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ART-AND-CULTURE

For art curation in India, challenge lies not only in preserving culture, but also envisioning what must be preserved

What is the role of an art curator at a time when truth has become a major casualty?

Ankush Arora | April 13, 2021 11:01:08 IST



Image via Facebook/@KochiMuzirisBiennale

What is the role of an art curator at a time when truth has become a major casualty? The Kochi Biennale Foundation's curatorial workshop, involving young curators, artists and architecture students, is an interesting lead-in to explore the role of an art curator as cultures and histories are being eroded and manipulated. Led by the Mumbai-based curator Nancy Adajania, the online workshop (31 March-25 April) is titled 'Once Upon a Cultural Famine: A Curatorial Thought Experiment,' and an excerpt from its concept note reads:

"If there were a cultural famine, what would we secure for the future? It could be an artefact that is classical or demotic, modern or contemporary. It could be an endangered language, a story or a song, a recipe, a quilt, an extinct seed variety, a technical manual or the Constitution."

What stands out in the concept note is the workshop's intent on focusing on the participants' 'voice' as curators, other than the fact that it alludes to a widespread crisis where dissent and intolerance towards independence of thought; and the fabrication of facts and erasure of history, etc., have left us in a state of perpetual conflict. In such a

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Scenario, a high degree of voice from the practitioners of arts appears to be an imperative, especially when — as the workshop's open call reads — culture needs preservation, in the event of a hypothetical (or anticipated?) cultural famine. That this excerpt ends with the "Constitution" as one of the aspects of culture that needs to be saved for the future suggests the curator's intervention in interpreting our day-to-day — and by no means are they mundane — conflicts and turbulences is necessary.

In the book *The Curator's Handbook*, Adrian George, the Director of Exhibitions and Museum Services at ArtScience Museum, Singapore, looks at the role of a curator as broad, evolving and all-encompassing, who "challenges perceptions", investigates what "future culture" would look like, and brings social engagement into the curatorial practice. Other than pointing out the standard job responsibilities of exhibition-making and managing collections, George highlights the interpretive role of a curator, especially in making complex ideas accessible to a wider audience. The curator, being the subject specialist, is also seen as an umbrella role of a critic, journalist and writer — all combined into one.



Image via Facebook/@KochiMuzirisBiennale

In India, where freedom of expression has become a disturbingly polarising topic, art curation based on a strong sense of voice, particularly with a journalistic/critical bent, can be a tightrope walk. However, there have been exhibitions in the recent past, such as the India Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2019), that can be interpreted as being critical of governance, but in an indirect way. Under the curatorial theme of 'Our Time for a Future Caring,' and with Gandhi's legacy and ideals as its reference point, the exhibition's modern and contemporary artworks were presented as "an opportunity for a renewed search and investigation into received notions of agency, action, and freedom."

But exhibitions of such a wide scale and nuanced curatorial approach are few and far between given the series of challenges that do not prioritise the nurturing of art curation in India. These include the lack of opportunities for curators to take up full-time roles at museums or galleries. State support, including budgetary allocation, for the growth and promotion of art and culture has often been found to be increasingly deficient, and where the representation of contemporary art is left in the hands of patrons, philanthropists and art connoisseurs.

In terms of the training programmes to become a curator, India offers many options — from degree courses and diplomas to the more popular programmes at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, for example, and the shorter duration programmes offered by Mumbai's Bhau Daji Lad Museum, and New Delhi-based Khoj International Artists' Association. However, there is a need for the art market to create

Listen to the latest songs, buy vinyls, learn about art into professional experience that can be the basis of a substantial career path as a curator. Because the stakes of raising one's voice are much higher now, the curator's role is paramount, and who is able to call out what is ignored, misread, or erased in our histories and contemporary narratives (as seen in a recent topical exhibition, 'Erasure,' at Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi).

Having said that, one refreshing aspect of art curation has been conversations involving curators through platforms such as the Experimenter Curators' Hub, which had its 10th edition last year, and the second edition of the Asian Curatorial Forum, a collaboration between the New Delhi-based Prameya Art Foundation (founded by Shrine Empire gallery) and the National Culture and Arts Foundation, Taiwan. Such models, whereby commercial galleries look beyond their original mandate to create independent spaces for dialogue and critique on/for the arts, are redeeming as we witness the perpetuation of a monolithic polity.

