

BUILDING CAPACITIES OF RURAL WOMEN ARTISANS : CASE STUDIES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT FROM THAR DESERT OF WESTERN RAJASTHAN

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ABSTRACT

The terrain of the desert of Rajasthan in India is harsh, arid and tough with shifting sand dunes, sparse population, extreme temperatures, and stunted vegetation. The Thar thus makes the lives of women even complex. Amidst this though, the journey of URMUL's producer groups of women is quite remarkable and inspiring.

Desert region has a high population of women engaged in hand-embroidery activities for income generation. They migrated with their families from Pakistan during the 1971 war. The middlemen from neighbouring districts exploited them by giving nominal wages.

During 1991-92, URMUL Seemant, a non-governmental organisation, organised these artisan women in groups, trained them in quality improvement, contemporary designs, colours, latest fashion trends, through continuous capacity building training programmes. The initiative has proved as a platform for creating and enhancing sustainable livelihoods for rural women artisans to earn a better living with dignity in the drought-prone areas of western Rajasthan.

Using five case studies of these women artisans, this paper presents the successful process of capacity building and inclusion of women in various aspects of empowerment through embroidery-based income generation project. The paper establishes the fact that if women get opportunities, exposure, support system and motivational trainings they can be the breadwinners, trendsetters, and change agents. This paper presents the success story of URMUL group of women artisans as an example of participatory, collective and organisational effort to accelerate women empowerment. They now speak against discrimination, inequalities and motivate themselves to have a greater participation in decision-making, access to information to develop life skills and confidence to inculcate leadership, self-respect and self-reliance.

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Introduction

Women in India remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in society. Viewed against almost all the indicators of development, women continue to lag behind men. According to the 2011 census of India, women make an independent group constituting 48.46 per cent of the country's total population. If we look at the sex ratio, there are only 940 women against 1,000 men in India. Women's access to literacy and education is more limited. Women employment record shows more women in unorganised sector performing unskilled and lesser-paid jobs. UNDP (2008) suggests that the workforce participation for women is half than for men in India. There are evidences of higher rates of women working in informal and non-farm sector (MWCD Report, 2007).

The last decade of the 20th century was a period of tremendous transitions. The age-old discriminations based on gender - largely unacknowledged so far - were finally coming out of personal spaces to national numbers and indices. The 1991 census, for the first time, openly accepted the falling sex ratio and raised alarms for the policy levels to take substantial action. There were 927 women to every 1000 men, with even wider gaps in the child-sex ratio in India.

This was the time of shifting gears in India. New ideas, new experiments, new approaches and new excitement - all were seeing spaces opening up for women. There was a surge of women coming forth to command their spaces in public. This 'New Indian Woman' was educated, resilient, self-dependent and was establishing herself as an equal. Nonetheless, significant population living in the rural villages remained largely disconnected with this mass movement. This was largely a phenomenon centric to cities and towns.

These 'gender lenses' were alien to rural India. Even the very idea of 'issues of women' was still waiting to sprout. The overall literacy

rate of women in the country stood at only 39 per cent explicitly revealing the limited scope of this global 'awakening' (URMUL, 2013).

In this growing India women are still facing inequality. People do not really care much about women's decisions and their voices. The low status of women in the community is mostly due to the poor economic and social profile. In this regard, it is important to mention that the employment record of women shows the high contribution of women in unorganised sector and they have been considered as unskilled and low wagers. Although women are major contributors to the survival of the family and are vital and productive workers in India's national economy, their contribution remains largely unrecognised.

Most of the women lack choices and options. They are restricted by poverty, illiteracy, poor nutrition and health care. Moreover, domestic violence and fear are facts of their lives. Lack of access to reproductive health, education and services can often lead to vulnerability. They are also limited in their notions of gender roles and lack in the understanding of reasons behind gender discrimination. By accepting the lower status given to them, they also accept the stereotypes that often restrict to express themselves and confine to a role that stifles sensitivity and creativity.

Diaz and Pillai (2004) reported that "India's human development is marked by a paradox that has seen a systematic decline in women's status despite recent advances in women's education and economic status. It is indeed puzzling that economic development of women has not brought commensurate change in their social development. Women continue to labour under the brunt of oppressive traditions, exploitation, lack of self-worth or identity and are routinely subjected to violence even at home. It is clear now that women and society in general are in great need of self-introspection

to overcome the downslide in human values and justice and empower women."

