

JRF: Building Community Leadership through Craftsmanship

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Choosing young women weavers, who show promise and who have a thirst for knowledge, as Bunker Sakhis, is an attempt to recognize the potential of women to flourish in business

TUCKED AWAY IN SOME OF THE MOST REMOTE corners of the country, there lives a community of artisans, who produce some of India's finest carpets through the age-old craft of hand-weaving, a practice that is, however, on the verge of extinction. Jaipur Rugs Foundation (JRF) was started in 2004 with the desire to conserve this craftsmanship. JRF is an attempt to give these artisans, the creators of handmade rugs, the opportunity to reach their full potential, have a voice in decisions that affect them, and a chance to live and work with dignity.

WHO WE ARE

Begun by NK Chaudhary, in 2004, as a non-profit organization, JRF

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believes in catalyzing sustainable livelihoods for all artisans engaged in the entire carpet value chain and connecting them to the global market. JRF reaches out to people in remote rural areas and establishes strong linkages with marginalized communities, focusing predominantly on women, with the aim of making the practice of rug-weaving go beyond a mere income-generating mechanism to a sustainable livelihood, striving to help them not only to weave rugs but also their own lives. Interventions are guided by first engaging with these communities, followed by developing and nurturing their creative capacities, and then sustaining these as part of a larger ecosystem.

PURPOSE

The purpose of JRF is closely connected to the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, whereby the significance of creating sustainable market-based solutions for the disempowered has been comprehended. There are myriad factors that force a subaltern population to remain confined to the vicious cycle of poverty. In a country that is predominantly dependent on agriculture and the

sector's limitation in providing round-the-year income, people are looking for alternative sources of livelihood such as construction work and large-scale migration.

Rug-weaving: The practice of rug-weaving in itself does not demand massive infrastructure-building and allows the individual to acquire this traditional skill at his/her doorstep. It is flexible enough to enable artisans to earn a sustainable livelihood working from home, without investing more time, effort or resources to complete a task. Instead, they get paid regularly for their participation and the work done. Furthermore, this activity also addresses the issue of widespread migration in villages, which occurs seasonally but year after year as a consequence of unsustainable livelihood options such as labour of different forms.

SOCIO-DEVELOPMENT MODEL OF JRF

Geographic presence: (MAP) JRF is currently working in five different states, namely, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand. The work is supported by a core team of development professionals based at Jaipur and many field

functionaries spread across different locations (mostly rural and partially urban). Several interns and volunteers from various academic institutions are constantly involved in spearheading the many activities undertaken by the foundation.

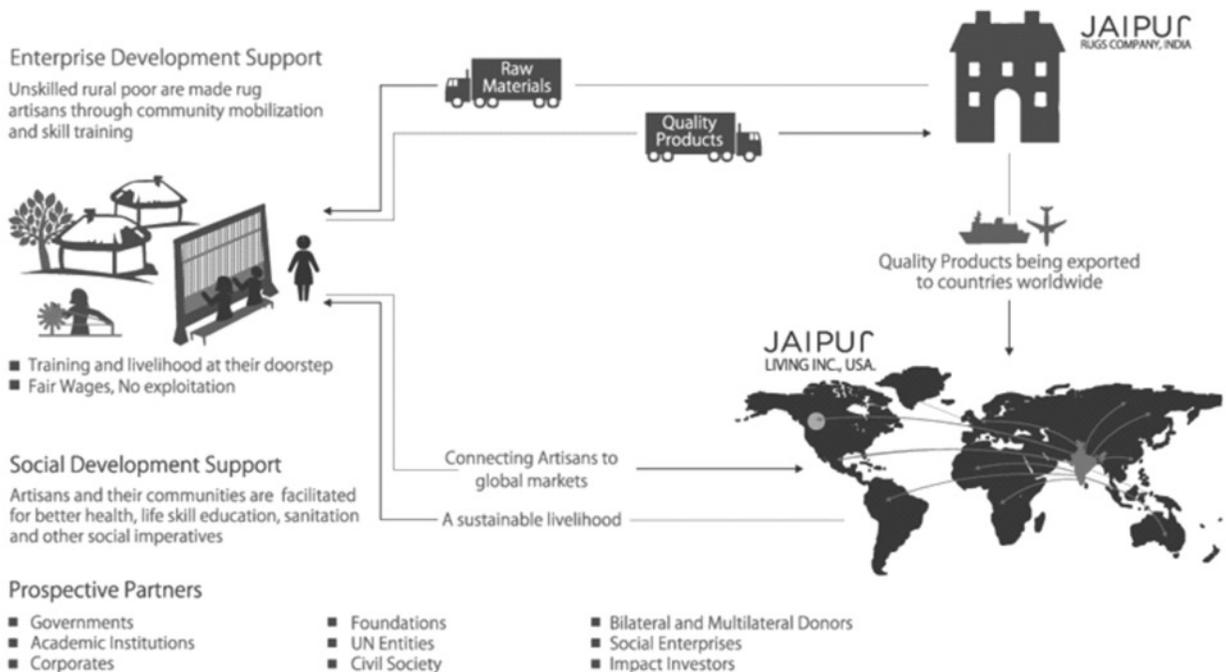
INITIATIVE BY JRF IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE BRITISH COUNCIL