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Brazilian dancer David Motta, who left Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet two months ago due to the war in #Ukraine, stars in the Swan Lake ballet at Rio de Janeiro's Municipal Theatre before joining the Staatsballett in Berlin.

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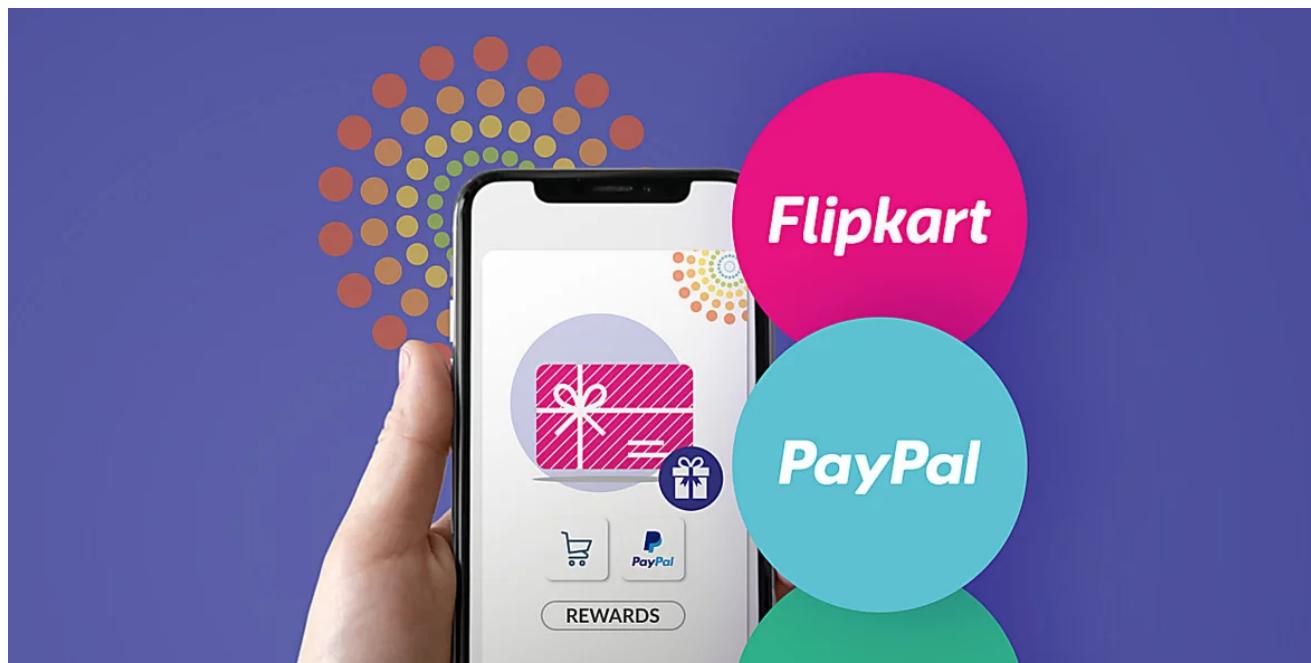


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Mala Mahesh's book Padma addresses the taboo surrounding infertility

In conversation with author Mala Mahesh on her book 'Padma' which deals with the struggles women go through because of infertility.

Lachmi Deb Roy | May 23, 2022 08:41:28 IST

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Society for ages has ingrained in our minds that childbirth fulfills a woman's fundamental duty and that being a mother is a sacred and ultimate duty of a woman. Unable to meet such expectations because of physiological reasons women are often named names and mistreated. We may think that such ultra conservative behaviour are acts of the past and that our current times are free of such judgment but there are still women who suffer every day for an expectation that attaches meaning to their existence not only at the hands of the society but also by her own mind. An issue like this can tarnish a woman's self-worth. Mala, in this book, shows us the relevancy of this subject by comparing two different women from two different time periods.

Edited excerpts from the interview:

Why is there a taboo around infertility?

