

# The Handmade Symposium

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Launched by Prasanna, the theatre director and social activist, and his colleagues in the handloom sector in early 2014, the Handloom Satyagraha has come to acquire greater moral density and resolve. A movement that sought to secure the autonomy and welfare of handloom weavers threatened by the industrial textile lobby has come to take on newer concerns and gain in political clarity. The Handmade Symposium held in the city over the weekend made these clear.

A fellow traveller of the handloom satyagraha, as this column has clarified on past occasions, I eagerly sat through the Handmade Symposium last Saturday.

Asking that we “pay better attention to the handmade,” and offer “better value to the handmade product,” Prasanna’s inaugural remarks emphasized that “the hand-making system of production” would “be the enterprise of the future” and offer “a better economic alternative to the neoliberal economy”: “We can, we are sure, find solutions to the various problems facing humanity today, namely, the crisis of environment, the crisis of inequality, the crisis of morality and the crisis of the self, i.e. alienation of the individual from the society, all through this shift in the production system.”

Why is there a hesitation to think of alternatives to the present economic system? Prasanna saw two chief reasons behind it: first, the fear about wanting to return to a pre-modern era; and, second, the fear that an economic slowdown might have catastrophic consequences.

Both of these fears, Prasanna argued, were unfounded. It isn’t a question of turning back time, but one of retaining the best of what modern civilization has thought and a setting aside of the worst it has to offer, that is, the contemporary market system. “Modern ideas of equity and sustainability,” he clarified, ought to be used “to deconstruct the material world.” Further, he noted, the slowdown had already started with the swift depletion of natural resources and fossil fuels in the world. And, the demand was not for a sudden overturning of the current system but for “a planned, self-motivated and civilized way” of rebuilding it. The shift towards lesser and lesser dependence on machine technology, Prasanna feels, had a spiritual side. Working with the hands, he eloquently affirmed, “will get us our dear God back.” The religious fundamentalists view wealth as “real” and God as “a mental construct,” whereas for the handmade activists, both are “made by the hand.” In embracing this idea of God and wealth, the saints of the past who didn’t see work and the pursuit of God as separate offer a guiding vision.

The symposium participants extended support to this founding vision in distinct ways. Saying acting was handmade work, Irrfan Khan, the actor, wished for better economic fates for the others who worked with their hands in India. Uzamma, the handloom activist, reminded everyone that the industrial economy which was put in place through “violence and exploitation” needed to be dismantled and rebuilt.

Pointing to how machine production might spoil the beauty of the hand-made product, MS Sathyu, the film and theatre director, offered the analogy of how artificial means of amplifying sound like the mic spoiled the beauty of live music performance. The singer, MD Pallavi’s evocative rendering of the weaver-saint, Kabir’s bhajan, “Jhini Chadariya (Subtle is the Weave),” held the discussion from becoming discursive. At the symposium, the delegates adopted a few resolutions “on behalf of all the peasants, weavers, crafts-people, forest-dwellers, fisher-folk, animal-herders and such other hand-working communities”:

1. The GST council should exempt all handmade products from tax.

2. The central and state governments in India should strive to find better prices for the handmade products.

3. Since the livelihood of 60% of Indians still depends on making products with their own hands, a separate ministry for the handmade sector ought to be formed with

budgetary allocations proportionate to the number of people in that sector.

4. The government and other concerned agencies should define the handmade product to mean a good produced through a process where at least two thirds consists of the hand process and not more than one third the machine process.

The struggle for the handmade is a quiet, earnest presence in our midst. The obstacles seem immense and very many. And, it isn’t clear at all how precisely they will be overcome. It is as if the concrete steps will suggest themselves once the abstract point about reducing the machine dependence of manufacturing becomes gets across. And, why not? Why must the moral imagination make way for realpolitik considerations? The struggle for the handmade might even help find a way of renewing political work at a time when politics all over seems dangerously polarized and in a state of cynicism and fatigue.

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