

Save Majuli

Ziv Kessel, The Calcalist Magazine, 20.2.2014 - Translated by Ben Vorspan

Two young Israeli women devote their lives to improving the lives of tribal community members on a far-away Island in India that is quickly eroding into the Brahmaputra River. They are enabling tribal women to sustain themselves on traditional weaving, mobilizing them by providing bicycles and even providing the opportunity to leave their villages for the first time in their lives. As for the men, they are teaching them organic farming, how to use computers and empowering them with self-confidence. This project is both so highly modest and innately revolutionary, that it is developing a new, impressive model that sheds light onto how to strengthen vulnerable populations.

Dipa Payun was born in a small village on the Indian Island of Majuli, 38 years ago. As an un-married woman, her status amongst members of the *Mising* tribe was entirely inferior. She still lives in her brother's home, and over the years has made a sparse living on small sewing projects for her neighbors. Alongside her occupation, like all the women in her tribe, she wove traditional scarves, cloths and bags. Nearly two years ago, Payun joined Rengam, a women's weaving cooperative established on the Island, and quickly was chosen to be the cooperative's secretary. The task empowered her, and over time, she developed managerial skills. She ultimately established a weaving center in her home that held four looms and enabled four weavers to work together, significantly increasing the speed of their production.



Gili Navon (Center) and Shaked Avizedek (3rd from left) with the women of the Women's Weaving Cooperative, members of the *Mising* tribe on Majuli Island. The cooperative comprises of more than 80 weavers, including one man.

Her success did not escape the eyes of village leaders, and they invited Payun to join their local council. She quickly established herself as a dominant figure not only in the council, but in the village at large, and became a central figure in guiding women in weaving from other villages on the Island. All of this occurred within two years.

This revolution, in the life of one woman on the other side of the planet, can be attributed to Gili Navon (30) from Kokhav Yair and Shaked Avizedek (28) from Giv'at Shmuel. In actuality, their work extends beyond this one story. Navon and Avizedek run, on the Island of Majuli, a unique community empowerment project, that provides alternative livelihoods opportunities in times when local agriculture is collapsing, mainly enabling tribal women to make a living from their own traditional weaving, societal independence, a community support network, and basic economic tools.



Flooding in Majuli. Over half of the island's land has been lost within 100 years.

The project, which was born within the framework of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's [Glocal Community Development Program](#), already has established no small amount of changes in the daily lives of this impoverished Island, all thanks to a very minimal donation. This month Navon and Avizedek completed a fundraising campaign on the website Headstart, during which they managed to raise no less than 112,000 shekels to expand the project. Indeed, the method they used to fundraise proves the extent to which it is possible to strengthen vulnerable communities. One does not always need large sums of money, but rather, should focus on establishing trust with the target community and understanding their strengths and assets, while thinking creatively, and of course, coming with tremendous humility. Perhaps one needs to think as far as India in order to enable such revolutions here in Israel.

The island is sinking, the land is eroding and livelihoods are being lost

Majuli is one of the largest river Islands in the world (however, during the dry season, it looks more like a bay). Majuli is roughly 450 square kilometers, and is located in the Brahmaputra River in the northeastern state of Assam, between Burma, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The growth rate in Assam is among the lowest in India, and the situation in Majuli is particularly dismal. The near 160,000 inhabitants of the Island are primarily from the *Mising* tribe, and subsist mainly on agriculture and fishing. However, in the last few decades the flow of the mighty river surrounding the island has changed, the floods are intensifying and the island has lost more than half of its land. To draw a comparison, just 120 years ago, the Island was over 1,150 square kilometers in size. This can be attributed to dams that were built upriver as well as glacial thawing. According to experts, the Island could disappear entirely within 20 years.



Weaver. The work that women have done for years in their private homes has become organized and more communal in nature.

“The Island is simply disappearing rapidly and a large number of the locals with whom we work have lost their land and were forced to relocate to the center of the island. 9,000 families have been displaced,” says Avizedek. “These were people who, while not wealthy, had at least the financial security in the land they owned. The land loss, disappearance of a traditional lifestyle, and damaged livelihoods makes it increasingly difficult for them on the island, and as a tribe at the bottom of the Caste System, even when they leave the Island, they face great difficulties integrating into Indian society.

