

## NEW DIRECTIONS FOR SOCIAL ENTERPRISES: THE ROLE OF DESIGN IN EMPOWERMENT

Vandana Bhandari

### ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship has played an important role in the development and livelihood of people in different areas of India. This article presents new directions for a social venture to achieve the goals of an organisation. It proposes that collaborative innovation between designers and social enterprises can become a means of empowerment.

In 1988 Sadhna, a social enterprise, was conceived with the aim of providing rural and urban slum and tribal women from Udaipur with alternatives for income generation and empowerment. The main objective of Sadhna, a women's handicraft organisation, has been to create a sustainable and independent world for its artisan members. One of the challenges it faced was to make products of good quality with market appeal. The dynamic and enduring forces behind the fashion industry created a threat to this objective of building a sustainable enterprise.

With a history of nearly two decades, the organisation has now come to a stage where it needs to innovate in order to maintain itself. One of the important ways in which this can be accomplished is to introduce design as an essential part of product development.

This paper aims to demonstrate that design is an effective and efficient means of expanding the capacity of artisans and that it enhances their understanding of the potential of new markets. A case study approach is used to understand how design is important as a means of creating livelihoods for women artisans through craft intervention projects run by design institutes and professional designers. The reflections and analysis offered suggest ways of making design interventions economically viable, socially equitable, culturally sensitive and environmentally responsible.

### INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship has played an important role in the development and subsistence of people in different areas of India. This paper proposes that collaborative innovation between designers and social enterprises can become a means of empowerment. According to Shashank Shah,

Social enterprises are organizations that have created models for efficiently catering to basic human needs that existing markets and institutions have failed to satisfy. [They] combine the resourcefulness of traditional entrepreneurship with a mission to change society. In the handicraft sector, social enterprises generate opportunities for creation of alternative sources of livelihood for rural populations that are predominantly dependent on the agricultural sector.<sup>1</sup>

Sadhna, a women's handicraft enterprise, is one such social enterprise, and provides a sustainable and independent environment for the women who form this organisation. Its operations are located in Udaipur, a city in the western Indian state of Rajasthan, and its environs, a district which has a large tribal population (mainly the Bhil and Garasia tribes). The organisation was established to provide permanent work and alternative incomes for women working under the umbrella of Seva Mandir, an NGO which has been working for 40 years with the rural population in

Udaipur. Today, Sadhna has 700 members in 49 groups spread over 16 locations in and around the city. Each group comprises of 10-20 artisans, and numbers are growing. Sadhna's operational area includes the villages of Delaware, Madar, Sheeshwi, Karol Colony, Ratakhet, Manoharpura, Khanjpeer, Bhuwana, Godwa-Jhadol, Bhinder, Fatehnagar, and Kankroli, all situated in the Udaipur region.

In the early 1980s, household income in this region was solely dependent on rain-fed agriculture and there was pressure to initiate income-generation activity that would involve women. In 1988, Seva Mandir decided to explore and introduce non-farm-based income generation projects and, after several efforts, surveys and studies, the NGO decided to teach local women embroidery skills – mainly patchwork, appliqué and basic running stitches (tanka embroidery). Seva Mandir started its patchwork programme by training 15 women. This initial cohort became Sadhna in 2004.

The key feature of the organisation is that members are taught the skills of embroidery – unlike other traditional craft clusters in India, where the artisans involved have a hereditary skill. Typically, when a designer works with artisans, they possess a knowledge bank with years of expertise and are capable of adding great value to their finished products on their own account.<sup>2</sup> At Sadhna by contrast, as the result of constant engagement with new artisans, varied levels of skill and tacit knowledge of the craft and organisation co-exist, and thus 'hand-holding' becomes a valuable tool.

Sadhna actively coordinates with other organisations working in the field of handicrafts, such as SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) in Lucknow and SASHA in Kolkata, and organises exposure visits for its women artisans to such organisations. Sadhna is run as a professional enterprise and remains a trust-for-profit social brand, whose main goal is to reach out to as many women as possible. Members are supported to become economically independent through exposure to skills, design knowledge and the formation of collaborative groups, rather than to earn large profits per se.

The artisans involved with Sadhna create textile products using handwork techniques such as appliqué and running stitch on kurtas (tunics), saris, home furnishings and accessories. Sadhna sells its products through retail showrooms and also caters for B2B orders. It produces products for both the domestic and export markets and also sells through exhibitions in different venues.

