



I am happy to publish the second issue of AIACA newsletter. Our engagement with the handicraft and handloom sectors through cluster development interventions as well as phased customized business support to our Members gives us the opportunity to address challenges at multiple levels both with a micro and a macro approach.

Our everyday work in the field is both inspiring and educative. We strive, fail and succeed and continue to learn, review and rethink. There are conflicts and reconciliations at all levels of work that make us grow and add dynamism to what we do.

It is often difficult to decide on stories to be featured in the newsletter because for us every intervention and experience is equally important. We hope to share them all as we go along. In this issue we have highlighted stories from Kashmir, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, some of the states very rich in handicrafts.

In our guest column, Mr. Shishir Ranjan Dash, Sr. Consultant of Tata Trusts has contributed an article on “Is investment important for craft sector?”. We thank Mr. Dash for his article and invite our readers to contribute to this column too.

Enjoy reading!

Madhura Dutta
Executive Director

Enterprise Support Program



Stories from the Field



Policy & Advocacy Initiatives



Guest Column



Highlights

AIACA's Enterprise Support Program (ESP) addresses challenges faced by craft enterprises, through business development and capacity building solutions thus promoting sustainable livelihoods for artisans.

UNDYING SPIRIT OF KASHMIRI WOMEN

In March 2016, our team conducted an impact assessment study for Godfrey Phillips' Amodini project based in Srinagar. The Project was implemented by J&K Help Foundation with the aim of providing income to women in the J&K valley through training in stitching and Aari embroidery. More than 800 women have been trained in Aari embroidery, tailoring and fashion designing. The training is imparted by master artisans themselves and managed by women previously trained at the local training centre. Over 200 women now possess good skills and are able to produce products fit for the market. Most of these women work at the production centre set up under the project at Inderhama as well as other production houses. The women, once exploited by the traders, are able to earn fair wages from the work they carry out at the production centre.

We personally visited women who had been trained through the project to examine how the training had impacted them. A lot of these women came from families directly or indirectly affected by the insurgency in Kashmir. It was heart breaking to hear stories of their family members being killed, jailed and beaten up. The training helped them find a support system in each other and gain a means of livelihood. Their personalities grew to become confident and positive.



About 5 groups of women came together to set up boutiques where they stitch garments for the local market. Limited by low capital, these groups struggled to sustain their boutiques. Their determination and perseverance was inspiring, to say the least.

One such boutique we visited was called 'Modern Boutique'. It was set up in Gousia's home since she wasn't allowed to work in a commercial space. Gousia, a bright girl, couldn't stop chattering or contain her excitement at meeting us. Once not allowed to step out without a burqa, she now only had a scarf tied around her head, her eyes shining and cheeks pink. Gousia is a post graduate in commerce but couldn't find a job once she completed her education like most other Kashmiris. She has great plans to make the boutique a success and to make herself and her partners financially independent. She told us about her ideas to create new designs and advertise the boutique to get more customers. "We need more sewing machines" she told us "and we try to keep aside Rupees 500 a month so that we can buy one". We were served tea and cake in beautiful china as we sat down to hear the stories of these strong women and how they proved to be a pillar of strength for their family members.

VARANASI WEAVER'S STORY

Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Society, aka Varanasi Weavers Hub, is bringing new hope to the highly exploited and marginalized small handloom weavers of Benaras. With our continuous engagement in the field we come across inspiring stories that kindle the motivation and the pride for continuing this age old tradition.

Gopal Pal, a small handloom weaver from Ramnagar cluster of Varanasi has been working as a wage earner weaver for *grihasthas* (Traders) for over four decades. He and his children operate three looms that they own. He came in contact with Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Society (VWAS) through the business skills and design trainings that it organized. It was the beginning of his self-realization that he probably possessed the design and the business knowledge for starting something of his own but lacked the confidence and motivation to take risks to start his own work.