Navon was first exposed to these conditions when she arrived in Majuli for the first time in 2007, while looking for off the beaten track locations to travel while in India. “It was a fascinating tribal area, completely different from anything I had seen in India beforehand,” she says. “I would join the women working in the jungle and fields and slowly became involved, feeling a part of the daily life here. I had a powerful experience

in Majuli and realized that it was important to me to devote myself to it in the future. This is one of the primary reasons I chose to join Glocal, so that I could find a structure within which to work in Majuli.”



Island resident learning how to ride a bike, replacing what used to be an hour-long walk to the next village

When she returned to Israel, Navon began studying Anthropology and Indian Studies at the Hebrew University where she studied Hindi, Sanskrit, and later, Assamese. Navon had a clear objective: to return to Majuli for research purposes. Just as she was finishing her undergraduate degree, the Glocal M.A. program in international community development opened. The program, supported mainly by the Pears Foundation, the Vital Foundation and the Duran Foundation, trains professionals, both Israelis and Internationals, to work in community development by giving tools to work with local communities around the world. Navon joined the first cohort of the program, where she met Avizedek. In the summer of 2011, as a part of her practical component of the program, a four month internship, Navon went to work with a local organization in Majuli, establishing a raw-materials bank and bicycle bank, as well as working with local women to market their weaving products. Avizedek traveled to the Dominican Republic to work in agriculture, training residents sustainable farming techniques.

They kept in touch from opposite ends of the world, and upon their return to Israel, they compared challenges in the field – from mitigating cultural differences to the horrors of huge mosquitoes! After completing their degree, Avizedek decided to return to Majuli with Navon, harnessing her knowledge of agriculture to best benefit the residents of the Island. As the Island is gradually being lost, the residents struggle to provide new tools for livelihood, racing against time and erosion.

Enabling people to recognize their strength, to move forward, to develop

Navon and Avizedek have been working in Majuli through a number of channels since 2012. The central component to the work they have done was the establishment and guidance of the Rengam Women's Weaving Cooperative. The idea, explains Navon, is based on a development approach that leverages existing strengths and assets of a community to develop programming (the Asset Based Approach). "This means focusing on the intrinsic capabilities and skills a community possesses, rather than focusing on their needs and weaknesses," she explains, "in a sense, we are concentrating on the positive side. In the case of the *Mising*, we focused on the unique weaving skills the women of the tribe possess; they are talented weavers from a very young age. However, they are scattered in villages far away, with almost no public transportation. What transportation does exist remains far too expensive for frequent travel. The women remain within the boundaries of their villages. The fact is, is that these women produce beautiful, marketable work. Occasionally, a dealer passes by and purchases their work at a very low sum and makes a huge profit."



Meeting of women in the cooperative. A support network between the women was formed.

Even before Navon and Avizedek, local organizations identified the talent of weaving, and even brought a designer to teach the *Mising* women modern design. This approach, however, did not work. The weavers were unable to implement the tools they learned and could not succeed in selling. When Navon reached the Island, she sought to identify and solve the central problem, a lack of emphasis on group work. "I did a market analysis to see if these products; *Gamosas* (traditional Assamese scarves), ordinary scarves, napkins, cloth and bags, were in demand in Assam and across India. When I discovered they were, I decided to form a union of 25 women that would be able, for the first time, to produce and sell these products independently. I connected the

women with women from outside the Island who had successfully produced and sold products, and from there we established a strong base. The important thing was that these activities could continue after my internship. This is exactly what happened. The women continued their trade and even established weaving centers in some houses.” In other words, women are able to work from home, establishing a stable income, and have access to a workshop offering looms and a variety of raw materials. The cooperative has since grown to approximately 80 women and one man in more than 20 villages, and has even set up a bank of quality raw materials for weaving.



Gili Navon with Raju Gam, a local project staff member, employed by the project. Navon and Avizedek live and work closely with the community in Majuli.

About 80 percent of the locals with whom Navon and Avizedek work are women, and slightly less than 20 percent are men, who mainly work in the project’s other primary program, training land owners with organic farming techniques. The numbers of trainees in the program are generally equally divided between women and men, as is the case with a group of local volunteers formed to help in cases of despair. Still, Navon and Avizedek place their primary focus on the empowerment of the women of the tribe.

Thus, the idea of the Women’s Bicycle Bank was born, allowing women to buy a bicycle under very favorable conditions. “Once, we met one of the women of the cooperative walking with her son to the hospital to give him immunizations, a 2-hour walk in each direction,” says Navon, “over time, we realized that the lack of mobility of the women is a significant problem. In Majuli, there are plenty of bike shops, but the prices are extremely high, and it was not really possible for women to ride in traditional dress.” “We had to buy special bikes to suit their needs,” says Avizedek. They cost 4,000 rupees (just over 200 shekels). Even still, the amount was high for these women, but when the Bicycle Bank allowed them to pay in 12 installments, they were happy to buy.”



