

Rose Sarita Shuman,
 Founder & CEO of Open
 Mind — Question Box and
 a local resident of Loni
 village (near Pune) in
 Maharashtra



HANDS UP FOR RURAL INDIA

Across India, organisations are coming up with innovative ways to empower India's rural population. SOWMYA RAJARAM finds a green button on a metal box that holds the answers to questions about life, and other such inspired initiatives that will save the pretty motif on your granny's saree, and help MPs in Delhi Skype with a village sarpanch.

sowmya.rajaram@mid-day.com

IT'S a scenario most Indian women are familiar with — lofts and storage space above cupboards and under beds crammed with suitcases that are stuffed with their mothers' silk sarees. These are duly aired, checked for mothballs and repacked once every year. This is also a scenario ripe with potential for the revival of traditional weaving tech-

niques, believes Harriet Vidyasagar, Consultant and Founder of Out of India, a web-based resource that helps people stay connected with things Indian. Women of India, one of its initiatives, seeks to empower Indian women by leveraging technology for development, and creating a web-based resource for them.

Saree Conversations is one of its forthcoming projects slated for a summer 2012 release. "A lot of NRI women in the US are sitting on a treasure trove of old sarees that they have collected (to wear) during weddings but find no opportunity to wear anymore. The younger generation doesn't wear them either, and these fabrics, styles and designs lie around, rotting, while traditional forms of weaving continue to go extinct in rural India," she says.

The idea of Saree Conversations, therefore, will be to hold a series of talks, lecture-demos and exhibitions across the US, with the goal to help preserve the handloom textile tradi-

tions of India and support a group of women weavers back here in Karnataka. "We want to generate income opportunities for weavers by engaging these women to show us what they have, educating them about its history, and taking the idea back to the weaver to see if the motif or design can be incorporated into a new, modern garment, like the stole, for the younger lot to wear."

Vidyasagar sees this as a way to generate employment for rural communities and prevent the loss of crafts.

She has company in working to put India's rural communities on the digital map and make them aware of the need to preserve their tradition and way of life. Organisations and entrepreneurs are now seeking ideas to empower India's villages by providing them with information, technology, and the awareness of practices that will keep them up to date with developments in the rest of the country.

CONTD ON PG 4

Hands up for

...Contd from page 03

Artisan goes back to school

It was something as simple as a college project that got Medhavi Gandhi, Director, Happy Hands Foundation, interested in the revival of traditional craft. "In 2008, I was working on a project for UNESCO and the Crafts Council. It led me to interact with artisans, many of whom were confining their craft to a hobby and taking on alternate means of making a livelihood. Their kids saw no future in the family tradition. In the hope of a better future, there were considering labourer jobs!" rues the Delhi-based entrepreneur. A bit of research revealed that no organisation was focussing on artisan education. How was a craftsman to learn new design techniques and improve his skill, innovate and keep up with the market? Gandhi decided to launch Happy Hands on what she calls a 'strong impulse'.

The impulse has turned into a movement over two and a half years later, with the project having touched remote villages in Orissa, Nagaland, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh in a bid to discover artisan families struggling to make ends meet, and provide them with the tools to revive their trade. "Some are art-based, others are craft-centric. We work on pottery, crochet, Cherial art, Pithora art, Warli, Madhubani, bamboo craft, Gond art, doll craft, lacquerware, Ikat, Dhokra, Banjara jewellery.... it's a network of over 500-odd artisan families," she says over the telephone on a Thursday afternoon, between meetings at her Hauz Khas village office.

Green Room, an artisan education workshop, gets artisans in touch with design institutes, students and brands to create cohesion, and learn from each other, ending in an exhibition. Project Dor, a women's empowerment programme, is intended to teach underprivileged women the basics of design so that they can create simple designs that can help them earn a livelihood. "For Dor, we have worked with sex workers from Andhra Pradesh, and have recently got in touch with a farm worker in Gujarat who was desperate to support her family."

One organisation ran a science and homework help hotline, and got a big response from kids. We even got questions like, 'why is the sky blue?', and 'who is the richest man in the world?' At the time, it was Bill Gates.

ROSE SARITA SHUMAN
Founder & CEO, Open Mind — Question Box, talking about the various reasons villagers use and love the Question Box



Panchayat members from Chamba in Tehri in Uttarakhand learn how to put their activities online during a workshop

Dial a question

Information is power, or so believes Rose Sarita Shuman, Founder and CEO, Open Mind — Question Box, a tool that empowers villagers through information, whose availability is not contingent on power or an Internet connection. A simple, durable metal box that works as a telephone intercom, is hung on the wall in village streets. Anyone seeking an answer to a question has to simply press the green button on the box. This connects them to a live question-and-answer hotline service, manned by operators who speak in the local language. They then search the Web for answers, and

relay it back to the seeker. It's an idea whose genius lies in its simplicity, and is transforming the lives of people in villages near Pune and Haryana.

Shuman, who has worked with development agencies for 12 years, recalls how it all began. "I got interested in mobile phones and how they overtook different parts of the world. The Internet is not sweeping the developed world for various reasons — low literacy rates in adults, language barriers, etc. Question Box was designed for people who are used to phones, placing a heavy emphasis on the comfort of the user."

While callers may not be equipped to handle the Internet or have access to it, they are likely to be familiar with making a phone call and talking to someone on the other end who speaks their language. After conducting successful trials in Noida, Open Mind took Question Box to Pune. For Rs 11,000, a Question Box is hand-built, installed and maintained for a six-month period.

Shuman's future plan includes focussing on partnering with community organisations and hospitals that wish to extend their presence in villages. "We realise that it is more sustainable and impactful to serve as

a support to social sector organisations, who run hotlines based on their area of expertise, rather than the Internet as a whole," she says.

Villagers have asked an assortment of questions, she shares. They use it for information on commodity and farm market prices that saves them from being swindled by middlemen. They use it to inquire about train timings, and even children have received help with their homework. "One organisation ran a science and homework help hotline, and got a big response from the kids," Shuman recalls. She laughs, "We even got questions like, 'what is the final score of the Test match?'