

***“I am driven to spread happiness. Art and creativity are in the blood of Kashmiris. What they lack is exposure. I am acting as that bridge”***

**DEEPA SONI, Artist and fashion designer**

hama—woven with the help of eyeless needles called *kani* or *tuzhi*. Woven on handlooms, Kani shawl-making is a long, laborious process that not only requires immense skill but also infinite patience, with a single stole taking six months to a year or two to make. The design script itself is an intricate code, a ‘taleem’ drawn on paper that is decipherable only by the weaver. Over the years, however, the lack of a skilled workforce, exploitative middlemen and competition from cheaper, machine-made products have

left the craftsmen disheartened.

Soni’s workshops, therefore, are serving as the last hope for the ‘last generation of craftspersons’. “The last generation is not passing their craft or skills to their offspring,” she says. “They want them to be doctors, engineers—anything but craftspersons.” The oldest family of Kani shawl weavers—the Sant Kabir Award-winning

Mirs of Natipora in Srinagar—is all praise for Soni. Majid Ahmad Mir, a fifth-generation artisan who has a master’s in economics and political science from Kashmir University and IGNOU, had long lamented the prospect of the craft of his forefathers disappearing into the pages of history. Soni’s interventions, he says, have given it a new lease of life. He recalls



**ONE-MAN ARMY**  
Sushanta Giri, on a boat in one of the many creeks that cut through the Sundarbans

DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

# Helping Hand on the Sundarbans

***Happiness delivery: Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha helps people in the Sundarbans’ remote coastal villages battle grim lives by taking care of their basic needs***

By ROMITA DATTA

the time when they were all wondering what to do with a discarded piece of Kani shawl. “She asked us to get five metres of crepe fabric and integrated the discarded piece into it to make a beautiful sari,” says Mir.

Likewise, her interventions in *pherans*—the long traditional gown Kashmiris wear in winter—have produced stunning results. She introduced the paisley motif at the back of the garment, and got craftsmen to weave traditional colours in unusual combinations so that the final products became statement pieces. “Not only has the volume of our business increased but our craft is breathing again,” says Mir, who was part of the six-member team from India that was invited to

Oxford University in 2019 to share their experiences in different fields.

Ask her what drives her passion, and Soni says it’s the feeling that she can perhaps play a part in bringing happiness into people’s lives. “I am driven to spread happiness,” she adds. “Art and creativity are in the blood of Kashmiris. What they lack is exposure. I am acting as that bridge.”

The same impulse permeates Soni’s paintings as well. A self-taught painter since childhood, she has done a series as a tribute to the ‘last generation of artisans in Kashmir’. At ‘The Autumn Art Exhibit’ in Srinagar in November 2022, not only was her own art on display, but all were encouraged to participate. One painting in

particular inspired much discussion. It showed a child in a cap on a papier mache-patterned prayer rug and rosary. “I used the papier mache background as a tribute to the artisans who are keeping the art alive against all odds,” says Soni. “My work evoked a lot of curiosity among younger people. I am getting a lot of inquiries.”

Alongside, Soni is trying to dispel the misconceptions and stereotypes around Kashmir through her works and promote ‘peace’ and ‘positivity’. “There is a certain fear outside Kashmir that the place is not safe,” she says. “But every bit of this place is inspiring. And that is the message I want to portray through my paintings.” It’s art with a heart. ■

**B**it by bit, Sushanta Giri’s mother wasted away, as the deadly liver ailment progressed. The family, who live in the remote Baikunthapur village in the Sundarbans in West Bengal, had no means to take her to the nearest sub-divisional hospital at Joynagar, 49 km away, for treatment. Giri’s eyes well up as he recalls those nights when his mother suffered acute pain, and how he frantically did the rounds of village quacks for some palliative. Giri’s mother passed away the day he wrote the final paper of his school-leaving board exam. Back from the funeral, the 18-year-old resolved to help improve the living condition of the people who live in these

coastal backwaters—the very margins both geographically and socio-economically—so that they could access the basic needs of life.

