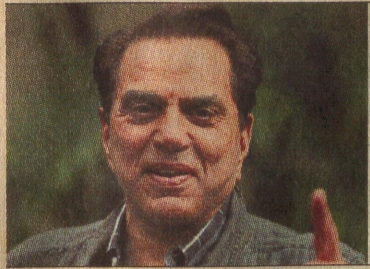


THE HINDU
MAGAZINE

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2011 • WEEKLY EDITION • 2



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Together in
the kitchen

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Homeless in Brajbhoomi

Vrindavan continues to be a haven for many widows who prefer it to the stifling orthodoxy of their villages. Though food security is not a problem anymore, a lot still needs to be done in terms of social attitudes, access to government schemes, services and facilities, reveals a recent study.

USHA RAI



LIFE ON HER TERMS: Secure at Vrindavan. PHOTO: RAJEEV BHATT

It was a typical cold January morning and opposite the ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) temple, Vrindavan, were a row of *dhabas* (shops) selling steaming hot *kachories*, fried in hot oil and served with aromatic potato gravy and pickles. Vrindavan is as famous for its *kachories* as it is for its rich, creamy milk, sweets and its myriad temples. Hardly anyone who comes to Vrindavan, whether it is an Indian or a foreigner, can leave the city without tasting the *kachories* and milk.

A rich, educated family from Gujarat was at the *dhabas* for morning breakfast. You could see the diamond studs in the man's ears, the wife was dressed elegantly in *salwar kameez* and close by was parked the Chevrolet car in which they had driven to Vrindavan. Their children of seven and 10 were also enjoying their pilgrimage to the holy city. The family was well bred and affluent. They had barely ordered breakfast when about a dozen poor and hungry widows, men and children approached them for a meal. The man did not get angry or shoo them off.

He asked all of them to sit on the roadside and asked the *dhawabawala* to

serve them whatever they wanted. He and his young children personally served the food to the widows and beggars. Even as they were eating, others joined in wanting to be fed too. Some had eaten elsewhere and were happy just to have a hot cup of tea. The rich man, who was in his mid-forties, did not get angry or impatient.

He just ordered for more *kachories* for the newcomers. Satiated, one of the widows blessed him and left.

But in another part of the town, one witnessed a heart-wrenching scene and there was no one to help the widows. It was the first week of March and a few of us were doing the rounds of widows' homes, *ghats*, *bhajan ashrams*



AT A TEMPLE: Solace in community activities... PHOTO: ELA GHOSE

of Vrindavan before beginning enumeration on the poverty levels of widows for a study for Guild for Service and UNIFEM. Suddenly, in the middle of a fairly busy road with shops on either side were two widows slumped on both sides of the road. One looked very old and very sick and seemed at death's door. She was lying in a huddle on a plastic sheet and close by was her bowl, a glass and a stick. Barely two feet away was another widow hunched up and crying and wailing piteously.

People moved on as if it was a daily sight. The team from Delhi jumped off a tempo and tried to talk to the women. While there was no response from one, the other continued wailing. The shop keepers said the women had been lying there for a few days and the wails from the younger one never stopped. Having failed to pick them up and take them to a hospital, the Delhi team rushed off to the Ramakrishna Hospital close by and requested the Swamiji heading the hospital to pick up the women. He said a pickup was not possible but medical assistance would be provided if they were brought to the hospital and there was someone to stay and take care of them since the hospital was short of staff.

These are two contrasting facets not just of Vrindavan but of the entire Brajdharm of Radhakund, Barsana, Gokul and Govardhan that were covered for the poverty levels and the deprivation faced by the widows of Braj-

hoomi. The study looked at deprivation beyond just food and shelter, for, as the Capability Poverty Measure of the Human Development Report 1996 indicates, lack of income is just one dimension of human poverty. Improved capacities are ends in poverty eradication. Improved incomes are means for poverty eradication.

The study, based on questionnaires with 520 widows, looks at indicators of socio-economic status as well as the attitudes to widows. It looks at literacy levels, the widows' ability to access various services and their own sense of self-esteem. It looks at the services and facilities available to widows from the central and state government.