The cooperative's raw materials bank. Providing quality raw-materials to ensure better finished products.

This seemingly trivial thing – a bicycle with loans spread over a year at very low interest rates (to meet the administrative expenses of the Bicycle Bank) – has changed the lives of women in the village, and is beginning to change the social fabric of the community on the island. “Those women who remain at the fringe of the village, are suddenly starting to move freely within the villages and reach communities they have never visited. We are creating a sort of platform that not only strengthens women economically, but enables women to reach the market and interact with each other. This holds immense importance. It is inspiring to see the pile of bicycles outside when we hold our meetings, when the same women used to walk two to three hours each direction, or could not come at all because they did not have the 50 rupees for the once-daily bus.”

Mobility is not only something technical, mobility frees something fundamental

It enabled Navon, for example, to lead a tour of some of the women of the cooperative, off the Island. After traveling 24 hours, they met women from another cooperative.” This trip was inspiring for the women,” says Aya Navon, one of the coordinators of the Glocal Program, who still follows the activities of Avizedek and Navon (no relation).” Being that this was the first time the women had left the Island of Majuli, they traveled to train stations where they encountered homeless people. To a certain extent, this demonstrated to them the extent to what they have.



Mising women with their purchases from the Bike Bank. Simple bicycles, a convenient payment plan, enabling women mobility for the first time

This was the first time these *Mising* women had ever met with women from another tribe," adds Avizedek. "They did not believe it when they saw other tribal women with such professional work. They asked a lot of questions and came away inspired. After the meeting, they began to talk to us about building a mutual help group for the group members. If one woman had problems with her child, or another had problems with her husband, the group's support would be there. They began looking for new ways to join together to help each other.

What can you do for a mere 10,000 dollars?

Navon and Avizedek spend half of the year in Majuli. The rest of the time they spend in Israel, in the Jerusalem area. Avizedek earns a small income from guiding tours, and Navon previously worked in a start-up. Both live frugally. "Majuli is full time for us, but our income does not come from there," says Avizedek. "We'll have to solve this in the very near future."



Weaving center in one of the homes. Turning traditional handicrafts into a Marketable Commodity.

So far, all fundraising efforts have been put into raising money for the project itself. During the first stage, a private donor gave \$10,000 to launch the project. "The project the two were able to make with this sum, large development organizations fail to implement on a budget of \$500,000," says Aya Navon.

Still, it is not enough. More money is required. "Working on such a limited budget so far has forced us to work day in and day out, and has made it difficult for us to develop a plan with a clear vision," explains Avizedek. "We considered applying to funding from large foundations, but it was clear to us that such financing would require a strict action

plan, while the situation on the ground requires a tremendous amount of flexibility, requiring constant monitoring and modification of the goals.”

Thus was born the idea to fundraise from the general public, and we launched a Headstart campaign under the name Amar Majuli (our Majuli). Our fundraising target was 100 thousand shekels, and we fundraised 112 thousand. For a number of the donations, donors will receive hand woven products from the women of Majuli. This money will be used to continue existing operations and for expansion. The project will include the establishment of a permanent center for the project, adding bicycles to the banks, computer training courses, water purification workshops, planning vegetable gardens for needy families, and even a planting project with plants that prevent or stop erosion on the Island.”

"Most donors are Israelis who know us or acquaintances of acquaintances," says Avizedek," as well as a number of foreign donors, mostly our acquaintances.” There are, however, a few dozen people who simply heard about the project and decided to donate, including an Israeli businessman who read about the project in a group email sent by a friend. He spoke to us on the phone to hear more, and decided to donate 10,000 shekels. The same amount came from New York, from someone who heard about the project resident of Mumbai who visited the project in Majuli. An Israeli woman donated 5,000 shekels, as she wanted to join a network of women empowerment initiatives. Our response from donors, even those who have contributed smaller amounts has been incredible and is deeply important to us.



Avizedek providing a training on organic farming. Bringing experience on leading agricultural trainings to Majuli.

Alongside the struggle for the economic survival of the project, Navon and Avizedek have had to battle Indian bureaucracy throughout. "We refused to pay bribes, so only

now, after a long and exhausting process, we were able to register in India as a legal cooperative," explains Avizedek. "It was blood sweat and tears, Navon adds." Sometimes you just understand that even if you do everything exactly by the book, and things do not move, there is a reason. Lately, only after we had established a network of contacts and gained extensive project experience on the island, our employee approached the government offices with a journalist friend. His presence helped to complete the process."