The responsibility of bringing the next generation into existence lies largely with the women and people tend to think that childbirth comes naturally to a woman. When that doesn't happen as easily as perceived, then the pressures and expectations on her increase. There's a sense of shame, like a feeling that you are not good enough because you can't do what comes easily to your family and friends. Another factor is that the problem could lie with the woman or man or maybe both. Even in today's day and age, many men don't like to accept that fact and refuse to even get themselves evaluated. Hence, the couple and mostly the woman, don't reach out for help, for fear of being judged by her friends, family and society.

Were there any real-life experiences that influenced you to write the book?

No, I don't have real-life experience on this matter, though I heard stories from my grandmother about one of my ancestors, who was unable to have a child. This lady suffered a lot of injustice and unnecessary barbs just for this reason. She carried the pain and burden of her infertility for many years, till her death. I felt it was unfair to blame her for something she couldn't control. Since they lived in a large joint family during those times. I imagined it must have been difficult for her to watch the other daughters and daughters-in-law being pampered and showered with love when they conceived. This poor woman probably felt left out in her own home and her family's insensitivity would have been so hard to cope with. I could empathize with her situation and was an inspiration to write this book.

The book is based in Kerala. Do you have any memories about that place that influenced you to write the book?

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I was born and brought up in Mumbai but I am a Kerala Iyer. We're a community of Tamil brahmins who moved to Kerala long ago. My grandparents and my father lived in Kerala before shifting to Mumbai. They have told me stories about their lives in the villages, which was a major influence in writing a story based out of Kerala.

Who are these two women? Are they someone real?

This is a work of fiction inspired by real-life incidents and stories heard over a period of time. I realised that the issues relating to infertility are as pertinent now as it was before. So, to make the book relevant to the present times, I created Naina's character who also has trouble conceiving. In the story, a misogynistic remark by a relative about infertility leads to a series of events, which turns Naina's life topsy-turvy. Recently my friend narrated an incident about one of her employee's struggles with infertility. I found it unnerving that the details of the insensitive aunt's remarks, mentioned in my novel, matched word to word with this real-life incident.

Why is the issue of infertility still so sensitive and why do people shy away from any kind of positive discussion around it?

A lot of people feel awkward to openly talk about sex, their body and problems associated with it to an outsider. It's unlike discussing other health problems like diabetes or high blood pressure. It would help if there's more awareness, understanding, and encouragement in the community for more open discussions on this issue. Creation of more support groups could help people share their problems with others.

How can infertility affect both urban and rural women and how even with our modernization the scene has not changed much even in an urban setup?

Infertility issues maybe higher in urban women than in rural areas but the challenges to address them may be different. In rural places, the access to clinics offering assisted reproductive technology are fewer. The cost of these procedures can also be prohibitive for lower income groups, so more effort would be needed to inform the couple about the facilities available, insurance coverage and their premiums.

Perhaps lack of understanding, myths surrounding infertility, and the resultant loneliness and pain of those suffering are about the same in the rural and urban population. People do not realise difficulties surrounding childbirth are rather common and even lesser numbers go for testing. If they do get tested, many of them could get treated with simpler treatments. Not all of them may need these procedures. The good news is that the changes may be slow but it's happening. There are more IVF centers opening in rural areas too and steps are being taken to create awareness amongst the public about this issue.

How does this whole taboo around infertility affect the victim mentally?

It can cause anxiety and isolation, which can lead to depression in the person. They often blame themselves, even though they know the problem is out of their control. There's already a pre-existing taboo for mental health problems. So, seeking help for the psychological effects of infertility would add another layer of challenge for people facing this issue.

Does your book offer any solution?

I hope my book creates a level of empathy towards this issue. It's not as if the public are heartless or uncaring but sometimes we all get involved in our own world and have no time

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or headspace to look into someone else's problems. I hope my story would encourage more discussions in the public to allow people to share their pain and experiences and provide a path for others to follow. While it's important for the community to be sensitive and understanding, it does take time. The other option would be to look into yourself truthfully and see what you really want in life? Examine your motives and then communicate them to your family, friends or therapist. It would help the most when we ourselves find a solution to our problems. I would like to quote two lines from my book: "Truth and courage are interlinked. Whenever your courage fails, staying on the path of truth will give you the guts to stick to your convictions."

