

# Unsung Heroes Creating Livelihoods in Rural India



Artisans at work at Khangabok village in Thoubal district of Manipur

The second largest employment provider in India, handloom and handicraft sector is the most neglected and undermined by policy makers. It is only social will of some individuals and organisations, the sector is witnessing a transformation from within.

**Mohd Mustaqim** brings to fore unsung heroes of the sector

**A** sense of satisfaction was clearly visible on her face. With an average daily earning of Rs 400 to 600, Laharinbai, 38, was today able to send her 12 year old son Prem and 9 year old daughter Janki to the village school in remote Bajga village in Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh. A transformation

from traditional weaving to a skilled artisan, though not very easy, resulted in regular and modest income for her family.

Belonging to a socially and economically backward community, Lahrinbai came into touch with a local not-for-profit organisation, WomenWeave in the second half of the year 2011. Inherited from her ancestors, earlier she had been doing traditional



Women engaged in crafting Carpets in a Rajasthan Village

weaving in the village. After getting training from WomenWeave, she is now a skilled artisan who does weaving at her home. It fetches a modest earning to her. "Today I am able to spend easily on the daily needs of my family," she says.

### WomenWeave, Madhya Pradesh

With an aim to connect maximum number of women from the socially and economically backward communities, to provide them employment and to revive traditional weaving, Sally Holkar founded WomenWeave Charitable Trust in 2003 in Maheshwar district of Madhya Pradesh. As the business grew, the Trust established another training centre in 2009 at the remote Bajag villages in Dindori district of the state. The project has now established good business in both Indian and overseas markets.



“WomenWeave aims at connecting maximum number of women from the socially and economically backward communities, to provide them employment and to revive traditional weaving. Founded in Maheshwar, MP in 2003, today we have set up two another units at Dindori and Balaghat as well as The Handloom School for skill development”

### Nivedita Rai

Executive Director- Gudi Mudi Khadi Project, WomenWeave

Thus, a failing traditional craft is being revived and traditional tribal weavers earn much more than ever before. In 2015, a similar project has been started in far eastern, MP in Balaghat district.

The first challenge before WomenWeave was to establish credibility with downtrodden and disenfranchised tribals. Once the tribals were able to trust the project, they also began to improve

their learning curve and gradually learned spinning and weaving up to international standards. This was a slow, but steady process as they were completely ignorant of advanced techniques and equipment. The yarn they learned to spin on Amba Charkas led to shrinkage and breakage that took time to overcome. When those challenges were overcome, the project began to make inroads in both national and international markets.

Design inputs from textile graduates of National Institute of Design were a big help in creating products acceptable in the international market. But the native skills and designs of the local tribals brought much to the saleability of the products.

“Getting skilled weavers with advance techniques was a big

challenge. Thus, WomenWeave started The Handloom School in Maheshwar to impart training to young weavers for six months period. These weavers are taught barefoot business techniques, use of smartphones for business dealings, barefoot English, Colour and Weaving theories, Costing and pricing of products and many other subjects which enable them to deal directly with their



Women engaged with their livelihood in the outskirts of Bangalore

markets,” Nivedita Rai, Executive Director- Gudi Mudi Khadi Project, WomenWeave.

The programme attracts traditional weavers between the age of 18 to 27. After graduating, the students return to their native places where they continue to weave special orders allocated by The Handloom School. Now, they are free to deal directly with their buyers. Many of them have already formed small clusters of independent 'business weavers' and are getting good income.

Promoted through numerous exhibitions, social media and local sale at Maheshwar, the Gudi Mudi Khadi products of Maheshwar have developed a large following and steady markets both in India and abroad. The products are expensive, by normal Indian



“So far, our craft based skill development programmes have benefited over 1,000 beneficiaries, majority from marginalised groups such as persons with disability, women rescued from a life of trafficking, rural women and youth who would not have access to alternate income generating opportunities”

**Mayura Balasubramanian**  
Founder and CEO, Craftizen

standards, therefore they attract a select market both in India and abroad.