Women empowerment issue is very compelling and a challenging national commitment and public agenda in many countries. Empowerment is not something which can be achieved easily. Though empowerment is a complex concept to understand, it is a process of awareness and capacity building, leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control over transformative action. Empowerment is the phenomenon of 'giving power to' "creating power within and enabling'. Empowerment involves negotiation of the balance of power between the more and less powerful. It is a multi-dimensional process that enables one to realise one's full identity and powers in all the spheres of life.

Douglas (1996) viewed empowerment from the point of the individual and group/community; several strategies may be employed to improve consciousness among people, at grassroots levels for improving their living conditions, and internal disposition to initiate action for enacting social change. Mayoux (1998) suggested, "Empowerment is a continuous process where powerless people become conscious of their situation and organise to improve it and access opportunities; an outcome where women take control over their lives; set their own agenda; gain skills; solve problems; develop self-reliance".

Empowerment is a process of negotiation where the subjects of the empowerment process define the main priorities and strategies. According to the development organisation 'Pradan', this process of negotiation, however, requires an appropriate forum and information to enable women to fully consider the possible options and potential consequences of choices. It is also likely to require explicit promotion of women's interests at the macro-level to widen the scope of choice. Shivmurthy (1999)

mentioned that collectivisation brings group of women together at a base to become an integral part of an economic activity, an important part of the strategy towards empowerment. Capacity building step is to enhance their capacity to work as a group and play different roles necessary for development and maintenance of group.

Singh et al (2000) found empowerment of women as dynamic process enabling women to realise their full identity. Vaish (2004) reported that the empowerment of women leads to benefits not only to the individual woman but also to the families and community as a whole through collective action for development. Harper et al (1998) found in their study that women's level of confidence, awareness and pride on themselves were substantially increased by virtue of their membership in income generating programmes. Similarly, Pandian and Eswaran (2002) found that over 95 per cent of women felt that income generating activities enhanced their status and participation in decision-making process. Rao and Appaji (2002) revealed that leadership abilities are positively and significantly related to income generation behaviour; also significantly related to behaviour of women.

Aims and Objectives

The research paper argues that if women get opportunities, exposure, support system and motivational capacity building trainings they can be the breadwinners, trendsetters, and change agents. The success story of URMUL group of women artisans is an example of participatory, collective and organisational support.

The present research paper establishes the fact that the local and small level actions can also help in creating the platform of opportunities for poor rural women artisans towards sustainable livelihoods and better life options. Capacity building and inclusion of women in different areas leads to enhancement of various aspects of empowerment like developing their

life skills, enhancing personality, confidence, inculcating leadership and decision making power and strengthening self-respect among them.

Using five case studies of rural women artisans from desert region, this paper presents the successful process of capacity building and inclusion of women in various aspects of empowerment through embroidery based income generation project.

This paper will help developmental professionals, policy makers and planners in understanding the importance of building women's capacities to improve their socio-economical status, which can significantly improve their skills, personality, self-concept, leadership, self-esteem for empowerment and income.

The objectives of the paper are :

1. To understand the status of women in rural India.
2. To develop and analyse case studies of five women artisans of desert region who joined URMUL's embroidery initiative as a livelihood option, leading a better life, supporting their families and acting as change agents in the community.
3. To emphasise the need for women empowerment through livelihood generation and regular capacity building for their socio-economic development and to become the breadwinners, trendsetters, and change agents.

Significance of the Paper

Women too have right to make choices to determine their future. Moreover, they can certainly develop the capabilities to make choices. They can learn to make their choices by gaining socio-economic stability, which will lead and ensure developing in them the realisation of self-respect and self-esteem, creating

supportive mutual relationships, expanding their skills and access to resources, analysis of the situation, decisions making, leadership, problem solving and power to negotiate.

There is a need to empower women through an informed approach whereby women become able to organise themselves to increase their self-reliance, to assert their independent rights to make choices and to control resources, which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination. In order to ameliorate the conditions of rural women artisans, the non-governmental and international organisations initiated various programmes. The need for empowerment of women and girls was also stressed in U.N. in the fourth world conference of women held in September 1995 in Beijing. Ensuring women's equal access and full participation in the power structure and decision-making is a challenge for every single member of the society.

Methodology

The study was carried out in the selected villages of Bikaner district of Rajasthan State of the Thar Desert of India. The desert region is a challenging area to live and survive. The terrain of the desert of Rajasthan in India is harsh and tough; it is the driest region of the country. It is a vast, arid, unfriendly and tough terrain with shifting sand dunes, sparse population, extreme temperatures, stunted vegetation and very little arable land. Despite these tough conditions, the desert has approximately 12.8 million inhabitants. Desert people struggle to earn their bread, as the livelihoods options are very few in the region.