Inspired by a series of engagements and interactions with the Varanasi Weavers Hub he got the confidence to test his capabilities. Based on his learning from the design exposure workshops and trainings, he designed a saree with his own investment in raw material and loom set-up. Owing to his honest nature, he requested a meeting with his master weaver at the VWAS office and convinced him that he wanted to design his own sarees. Thereafter, he has got an order of 6 sarees from CCIC @Rs.15,000 per saree. It took six months for him to receive an order. However, his perseverance paid off and this experience has given him an added boost to design more products. He has now started his own business too.

Motivated to take the next step, he said: *'I have spent my whole life weaving, yet find myself stuck in the same situation. For the first time in my life, I am putting my money and creative sensibilities to weave a new design. I believe that this is a new beginning to my life as a weaver'*.

He believes that the Varanasi Weavers Hub can act as a platform to build the confidence of weavers as well as support them in fair business practices. He has also joined the recently established Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Society as a Board member.



BAMBOO CLUSTER IN ODISHA

AIACA has been working with a Bamboo cluster of over 80 Dalit artisans in Balasore in Odisha for the last one and half years with the aim of organizing the artisans into a collective for long term business competitiveness, skill development for producing diverse products, design innovation and development of product range with vegetable colours, financial literacy training, and direct access to market.

These Dalit artisans are highly marginalised and had mostly engaged in menial jobs. Their bamboo weaving skills were used to make rudimentary baskets and basic household utility products. Never did they imagine that their skills could be honed to a level that they would experience appreciation and also earn income from it.

Mobilization of these artisans to join our initiative was both challenging and critical. Participatory learning processes, regular community meetings, exposure trainings on market and business possibilities with upgradation of skills, hands-on training on new product development and basic costing-pricing exercises have been the key to generating aspirations among the communities to grow as successful bamboo crafts based business. Currently, 8 SHGs work regularly on production of varied bamboo products and have received their first ever direct access to urban market such as in Delhi exhibitions. They have also started producing for export markets in Finland.

They are now ready to take their next step for further improving their skills, products and markets.



CRAFT-BASED SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN RAJASTHAN

Since September 2014, AIACA has been providing eco-friendly, craft-based skill development to local women in the tribal cluster of Salumber in Udaipur (Rajasthan). Working primarily as wage labourers, most women did not have a substantial source of income. AIACA worked with the local NGO 'Vishvas Sansthan' to train 700 tribal women in the craft of recycling scrap fabric and waste paper to produce paper bags, jewellery and other marketable accessories.

The first round of workshop was conducted by previous Craftmark member 'Jansandesh'. The workshop successfully trained artisans in producing paper bags from scrap newspaper; these are now regularly purchased from them by the local market. Additionally, key master trainers were identified and trained in design and product development. Linked with the ICICI RSETI, SHGs run by these women received post-training support in the form of credit and market linkages.



POLICY INITIATIVE WITH HANDLOOM WEAVERS AND ARTISANS IN VARANASI

Varanasi in recent times has been one of the most vibrant centres of policy consultations and government interventions. In the past 2 years, AIACA has intensively engaged with the local government to significantly increase the uptake of government schemes and social entitlements for the betterment of smaller weavers.

More than 2200 weavers have obtained access to social benefits and entitlements through linkages with government schemes such as Weavers card, Artisan Card, Aadhar card, Rashtriya Swasth Bima Yojana (RSBY), bank account under Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), pension scheme, etc. Financial linkages have also been established with banks (Union bank of India and Kashi Gomti Grameen Bank). The local textile department has been extremely active in supporting this process.

Through collective initiatives at the ground level with our local partner, Human Welfare Association, many of the smaller weavers (also part of our beneficiary groups) have received recognition and awards and have had the opportunity to showcase their products on national platforms in presence of the Honourable Prime Minister himself. Empowered to stand up for their rights and entitlements, the weavers have started demanding effective implementation of the Common Facility Centres, and Geographical Indication.