There are women who don't want to have a kid by choice and yet they have to go through a lot of humiliation and answering questions. Why is it that your book didn't touch upon that issue?

Just a few days ago, I read an article about a couple who were suing their son and daughter-in-law because the couple didn't have children for six years since they were married. I found it both comical and sad that the parents demanded a sum of rupees five crores if the couple don't have a child within a year. My book is a parallel about two women across different time periods facing the issues that are particular to their time. But both women want children for their own reasons. So, I felt touching on areas where couples are childless out of choice, would deviate the focus from the main plot and slow down the pace of fiction.

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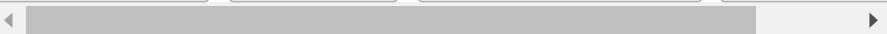
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Translator Daisy Rockwell on 'Tomb of Sand', first Hindi book to reach International Booker shortlist

The funny, engaging and deeply original novel tells the tale of an 80-year-old woman somewhere in northern India who has slipped into deep depression after the death of her husband. Resigned from the world she turns to the wall and almost becomes a part of it, unspeaking, unmoving and unresponsive even to her dearest grandson

Manish Sain | May 22, 2022 17:19:20 IST

Firstpost.

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Tomb of Sand is the first Hindi book to be shortlisted for the International Booker Prize.

In a world ruled by mundanity, it takes courage and a sense of unadulterated adventure to break the system, which is no more relevant or even exciting, that has been set for decades, if not centuries.

Geetanjali Shree's 2019 Hindi novel *Ret Samadhi* is such a benchmark-shattering, genre-defying work that has reached the [shortlist for this year's International Booker Prize](#) in the form of its English translation, *Tomb of Sand*.

It is an unusual book from start to finish. The sentences, its literary form, narrative, its prose, all of it is categorically unusual. It takes some 100 pages to really dig into the pace of the novel and even then it takes one to dig one's heels to stay rooted in place.

The book, translated by Daisy Rockwell, cannot be read. It has to be imbibed, to be lived. It demands its reader to be in the room that is silent as a graveyard, except for the light snoring of a bundle in the bed. The book demands its reader to look through the window that opens to a lush garden full of football-sized chrysanthemums. The book demands its reader to walk, or hobble, with the protagonist who has decided to rise after months of facing a wall.

When first published in 2019 in Hindi, the book took critics and readers by surprise for its experimental style of storytelling. As difficult as it could have been, Rockwell has kept the translation true to the original literature. She has kept the atypical prose, the unrestrained wordplay, and the characters of the characters therein haven't been lost in translation.

Translating the novel into an International Booker-shortlisted book was no mean task for Rockwell, who admitted it to be challenging.

"Experimental writing is very difficult to translate, and *Ret Samadhi* was no exception to that rule. The experimentation had many facets that were peculiar to Hindi and it was a challenge to convey that, but ultimately if the translator is in tune with the author's voice, everything works out in the end," she told Firstpost.

The book, which can be "quite difficult" for casual readers and even more difficult, in either language, for readers "with inflexible notions of what a novel should be and how a story should be told".

"*Ret Samadhi/Tomb of Sand* seeks to break down those norms which can make it challenging for some."

The funny, engaging and deeply original novel tells the tale of an 80-year-old woman somewhere in northern India who has slipped into deep depression after the death of her husband. Resigned from the world she turns to the wall and almost becomes a part of it, unspeaking, unmoving and unresponsive even to her dearest grandson.

And, then one day she gets up, unbeknownst to all in the house, and disappears into the early morning air. The turn of events leads to mass hysteria in the household as people start looking for the grandmother in the most unusual of places, under the newspaper, or the quilt and so on.

Throwing caution and convention to the wind, Ma insists on travelling to Pakistan, befriends a transgender person, reevaluates what it means to be a mother, a daughter, a woman, and a feminist.

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Based on a tragic premise, the story however has a playful tone and exuberant wordplay.

“At the same time, it is an urgent and timely protest against the destructive impact on borders and boundaries, whether between religions, countries, or gender,” reads the book cover.