The organisation has been instrumental in changing the lives of its members, who previously had limited exposure for their work outside their immediate social environment. The impact has been so positive that the artisans involved have become confident enough to make their own decisions within the family, as well as to interact with other socio-economic groups. It has also empowered the women economically, resulting in marked improvements in their social status, awareness of education, healthcare and family life.

One of the key reasons for the continued success of Sadhna has been its engagement with professionals such as designers, who have introduced both explicit practical solutions and implicit social functions into the organisation. Right from its early stages, Sadhna realised the importance of professional management in boosting outputs. The role of design is progressively becoming fundamental to creating innovation ecosystems and in improving productivity and market reach, which is so important in the modern economy. As it has grown, Sadhna has been engaging with designers in different ways. These collaborations have led to many changes in the organisation, and a few of them are discussed below.

## INTRODUCTION TO NEW SKILLS

Sadhna is constantly working on new designs, colours and the variety of its offerings in order to create new products. Previously, appliqué was the mainstay of Sadhna, but this was soon expanded to include the traditional tanka work of the region. Today, skill development training is always available the artisans, enabling them to enhance

their understanding of finished products in terms of their design and marketing potential. Design workshops are organised with professional designers who guide Sadhna members to create product designs that incorporate innovation and practicality, as well as a creative combination of traditional and contemporary features, which in turn helps improve efficiency and boost quality. By these means, new marketing linkages are established which increase sales further.

Participation in this creative process helps the women to be involved in more than just labour; they also learn valuable marketing and design skills. Quality assurance and the introduction of superior finishing techniques in the stitching and fit of garments has also become a focus of these workshops.

## **LONG-TERM INTERACTION OF DESIGNERS WITH SADHNA AND ITS ARTISANS**

While the importance of design in the social sector is widely acknowledged, often the financial outlay involved becomes difficult to justify and sustain. In the initial years of the group, designers were engaged for very short periods. Typically, a workshop of 10-15 days was held where the designer would work with artisans to develop a product range. This presented several challenges, including the difficulty of producing pieces of the same design value and quality after the designer had left the project. In the group's early years, this led management to see design as a failure and designers as a waste of precious resources. It was only when designers started to be involved for longer periods that their contribution was recognised as an asset and began to be acknowledged. Although management was open to the concept of design, integrating it into the system was a slow process.

The design engagement at Sadhna followed a participatory approach where designers built a rapport with the artisans, gradually coming to understand their skill set, capacity and motivation to work. This process also led to the social, economic and personal growth of the artisans as some began to engage with design. It was observed that when women regularly attended workshops aimed at creating new collections, they participated by giving their opinion of the designs being made. For example, if the thread colour in a pattern was too tonal, they would say that the contrast should be greater so that the stitching could be seen by the customer.<sup>3</sup> There was an increased interaction with design issues, whether styling, motif or colour.

The designers engaged had textile and fashion backgrounds and had been trained by the National Institute of Fashion Technology and other leading design institutes. Some began working as interns and others were approached to undertake short workshops. A few were subsequently absorbed into Sadhna as employees and are now responsible for a multitude of functions in addition to design.

## **DIVERSIFICATION OF PRODUCTS**

Initially, the products made were for domestic use and included cushions, bedspreads and other home furnishings. Designers with an advanced understanding of sizing, patternmaking, construction techniques and fashion trends introduced clothing into the product mix. This was a faster-moving category than home products and enhanced the company's customer base.

## **GREATER FABRIC CHOICE**

In the early years, Sadhna used local fabrics which included poplin, cambric and block-printing fabric from Akola, a city in Maharashtra state in central India. As designers with wider experience started to engage with the group, they introduced new, more fashionable fabrics. Innovation was also applied to local fabrics. For example, traditional block-printed fabrics from Akola were redesigned with new motifs and varied placements. A secondary benefit of this was a revival of techniques which traditional block printers had stopped practising.

## INTRODUCTION OF COLOUR

Colour is an integral part of an individual's visual interface and is considered to be one of the key attributes of fashion. In the initial years, the women used black-and-white thread on differently coloured cotton or block-printed fabrics, which were sourced from Akola. This gave them a distinct identity, but limited variety in the product. As the organisation started to engage with design professionals, a larger colour palette was introduced in the product range.<sup>4</sup> One relatively easy way to update and modernise a traditional craft without moving away from its core is to introduce colour. It was found that varying the colour palette significantly for each collection could be achieved without making major changes in the skills of the artisans involved and the essence of their craft. Since the women were used to a single style of working, small changes like colour were easy for them to adapt to and accept. The introduction of a varied colour palette also allowed the concept of the changing seasons to be incorporated and greater variety to be brought into the collections.

