

Success at the bottom of the pyramid

Non-government entities play a crucial role in developing rural entrepreneurial networks for the ailing handloom sector

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In India, handloom art is in crisis. The textile ministry's Handlooms Census (2010) shows there has been a 33 per cent drop in handloom employment since 1995-96. Only 4.3 million people are engaged in handloom weaving and allied activities now, against 6.5 million in 1995-96.

Handloom is the second largest unorganised set of economic activities in the country, after agriculture, that supports rural areas. More than three-fourth of all adult weavers are women and members of SC/ST/OBC communities. There are almost 2.4 million handlooms in India, of which almost 85 per cent are in villages.

Needed, a rescue mission

India's handloom exports touched ₹2,246 crore in 2014-15. However this has been continually declining compared to the previous 4-5 years. Since India produces almost 85 per cent of the world's handloom products, we can ill afford to let the handloom sector and handloom art to fall into decline.

That said, not much effort is visible to save the art and document best practices in handloom art and weaving.

Handloom art and weaving centres are clustered all over the country. Many of these art genres are popular in local and international markets.

The Chanderi cluster, for example, is known for its genre of silk garments and sarees. Other clusters include the Varanasi cluster for Banarasi silk sarees, and the Chirala cluster for its traditional varieties of zari (golden metal threads) sarees and dhotis.

These clusters preserve traditional knowledge, which is passed from one generation to another. The exclusivity and the rarity of these handloom art forms provide them with the much-

needed competitive advantage. The role of NGOs and social enterprises in saving handloom art cannot be overemphasised. I have worked with one such NGO, Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), which has fulltime operations in Chanderi, located in the Ashok Nagar district of Madhya Pradesh.

The Chanderi model

The town is home to one of the biggest concentrations of handloom weavers in central India. Here they prepare a finely embellished silk and cotton based fabric with woven patterns of zari. Chanderi has 30,000 inhabitants and about 4,500 active looms. About 60 per cent of the inhabitants are dependent on this centuries-old traditional business either directly or indirectly.

A weaver earns approximately ₹3,000-4,000 a month. Although the textiles ministry had sanctioned a four-year mega cluster project for Chanderi, whereby a weaver-owned producer company was promoted, and the department of rural industries of Madhya Pradesh had also been implementing several schemes aimed at improving the production and marketing of Chanderi products, the impact of these interventions have not been studied scientifically, and at the ground level poverty is still visible.

From 2009 onward, DEF started working on a market linkage project in partnership with Media Lab Asia (MLA) and with the support of the IT ministry. It initiated a project named Chanderiyaan, which is essentially the Chanderi weavers' ICT resource centre.

Chanderi weavers sell their products across the country at a premium under the brand name of 'Chanderi', which is known for its unique art and designs.

The demand estimation, order generation, and distribution of finished product from Chanderi to different parts of the country is a complex and unstructured pro-



Visibility factor That's of paramount importance CH. VIJAYA BHASKAR

cess. Weavers use different methods to reach their consumers.

They sell directly to their customers (shopkeepers in other cities) by visiting their place with the products, participate in trade fairs, or sell to intermediaries.

The right links

DEF created a web portal to help weavers sell their products, going beyond reducing physical market separations and building a bridge to provide market access to their producers. The Chanderi model has been able to demonstrate the viability of market-based solutions for alleviating the poverty of 'bottom of the pyramid' producers, while also salvaging dying

art forms. Such interventions when done in a timely and appropriate manner can create functional ecosystems of partnerships between the social sector, governments, and poor weavers to successfully develop markets for dying art forms.

Like any other market, handloom is also required to serve three main functions: (1) matching of demand and supply that involves identification of buyers and sellers, for which matchmaking product offerings with needs, as well as price discovery is important; (2) facilitating exchanges or transactions, for which logistics, payment mechanisms, and facilitation of credit along with

communication between buyers and sellers become important; and (3) providing institutional infrastructure such as enforcement of legal and regulatory mechanisms.

These functions are already well-developed in formal urban markets, but the active intervention of external agencies may be required in poor, rural areas to make the markets work efficiently by reducing market separations. External non-governmental agencies can be of great help in underdeveloped informal BOP markets in many parts of India.

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