

‘Strengthen Traditional Practices and Livelihoods’ Activists Demand, for a Post Covid Economy

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New Delhi: Social activists and grassroots leaders unanimously contended that in rejuvenation of small-scale traditional industries lies a huge potential for strengthening of the domestic market and generation of livelihoods in villages.

The speakers at the webinar Asserting Livelihood with Dignity: Re-Visioning Traditional Knowledge, Artisanal Livelihood & Practices included, Ambika Das, Omon Mahila Sangathan; Mohan Rao, National Federation of Handlooms and Handicrafts; and Kamesh Salam, South Asia Bamboo Foundation. Aashima Subberwal, Programme for Social Action moderated the session.

Pitching for immediate cash transfer for handloom workers, Mohan Rao said, “According to the 4th All India Handloom Census (2019), almost 68% of the handloom workers earn less than rupees 5000 a month. There is an immediate need to provide financial package specially in post Covid scenario” Asserting that supporting the local artisans is the only way to tackle the fall out of huge reverse migration, Rao said that, with the workers forced to return to their villages, the biggest support for rural economies will be to support Handloom and Handicraft sector to create rural employment.

Referring to the slogan of “be Indian buy Indian” by Prime Minister Modi, Mohan said that it is just supporting Indian corporates and companies. “Our slogan has to be ‘buy handloom, buy handicraft’”, he exhorted.

Livelihood practices of traditional communities and indigenous peoples have always played a very important role in preserving traditional knowledge systems, cultural practices and community living. Such heritage livelihoods also draw from the local raw materials, tools and techniques making them unique and varied across the country.

Handloom, handicrafts, bamboo works, pottery, etc. to traditional medicinal systems of indigenous communities, they stand in contradiction with the deeply homogenised modern capitalistic production. Further the growth of industrial production and the resource intensive mode of development have posed a threat to not just the livelihoods but also lives of many of these communities.

The session attempted to see if the crisis of the pandemic has in anyways thrown open new opportunities to strengthen such traditional practices and livelihoods. With the wheels of production of big industries brought to a halt and the global supply chain weakened, is it time to move away from a system that values profiteering over heritage, labour and ecological sustainability?

This webinar was a part of the series Re-Imagining the Future: Peoples Agenda for A Post Covid Economy which is organised by trade unions, people's movements and other civil society organisations.

Coming down heavily on lack of policy of the government, Kamesh Salam said "India has 5 Ministries handling the bamboo, which clearly is indicative of our incompetence in dealing with the bamboo industry". Explaining the state of affairs of the bamboo in India and drawing comparisons with other countries Kamesh said "While China and Vietnam are leading the way in bamboo production and its exports, we are not even clear on whether to declare bamboo a tree or a grass".

While explaining the reason behind such condition of bamboo in India Kamesh said that "the real value chain has not been understood by the bureaucrats or by the people of India that's why the bamboo has remained where it is."

Advocating the importance of protection of natural resources by quoting example of her own village Ambika Das said "the mining is sucking the resources of the village and because of this the villagers are losing their livelihood day by day." This destruction of natural resources have a great impact on locally available medicinal plants/herbs in places where governments have failed to take efficient medical facilities and where it is prohibitively expensive to people in rural areas. She explained how their women's organisation is tackling the problems in their area by reviving the traditional medicines for increasing immunity of tribal communities. "We cannot give up on our forest. We are hugely dependent on the forest for our essentials. We have been mobilizing groups of women to protect the forest of our village, with support from Gram Saba," she added.

This Webinar series was started on May 15, and previous sessions witnessed eminent speakers like Thomas Isaac, Finance Minister of Kerala; economists Prof Prabhat Patnaik and Aseem Shrivastava, social and environmental activists like Aruna Roy, Medha Patkar, Vandana Shiva and Ashish Kothari and former civil servant M.G. Devasahayam, Elango Rangasamy, Jesuretinam, Sagari Ramdas and Com. Roma.

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