## EXPANSION OF MARKETS AND MARKET AWARENESS

One of the first challenges that the Sadhna designers faced was to ensure that new markets were identified. In the early years, products were sold through exhibitions which were held locally. From here, the group's merchandise started to be sold at Dilli Haat (a marketplace in Delhi), the Nature Bazaar in Dastkar (a market fair for artisans), and then to big retailers like Fab India and other outlets. Today, Sadhna sells its products through its own website (set up in 2015), in addition to other outlets.

It became vital to ensure that the products being designed were appropriate for the market segment which they were targeting; the designers' understanding of this was crucial. For example, in the early years designers worked with artisans to create exquisite products with very fine craftsmanship. However, customers often did not place as much value on the fine techniques employed as on the perceived value of the product. Such products could not be sold widely in the markets and thus became unviable. As the brand caters to a particular market –ready-to-wear – simply creating beautiful products, which would be appropriate for a boutique, was not feasible. The understanding of customers and markets which well-trained designers bring to the organisation is thus invaluable.

The other major change in the organisation started to come when, in addition to designers, Sadhna began to work with retail consultants who connected them with retailers like Fab India. This changed the functioning of the enterprise in many ways; one of the key changes was that work became continuous rather than seasonal.

## INNOVATION WITH LIMITED SKILLS

Another challenge faced by the designers who have worked with Sadhna is that although the skills of the women artisans involved are of good quality, their skill set is limited, as tanka, appliqué and patchwork have been the focus of training programmes. It is a challenge for the designer to ensure that, each season, the products that the group make have a freshness and allure for the customer. The majority of artisans treat their income from Sadhna as supplemental, and so encouraging a culture of timely delivery is often a challenge. Among the other challenges faced by designers is the ability of the workers to adapt to new styles. They are comfortable with routine work and when contemporary styles are introduced they are often hesitant to make rapid transitions.

## CONCLUSION

Most craft organisations face the challenge of maintaining a balance between the authenticity of their traditional craft techniques and aesthetics and meeting the demands of the modern consumer.<sup>5</sup> Sadhna is in a unique position as the craft the artisans use is a taught skill and they can work closely with the market as long as the goal of social empowerment is met.

There exists a fundamental social and economic disconnect between the artisan and the market – for a customer to purchase a product it must make economic and aesthetic sense. The designer thus plays an important role in engaging with artisans and sensitising them to market needs on a continuing basis. They translate the value of the product, which will have an appropriate space in the market as long as it is viable, as only the market can sustain craft on a large scale.

The approach to development in craft has to be customised to local needs. It is essential to connect with the artisan and while training may improve skills, any interaction with a designer should result in enhancement at different levels for the artisan. The success of design in a social organisation depends on giving fair credit to the craftsman as well as the community, which in turn leads to an enhanced sense of pride, innovation, self-sufficiency and improved economic and social status, which is the goal of social entrepreneurship.

**Vandana Bhandari** is a Professor at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi. Extensively published in journals and magazines, Dr. Bhandari has also authored and compiled books on fashion and textiles. Her works include: *Celebrating Dreams: Weddings in India* (1998), *Textiles and Crafts of India: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur* (1998), The NIFT Millennium Document titled *Evolving Trends in Fashion; Costume, Textiles and Jewellery of India – Traditions in Rajasthan* and *Jewelled Textiles: Gold and Silver embellished Cloth of India*. She is guiding doctoral research and currently leading a national social innovation project for empowerment of artisans.

- 1 See Mukti Khaire, Shashank Shah and Kundan Madireddy, *Innovation in Tradition: Rural Livelihood Creation in the Indian Crafts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University South Asia Institute, 2017), 9.
- 2 See Sharmila Wood, "Sustaining Crafts and Livelihood: Handmade in India," *Craft + Design Enquiry*, 3 (2011), 89-100.
- 3 Jaya Bhatt in conversation with designers from Sadhna. Interview, 2015.
- 4 Ritu Suri in conversation with designers from Sadhna. Interview, 2015.
- 5 Khaire, Shah and Madireddy, *Innovation in Tradition*.