

TRADITIONAL ARTISANS IN GLOBAL MARKET: EXPERIENCE OF WEAVERS' COLLECTIVE FROM WESTERN RAJASTHAN

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Abstract

The traditional weavers of the western region of Rajasthan in India belonged to a backward community of rural artisans. Their craft of weaving has never been a stable means of livelihood, especially during drought season, which occurred with regular frequency in the desert area of western Rajasthan. Following the severe drought of 1987, which forced these weavers to abandon their traditional craft and to turn to famine relief works, URMUL, a non-government organisation in Rajasthan, organised them to form a weavers' collective, called the URMUL Marusthali Bunkar Vikas Samiti, in order to make their traditional craft of weaving a viable economic enterprise for their livelihood. The traditional weavers were trained not only in the new techniques of dyeing and weaving, but also in capacity building for managerial skills in running their enterprise. Within a short span of time this weavers' collective diversified its products, improved their quality and found market for them both within and outside the country. Its success story demonstrates the viability of entrepreneurship in the craft of traditional artisans, if they are helped with initial inputs in material resources and capacity building in managerial skills.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents the case of the weavers from Phalodi and Pokharan of the western region of Rajasthan, a state in India, who organised themselves and modified their traditional craft of weaving in order to make it a viable economic enterprise. The immediate situation that led to the transformation of their traditional craft was the drought during which they could not continue with their traditional craft as a means of livelihood. A non-government organisation (NGO), the URMUL (Uttar Rajasthan Milk Union Limited) Dairy of Bikaner, Rajasthan came forward to help these traditional weavers in their enterprise. URMUL took the initiative in organising the weavers and provided them financial assistance and training in capacity building for modifying their craft in order to make it a viable enterprise.

2. The Background

The western part of the state of Rajasthan is in the area of the Thar Desert. The dry and harsh terrains, sandy strong winds and scorching heat are the distinct features of the desert area of Rajasthan. The districts of Ganganagar, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Barmer, Jodhpur and Churu in Rajasthan belong to this desert area. This region has one of the world's toughest climate conditions. The region comes within the operational area of URMUL, a family of development organisations, established in the year 1984. The vision of URMUL is "to lead the poor towards self-reliance by making available to them a package of development services that they themselves decide on, design, implement and eventually finance." Its mission is "to organise communities for collective action, developing their skills and levels of confidence to lead them to self-reliance." Given the harsh physical geography of the Thar Desert, the thrust of the URMUL initiatives has been to offer security of food, fodder and water. Since its inception, URMUL has grown and developed into an integrated rural development organisation with health care as the primary component of the diverse development package.

In the year 1987 the desert region of Rajasthan faced the worst drought of the century. The severe drought prompted URMUL to review its plans and take up programmes for providing livelihoods to the poor in a big

way. While looking for possible options for supporting the needy poor of the area at this time of distress, URMUL discovered that the old traditional spinning activity had the potential of providing the people of the area sustainable livelihood. The raw material for wool spinning was locally available in Bikaner, which was and is one of the biggest wool markets in India. The rural folk was traditionally acquainted with the skill required for spinning and they also had *charkhas* (spinning wheels), lying idle with most of the poor households. Some time back, this used to be an integral part of the activities and livelihood portfolio of the households in this region. But it was not being used, because the product did not have demand in the market.

Considering the locally available raw materials, human skills and markets, URMUL began its first income generating activity for enhancing the household income of the rural people of the region, viz. the enterprise of spinning wool. URMUL identified the poor families to be involved in the activity. They were given wool to spin. These families, however, were not traditional weavers and so they could not use the spun woollen yarn themselves. The spun wool was collected by URMUL after paying the wages to the spinners. A lot of spun wool got piled up and the URMUL team was clueless on what should be done in order to dispose it off at a reasonable price so that the money raised could be put back into the programme. Soon URMUL realised that it was difficult to move the spun wool into the market at a reasonable price. They were forced to look for other possibilities, like weaving. URMUL started searching for experts or traditional weavers, who could train the local people in weaving so that they could produce something that could be marketed at a reasonable price. This exercise led URMUL to contact an informal group of weavers from Phalodi in the Jodhpur district of Rajasthan.