The paper covers sample of five respondents. They were selected purposively. These women belong to remote villages of desert of Rajasthan in India. The criteria of sample selection were their basic profile, membership in self-help group (SHG), livelihood practices, leadership qualities and affiliation with URMUL'S embroidery initiative programme. They were

identified with the help of the records maintained by URMUL organisation.

The tools adopted for the paper were personal interviews, observations, and area survey. For collection of primary data, a focused interview schedule was formulated and field tested prior to be administered on the respondents. The variables covered in the interview schedule and observation are background information of respondent, initiation into the craft, problems and difficulties encountered, overcoming strategies, collaboration with URMUL, respondent's role as a member or leader in SHGs, income pattern, sociability, decision making, participation in community works, level of confidence, family life, future vision for herself, family and community. The respondents were interviewed individually to gather the information and the relevant data.

The method used to satisfy the study's objectives relies on qualitative analysis methods, leading to develop five case studies. The study used both primary and secondary data. Secondary data were collected from books, articles, journals, research papers, official documents and institutional websites. All the information and data collected were critically examined and described in order to answer the research objectives.

Background of Women Embroidery Artisans in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan in India

The tough terrain of Thar Desert of Rajasthan in India makes the life of women even tougher, but the journey of 'URMUL producer group of women' is quite remarkable and inspiring. This is the story of many Pakistan-oustees (Pak-oustees) women in the desert of Rajasthan. There are many Pak-oustees villages along the border area of Western Rajasthan in Thar Desert. The inhabitants of the villages were the refugees from Pakistan. After the third war between India and Pakistan, in between November 22 and December 17, 1971, lakh of people fled to

different parts of the adjacent Indian states and they were called 'refugees'. Many Pakistani oustees came to the harsh desert of Western Rajasthan too. As refugees these people were empty-handed and had no money, no assets and in the dry desert they also had no livelihood options.

These refugees were forced to stay in refugee camps at Barmer and Jaisalmer for almost 17 years. Then the government of Rajasthan allotted land to them. Though it was virgin land and had never been cultivated, gradually Pak refugee's rural households started doing agricultural works and they were dependent only on rainfed agriculture and animal husbandry. Almost every year failure of monsoon caused severe drought conditions resulting in scarcity of food, fodder and water. Frequent occurrence of drought made their lives very difficult. During these hard times they used to do labour works and some used to migrate to nearby cities to earn their livelihood. Apart from harsh climate and frequent occurrence of drought, poor quality of land and scarcity of water resources for irrigation were additional constraints. Thus, food security and subsistence were their primary concerns.

For the refugee women, embroidery activities played a prime role by contributing significantly to the household income. As far as income generation is concerned, desert folks usually prefer to do off-farm and non-farm activities like weaving, embroidery, spinning, dying, block-printing, woodwork and other handicrafts. Similarly, the only skill these Pak-refugee women had was a special kind of embroidery or Kashida namely Sindhi Kadhai, Taanka Bharat and Soufe (types of embroideries). Initially, middlemen from neighbouring districts took advantage of their situation as these women were illiterate, unorganised and were in need of money. The middlemen exploited them for a very long time by giving nominal wages for their exquisite hand embroidery.

In 1992, a developmental organisation URMUL Seemant working in the region of Western Rajasthan realised the skills of these Pak-refugee women and supported them in terms of mobilisation, skill upgradation, technical support, and national - international market linkages for their creative handicraft, also supported the women artisans from the exploitative middlemen. Women artisans started getting organised in small groups and started doing kashidakaari. Gradually these hands became skilled in their craft. Women themselves created many such groups and presently hundreds of women through their SHGs are doing embroidery work and on an average they are earning around 3000-5000 Indian Rupees (68 USD -115 USD) approximately in a month and have started getting recognition as a Kashida cluster in national and international market. It promotes an equitable distribution of income and contributes to the poverty alleviation. Handicraft provides modest livelihood to a large number of poor women and generates employment opportunities.

Now, from 1992 till 2013 it's been a long way for these Pak-refugee women. They are continuing with their traditional embroidery skills with the contemporary designs, colours and fashion. Today, the desert region has a high population of women engaged in embroidery activities for income generation. They are skilled, they embroider beautifully, and they know their traditional craft very well. They laugh, sing, and weave the threads of colours and designs simultaneously to create and produce beautiful hand embroidered garments and apparels. They work to earn money for food, fodder and fuel in order to meet the daily demands of the lives of their families.