In the initial stages, WomenWeave raised funds from The Dallas Foundation (USA), from the Tata Trust, from HSBC Bank and from the MP government. After successful journey, the Gudi Mudi Khadi project is self sustaining today. However, the newest project at Balaghat requires funding. For this, WomenWeave is approaching

many different government and non government sources to find the required funding. The Handloom School is presently funded by Tata Trust.

Highlighting future plans, Rai says, “WomenWeave plans to expand production in Khadi through various clusters where there are economically and socially deprived women willing to learn and work with Amba Charka spinning and weaving. The location of these clusters will become clear with time and experience.”

#### **Craftizen, Karnataka**

Similarly, another initiative, Craftizen Foundation was founded in Bangalore in 2014 with a vision to preserve and evolve Indian craft skills so that they remain an integral part of cultural fabric. “We focus on craft based skill development and

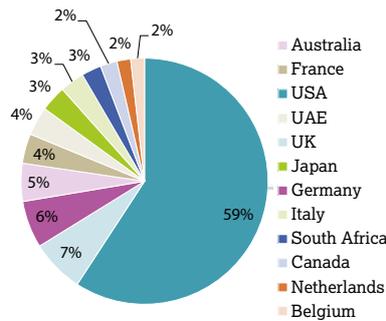
income enhancement, coupled with strategic interventions and business acumen support to enable sustainable livelihoods,” says founder and CEO, Mayura Balasubramanian.

In 2013, the new companies act was outlined along with the CSR clause, which would bring in funds for the development sector. It provided a good opportunity to Craftizen to get corporates involved in donning the mantle of ‘patrons’

and supporting the handicrafts sector. Further, in mid 2013 the organisation won a business plan competition organised by NABARD as part of their rural innovations fund and this provided the support and impetus to get started on the venture.

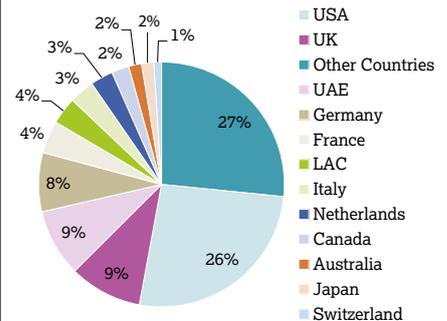
In the first year, Craftizen focused on building portfolio of products and partnerships, and pitched a lot of proposals! Mayura explored different interventions

### Country wise export share of Handlooms



Source: Export Promotion Council of Handicrafts

### Country wise export share of Handicrafts



as well as rural locations and over 75 percent of all beneficiaries till date have been women.

### Jaipur Rugs Foundation

Working with 40,000 artisans, belonging to socially and economically vulnerable class in over 600 villages in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand makes Jaipur Rugs Foundation a stellar example of social entrepreneurship in India.

Founded as a not-for-profit organisation in 2004 by Nand Kishore Chaudhary, the Foundation forms an integral part of the Jaipur Rugs Company which is the largest manufacturer and exporter of handmade carpets. It is exporting these handmade carpets to more than 45 countries such as in Europe, United States, Canada, Australia, Russia, Middle East and Asian market among various other countries.

The foundation works under two different verticals, entrepreneurship development and social development. "If we can develop entrepreneurship at the grassroots level, we can disrupt the global supply chain. It starts with skilling the unskilled people through our skilled development programme to provide them



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**Yash Ranga**  
Jaipur Rugs Foundation

in the crafts sector and met many experts and organisations.

Today, Craftizen has donors such as Accenture India, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd, Confederation of Indian Industry and Deloitte India. It has as many as 15 craft based NGOs as on-ground implementing partners. It also received a grant from Harvard University's South Asia Institute and Tata Trusts, which enabled them to come up with the innovative 'Finishing School for Artisans', a customised curriculum designed to make artisans market-savvy.

"So far, our craft based skill development programmes have benefited over 1,000 beneficiaries, majority from marginalised groups such as persons with disability, women rescued from a life of trafficking, rural women and

youth who would not have access to alternate income generating opportunities," Mayura says.

