

Panika fabric for Mumbai

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An interview with Shanav Mehta, a

student from Mumbai, who, visiting rural weaving plants run by the Panika Tribe residing close to Katni, customized the Tribe's hand-woven products (shoe bags and covers for sunglasses) with modern-art prints and promoted them at several Mumbai exhibitions. Inspired by his grandfather who is a member and supporter of Ekta Parishad, Shanav Mehta, a student from Mumbai, visited rural weaving plants run by the Panika Tribe close to Katni. By customizing the Tribe's hand-woven products with a modern-art print and by promoting the products at several exhibitions, he managed to link the traditional handicraft with the market for shoe bags and sunglass covers in metropolitan Mumbai. **Mr. Shanav, it is touching to read your very personal description of your visit to the village. I understood that you wanted to link the rural products with the urban market in Mumbai so that the people in the Panika Tribe would receive the demand and the appreciation they deserve. Maybe you can describe your initial thoughts when you launched the project.**

I decided that the only way to introduce this cloth to a metropolitan market was to allow it to undergo a process of customization to the urban world. I decided to focus on using the cloth to produce simple products that the common man in a city could integrate into his daily life (e.g. sun glasses and shoe bags). A few weeks into the research phase, I tumbled upon some caricatures that I had created in middle school and decided to incorporate it onto these simple products that I had developed, and hence spawned the Panika Project.

How did you proceed with your idea? How much effort did you have to put into your idea to get the project running?

I spent three months combing the streets of Mumbai city looking for printers and tailors who could help me make this vision a reality. Finally, after months of searching, I found a group of tailors and printers who could help me create these products as I had envisioned them. Since I am a boarder who spends five out of seven days a week on campus, I had to spend late nights to ensure that although our communication was limited to telephone conversations, the products would be crafted perfectly. Soon the screen prints were ready and the products went into mass production. Over forty-five meters of the cloth were purchased from the village – a bulk order that the village had not received in decades. Fortunately, multiple local organizations pledged support to the cause and I was given the

opportunity to hold a stall and promote these products at various exhibitions.

You're mentioning the exhibitions. How important were they to attract costumers and what was you personal experience during the display?

The exhibition ran for over twelve hours, and when fatigue threatened to take over all that kept me going was that image of the village and the people who deserved better. Surprisingly – despite its seeming simplicity – the stall received a great response, with the shoe bags and sunglass covers getting sold out in less than five hours. A number of customers placed bulk orders on the shoe bags, and 'The Panika Project' has been in touch with a number of event organizers ever since. However, the most compelling fact of all was that a majority of the customers purchased the products not solely because of the cause, but because they found both the cloth and the idea appealing. It was satisfying to know that I had managed to bring their product to the urban market not as a charity venture but as a product that was demanded by customers for its quality.

What are your future plans with the Panika Project?

I have been given the opportunity to participate in a number of exhibitions and hopefully by the end of the entire venture, the people of the Panika tribe will not only have sold a large amount of cloth and inherited the profits from this project, but also will have gained a demand in the urban market for their cloth. Over the next decade or so, I hope that the Panika tribe will evolve into a self-sustaining people and this small venture will have played a part – however small – in making their dream a reality.

The Panika Tribe

The Panika tribe is a small community that resides in rural Madhya Pradesh (India) in a number of villages in the Katni region. Their sole means of self-sustenance is the cloth that they weave by hand: an amalgamation of cotton and silk. The stars hung suspended in the night sky forming an oasis of beauty in a desert where the ground was not strung by sand but skyscrapers. The year was 2012, and for the past sixteen years of my life I had been exposed to nothing but the melancholic bustling of cars and the daunting lights sky-bound buildings. So when I got out of the small train compartment and set foot on the Katni platform, it seemed as though my mind required more of an adjustment than did my eyes. My grandfather stepped onto the platform beside me, heaving from the three-step climb off the train, yet contently smiling at the view of damp mud that graced the ground below us. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, almost taking a mental image of the moment. I, however, couldn't seem to understand the appeal of a small village and a cluster of hey-strung houses, at least not then. Later that evening we trekked to the small house of the village leader for a small supper. His wife stepped out of the small clay structure where she cooked the daily meals - wearing no more than a simple saree and a smile on her face – and served us a simple Indian meal. Despite the fact that the only stars that graced that house were those in the night sky, the food was more satisfying than any dish I could've hoped to be served at a five-star restaurant in the metropolitan city. As I gazed out of a small hole in the roof at the sky, the thousands of stars above the house seemed almost fitting; I could now see why my grandfather wanted to soak in every moment of it.

The next day we visited the weaving plants; the residents of the village had no other means of sustenance than the returns on the cloth that they hand-wove. I was seemingly intrigued by this craft, for in all its complexity these individuals – most of whom had not even had an education past the fifth grade – made it look as simple as eating a meal – a simple reflex. I sat myself down next to one of the weavers and began questioning him on all the intricacies of this delicate process, absorbing all that fill my intellectual appetite.

But as I spoke to him, he told me that the demand for these products had been diminishing for the past decade, and that many villagers had been evicted from their homes with nowhere to go. And as his hands glided slowly over the wheel, I heard the sound of a child's laughter edging towards us and his five year-old son made his way towards us. He asked his father what was going to be made for dinner, and with a lump in his throat the man said that he'd let him know once he got home.

As his child walked away, a tear rolled down his cheek and landed on the soft amalgamation of silk and cotton, hand-woven to perfection. I couldn't see why people wouldn't buy these products; it had to be because they didn't know of their existence. 'I don't even know whether I will be able to put the next meal on the table this evening', he stuttered softly in Hindi, 'But this piece of cloth is for you; I saw how much you liked it. I just hope others see it the same way some day'.

(Excerpt from the book "The Panika Project", written by Shanav Mehta) First Published on [Ekta Parishad website](#) Original Title: The Panika Project: Rural products aligned with urban markets