3. Traditional Weavers of Phalodi

The traditional weavers of Phalodi, contacted by URMUL, belonged to the *Meghwal* community, which is considered as one of the lowest sections in the caste hierarchy of western Rajasthan. On account of the practices of caste discrimination, to which the community had been subjected in the traditional society of Rajasthan (such as prohibition to draw water from the common well), the community remained downtrodden and had few

opportunities and means to improve its living conditions. Most of the weavers from this community were uneducated. They had less interest in education and so their children were not enrolled in school or left school during primary classes. In addition to parental neglect, factors such as caste based discrimination and unfriendly school environment have contributed to poor schooling of weavers' children.

These traditional weavers used to buy raw materials from the local market and sold their products in the local market and in rural fairs. However, they were under stress because of low demand for their product. The weavers' main product was *pattu*, a large woollen shawl worn by men. Generally *pattu* was bought to be presented as gifts to relatives at marriages after good seasons of rains and crops. In drought season, which occurred regularly in western Rajasthan, there were no marriages or such occasions of social celebration at which *pattu* was used. It was all entangled in the vicious circle of poverty. In these situations the weavers had to bear exploitation too at the hands of others. Thus the weavers themselves were looking for better options to their traditional craft.

3. Organisation of Weavers' Collective

When reasonable wages were offered by URMUL, these traditional weavers agreed to come to Lunkaransar (URMUL's project area) for training in order to improve their skills in weaving and dyeing. Professionals from the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad were invited to discuss the possibilities in this regard. As the outcome of the discussion, weaving to be taken up by these traditional weavers emerged as a strong proposition. The training process went on well for a couple of years. The materials produced during the training were found acceptable by everyone and were sold in the market. As traditional weavers, they were willing to improve their products and took keen interest in the training. They actively started acquiring the skills of design, production, marketing and other managerial skills.

A proposal was made to these trained weavers for starting an organisation in their native place of Phalodi as per the vision and mission of the URMUL Trust. URMUL promoted the proposal by supporting the

weavers with financial and material resources to start their work in their area independently. Thus, the URMUL Marusthali Bunkar Vikas Samiti (UMBVS) was registered as an independent weavers' organisation under the Societies Act on 30 January 1991, when the country was remembering Mahatma Gandhi on his death anniversary.

The objective of URMUL in the formation of the UMBVS was to make the artisans of the arid and drought prone belt of western Rajasthan self-reliant. Therefore, this initiative was an effort of creating and enhancing sustainable livelihoods, which could help the poor artisans survive through the difficult periods of droughts, which were so frequent in the region that in almost every alternate year there was drought of some degree due to very low rainfall. In the first year of the UMBVS, weaving was started in six villages of Phalodi and Pokharan (in the Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan) with 70 weavers. The number of weavers increased to 90 by the end of year. At present the UMBVS has 170 weaver members.

Having been formed as an independent weavers' organisation, the UMBVS faced some organisational challenges. They pertained mainly to (i) organisational management, (ii) the technical matter of dyeing, (iii) efficiency of the loom used for weaving and (iv) marketing of the products.

3.1 Organisational Management

The UMBVS is an organisation in the true sense of weavers, for weavers and managed by weavers. All the activities, including management of the organisation have been carried out by weavers themselves. The chief executive and other leading managers have been weavers. It has been remarkable that weavers, who had not even completed high school education, could manage an organisation of about 200 member families for providing livelihoods through traditional weaving in the drought prone arid area of Thar Desert. Those in the managerial roles were educated up to the 8th standard of formal schooling. But they could perform the tasks of coordinating the weaver members in the overall management of product planning, procurement of raw materials, designing, production, quality control and marketing. They also managed the financial matters of the organisation.