Young Women Social Entrepreneurship Programme

JRF and British Council, in partnership with Diageo, launched this programme with the aim of providing entrepreneurship education to rural artisans. The training targets women artisans between 20 and 35 years, and are trained to be 'Master Trainers'. Through these Master Trainers' the training aims at reaching a growing body of communities interested in social entrepreneurship.

JRF started this initiative in 2014 by mobilizing over 100 women weavers from Rajasthan and organizing workshops needed to help them understand the rugs value-chain better. The training received a footfall of 104 artisans, between 18 and 35 years; 26 of

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these were chosen as spinners and 78 as weavers and given further training. The intent was to broaden their perspective about rug weaving (rather than being concerned only with weaving the way they do), to be able to look at the bigger picture, explore the global journey starting from the artisans' doorstep to the customers, and to take up higher responsibilities with respect to quality supervision, waste

minimization, error reduction, etc. Gradually, the expectation is that these women emerge as grass-roots entrepreneurs, managing a specific component of the rug supply chain.

Quintessentially, JRF concentrates on involving unemployed and unskilled women, living in rural villages and provide them training in the craft of rug-weaving. Once the

women transform into working artisans, they get an opportunity to integrate with Jaipur Rugs' 'inclusive development model'. The subsequent phase is to deliver technical training and augment their skills and knowledge through up-gradation. This completes the skill-building facet of transforming women artisans, who by then have earned economic independence, working from home.

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BUNKAR SAKHI LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAMME OF JRF

The Bunkar Sakhi Leadership Training Programme was started as an experiment in August 2014, wherein women artisans were to be identified as local community quality supervisors.

A celebrated art form across the world, Indian handicrafts powers much of the country's export business. These crafts are passed on generation after generation with individual villages emerging as having special skills that are traditionally transferred from master to student.

The sad truth, however, is that these craftspeople have, for centuries, remained underpaid and under-celebrated and been confined within the same trade circles. The result of such gross negligence has been a steady reluctance of future generations

to take up these art forms. Often, families that have practiced these art forms for generations refuse to allow their children to continue the craft because of the perceived lack of dignity in such work.

In an attempt to recognize master craftsmen and the potential of women in business, JRF started the Bunkar Sakhi Programme in partnership with British Council. Through this programme, young women weavers, with a thirst for more knowledge, are chosen for managerial positions and further trained to develop their skills.

In order to identify master craftsmen/master weavers, who have the potential to grow, JRF engages weavers through a Weaver Engagement Programme in which they are given the opportunity to visit the Head Office, where they can see, first-hand, the finished carpets that have been woven by their own hands. This experience helps to instill in them pride in their work.

During these two-day programmes, we identify potential women weavers. We, then, encourage them and their families, to work with JRF as Bunkar Sakhis, whose job is to ensure that carpets are of good quality, are well-designed and delivered on time.

OBJECTIVE

The Bunkar Sakhi Programme aims at developing leadership skills of women so that they can become good decision-makers, not only in business but also at home and in the village. Women who have never spoken up before are now being taken seriously by their family members and society.

This initiative gives new hope for the younger generations of women, who do not want to weave at home. A new door of possibilities has opened up for them. Women who work as Bunkar Sakhis can preserve the dying art of carpet weaving in India, by becoming professional trainers who travel across India to teach the art of carpet weaving. Thus, they become change-agents in alleviating poverty in our society.

This training by the Bunkar Sakhis helps weavers to increase their capacity so that they become financially stronger than just the typical weavers.

THE ROLE OF A BUNKAR SAKHI

A Bunkar Sakhi is a quality supervisor, who visits every loom in her village, places orders and

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ensures the timely delivery of raw material. She checks the quality of the product being woven and also checks the consistency of weaving. For the very first time, a weaver, as Bunkar Sakhi, has the liberty to visit different houses in a village, and is socially accepted. This has slowly changed the way these women perceive themselves.