No fear of starvation

The study very clearly shows that the widows have adequate basic food. None of the widows is in danger of dying of hunger or starvation. In other words, there is no food-related poverty. *Chapattis* and rice with *dal* and vegetables provide basic sustenance to rural India and this is true even in the Brajbhoomi area. Seventy-two per cent of the widows ate thrice a day and 25 per cent twice a day. All of them have the staple Indian diet of rice, *chapattis*, *dal* and vegetable.

Sanitation was an area of concern as two-fifth had no access to toilets and of those who did, 59 per cent said they were dirty. Although 58 per cent of the widows used the toilets where they lived, 40 per cent used open fields as

they had no access to toilets and a seventh of the widows squatted over street *nalas* occasionally — indicating access to toilets was a problem.

Most widows (97 per cent) had access to water after going to the toilet, just 68 per cent had access to soap to clean their hands. A third of the widows (32 per cent) who did not have soap used soil and ash (*rakh*) to clean up. Most of those who did not have access to soap used soil (99 per cent).

Shelter is another area that needs intervention. Most of the older widows live in ashrams or government-run shelters. The younger ones are independent and prefer to live on their own, not bound by regulations of hostel and ashrams. More than half the widows (54 per cent) live in rented rooms/ spaces. Approximately a third of the widows live in the open — that is on streets, *ghats*, railway stations, bus stops and parks. For these women shelters are vital. They provide safety, security and a sense of well-being.

Because of their extreme poverty, widows avoid accessing healthcare till they have no option. But 80 per cent of the widows had fallen ill in the six months prior to the interview. More than half of those who had fallen ill suffered from diarrhoea. Other medical problems included frequent fever, arthritis, high BP, asthma and diabetes.

Continued on Page 4

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Lord Krishna saved me

"I was married at the age of 15 to a 50-year-old widower. He had children from his first marriage who were also married. His married son stayed with us in our rented house. After a married life of 15 years, I became a widow. Although three children were born to me, two died soon after birth and the third lived for only five years. So I had no one. After my husband's death, his married son threw me out of the house. I went to live in my brother's house. But after some time, I realised I couldn't stay there forever. I was thinking about ending my life. However, before I could do anything, I heard about Vrindavan and how widows found a place to stay there. So I came to Vrindavan and have been staying here for the past 11 years. Lord Krishna saved me. Initially, I stayed at the Shyam Sunder mandir and worked there in lieu of food and clothes. Then I heard about Amar Bari, the home for widows run by the Guild of Service, and came here. I am happy here."

Heman Das, 60, Ganjam, Orissa

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THE INDO-BANGLADESH BORDER

No-woman's land

The 150 km-long porous border with Bangladesh is notoriously crime-prone: smuggling, human trafficking and prostitution thrive, often abetted by the 'law-enforcing' agencies of both the sides. At the receiving end are mostly women and children. Will having a women's battalion of the BSF in the area be a start to solving some of the problems here, asks **USHA RAI**.

The landscape along the 150 km-long Indian border with Bangladesh, from Jalangi to Farrakha in Murshidabad district is lush green with large stretches of water bodies and the rivers Jalangi and Ganga waxing and waning with the seasons...but life here has been blotted by smuggling, in which minors and women are involved, and sex trade.

On both sides of the road leading to the Farrakha Barrage and along the ghats are shanties where a roaring business of sex work operates with impunity — the police and the Border Security Force looking away if not taking full advantage of it. The poverty, unemployment and social issues along this porous border, leading to smuggling and trafficking, have not stirred the conscience of the nation. Unlike Kashmir, this is a border which does not make the headlines because terrorism and insurgency are not issues.

The border problems have been exacerbated with shifting rivers and large tracts of Indian and Bangladeshi land and people living behind the man-made fences. In fact, in many cases, families split by the fencing live in harmony and join hands for smuggling. As against half a dozen legal entry points between the two countries on this stretch of the border, there are 17 illegal ones, called ghats. Like liquor vendors, these ghats are auctioned and the ghat *maliks* set their own rates of commission for permitting the illegal activity. There is also a loose network of line-men, agents and carriers who facilitate the smuggling of cattle, rice, shimmering nylon saris and phensedyl (a cough syrup that serves as a narcotic drug) across the barrier. Few NGOs operate in these border districts and funds are inadequate.

Help at hand

However, Sanjog, set up in 2005 in Kolkata to check the growing violence against children, is now networking with NGOs working in the border districts and the rural hinterland in both countries to check cross border trafficking and protect children. Sanjog's interventions are based on the key findings of four cross-border researches they commissioned between 2006 and 2010.