Through the proactive facilitation of our local partner, Human Welfare Association, other handicrafts of UP, namely, Sandstone Art of Chunar, Soft Stone undercut work of Ramnagar and Jute Wall Hanging crafts of Varanasi are in the process of applying for Geographic Indications. It is by itself exemplary that Varanasi alone shall be the home of 10 Geographic Indications.

These efforts shall go a long way in promoting the welfare of the weavers and artisans of Uttar Pradesh, which as per the provisional results of the 6th Economic Census, is among the top 5 states in number of handicraft/handloom establishments. About 29 % of India's artisans are in Uttar Pradesh and therefore development of this sector is potentially significant.

UNION MINISTER- NAJMA HEPTULLAH INTERACTS WITH WEAVERS FROM VARANASI WEAVERS & ARTISANS SOCIETY

In the context of the launch of the revamped USTAAD scheme, the Union Minister for Minority Affairs Dr. Najma Heptulla visited Varanasi on 30th April 2016 to meet the handloom weavers of Varanasi and interact with them. Amongst them were our project beneficiaries and members of the Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Society. In order to improve the degrading conditions of minority community of weavers in Varanasi, robust implementation of the USTAAD scheme was proposed. Facilitated by our local partner, Human Welfare Association (HWA), members of the Varanasi Weavers and Artisans Society participated in this event and interacted with the minister.



IS INVESTMENT IMPORTANT FOR THE CRAFT SECTOR?

The Craft Sector is India's largest source of employment after agriculture. According to official estimates, more than 11 million people are engaged in craft production. While there is no census data available on number of crafts people, unofficial sources indicate that more than 200 million people are earning their livelihood from handicraft and handloom activities. Most of these artisans are from poor, marginalized communities and women constitute more than half of the population. Besides employment opportunities, the sector also has great economic potential, with exports of more than INR 9000 crore and domestic consumption of INR 14500 crore during 2014-15. However, the sector is not considered as an emerging industry beyond its cultural and aesthetic values.

The sector as a whole is grappling with many paradoxes. At the macro level, budget allocation and investments are negligible. Today a large quantum of CSR fund is available for development activities; however a very meagre amount is spent on craft sector development. Many agencies believe that the craft sector is a sinking industry and investment may not yield the desired result. Similarly at the cluster level young artisans feel that their hereditary profession is going to be non-remunerative and are unsustainable and prefer looking for alternative livelihood options.

It has been proved by a number of initiatives such as the Self Employed Women's Association, Urmul, Jawaja experiment, WomenWeave Charitable Trust, etc. that handicraft and handloom can be profitable businesses. The key to most of these successful initiatives is the introduction of market led innovative designs and preparing the artisans to face changing market needs. In the contemporary world, ways of doing business have transformed manifold. Therefore, artisans should also be given the opportunity to advance their technical, business and networking skills.

I recently visited The Handloom School, a project by WomenWeave Charitable Trust in Maheswar, Madhya Pradesh supported by Tata Trusts, providing entrepreneurial skills to young weavers. I was amazed by the rigor of the course and quality norms that are followed at each stage of the project. During our discussions Ms. Sally Holkar, CEO of the Trust mentioned that the school is an innovative initiative to make handloom a profitable, fulfilling, sustainable and dignified income-earning activity in rural India. In this school young handloom weavers from various regions of India live, work and learn together. They are learning to share designs and pictures with peers and buyers using smartphones, connect with clients globally by using social media and understand their requirements over Skype. They are taught to converse in English with buyers confidently and manage their businesses smartly. This collaborative experience backed by the traditional knowledge and practice of weaving is transformational and can be replicated.

Similarly Tata Trusts is setting up a Craft Design and Innovative Hub in Odisha, which will support local artisans with resources and collaboration opportunities and provide an enabling environment to earn a decent livelihood. It will build in sustainability by facilitating collaboration with design institutes, organising trainings for more artisans by connecting them to master craft persons, facilitating market linkages with e-commerce platforms that will give them greater exposure, and so on. It plans to build a network of craft pilot models and all the craft-based interventions in the region will then be linked to the craft hub.