THE BUNKAR SAKHI PROGRAMME IS UNIQUE

The art of carpet weaving has been gradually dying across the world in many countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bhutan, China and Nepal due to an increasing reliance on machines for weaving. Hand-knotted carpets represent the ancient hand art of spinning wool and weaving the carpet. These communities of spinners and weavers are disappearing slowly due to many social and economic conditions in various countries.

JRF's vision through the Bunkar Sakhi Programme is to start preserving the lost dignity of and pride in hand weaving so that a new generation of women can work in this sector and make this industry sustainable. These women are the catalysts for preserving this precious art of

hand-weaving in India and for the world.

IMPACT

So far, eight Bunkar Sakhis work in Rajasthan and three in Uttar Pradesh, encouraging 2,000 weavers.

The impact of the intervention has been remarkable. It has led to a boost in the self-confidence of Bunkar Sakhis, who now have a newfound say in various decisions. Moreover, it has led to an increase in the attention to detail, with regard to weaving. Not only is there improvement in the quality of the products but also a strong relationship has been built between the Branch Office and the artisans. An increasing number of weavers now aspire to become Bunkar Sakhis.

One significant milestone achieved this year is the inclusion of Bunkar Sakhis in the Grass-roots Leadership Programme, organized in association with Pravah, which earlier used to limit itself to the Office staff only. The impact is reflected in the much-strengthened link between the Head Office and the grass-roots, and more importantly, the Bunkar Sakhis understanding the

significance of their role in JRF's value chain system.

FUTURE

A Bunkar Sakhi is an active weaver who wants to grow with the company. She can be given training so that she eventually becomes a Quality Supervisor, a Branch Manager and a Trainer for the company.

KATWARI SAKHI LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAMME

A Katwari Sakhi is an active spinner, who wants to work with the company. The success of the Bunkar Sakhi Leadership Training paved the path for extending a similar training programme for spinner (Katwari) communities working in Bikaner, Rajasthan. This programme also started on a purely experimental basis to address the growing quality concerns with regard to the spinning of yarn. There was a need for a local individual, who would go to every house and check the quality of the yarn being spun, the quality of yarn being bought, the count of the yarn, etc.

The rationale behind this was to increase the level of awareness

Under this programme, women spinners, with leadership potential, were identified and provided with additional training to take up the responsibilities of Katwari Sakhis (Spinner Companions). Like the Bunkar Sakhis, Katwari Sakhis are expected to play an important role in strengthening the carpet-making value chain while evolving into grass-roots leaders

Impact of the Bunkar Sakhi Programme

Commercial	Social
<p>The result of this project has been a 114 per cent increase in production, both in Rajasthan and UP combined, from September 2014 to February 2015, and March to August 2015. More importantly, there has been an immeasurable increase in the dignity of these artisans and this has encouraged their growth.</p>	<p>At present (2017), there are 11 Bunkar Sakhis—eight from Rajasthan and three from Uttar Pradesh. The women in Rajasthan belong to very traditional Marwari families and have never been allowed to move freely in their villages or talk to the men. Women weavers are now able to share their problems related to work and their lives with the Bunkar Sakhis, resulting in a positive environment in various villages in Rajasthan. The weavers in UP belong to very traditional Muslim families and also face similar social restrictions as the women in Rajasthan.</p> <p>Thanks to this programme, Bunkar Sakhis are able to move freely within their villages and confidently to nearby villages; they have the support of their families in this. Enhancing the confidence of the women and giving them constant support so that they can work and grow to their full potential is a direct outcome of this programme.</p>

among spinners, with respect to hand-carding and spinning techniques and other processes, in a way that they develop a sense of ownership—an ‘owner mentality’ and mindset—in order to cultivate a sense of pride and dignity in their work, as they play a significant role in the entire value chain process of carpet-making.

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making value chain while evolving into grass-roots leaders. This initiative has so far trained six Katwari Sakhis and they are in the process of understanding their new responsibilities.

The training includes a step-by-step coverage of the various processes involved with yarn (wool) production. This has had a remarkable impact on the lives of the newly turned Katwari Sakhis, who belong to the remotest corners of Rajasthan. It was a turning point in their lives, their first step towards liberty and independence, an opportunity to be heard and an opportunity to earn. This, further, had a great impact on the organization, with respect to better quality yarn,

better spun yarn and a richer, deeper outreach in the villages of Bikaner.

The ‘Women’s Entrepreneurship Development Programme’ and the ‘Leadership Training Programme’ are adding a cadre of highly self-motivated women with an entrepreneurial mindset to Jaipur Rugs and JRF.

CASE STUDY: ARCHANA DEVI, BUNKAR SAKHI, MAHASINGH KA BAS, RAJASTHAN

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Archana Devi was one of the participants of the ‘Young Women’s Social Entrepreneurship Development Programme (YWSEDP) Phase 1’ in 2014.