Being foreign, she says, is an advantage. "On the island, we are like UFOs, people do not understand from where we landed, and it allows us to open the doors of government offices that are unopened for Indian women. We are working to teach these women to access governmental offices on their own. This is actually the goal, no matter whether the Island disappears anyways, as we are often told. We work with these people to give them financial security and opportunities towards social security in order to meet the challenges they face daily. The most painful thing to contend with, however, is the strict social order. It is scary to discover how these things are so deeply embedded in people's hearts. I worked with a local organization whose members refused to touch food that the *Mising* prepare. Even the primary aid organization working with the tribe perceives them as inferior, and these organizations also find it difficult to accept the fact that we work almost entirely face to face with the 'inferior' tribal population. Eventually, it affects the perception of the tribes themselves."



Weaving Products: Scarves, Napkins and Bags

Trust, responsibility, commitment. No longer a vacation.

The main key to dealing with this challenge is the trust that Navon and Avizedek have managed to build with the tribe. "One of most dominant figures in the cooperative, Dalimi Kutum (41), was selected as the cooperative president," explains Navon. "At first, it was very important to her to attend a leadership workshop I initiated in the village, but she was too busy. I joined her for two days of work in the field, I mowed with her, I met her husband and children. This enabled it to be possible for her to come to the workshop.

"If you want to create a true collaboration and not to use force in the colonialist manner, you can not skip the step of acquiring confidence," says Avizedek . "Therefore we are with people in their homes a long time, hosted their events, we eat and drink with them. It is very significant for people who are used to being at the bottom of the social ladder. They also see us walking around a lot in the villages. There is nothing like seeing something with ones own eyes to be convinced. Good results are also a way building trust: for example seeing other women in the village who have improved their situation, or to meet other women's groups across the country managed to accomplish that."

Actually seeing the results could convince not only the women, but the men as well. Navon and Avizedek managed to find a way to empower women in a traditional society without arousing protest from the men. "We do not operate under the flag of women's empowerment. We work to promote the economic security of the family. This is also in the interest of the men in the village," explains Avizedek.

She, by the way, does not speak the local language, a fact that makes daily life challenging for her. Additionally, the array of cultural differences can sometimes lead to loneliness. "When I become exhausted, I expect that someone there would be someone to understand me, though I know they do not have the tools to," admits Avizedek." Navon adds, "it's not easy to live your live like this. My family supports what we're doing here, but clearly they find it difficult to accept the fact that I spend most of my time abroad."

Another challenge comes from, of course, the difficult living conditions on Majuli. Sometimes, it's the inescapable heat and sometimes, it's the mosquitoes. Sometimes a week will pass without electricity bringing detachment from the outside world. Sometimes, it's death itself. They tell of a disease that afflicted the vice chairman of the cooperative. She was faced with a rapidly deteriorating situation, and the challenges to get her to suitable medical care proved to them "how places without basic infrastructure have death always lurking around the corner." Avizedek says, "there is a sense of helplessness and fear that someone is going to die right in front of you and you may not have the ability or won't have the means to help. This is certainly one of the most difficult moments I had on the Island."

Moments of satisfaction, they say, make up for it. “Just two days ago, we initiated a picnic for the women of the cooperative and their families, women from villages that, in the past, had no connection between members. It was amazing to see people who barely knew each other happy to celebrate together for the first time. When you sit down with the whole family, and hear that they have to say, you can see the deep meaning your work holds for these people,” says Avizedek, “but this also emphasized the great responsibility involved in the matter. When you get people to dream, you do not want them to be proven wrong. When you meet with dozens or hundreds of families, your commitment to them grows. In order not to fail, we realized we needed to build a better and stronger system for this project. We trained local staff members, defined organized principles of work, as well as project evaluation and documentation. We set up work plans that enable people to work with existing resources to not continually expand based on needs, without the possibility to do so.”

Along the way, they had to give up freedom, and grow beyond the experience of a trip. The two girls that used to pedal around the island for pleasures became “Madams,” respectable women with a tremendous amount of responsibility on their shoulders. Sometimes we are forced to give up the desire to be silly, because we are no longer foreigners in their space. Other times, which are become more and more rare with the passage of time, we are tourists again just like in the good old days, without huge project cargo and a mission to save the world. Simply two Israelis at the edge of the world.”