Case Studies of Women Embroidery Artisans

Case I: Samu Bai

Samu Bai is from the village 2DO. She is 35 years old. Samu Bai belongs to the family of Pak-refugees. She began working when she was ten years old. Her paternal aunt was a very good artisan. Samu as a child used to watch the neat stitches and artistic curves of the motives on the cloth. She admired the colourful patterns her aunt created on kurtas, duppattas, saris, cushions and bags. A favourite of her aunt, Samu tried to help her in whatever way it was possible. After the school hours, she used to explain and sometimes teach the meaning of those new words that her aunt heard whenever the cluster coordinator from URMUL office came to deliver or to collect the products. Samu Bai learnt embroidery at a quick pace by the time she was thirteen or fourteen years of age. Samu Bai became expert in embroidery under the apprenticeship of her aunt. Soon she was known as a skilled artisan in demand. She is SHG leader and her handwork and knowledge made her indispensable for the URMUL coordinator. She was made Vyavasthapak (team leader) for two villages and her monthly earning now is in between 3500-4000 INR. She now says "*Kashida to hamare liye khet aur fasal hai*"; (For us this embroidery work is like fields, crops and produce.) This is the only earning source for them. They are taking care of their families from the earnings of embroidery.

Case II: Paaro Bai

Paaro Bai hails from the village Dandkala. She is 48 years old. She was one among those refugees who were forced to migrate from Umarmot district of Pakistan in 1971 Indo-Pak war. Her family settled in Dandkala village of Kolayat block of Bikaner district. When they first came to this village they were shocked as there were no trees, no shrubs, no shade, and no water. It was difficult to settle there but they had learnt to be patient. They had to survive in whatever conditions were in front of them. Life in this new country was to be lived and they worked hard to make it their home.

The skill of *kashida* (embroidery) was the only means of survival though they were exploited from the middlemen from Barmer district who were at least kind to give them work to do even in this new place. When URMUL volunteers visited their village, they showed their handicraft to them and narrated the story of their exploitation and requested them to plan for some income generating activity. URMUL understood the need and responded accordingly by starting income-generating programme of embroidery. Paaro Bai took initiatives in motivating and organising women in self-help groups. Soon the collective efforts of URMUL personnel and Pak-oustee women artisans were supported by famous designers like Laila Tayabji and graduates from National Institute of Design and other organisations in India. Gradually, Paaro Bai organised her fellow workers in village and made them aware of health, plantation and child-care. She is the team leader of two SHGs (Self-Help Groups) of her village. Paaro Bai and her group raised voices against liquor consumption and other evils exercised by men. Paaro Bai says "Hamara gaun aage badh raha hai" (our village is moving ahead, it is progressing).

Case III: Ramku Bai

Ramku Bai belongs to the village called Aduri. She is 42 years old. Like nearby villages, Ramku's village also had high rate of migration due to lack of livelihood and employment opportunities. Years back, when Ramku came to know about the progress of the women of Dandkala village, she became motivated and talked to the women of her own village about the embroidery initiative of URMUL. Ramku led a small group of women and went to meet URMUL officials with a request to associate them in income generating projects. They showed their own skills to them, impressed them and became a working group of this income generating venture.

Ramku is a founding member of her SHG. There are twenty five women in their group who

earn INR 2500 - INR 4000. Ramku Bai says that the involvement in *kashida* (embroidery) work helps them to remain in their villages rather than migrating to the cities. The greatest satisfaction for Ramku and her group members is that they work in their homes. Their own homes are their work place and they earn with dignity. An exposure to the outer world, capacity building trainings, keeping their interaction with URMUL officials, designers and buyers enabled them to see the world in a wider perspective. This experience is very exciting for them. They have got opportunities to visit State capitals and national capitals like Jaipur and Delhi. The journey with URMUL transformed the lives of all the women of the village Aduri. Now, there is a school for children in the village, and also water course. Men-folk of their village do not sit idle now; they help the women-folk, take care of the children and families, listen to their women-folk and accept their importance and roles as bread-earners.

Case IV: Kely

Kely is a 23-year old young woman. She is from the village 7AD of Pugal block. Her family migrated to India from Chachro of Pakistan with others. Her family came to Pugal because of the relatives who were allotted land there. Her father died in a road accident in 2000 when Kely was hardly ten years old. As her mother had to look after her younger siblings, Kely and her eight years old younger brother went to work in field and earned ten rupees each for the hard work of collecting peanuts or cotton from the fields. Kely could not study further. After a year, she began working along with her mother as a hand-embroiderer in URMUL's embroidery project. As an artisan, Kely makes sample designs for new products. She creates new motifs, matches colours and develops new patterns, and earns INR 3500 approximately per month. She is now confident and keeps her earning in bank and proudly operates her account. Kely is not getting married, she wants to work for a couple of years,

