



Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders

A collaborative initiative of Centre for Financial Accountability (Delhi) and Environment Support Group (Bangalore)

In this climate of despair induced by COVID-19, various young researchers and activists have been working on emerging trends in Interdisciplinary Action Research which address some of the most pressing issues of our times, and that from various sectors: urban planning, public health, sociology, ecology and environment, digital commons, public education, migration studies, entrepreneurship, informal economy, and more. CFA and ESG collaborate to bring to focus various exciting explorations by such young researchers, who conscientiously draw attention to some of society's biggest challenges through their interdisciplinary efforts.

Webinar 8: Janapada Khadi: A Step Towards Swaraj Development

Introduction

Khadi in India is not just a piece of cloth. It conveys timeless sentiments with all. Mahatma Gandhi introduced Khadi culture in 1920 and it became an instrument of expression to boycott machine-made foreign goods. It also created a vision for a sustained livelihood. Khadi was kept alive since independence for some time until liberalization made way for mechanisation. Despite many efforts by civil society, various challenges have systematically made it unviable. While we discuss climate emergencies and sustainability with such fervor across International government meetings and corporate boardrooms, little has been done to ensure this age old tradition that is self sustained, not dependent on any energy, and a great employment provider is nurtured.

In the current scenario, some of the prime challenges to the growth of the khadi sector in India have been with the growing of cotton itself. Since the early 2000s, the introduction of Bt cotton has caused different kinds of trials for farmers and weavers, there has been a lack of access to market, competition with machine made clothes, impact of demonetisation and GST on khadi, lack of research and development works and now the pandemic has also dealt a heavy blow.

In this regard, Janapada Sewa Trust founded in 1960 has been changing that situation for farmers, weavers and the world of Khadi. It is the primary work of a single family, now in its third generation.

Discussants



Sumanas Koulangi has been closely associated with the Janapada Seva Trust and a recipient of many research grants in his early career from University of Oxford and has been a Research fellow at the Indian Academy of Sciences. He has travelled extensively across India studying the Desi cotton landraces in the country. He is an ecologist, avid birdwatcher, agriculturalist, educator and is currently exploring development as swaraj (self rule) as proposed by M K Gandhi and J C Kumarappa in establishing a non-violent social order.



G.N. Raghu is a mechanical engineer who started his career in the automotive industry. But soon he travelled across India and realized the need for decentralized technology at the grassroots level especially for the communities in the textile sector. He started working on technology solutions for cotton processing. He is also Founder at Studio for Humanscale Technologies, Co-founder at Bag N Stories, Marketing and Technology at Janapada Khadi

Sumanas Koulagi, Research Fellow at the Indian Academy of Sciences, opened the webinar by giving an introduction to the Janapada Sewa Trust. Founded by his grandfather in the 1960s, the organization is based in Melukote, Karnataka. Janapada Sewa Trust works to empower and support the local community in myriad ways. Their current projects include an adoption center for infants, an environmental education program, a reforestation initiative and the Khadi production enterprise with the local weavers.

Strongly based on Gandhi's idea of Swaraj, the Janapada Khadi enterprise strives to treat all its members in a humane way. As Sumanas shared, they've consciously tried to keep it a small organisation, so that members feel a greater sense of connection with each other. What's more, one-third of the capital investment comes from the workers themselves. So they feel empowered as owners of the enterprise, not just as labourers. As a radical step, the organization has fixed six hours as the maximum time an employee can work per day. This allows them the time to take care of other aspects of their lives.

Zooming out to the larger context, Sumanas highlighted the important role Khadi has to play in tackling some of the crises of our times. "Swaraj and Khadi have far greater effects than would one think, I see them as a solution to both ecological devastation and social inequality", he shared.

G N Raghu, Marketing and Technology advisor at Janapada Khadi, began his intervention by describing the journey that took him from mechanical engineer to social entrepreneur. While traveling across rural India, he realised there was a great need for technology and innovation in small-scale industries.

One of Raghu's main areas of focus is to design and create affordable machines which can process cotton at the local level, thereby bolstering the livelihoods of farmers and weavers. He went on to explain just why this is so important from an ecological perspective. Since most cotton processing machines are built only to process Genetically Modified cotton, this disincentives growing pest-resistant desi cotton. And in India, an estimated 50%

of all pesticides used are for cotton plants. Furthermore, using GM cotton means that the farmers lose out on their seed sovereignty.

A member of the audience enquired as to what steps can be taken to make Khadi clothing more affordable, since it is relatively more expensive than mass-produced power loom fabrics. Sumanas acknowledged that this would be quite difficult to achieve, but felt that even making sure that more privileged people buy Khadi would be beneficial. "Because of the social condition of our times, most ordinary people cannot afford Khadi. Reaching out to the elite to buy our fabrics puts more money into the hands of our weavers. In a way it helps to reverse the social condition by redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor", he shared.

Adding to this, Raghu appealed for more conscious consumption: "Rather than buying three shirts costing Rs. 400 each made using power looms and synthetic dyes, it is much better to buy one Khadi shirt which costs Rs. 1,200", he asserted.

Sumanas went on to reveal that in the textile industry, most mass-market clothing is produced under highly exploitative conditions, where workers are paid inhuman wages. He also called for greater responsibility on the part of consumers, saying that what a society produces is largely determined by what it consumes.

ESG and CFA continue the **"Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders"** series next Thursday, 15th October 2020 (5:00 - 6:30 pm on Zoom and Facebook) addressing the theme: **Alternative Maternal Care** with Chetna Kulkarni. More details on this webinar series can be accessed on www.esgindia.org and www.cenfa.org. Recording of the webinar is accessible at:

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