Traveling across the border district of Murshidabad and interacting with the sex workers, pimps, NGOs and representatives of Bengal's State AIDS Control Society 'drop in centre', it was evident that sex trade was a thriving business. Women who were initially into smuggling are now in sex work. Many of them interviewed said they were literally pushed into sex work because those guarding the borders demanded sexual gratification.

At Biswas para in Jalangi, Leila Bibi, 45, hailed as a guru in the business, said she worked for five years as a rice smuggler but found that the sentries would not allow her to cross the border unless she provided sex. Then others from the Border Security Force would join in for 'free fun'. Having been seduced several times, she decided to move into sex work, which was more lucrative than smuggling rice. She has under her 10 young girls from Bangladesh and the villages around Jalangi, who she supplies to the BSF. "If the demand increases, I can get more girls", she says. The demand for sex trade is so high and the returns so lucrative that women who were in farming are now into sex work. In addition to women who take to the trade because they have been abandoned by their husbands and have to bring up children, there are young girls who have left homes with relatives or agents who promised them jobs in Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai and then sold them into prostitution. The third category are young girls who have been married by their parents to men posing as businessmen or workers from India and then sold to the brothels. Both Salma and Jayati, in their early thirties,



HARD REALITIES... PHOTO: USHA RAI



who work with Leila, were deserted by their husbands. Salma with her red and white nylon sari, dangling gold earrings, necklace and bangles worn with her *shakha* (the symbol of married women in Bengal), is attractive and could well be on the cover of a women's magazine, but she looks disturbed. Problems made her leave her marital home and since her parents were poor she did not want to be a burden on them. So when her friends told her about sex trade she left to fend for herself. She had injuries in her mouth and internal organs and was on medication provided by an NGO. She says "I cannot afford to take a break from work for full recovery. I need the money and others would displace me. If I had someone to love me and take care of me, I would not be in this trade."

Jayati, with her light brown eyes and dusky complexion, is not dressed to kill like Salma.

Mother of three, she was abandoned by her husband and moved to her maternal home. Her parents don't know she is in 'this business'. She has told them she works with a health centre. Two of her three children are in a school and she spends Rs. 2,000 a month for their education. She works both at night and during the day. Mobiles, used by sex workers as well as pimps, enable clients to access them easily.

Research commissioned by Sanjog shows the BSF as well as the BDR (Bangladesh Rifles) in a negative light. One of the researchers, Swagato Sarkar, a Bangalore-based academic, says "smuggling and sex are intertwined". Smugglers regularly supply women to the BSF to facilitate passage of goods. When there is a group of women smugglers, one member offers herself to the BSF or the BDR. This is also done in rotation so that others can continue with the smuggling.

Soma Bhowmick, Director of Suprava Panchashila Mahila Uddyog Samity (SPMUS), Jalangi, who has been running since 1993 a child protection programme for children of women in prostitution, an intervention programme on HIV/AIDS for women and a care centre for those infected, says Quest Asia, NACO's authorised agency for mapping high risk groups, shows there are 2,400 sex workers in Murshidabad District, 200 of them from Bangladesh. Soma fears three per cent of the sex workers are minors.

Children for smuggling

SPMUS' own study of 300 children involved in smuggling at six spots of the border — Jalangi, Sheikhpura, Sagarpara, Bhagwan Gola, Lal Gola and Shamsheganj — in 2007 showed children of 8 to 14 years taking across cattle, rice and phensedyl. This study too confirms that young girls were involved in the smuggling initially but due to the harassment suffered at the hands of the BSF, they gave up and went into sex trade. Children are involved in smuggling because parents feel the BSF and police will be less harsh with them if caught.

SPMUS also works for the rehabilitation of the girls who have been rescued from Mumbai, Delhi and other cities. But this again is an uphill task. There have been instances where the village *pradhan*, in league with a trafficker, actually tried to have the case against the trafficker dropped. In 2010, two 15-year-olds of Domkal, Murshidabad, who were taken to Delhi as domestic labour by an aunt, found themselves in a hotel being forced into prostitution. They immediately rang up the aunt and complained and she took them back to Domkal and lodged a criminal case against the trafficker. The girls' parents were approached by the village *pradhan* to drop the charges against the girls for Rs. 18,000.

