Straight from the art with Amitava Bhattacharya

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Amitava Bhattacharya took the plunge into an uncertain journey in rural India to uplift poverty-stricken artisans, using folk art and culture. The man behind millions of success stories and smiling faces talks to swati sengupta

You are leading a crusade against poverty, making thousands of rural villagers find livelihood through art and culture. What’s the principle behind it?

Amitava Bhattacharya: People are poor not because they lack money, but due to dearth of employable skills. If art and culture is considered as skill and nurtured, it can be developed into rural entrepreneurship. Donating money demeanes ‘izzat’ (pride) and human power; it does not help a country’s economy. The poor are infinitely happier to have purchasing power to buy food instead of getting it for free.

What’s your model?

We train, build confidence, and provide rural artisans with market linkages. We follow “Communication for Development” (spreading social awareness) and “Art for Life” (livelihood). The idea is to make communities/villages self reliant whether in preventing child marriage or earning livelihood from performances. For example, Baiga communities in Dindori (Madhya Pradesh) hardly reported malaria deaths in the last two years after our intervention.
How have situations changed?

Thousands transformed from insecure pachitra, madhubani painters, bauls, chhau dancers to confident artists who glow with money and self esteem. This October during Durga Puja — the largest festival of Bengalis — hundreds of villagers performed live in Delhi, Chennai, Lucknow, Hyderabad and Kolkata. Many were engaged in making over a hundred pendants — temporary artistic structures where goddess Durga is worshipped for four days. Some even made $4000. Few years back, many pulled rickshaws or carried corpses in their villages for livelihood. Now sanitation is 80 per cent where it was 10 per cent and all send their children to school.

Why is community the focus, instead of individuals?

No villager we worked with migrated despite increased purchasing power. If traditional culture declines, unsafe migration increases and leads to human trafficking. Also, let’s say people know Gobhanga village instead of artiste Golam Fakir. The village is a brand — which makes all villagers proud — they protect it and thrive on it.

Why did people not value folk art earlier in terms of money?

It did not have wide reach. There was exploitation. So-called educated people acted brokers. Like, they bought patas from Pingla (a village in eastern India’s West Bengal), at Rs 20 (0.33 USD) and sold them abroad for Rs 5000 (81 USD). We connected patas to art galleries in India and abroad and now they know their buyers.

How did the sudden turn from software to folk art happen for you?

I came back from California hoping to make a difference in India. I toured villages for three months — Rajasthan, West Bengal, Odisha — trying to understand poor villagers’ needs.

How did the discovery of India turn out to be?

I asked villagers if they worked happily, what they ate, how many clothes they had, and most answers were grossly negative. But I was able to find the gap.
Does it look like it has been bridged?

I wanted to connect villagers to the world through computers. But their answers indicated it wouldn’t work. So I opted for culture and communication for development. Now I'm happy they earned well this year. We link artists and audiences by organizing festivals without entry fee. People walk in, listen to stirring music, invite performers to their neighbourhood programs or college fests; the message is spreading well.

Are the youth enthusiastic?

Now, they have connected — whether on finding bauls performing with renowned musicians or finding madhubani tees — they realise folk can be cool too.

How did the cool quotient evolve?

We requested renowned artistes to promote the art forms in their own way. Bickram Ghosh, Pandit Tanmoy Bose shared stage with bauls like Golam Fakir, Akkas Fakir. This made the audience value ‘baul’ — one of Bengal’s spiritually richest music — much more. Fashion designer Agnimitra Paul uses ‘patachitra’ and ‘madhubani’ in her creations, opening huge market for artists. Now unknown ‘patachitra’ artists get good pay for doing home interiors.

What is the inspiration behind profit not being your priority?

For me, social progress is profit. Sharing resources with people is our mandate. My wife Ananya (who also works in banglanatak) and I decided to work 50 per cent for money and forego the rest. In our organization, 30 per cent are engineers, 70 per cent from economics, sustainable development, and the rest field workers. We focus on deliverables.

Without donations, how do you pay 75 employees?

It comes from project assignments. We work with Planning Commission in India, state governments, UN bodies, European Commission, US department of state, World Bank among others, don’t indulge in luxury; our offices and my home are rented spaces. It works wonders.