With each woman character having authority over her decision, her choices and opinions make it a feminist novel at its heart. If for Beti, it is about leading her life in her own way, it is different for Ma. And entirely different for Bahu. The story’s strongest feminist character is a transgender person named Rosie.

“The point of feminism being that each woman makes her own choices and governs her own world...Throughout Tomb of Sand, she practices and preaches a philosophy of self-reliance, self-determination and self-actualization for both herself and for Ma and Beti,” Roswell said.

This isn’t the first time that Rosewell has translated a Hindi book into English since getting a PhD in South Asian literature from the University of Chicago in 1998.

She has translated a number of books since then, starting from 2013, including three by Hindi author Upendranath Ashk, apart from translating Bhisham Sahni’s timeless work *Tamas*, *The Women’s Courtyard* and *A Promised Land* by Khadija Mastur.

She also translated Krishna Sobti’s *A Gujarat Here, A Gujarat There*, and *Fifty-Five Pillars, Red Walls* by Usha Priyamwada.

Some more books by Krishna Sobti and Usha Priyamwada are in the pipeline for the translator along with an Urdu novel called *Nagari Nagari Phira Musafir* by Nisar Aziz Butt.

Even though she’s passionate about translating iconic Hindi works by some of the legendary authors, she does not see it as a career option.

“I don’t really consider it a career, since very few people can live off the earnings of literary translation. Literary translation is a labor of love for most translators. It is different, of course, for some language pairings, but not in India.” she said.

The aches of a translator don’t end with an improper financial situation, it continues to add up with the lack of recognition that they receive for the work.

Even though translators and authors share a tight bond, it is “an unfortunate tradition” that there is a significant gap in recognition of the two.

“I think in eras past, translators were held in great esteem, but for whatever reason, over the past century, it has become fashionable to erase them, both literally from the covers of the books, and also from reviews, etc. Because the translators’ names are not on the covers of the books, readers are not aware of specific translators and do not buy books on the basis of who translated them,” she said.

Rockwell insisted that if it becomes a norm to have translators’ names on the book covers, it would help readers find their favourite translators.

“...you will find that you have favorite translators, and that they have oeuvres, just like authors do. Think of your favorite translators as curators--if they picked out a project, it is likely to be well done; the authors will change and the writing styles will be different, but the execution will be flawless,” she said.

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Amidst criticism against choice of translator, Dutch poet refuses to work on Amanda Gorman's poem

The publisher said earlier this week that Rijneveld was the translator it had dreamed of and said that “Amanda Gorman herself was also immediately enthusiastic about the choice for the young poet.”

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British author Lucy Hughes-Hallett, who is chairing the panel of judges, said the list showed that some of the most exciting new writing is going on "in the borderlands" between fiction and other genres, such as history and memoir.

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For deaf and mute Mohammad Yousuf Muran in Kashmir, the dying art of woodcraft remains his voice

Despite being a specially-abled person in Jammu And Kashmir, artisan Mohammad Yousuf has not been selected for any state or national award to encourage his unmatched wood carving artwork

Mudasir Rawloo and Sajad Hameed | May 21, 2022 14:45:16 IST

The Firstpost logo, which consists of the word "Firstpost" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letter "i" is red, while the rest of the letters are black.

Mohammad Yousuf Muran busy with his woodwork. Image courtesy Mudasir Rawloo

The deaf and mute artist from Kashmir brings deadwood to life.

Deprived of the power of speech and hearing right from birth, 55-year-old Mohammad Yousuf Muran remains busy from dawn to dusk churning out wood-carved masterpieces.

Muran hails from Eidgah Narwara in Downtown Srinagar. Born deaf and dumb, this incapacitated Kashmiri has learned the art of wood carving from his elder brother, who was also deaf and mute but a master in wood carving. Unfortunately, he passed away a few years back.

The younger one has been at it since the age of four, carrying forward the traditional work of his forefathers with his excellent talent and expertise.

For Muran, deadwood meets excellence through his superlative art. The replica of the famous Jamia Masjid in Srinagar that he took three months to complete is a reflection of his brilliance. This art piece has won him applause and appreciation from across the world.