A developing country like India has a comparative advantage in this sector due to its diverse cultural traditions, distinct designs and products, and availability of quality local raw materials. The production of craft materials carries an inherent advantage for its producers, such as the possibility of working from home on a flexible schedule. Additionally, artisans need very little start-up capital with high degree of autonomy in operating and managing the business. On the other hand, these poor families are afraid of taking risks as they have a very small resource base. Such challenges require a holistic approach to the problem with special focus on market led designs and business management skills. It will help them to achieve a sustainable livelihood as well as dignity in work and society. Hence, investing in the sector and integrating the poor and vulnerable craft communities into the mainstream would positively impact the economic landscape and sustainable development goal of the country.

-Shishir Ranjan Dash (Senior Consultant)
TATA Trusts

HIGHLIGHTS

VARANASI WEAVER RECEIVES EXIM BANK SUPPORT THROUGH AIACA

Varanasi weaver Mustaqeem successfully qualified the Export- Import Bank (EXIM) due diligence and has received a loan of Rupees 20 lakhs to scale up his business through infrastructure development.

CEO OF RBS VISITS AIACA'S TODA ARTISANS IN CHENNAI

Ross McEwan, CEO and Elaine Arden, Chief HR Officer, The Royal Bank of Scotland, UK took time from their busy schedule in India to engage with AIACA's project in Tamil Nadu supported by RBS Foundation India on 18th March 2016 in Chennai. AIACA's journey and achievements with the Toda and Lambadi embroidery artisans were highly appreciated as there has been a 150% increase in the revenue of the local artisan based Societies and almost 300% increase in the average monthly income of the actual producers over the last 4 years!

Ross and Elaine also engaged with the artisans, interacted with Sheela, CEO of Shalom Welfare Society working with the Toda artisans and inaugurated the repository of the revived designs of the Todas!

BRITISH HIGH COMMISSIONER'S VISIT TO THE VARANASI WEAVERS AND ARTISANS SOCIETY

On 1st May 2016, Sir Dominic Asquith, the British High Commissioner to India, along with the DFID team, visited our Varanasi Weavers Hub, the social enterprise we have set up within the last 2 years with the mission of rejuvenating and promoting the authentic Varanasi weaves and facilitating direct access of the marginalized but highly skilled handloom weavers to a fair share of diverse market channels, fair prices and due recognition. The Hub also continues to support the smaller weavers with design innovation, capital, and social benefits through government schemes.

The British High Commissioner interacted with the local team, the weavers themselves and wrote in the comments book: "*Both a fascinating and an uplifting experience and set of discussions. I am full of praise for what you do.*"

AIACA COLLABORATES WITH WOMEN ON WINGS

Women on Wings (WoW) co-creates jobs for women in rural India by sharing expertise with and providing consultancy to Indian social entrepreneurs. Through its partnership with AIACA WoW will be extending enterprise development support to grassroots Craftmark members working with women.

AIACA PARTNERSHIP WITH AURA HERBAL

Aura Herbal Textile Ltd, a leading manufacturer of herb dyed organic clothing has partnered with AIACA to promote the use of chemical free herbal and natural dyes amongst craft based enterprises and thereby helping them improve their market competitiveness, inter alia, by meeting global standard compliances.

Herbal Dyes Foundation (promoted by Aura Herbal) will support Craftmark members with the necessary training to use herbal dyes and supply it them at discounted rates.

AIACA PARTNERS WITH THE DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION

Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) is a not-for profit organisation that works to find solutions to bridge the digital divide. Through its flagship eNGO programme, DEF will be extending digital services to Craftmark members. These will help grassroots craft organisations gain visibility in the crowded digital world, help in fundraising, call for partnerships and build networks.