Two other girls of 15 and 18 years, who disappeared after a wedding in Jalpaiguri when they were approached with promise of a job, called home from Mumbai saying they were being trafficked. Rescue Foundation and Oasis, a Mumbai-

based NGO, were able to track them through the mobile number and photos of the girls given by their parents. Today one of the girls is married and the other works at a shelter home. The traffickers have been approaching the parents of the girls to drop the cases against them on payment of Rs. 1 lakh to each girl.

Since many of the rescued girls can weave, SPMUS links them with those making and marketing *gamchhas* (thin traditional cotton towels). The raw material is provided by the agent and for each *gamchha* sold for Rs. 50, the girl earns Rs. 30. In a month she can earn Rs. 300 to Rs. 500.

Ensuring humane behaviour

However, sustainable rehabilitation that would enable a woman to earn better, since many of them have children, is needed. So far the focus has been on rescue. Both the police and the BSF have to understand that their role is to protect and prevent crime, not to add to it. There is need for a women's battalion of the BSF — not just for the body search of women who may be smuggling but to ensure a more humane behaviour on the border. This is on the cards.

In 2010, a magazine quoted C.V. Muralidhar, IG, BSF, South Bengal headquarters, when questioned on BSF *jayans* being one of the biggest buyers of sex on the border. He said "there have been allegations but no complaints at any level regarding this matter. If there is a complaint we will take very serious cognizance...Trafficking is a matter of prime concern not only for the BSF but also between the BSF and BDR." However, when this journalist called him, he denied making any comment to the media and said only the BSF DG could speak to the media.

Complaints are not easy to make unless there is a strong union or movement to support girls having the courage to speak up. Girls trafficked have no voice and those making Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 10,000 in a month don't want to lose their bread.



THE LAWS ARE DIFFERENT HERE: The redlight area in Shamsheganj.

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Women, who were confined to their homes, are now involved in sorting, grading and packaging of vegetables at the processing centres. They earn anything from Rs 1,500 to Rs 3,000 each per month

When Shah Rukh Khan-starrer *Swades* was released in 2004, it must have inspired many an urban youth to work for India's development at the grassroots level. But only a few bravehearts took the plunge. Usha Rai traces the journey of one such IIM-Ahmedabad topper from Patna, who chose to sell vegetables and help farmers of his state, instead of opting for a plush job at an MNC

The IIM sabziwala

The face of Bihar is changing! While Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and the political stability, now evident in Bihar, are at the forefront of the change, young Bihari entrepreneurs with degrees from the Indian Institutes of Management and Indian Institutes of Technology are using their knowledge and special skills to transform rural life. Social sector investment bankers are providing financial backing needed for any meaningful transformation in rural India.

WHEN Kaushlendra Kumar did his MBA from the IIM, Ahmedabad, and won a gold medal and topped in agribusiness in 2007, he was confident of turning his dream of making his home state Bihar, blessed with the rich alluvial soil of the Ganga river, the vegetable capital of the country. While his colleagues from the IIM were marketing toothpastes, noodles and detergents for the multinationals, Kaushalendra set up Kaushalya Foundation

The May 2011 issue of the *Time* magazine also featured the Samridhii venture in its business story on grassroots entrepreneurs in rural India



The faculty at his alma mater and friends helped Kaushlendra design a light vegetable cart that could be pushed or attached to a cycle. The technology-driven cart also has a cooling system — chemicals that convert into ice so that the vegetables stay fresh for five hours

and stuck to marketing nutritious but humble vegetables.

The vegetable supply chain venture was so novel that the faculty at his alma mater and friends helped him design a light vegetable cart that could be pushed or attached to a

cycle as well the technology that would enable him to increase the shelf-life of the vegetables through the summer heat. Initially, he even pushed his own cart to gauge public response and study the demands and gaps in his knowledge and marketing. And soon enough, Kaushalendra was nicknamed the IIM *sabziwala*.

The nickname has stayed but the business of the vegetable-supply chain called Samridhii has grown. It has yielded dividends for farmers who have joined his vegetable network, increased employment for women and won laurels for Kaushlendra and his Kaushalya Foundation.