The project locations are centered around Bangalore, Hyderabad and Kolkata and include peri-urban and rural areas around these cities. The beneficiary split is 40 percent urban and 60 percent rural and peri-urban. The organisation also supports nearly 200 traditional artisans spread across the country. Its design interventions have enabled artisans' access to contemporary designs that are more acceptable to the modern day urban consumer. Till date it has generated income of approximately Rs 50 lakhs for the several craft groups it works with.

In its skill development programmes, it has a focus on women beneficiaries, both in urban

livelihood,” says Yash Ranga of Jaipur Rugs Foundation.

The Foundation aims at training, developing and upgrading new artisans at the grassroots, then engaging them with sustainable business. Considering the agony due to intense caste and gender discrimination, the foundation started nurturing the traditional artistic capabilities with them, exploring their potential and linking them with the global market. To eliminate the menace of middlemen from supply chain, from training to providing work to connecting global market, everything is directly provided to the doorstep of the artisans.

The Foundation was initially funded by the profits of Jaipur Rugs Company. “We got some funding for skill development from the Ministry of Rural Development



Women getting training at The Handloom School at Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh



“ Set up in 2006 in West Bengal, Kadam addresses the issues of rural artisans who were semi-skilled and living below-poverty-line. The aim was to reduce poverty and also stop migration of rural artisans to cities. By 2011, we were working in two districts and now in 4 districts. We have touched and been catalysts in turning around lives of more than 600 artisans ”

**Payal Nath**  
Co-Founder, Kadam

and Panchayati Raj under its flagship scheme, Swarnjayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana. It was about developing 4,000 artisans in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. Currently, we have partnered with a World Bank project, JEEViKA in Bihar. The partnership would impart training to 2,000 women artisans in the biggest naxal hit areas of the state,” explains Yash.

Entrepreneurship development

and social development evolved as two different verticals of the Foundation. In the 600 villages where it is working, majority of them have no access to healthcare services, education and government schemes. Thus, the Foundation started artisans providing education to women artisans who had never been to schools. Under this, they get basic understanding of functional literacy

and life skills so that it eases their work operations.

#### **Kadam, West Bengal**

Set up in 2006 in West Bengal, Kadam addresses the issues of rural artisans who were semi-skilled and living below-poverty-line. The aim was to reduce poverty and also stop migration of rural artisans to cities. By 2011, it was working in two districts and now in 4 districts of West Bengal. “We have touched and been catalysts in turning around lives of more than 600 artisans,” says Payal Nath, Co-Founder, Kadam.

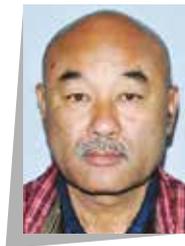
The modus operandi starts with the skill level analysis of the rural clusters. And then a matchmaking of this happens with the market requirements which are also analysed and studied



before any kind of training starts. “We offer a turn key solution – right from training the rural communities mostly artisans in the right way to creating market linkages via our market platform. About 600 artisans have come out of poverty and got livelihood solutions on a sustainable basis working with us, says Payal.

Every skilled artisan might not have the skills of admin, finance or production management. And therefore, Kadam identifies amongst the clusters, their respective skill sets, making their groups and then honing those skills to ensure the entire chain of activities related to making a good handmade product.

Once any cluster can produce high quality products, the market itself comes to them. “Currently we



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### **Bharjit Singh**

Chief functionary, ODESH

sell through 20-25 retail shows pan India. That gives access to local retails of the various cities we do exhibitions in. These get added to our database of retail clients whom we could sell to before the rural communities are ready to sell in bulk to bigger clients, informs Payal.

### **Organization for Development of Economic and Self Help (ODESH), Manipur**

Associated with over 100 Kauna Craft Artisans based at Khangabok Village in Thoubal district of Manipur, ODESH has been working towards livelihood enhancement for the poor and supports groups of rural artisans for an inclusive growth. It focuses on taking part and contributing in eliminating poverty, reducing unemployment, enhancing livelihoods and forging partnership with like-minded agencies.