In order to tap all the available opportunities, it is important to be aware of the many needs of the community, to be in sync with the bigger movements, to understand the role of the people in the change process and to build ownership in the changing scenario

Following this, she went through a leadership programme—the ‘Bunkar Sakhi Programme’—aimed at empowering women weavers. She now says, “I can do anything in the world.”

Her progress in the last three years is evident in the confidence with which she expresses herself in front of people; This has grown exponentially. She speaks fearlessly to the Branch Manager she reports to and the founder of the organization. Today, she manages the quality of 35 looms in Mahasingh Ka Bas village near Jaipur. The organization realizes that, inspired by Archana, many women have become Bunkar Sakhis, bringing the total to seven Bunkar Sakhis and adding a new cadre of women leaders at the grass-roots.

Her family comprises eight members, including herself, her husband, three daughters and two sons. Before becoming a Bunkar Sakhi in 2014, she had been weaving carpets for 15 years. When asked why she started weaving in childhood, she said, “I did not like to go to school although my family members used to force me to go. I was afraid of the strict teachers. I decided to weave because I love weaving.”

Before YWSEDP in 2014, she was working with a contractor from 2000 to 2007, earning Rs 50 per day. In 2008, she started working with Jaipur Rugs and the company paid her Rs 60–70 per day. After that, gradually, the rate increased as per the design and, in 2014, each weaver started earning Rs 200 per day for a specific design and quality. She worked 20 days in a month and earned Rs 4000 on an average each month. If there was an urgent order, she would work for 25 days and would earn Rs 5000. After she attended YWSEDP, she was selected as a Bunkar Sakhi; she got trained in August 2014 and was appointed for full time work in October 2014; her initial salary was Rs 5400. Thus, there was a significant increase of Rs 1400 per month in her income. When she joined the organization as a Bunkar Sakhi, her husband did not have a job. On Archana’s request, her husband also got a job in the store in the Branch. Today, Archana’s monthly income is Rs 6000 and her husband’s income is Rs 6500.

CASE STUDY 2: SHANTI, BUNKAR SAKHI, MANPURA

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As a young child, Shanti had always been a bright student with

a keen interest in studying. Her parents broke stones for a living; however, she continued in school for as long as she could. When it became difficult for her parents to make ends meet, she had to give up school (she was in the fifth grade) to lend them a hand. Besides breaking stones, she took up weaving as a practice under some local contractors; this would help her earn more. She was 17 years old when she got married. After settling down, she tried her hand at farming, joined a nearby beauty parlour and even tried making jewellery for a while—anything that would help her earn a few extra rupees. However, nothing satisfied her. She was not content with the kind of work she was getting involved with. There came a point when she became lazy and did not feel like working. This was a cause of concern for her husband, who worked day and night to support his little family in Manpura.

During this time, her brother-in-law, Harfool ji, who happened to be the Branch Manager of Manpura, asked her to become a Bunkar Sakhi. Her life took a different path after this—a path toward responsibility, empathy, honesty and sincerity. Nobody knew what a Bunkar Sakhi was supposed to do, in her

Once she underwent the leadership training, her perspective about life transformed. She began to accept bigger responsibilities and started focusing on work and quality maintenance

community. Most important, whatever it may be, the people had the least confidence that Shanti would be able to do a good job, considering how lazy she had become!

Once she underwent the leadership training, her perspective about life transformed. She began to accept bigger responsibilities and started focusing on work and quality maintenance. She also started helping JRF in most of its development interventions that took place in her community, to a point where she became an indispensable part of the grass-roots ecosystem. A grass-roots leader today, Shanti, the Bunkar Sakhi, is responsible for quality maintenance of

numerous artisans working in her community.

“The three-day training (Social Enterprise Leadership Program in August 2016) was a combination of fun and learning. My favourite part was the ‘tiger-hunter’ game wherein we learned teamwork and how not to work on assumptions. The story narrated by Ms Swati helped me understand how not to take things for granted and the repercussions of the same. We were able to relate those stories with our lives and, hence, it was a great learning opportunity. It also meant that apart from our individual work, we must make an effort to understand the others’ work as well, so as to get a systems perspective of working

for a higher purpose and for better results.

Furthermore, this particular training has been different from the others because, for the first time, the vendors or the loom-owners were involved. Through this, they now know their roles and responsibilities. Many vendors take the initiative to ask me more about how to improve the quality of the carpets being woven on their looms. This also shows us how well they have understood their work and how serious they are about improving their work. All this has definitely been showcased beautifully.”

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Yogesh Chaudhary is the Director of Jaipur Rugs.