Magnificent creations like George of England on a horse, a statue of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussain, Mahatma Gandhi, the Hazratbal Shrine, Kashmiri samovar, the fire pot kangri, shepherd, wildlife and peace monument sculptured on the opening of Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road link showing a Pakistani and Kashmiri hugging each other are all



Woodcraft is a dying art in Kashmir and needs immediate government intervention for survival. Image courtesy Mudasir Rawloo

"This craft of wood carving is an ancestral business that has been continuing now for about 200 years. We have established a factory in the downtown area of Srinagar where we prepare all these items. We have a store of our own too, on the Lethpora highway named Paradise Woodhouse. As far as my analysis is considered, I think this craft of wood carving has uplifted the handicrafts sector in Kashmir. Our craft items were sold in West Asia through the Silk Route by our ancestors. The places included Iran and Pakistan. And before the partition, we had a factory in Karachi. So that too was a connecting link between Kashmir and the Middle East. Our business was thriving but everything had a downfall. Wood carving is a dying craft now. Unlike pashmina craft, the carpet making and wood carving are dying arts," said his nephew Mudasir Muran, who acts as his interpreter and sign language teacher.

"Earlier my father used to make all these items and he was a legendary artist but unfortunately he passed away a few years back and now my uncle, Mohammed Yusuf, is engaged with this art. However, other people too make all these items but not with such a level of perfection as my uncle possesses. If you put any picture or monument in front of Muran, he will create the same on dead wood. one will find it difficult to believe or differentiate between the picture or the woodwork," he said.

"I think the role of government is very vital here. We don't see them helping people with potential and expertise. Government should do something about the upliftment of this sector. We also know that this sector of handicrafts has been monopolized by a few big traders of whom we are aware. The artists should be rewarded for their craft. I can challenge that there is no better craftsman other than my uncle in the whole valley. Just because he is deaf and dumb, he is being ignored. Otherwise, he should be rewarded with the highest award. Besides all this, I am trying very hard to keep this art form from dying. I have set up one of the best stores in Kashmir without any help from the government which has been quite difficult. I even met the high officials and laid down my ideas in front of them. But nothing makes any difference," rued Mudasir.

Apart from all this, the prevailing political and security situation helped little to make the business flourish.]

"I belong to one of the oldest parts of Kashmir i.e. Downtown Srinagar, I call it the "Crown of Kashmir" as they say there are only "Stone Pelters" but that's not true. It has produced the

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thing is we are being exploited. And taken for granted," he said.

"When people have less knowledge about anything they became judgmental. People start thinking our items are overpriced. Even if we look at a normal labourer these days, they cost too much per working day, so how can an artist's work be called overpriced. Our craftwork is benefiting so many people by providing jobs. I also met with the higher authorities. I had even put forward the idea of renovating the airport by starting up stores related to woodwork, carpets, crewelwork, pashmina shawls, paper-mache, and other crafts prevalent in Kashmir. This will let everyone know about the artistic work done in Kashmir because tourists visit Kashmir via the airport and automatically it will uplift the handicraft sector," said Mudasir.

There is no dearth of ideas but necessary support from the government is perhaps missing. The sector has a big potential for employment generation but barring a selected few hardly anyone has received help and guidance from the government.



Handicraft sector in Kashmir has scope to generate employment. Image courtesy Mudasir Rawloo

"Everywhere we can see the slogans of "Naya Kashmir" but this doesn't work when it is confined to social media. It should be done practically too. As an entrepreneur, I started my own thing without any help from anyone, therefore being the government, they should do wonders. Shouldn't they?" asked Mudasir.

Despite being a specially-abled person in Jammu And Kashmir, Mudasir's uncle Mohammad Yousuf has not been selected for any state or national award to encourage his unmatched wood carving artwork.

"My uncle's beautiful wood carved products can be sold for millions in the international market but the regret is that the government has not given him any recognition. We also approached the Department of Handicrafts many times for conferring state awards and

Listen to the latest song; only and so far nothing has been done so far," said Mudasir.

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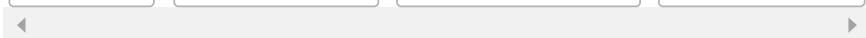
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