“ODESH started in 2001 by way of meeting rural poor and listening to their miseries, livelihood issues, aspirations, mobilising them into producer groups in the principle of self help, linking them to banks and other financial institutions for working capital and building a common platform from where they can feel, share and help each other,” says Bharjit Singh, chief functionary, ODESH.

Having understood livelihood

circumstances of artisans, ODESH first focused on imparting basic skill training to artisans with the support from NABARD. Initially, by having only 30 days basic skill training, artisans were finding difficulties in bringing out perfect products matching market expectation. Markets were demanding better products with better shape and design. Over the period, these challenges were overcome.

“We help rural poor generate livelihoods by providing them 90 days skill training, mobilising them into producer groups of 10 artisans, linking them to banks for working capital, giving them work order, collection of finished goods at their doorstep, marketing of the products and encashment of payments after having sold the product,” Bharjit says. As of now, there are over 100 artisans families directly getting livelihood through Kauna Craft profession at an average of Rs 40,000 to 50,000 per annum. The organisation is planning to increase Kauna Craft Cluster size from 100 to 300 members and increased average cash flow income of artisan family upto Rs 120,000 per annum by 2022.

### **Darbar Sahitya Sansad, Odisha**

Darbar Sahitya Sansad (DSS) was established as a literary organisation 34 years ago.

Gradually it started focusing on social development. With a focus on empowering rural women, over the period, several women empowerment programmes were started. At present, DSS operates in Khordha, Puri, Kandhmal and Balasore districts of Odisha.

“For empowering rural women, we are focusing on livelihood creation by providing training, credit, entrepreneurship training, market linkages. We conduct all sorts of activities which create livelihoods for them. Every month we are creating livelihoods for 100 to 150 women,” says Kedareshwar Choudhury, Chief Executive, DSS.



“Over the last decade, we have created over 8,000 women entrepreneurs in handicrafts, agriculture, vegetable cultivation, dairy among other rural livelihood. Around 800 women entrepreneurs are engaged with handicrafts only. They further provide employment to the rural women in their respective areas”

**Kedareshwar Choudhury**  
Chief Executive, Darbar Sahitya Sansad

“Over the last decade, we have created over 8,000 women entrepreneurs in handicrafts, agriculture, vegetable cultivation, dairy among other rural livelihood. Around 800 women entrepreneurs are engaged with handicrafts only. Further, they provide employment to the rural women in their respective areas,” he adds.

For social development, a number of challenges came in the way, from funds, staff to infrastructure. For this, DSS started mobilising the government funding as well as outside funding. There are marketing hubs in and around such as Bhubaneswar, Pipli, Puri and Konark which

register good number of tourists footfall. People are convinced with Odisha handicrafts easily due to its popularity. Some artisans do their own marketing and sell their products by their own while the organisation has separate a marketing unit. “We have also promoted around 300 handicraft cooperatives. They also provide end to end services in the value chain,” Choudhury further says.

DSS is expanding the similar activities from coastal Odisha to the hilly and tribal areas of western Odisha for the farmers, schedule castes and schedule tribes.

Despite providing second largest employment in India,

the handloom and handicraft sector is the most neglected and undermined sector. As per 6th Economic Census - 2013-14, there were 1.87 million establishments with 4.2 million employees are working in the sector across the country. However, an industry report estimates that 11.65 million Indians were engaged in the sector in 2013 which is expected to touch 17.79 million by 2022.

Among the States, with 17.62 percent, West Bengal had the largest share in total number of Handicraft and Handloom establishments followed by Uttar Pradesh with 16.55 percent, Odisha with 7.8 percent, Andhra Pradesh with 7.54 percent and Tamil Nadu with 6.8 percent.

Handloom is predominantly a rural phenomenon as 87 percent of weaver households are located in the villages while only remaining 13 percent are located in the urban areas. The sector needs special attention from the government, from the market and from the entrepreneurs. **R&M**