For thousands of underprivileged villagers in the Sundarbans, life is not just about coping with poverty and the absence of healthcare, education and roads and communication, it is also fraught by a constant struggle with nature—cyclones, flash floods, farmland laid waste by saline water from the sea, and land erosion.

Giri embarked on a comprehensive plan of community development and self-sufficiency, so that villagers could send their children to schools and share in the possibilities of a rapidly digitising world.

The beginning, in 1983, was humble: a primary school run by the local Ekta Youth Club. Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha

## HAPPINESS MANTRA

*“When I see a young boy who could not afford to go to school become a doctor, lawyer, teacher or working in an MNC, I tear up in utter joy.”*

SUSHANTA GIRI, Founder, BTS

(BTS) began as a school for the underprivileged forced to discontinue their education due to acute poverty. “We had 25 students to begin with. Our main aim was to give basic education to local children and tie up with good schools for higher education. Education was highly subsidised—a tuition fee of Rs 5-7, and a free meal with milk,” says Giri. Today, Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha is a reputed English-medium school till Class 8 with around 100 students. Earlier, teachers gave voluntary services; Giri is now able to pay them a monthly honorarium of Rs 2,000 because of aid and donors. BTS also has 500 former students—professionals like doctors, lawyers, teachers and nurses—who are doing their bit for their alma mater. “The primary school was a stepping stone for getting the FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) registration in 1996,” he says. But Giri has not stopped there. BTS’s activities in healthcare, community development and employment generation cover 52 villages of 14 gram panchayats in seven blocks of the Sundarbans. The total number of beneficiaries is estimated to be 55,000.

Though the region is a Unesco-declared world heritage

**BAIKUNTHAPUR  
TARUN SANGHA  
FOUNDED: 1983**

The Sundarbans,  
West Bengal



# Nurturing the Next Generation

site, 85 per cent of the Sundarbans' population falls in the BPL category. The rise in the maternal mortality ratio by at least 10 per cent in the coastal areas between 2005 and 2010 led Giri to start a community delivery centre in collaboration with the state's health and family welfare department under the NRHM. Over the years, it has served 922 rural women in the safe institutional delivery of newborns. It runs a 10-bed maternity clinic and holds medical camps periodically. To villagers with only around an acre of farm land, BTS has imparted professional aid so that their patches are transformed into highly productive areas yielding vegetables and lentils. "Villagers are growing paddy on slightly raised banks of their ponds, breeding fish. They get iron, vitamins and minerals from their own kitchen garden," adds Giri. BTS has also helped villagers sell their excess organic produce. The integrated farming approach has now increased farm earning three times from the meagre Rs 2,500 a month.

"I now earn Rs 40,000 a month from farm produce and Rs 12,000 a year from fish farming," says 36-year-old Soumen Samanta of Moipith-Nagenabad. "Even without ponds, BTS has taught us how to grow fish by digging drains around the field. Organic farming has taken off because of BTS—giving us seeds, other inputs and training free of cost." Rashmoni Kayal of Baikunthapur says, "Now men don't feel the need of leaving the villages. There's so much to do that no one sits idle." Rashmoni and other village women now complement their family income by doing tailoring and zaree work at a nearby Usha Silai School that is run with the BTS. Another BTS team, in collaboration with the Sneha Foundation, supplies low-cost sanitary napkins to students and housewives.

Besides all this, BTS has its own disaster mitigation task force for quick and on-the-spot response to natural calamities that are the bane of the Sundarbans, helping administration in prompt evacuation, rescue and distribution of relief. During the Amphan and Yaas cyclones, they saved many lives. Susanta Giri is a happy man today. His life's work has changed thousands of lives. ■

***Happiness delivery: Born out of the tragic infant deaths in Kota in 2019, Suposhit Maa Abhiyan provides specially curated nutrition kits and regular medical check-ups to underweight expectant mothers and ensures their children get a healthy start in life***

By **ROHIT PARIHAR**