save more money and support her mother. She remembers the time sadly when her first earning was INR 20 only for making a *khalichi* (hand purse) but at least this money enabled her to provide them bellyful of food. She was low at work. She embroidered one *kurta* in two days for 30 rupees. Practice made her expert in embroidery and she could make three *kurtas* in a day. Every piece she embroiders is a complete artwork in itself. She loves the work she does and knows that the sample pieces she prepares are sent through courier to Delhi and other foreign cities to be accepted. She is not educated. Her formal education is only of second standard but she confidently uses words like sampling, courier, cash, design, payment, colour matching, bank, saving, road, city, cooler etc., with such ease that any listener will believe that she was educated up to at least high school level. Kely is very particular about the education of her younger brothers and sisters and wants them to get higher education. She dreams about future of her family.

Case V: Babri Bai

Babri Bai is 45 years old and a native of 2AD village. Babri and her family had to take refuge in India after the 1971 Indo-Pak war. Babri still remembers the days of extreme poverty her family had faced for many years as a refugee. She mentioned that it took quite a long time for her to accept India as her home land. Babri says that as a refugee woman, she struggled very hard against the challenges and hardships to make a better life for herself and her family.

Babri joined URMUL's embroidery project after attending an awareness camp organised by the organisation. It has been years now as she continues to work in the project. Babri is a lead embroiderer now. She is also an active member of SHG. She is a very efficient team leader. She checks the quality of each embroidered piece. She is very particular and punctual as regards completing the work in time and getting the payments of her group. There has never been

any incident of not completing the orders in time. It is quite exciting to see Babri Bai like a city woman, carrying a bag on her shoulders and shaking hands with everyone she meets. Babri Bai says the name and flag of the organisation should fly high because of their craftwork. Her commitment and dedication towards work is admirable. She feels that every girl should go to school and after the school young girls should attend the training sessions of embroidery conducted under her own supervision. She efficiently trains young girls and ensures the quality of produce prepared by the young trainees and future entrepreneurs. She also ensures proper vaccination of every child and proper care of older people of the village. She tries to inculcate self-respect as a value in every woman. She has become an excellent entrepreneur. She visits each household and inspects cleanliness and hygiene.

Findings

On the basis of five case studies of women artisans it is found that embroidery work has brought visible socio-economic changes in the lives of the poor women artisans. The major economical impact of the embroidery work is that it ensured continued work availability to the women artisans. They get timely payment of wages, thus financial security is there. Women artisans are the members of SHGs therefore, they are organised; they save small parts of their earnings and are protected from the exploitation of middleman. Women are now leading a better life; they have become independent and confident after becoming a major contributor to the household earnings and acting as change agents in the community.

The social change in their communities, gender awareness and women's equal status with men is quite visible. Heightened sense of awareness and confidence and the feeling of ownership with URMUL's livelihood initiative in the women artisans can be realised. It is fascinating to see the women of the village

without (*ghunghat*) veil. It is wonderful to see that men of the families were equally supportive to them. Many men now work in the kitchen, as their wives are busy in embroidery work. In 2DO, 7AD, Dandkala, Aduri and in many other villages of Pak-oustee in Western Rajasthan in India, the livelihood activities have created platforms for women to move towards their empowerment, to speak for their betterment. On analysis of these women doing embroidery in many small groups, one can realise the meaning and importance of empowerment. They feel that they are also part of the process of income generation, they are also professionals and that they are part of the mainstream economic activity as a craft-producer. These women enjoy their freedom. This develops in them a capacity of leadership, negotiation, participation and decision making.

It is clearly visible that the status of these women artisans increased in their families due to their major contribution in increasing the incomes of family and their exposure of the outer world and their capacity to deal with it with confidence. All women are members of different Self-Help Groups and doing regular savings from their income for a better future. Their small

children are getting benefits of 'Integrated Child Development Scheme' for health, nutrition and early childhood education. Their girls are now studying in the village schools with boys which was restricted earlier. URMUL has not only revived the traditional craft and empowered women but also developed the area as an embroidery cluster in the last twenty years.

The cases strongly advocate and emphasise the need of women empowerment through livelihood generation and regular capacity building for their socio-economic development and to become the breadwinners, trendsetters, and role models.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that these women artisans together with the facilitation of URMUL, have already entered in the ongoing process of empowerment leading to a better future. There is a poem expressing, "*There is a serpent on your chest, open your eyes to reality, leave the false illusions*". The poor women artisans have identified their capabilities and experiencing self-reliance. They are becoming self-sufficient through their artisanal works.

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