap). The *nalpar* is one of the key places for social convergence and communication in any village. It is a meeting place for women in particular, who spend a lot of time there with their toddlers. In designing the site around different community taps, inputs from the villagers played a critical role, since attention needed to be given to functionality and physical convenience, and to facilitating social interaction, not just to aesthetics.

Navjot Altaf and her team, as arts entrepreneurs, are addressing objectives 1 and 2b above. They have employed local arts resources, aesthetic sensibilities and practical knowledge, apart from freely contributed labour, to make a positive difference to lives in the community. The community itself has learnt lessons in independence and self-reliance, rediscovering and validating their agency in the process. Equally, Altaf’s collaborators have arrived at a radically altered self-understanding. They have gone from being apprentices to a master craftsperson, labouring in a mass production enterprise, to seeing themselves as imaginative artists able to create new work as well as reflect on their practice. The team has also created a market for the art it produces – a market that respects the rhythms of creativity, the function of imagination and the purpose of aesthetics in the culture of the region. They have eschewed the quick fixes of the market, the easy path of reducing cultural expression to detached fragments for immediate access to consumers and swift, short-term gains.

The projects I have described are salutary on a number of counts. At the risk of repeating myself, I would like to underscore three of these in particular. Firstly, in all three cases, there is an effort to resist the market’s inclination to make a fetish of culture. Instead, the singularity of an artistic vision or the integrity of a culture provide the unalterable terms on which the market is engaged. Secondly, two of the arts entrepreneurs (Dastkar Andhra and Navjot Altaf) go farther in seeking different ways to actually counter the deleterious effect of existing markets on the spheres of arts practice in which they are invested. Thirdly, these arts entrepreneurs either operate from locations close to the arts producers or are themselves artists (Bansi Kaul and Navjot Altaf) creating work with them. Because they are either inside the world of the practice or have intimate knowledge of its cultural context, they are well placed to alleviate the adverse impacts and augment the positive outcomes of their own actions or that of the market.

I will end with the words of the late Jean Baudrillard, arguably the pre-eminent media and cultural theorist of our times:

*No society ever waited until everyone had enough to eat to play with words and signs. If culture is to be subordinated to needs or problems of under-development... then it is clear that culture has completely lost its meaning....*

*All singular cultures, politics, art itself are giving in to culture as universal standard – design culture, Disney culture, which are the opposite of culture as destiny....*

*Culture... implies a notion of sovereignty. Once it solidifies as a heritage, as power, as appropriation... it is all over. Finished (Baudrillard 2008, available from <<http://www.egs.edu>>).*

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