Today, more than 3,000 farmers in Patna and Nalanda districts are growing and selling eight to nine tonnes of vegetables through the Samridhii supply chain and their incomes have soared. While importance is given to

cultivation of traditional vegetables like green brinjals, *parwal* or snake gourd and seasonal vegetables, growth of exotic vegetables like mushrooms, baby corn and special varieties of tomatoes in green houses, is also catching on. Broccoli and other exotic vegetables can also be grown but in the absence of five-stars hotels in Bihar, it is not yet an economically viable option, says Anuj Kumar, 28, one of the five MBAs associated with the Kaushalya Foundation.

Farmers are being organised to work together as a collective unit. If a group of 25 to 30 farmers in a village come together, a vegetable collection centre is set up in the village or its vicinity. These centres are managed by the farmers themselves and they get paid an additional 10 paise per kilo of vegetable that comes to the centre. The Kaushalya Foundation, however, keeps a benevolent eye, advising and

solving problems if needed. The collection centres save the farmers the long trudge to the *mandis* with sack-loads of vegetables weighing 50 to 60 kg. So far, eight collection centres or Samridhii *grameen kendras* have been set up in Patna and Nalanda districts. The vegetables are then taken by tempos to processing centres, where they are cleaned, graded and separated according to their quality before being packed and dispatched for distribution.

Vegetables are cleaned but not washed because soaking them in water decreases shelf life, says Anuj Kumar. The prices of the Samridhii vegetables vary according to their quality. While the 'B' grade vegetables, used by bulk consumers like hotels and restaurants, are cheap, the 'A' grade vegetables, retailed through air-conditioned outlets to customers finicky about quality, are more expensive. Vegetables like potatoes, onions, tomatoes sold to bulk consumers are also big in size because they are easier to peel and chop and there is less wastage. The 'C' and 'D' grade vegetables sold to *dhabas* and wayside shops are the cheapest and have to be consumed quickly. If the A grade potato costs Rs 8 a kg, B grade would cost Rs 6 and C and D grade Rs 4 to

Rs 3 a kg, respectively. Samridhii also has pre-paid card facility to sell pesticide-free vegetables.

The Kaushalya Foundation owns one tempo and hires other vehicles as per requirement. The farmers have an assured market in the collection centres. They are informed about the purchase price of all vegetables the previous night and if the price does not suit them, they can defer the sale or take their crop to the traditional *mandi*. However, selling to the Samridhii *kendras* saves farmers the cost of transportation, weighing and packaging charges and the commission that *mandis* charge. The income of farmers, who have joined Samridhii's vegetable supply chain, has gone up from 0.25 to 1.50 times.

As members of the Samridhii family, the farmers are trained in organic farming, taken on study tours and encouraged and supported for growing exotic vegetables like baby corn and mushrooms in low-cost green houses or poly-houses (polythene sheets spread over bamboo poles).

This year the Kaushalya Foundation is entering into an MoU with the Agriculture Department, Bihar, for subsidy for the cultivation of baby corn. Also proposed is one poly-house in each village at government cost. Last year, the Kaushalya Foundation constructed five poly-houses at its own expense — three in Patna and



While his colleagues from the IIM were marketing toothpastes, noodles and detergents for the multinationals, Kaushalendra set up Kaushalya Foundation and stuck to marketing vegetables

KAUSHALYA FOUNDATION'S OBJECTIVE

- To connect vendors and marginalised growers to the mainstream of the society
- To provide a platform and support to vendors and marginalised growers in the evolving economy
- To prepare vendors and marginalised growers for new market challenges
- Creating infrastructure
- Strengthening the link between growers and vendors
- Reducing the operational cost and increasing price realisation for vendors & growers.
- Providing added benefits to the vendors & growers like insurance cover for family and free education to wards.

From left: Dharendra Kumar, Anuj Kumar, Kaushlendra, Navin Ranbir Gautam and H. K. Patel are the five MBAs working with the Kaushalya Foundation



Photos courtesy: The Kaushalya Foundation



This year the foundation received the Sankalp award from Aavishkar and Intelcap, social sector investors



Farmers are being organised to work together as a collective unit. If a group of 25 to 30 farmers in a village come together, a vegetable collection centre is set up in the village or its vicinity

two in Nalanda, the hometown of Kaushalendra, Anuj, and of course, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar.