In the initial phase of the setting-up of the UMBVS, URMUL provided two young professional managers from the IRMA (Institute of Rural Management), Anand, Gujarat and one designer from the NID, Ahmedabad to help the weavers in setting up the organisation, and improving production, market research and linkages. One professional from the London School of Economics was also engaged to provide overall support to the organisation. The young team of professionals took off the first phase of the organisation along with the weavers very well. To address the challenges, the team had done a lot of exercise collectively. The main weaver leaders divided themselves into small teams and made the tasks easier. The seniors among them took different important responsibilities as chief executive, manager-dyeing, manager-production, manager-marketing, manager-accounts and finance etc. The external professionals were supporting them externally.

3.2 Dyeing Yarn

Dyeing of yarn is an important activity in the process of weaving. The task here is to have attractive colour shades that do not easily fade. Colour fading of the product was one of the major problems in the initial days of the organisation. Earlier a weaver used to dye wool at home in the traditional way. In this operation, colours were not fast and got faded soon. For weaving on large scale, home dyeing was not suitable. Similarly, when there were more pieces of the product by different weavers, the quality of colour made a difference in the market. Out-sourcing of dyeing was costly and unreliable. The UMBVS had to respond to this issue.

The designer and other specialists of the UMBVS worked on making dyeing that lasts and is even. The expert from the NID and the team on the task of dyeing analysed different processes of dyeing. Finally they came to the decision of setting up a small dyeing unit at Phalodi. Two weavers were trained in dyeing and the dyeing unit started functioning. For a while there were some teething problems, but ultimately they learnt the art of good dyeing by the method of doing and learning. It went on well, but then the problem of the dye waste water came up, as the dyeing unit of the UMBVS at Phalodi was within a residential colony and there was no sewage system. Hence, the UMBVS shifted the dyeing unit to their new site at Pokharan on a large plot of land located outside the Pokharan municipal area.

The UMBVS was concerned about the environmental issues involved in the untreated waste from the dyeing unit. Hence, use of harmful chemicals was reduced with soda ashes and normal salt as supplementary. Secondly, the manual processing of chemicals was replaced with chamber dyeing, which reduced the time and the health risk to workers involved in the dyeing process. In order to deal with the problem of untreated waste from the dyeing unit, the UMBVS has now proposed to build a treatment plant at Pokharan in the coming year.

Use of fuel wood for heating water in the process of dyeing was another environmental issue. In this regard the UMBVS took the decision to reduce the consumption of fire wood for heating water for dyeing. As the dyeing unit of the UMBVS is located in the desert region, solar energy could be made available throughout the year. The UMBVS decided to use the solar water heating systems for dyeing and washing. By setting up the solar water heating systems at the dyeing unit at Pokharan, consumption of fuel woods was reduced up to 50 per cent. Similarly installation and regular use of chamber dyeing system also reduced the loss of energy and involvement of workers in handling the dyeing process. Time saving was another major gain in it.

3.3 Improvement of Loom

The type of the loom used by the weavers was another problem in production. Weavers of Phalodi and Pokharan were using the traditional pit loom, which posed the problem of the width of the material weaved. Weavers could produce material of the width of only 18 inches or less with the traditional loom. Their most popular traditional product of *pattu* was woven in two pieces, which were then stitched together. The whole process took double the time. The designer from the NID also worked on improvement of the traditional pit loom. The NID team modified the pit loom by increasing its width capacity from 18 inches to 4 feet.

As the weavers' teams got exposure and chance to meet other weavers from different parts of the country during exhibitions, they came to know about new and improved hand looms. They also contacted the Weavers' Service Centre of the Ministry of Textile, Government of India for support in improving the quality of their weaving and production. According to the

suggestions from different experts and the Weavers' Service Centre, the UMBVS has started to use the improved *tara* looms and *chitrangan* looms. Both these looms were technologically more efficient and reduced the labour. Improvement in pit loom and introduction of new looms provided further scope for increase in the range of products of the UMBVS. As a result of these improvements and changes, the weavers did not need to weave *pattu* in two pieces and then stitch them together for the final product. It saved a lot of time of the weavers and increased their profitability. Now the weavers of the UMBVS felt proud in guaranteeing their product regarding colour permanency, new designs, and overall quality.

3.4 Search for Market

Marketing is an important task involved in the production of any goods. The traditional weavers of Rajasthan had their special problem in this regard. *Pattu* had a very small local market. Traditionally rural communities were using it at marriage ceremony or during other occasions of celebration. *Pattu* weaving was not a sustainable livelihood means because of this irregular demand. Secondly, woollen *pattu* had to face tough competition in the market with the woollen products from the states of Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Punjab. So the biggest challenge of the UMBVS was the search for new urban market as the local market in rural areas was very limited, uncertain and dependent on rains and good crops.

The marketing team, consisting of weavers and professional managers, tried to explore urban market in Delhi and other metro cities in India. The product development team worked hard to develop products and prototypes of new designs on the basis of the feedback from market research. The marketing team explored buyers and got orders for supply. In the exhibitions at metro cities like Delhi and Mumbai, the UMBVS products got very good response from buyers. As sale increased, there have been also bulk orders for the products of the UMBVS. Production for orders and exhibitions has also been going on well. The UMBVS weavers understood the importance of new designs when during their third exhibition in Delhi, buyers asked for new designs and new products.

4. Achievements of UMBVS

Within a relatively short time the UMBVS made notable achievements in its enterprise. The products of the organisation were diversified and improved to meet the varying demands of the market. Its weaver leaders acquired the necessary skills in the management of production and marketing. All this contributed to the improvement in the quality of life of this relatively backward community of weavers.

4. 1 UMBVS Products

Earlier the weaver members of the UMBVS were used to producing the woollen *pattu* which had little market value. With the new techniques in dyeing, looms and designs the UMBVS is now producing a variety of goods that have found market within and outside the country. The products of the UMBVS are hand woven textile products with the traditional embroidery in weave. Major products are now in cotton with the traditional motifs of their earlier weaves in woollen shawls of men. The UMBVS also weaves in woollen and cotton mixed material as per the market demands. Products of the UMBVS are mainly garments and soft furnished items, which include a range of apparels for men and women, home furnishings like traditional bedcovers, pillow covers, and table runner and accessories.

4. 2 Gain of Confidence in Managerial Roles

After the initial phase of setting up the organisation, in the first year itself the weaver leaders of the UMBVS returned the professional managers from the IRMA to URMUL, but retained the designer from the NID. The justification for the move was that by then the weaver leaders, especially the members of the marketing team, had developed their capacities enough to deal with marketing on their own. They were also conscious of the cost of engaging managers, as by then they had made the cost-benefit analysis of their enterprise. They considered the cost on designer more beneficial than on managers. The weavers were sure of their analysis as they had learnt by then the lessons of production and marketing management. They were confident of doing what the professional managers did till that time. This meant reducing the cost of production.

The experience of the UMBVS has shown that it is not necessary to have highly educated professionals (with MBA and knowledge of English) for efficiently managing an entrepreneurial organisation. The weavers' collective has proved that management, considered as a specialised professional function, can be performed efficiently without higher degrees. It is a matter of acquiring the necessary skills in managing one's business, and lower level of formal education is not a barrier for learning such skills. The weaver leaders of the UMBVS, despite having low formal education, have been managing well all the activities of their organisation in order to achieve their goal of making the weavers of Thar Desert self-reliant by improving their livelihoods. After the initial support from professional managers, the weaver leaders improved their skills in the management of production, quality control, marketing and export as well as efficient management of financial and human resources.

4. 3 Quality Control and Marketing

The weaver members of the UMBVS understood the importance of designer in the growth of their organisation; they also saw that market has been fast changing. Market demands have been for new products and new designs every time. And to sustain the business in the fast changing fashion market, new products were required every season. Conscious of it and to maintain their brand image, the UMBVS hired the services of creative fashion designers from prestigious fashion designing institutes of the country, like the NID, the National Institute of Fashion Technologies (NIFT), and the Indian Institute of Craft Design (IICD).

Weavers learnt a lot by participating in the exhibitions. They understood the importance of quality when they saw how buyers selected and rejected products in exhibitions. Rejection of products made them more conscious about quality. Considering the good response from market, the quality issues were strictly taken care of. Arrangements were made for quality control. For every 10 weavers, one *vyasthapak* (manager) was appointed. The *vyasthapaks* were from the weaver community of the same village. First quality checks were done by these *vyasthapaks* at the village level. Then a second quality check was done at the organisation level when *vyasthapaks* brought the finished products.

In a short time the products of the UMBVS secured good image in the domestic and even in the export market. In the country they developed networks with buyers and increased the demand for their products with all big names in handloom, cotton and other crafts. “Fabindia” became and is still the major buyer of the UMBVS products. Some of their products were selected by the “Oxfam” for the catalogue of the Oxfam shops all over Europe. Similarly “Fair Trade” organisation also selected the UMBVS products for its international store catalogue. The products of the UMBVS are marketed under the brand name of ‘URMUL Desert Craft’.

All these market linkages opened new channels for export. Now the products of the UMBVS can be seen anywhere in the world. The famous designer Bibi Russell told that, when she saw the Phalodi bag on somebody’s shoulder at an airport in Jordan, she felt happy. Bibi Russell is a great admirer of the UMBVS weavers. Whenever she comes to that area, she spends some time with these weavers and stays with them. The UMBVS weavers also got the chance to participate in exhibitions and sell their products in Memphis (USA), Barcelona (Spain), Shanghai (China), Dubai (UAE) and Johannesburg (South Africa). For the weavers, going abroad was beyond their dreams. It became great news amongst weavers and other communities of the desert region of western Rajasthan.

As the production and marketing of the products of the UMBVS increased, the income of the member weavers also increased gradually. In the last three years from 2009 to 2011 the average sale value of the UMBVS products was Rs. 63 lakh. Some young weavers are earning Rs.6000- to7000 per month while the average weaver is earning Rs.5000 per month. They make this earning through weaving which they carry out from their home.

4.4 Consolidation of Activities

The UMBVS invested its profit in constructing a building of their own at Phalodi. The building was completed and inaugurated by the renowned supporters of crafts and craft-persons, Rajeev Sethi and Sanjoy Ghosh on 1 May 1994. The UMBVS also got another plot of land at Pokharan from the state government to construct a weavers’ training centre. Construction of

the two big buildings for different activities of the UMBVS became a great asset to the organisation. It also enhanced the image of the organisation in such a short time span.

The strategy which the UMBVS is now following is to train a large number of new artisans in order to facilitate introduction and implementation of new techniques and systems for improving the productivity of the organisation and reducing artisans' labour and production time. URMUL is assisting the UMBVS in training the new young weavers with the help of the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India in the Pokharan development block of Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan. There is a further plan to expand the geographical area of the operation of the UMBVS in order to cover the surrounding villages in the adjoining districts with its cluster activities.

5. Conclusion

Success in the organised efforts of the UMBVS has brought about significant change in the lives of the weaver members and their families, who earlier were considered backward in the social set-up of western Rajasthan. They have been freed from the exploitative vicious circle of poverty. URMUL's support to them was manifold and significant in this achievement of their transformed position in society.

In western Rajasthan, crafts have been a source of livelihood and also expression of creativity. It has been a living tradition in the region. Crafts complement and coexist with agriculture and cattle rearing. The success story of the UMBVS, the weavers' collective of Phalodi demonstrates the viability of entrepreneurship in the crafts of traditional artisans. The successful efforts in the capacity building of the weaver artisans enabled them to rise to the level of the global market with their products of quality and contemporary appeal. The weavers, their families, their community, and their desert craft have come to the forefront of development with their own contribution in the socio-economic development of the country.