There are 50 vegetable carts in Patna on the lines of the first designed in 2007. The new vegetable carts, attached to cycles and with better display and space for advertisements, are an improvement on the first prototype. The 60-kg carts have a five-year life and if these are able to get ads, it can pay the Rs 52,000 cost of the cart. Recently, the Bihar Government announced a subsidy of Rs 27,000 on these carts. The technology-driven cart also has a cooling system — chemicals that convert into ice so that the vegetables stay fresh for five hours.

The neatly packed and graded vegetables, carrying the Samridhii logo are bar coded so that the buyer knows the name of the village from which they come from, their price and weight.

With the entry of the Kaushalya Foundation, there has been a spurt in employment in the farm sector, especially for women. Women, who were confined to their homes, are now involved in sorting, grading and packaging of vegetables at the processing centres and earn anything from Rs 1,500 to Rs 3,000 per month. However, the women need to know how to use electronic machines for weighing, packaging etc. Poly-houses are also being

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Sizzling sidewalks
Delhi's booming street food business P.3



Unreserved style
Prakash Jha school of filmmaking P.4

Owning a share of their craft

Over 1,100 craftspersons are shareholders in Rangсутra

USHA RAI

A company share, framed and prominently displayed on the wall of an artisan's hut in rural Rajasthan signifies a small but important transformation taking place in the lives of craftspeople who have become shareholders of Rangсутra, a company set up by social activist-turned-entrepreneur Sumita Ghose six years ago.

For the over 1,100 weavers, embroiderers and artisans who have formed the privately held company by pooling in not just money but also their creative, productive skills, the shares are much more than just scraps of paper. For many it is their new savings, as valuable as the chunky silver they have invested in for centuries.

As a Fulbright scholar working on conflict resolution ten years ago, Sumita chose to look at the growing disparities in income between rural and urban areas leading to inequalities and civil unrest. She felt she could use her knowledge, experience and skills to stem this growing divide by improving people's economic status. Back in the mid-1980s she, along with Sanjoy Ghose, had set up an NGO, URMUL, to enable drought-stricken farmers in Rajasthan counter hunger and poverty through traditional weaving and embroidery skills. She decided to resume working with these artisans.



Artisans are shareholders in Rangсутra. Rangсутra helps with scouting for new designs, talent and markets. Women, who form 70 per cent of Rangсутra's workforce, largely work from home. Fab India is the biggest buyer of Rangсутra products. Paris store Numanu worked with the artisans to produce hand-crafted woollen jackets for the French market. UK store Monsoon is sourcing soft-furnishings, primarily applique covers, from Rangсутra. The ethical fashion show in Paris will see Rangсутra participating for the second consecutive time this year.

A WEALTH OF CRAFTS

So Rangсутra was set up as a company of artisans, all of them shareholders, from remote parts of the country — the deserts of Rajasthan, where colour has been a way of life; the hills of Uttarakhand, sometimes lush green and at other times snow clad; Andhra Pradesh, Assam and West Bengal, where despite insurgency, the looms and hand-embroidery have remained strong and vibrant. Sumita's objective, shared by her designers and the markets she reached out to, was to ensure sustainable livelihood for the artisans, by creating top-quality handmade products, based on the principles of fair trade and a celebration of the country's rich crafts heritage. "Socially", says Sumita, "craftspeople and artisans come from some of the most disadvantaged communities with very little opportunity for self-development and growth. Given the fast-changing trends in urban markets, which are the mainstay of many rural artisans, it is a miracle that artisans and craftspeople still retain their skills."

Rangсутra seeks to be a bridge between "artisan and customer, tradition and contemporary, and change and continuity". Its core value is respect for both the producer and the customer. It ensures a fair price to the producer and quality products for customers. Profits earned from sale are ploughed back to ensure a better life for the communities.

SHAREHOLDING EXQUISITE SKILLS

Making the company market-oriented was the challenge. It was not dependent on grants. So, before asking the artisans to step

in, she took two loans in 2006 — Rs 23 lakh from Avishkaar, a social venture or angel fund, and Rs 30 lakh from Artisans Micro Finance, a subsidiary of Fab India. Her own contribution was Rs 10 lakh. While her two big funders own 50 per cent of the shares, she along with other artisans own the remaining 50 per cent. Gradually she hopes to raise the share of the artisans to 49 per cent. All venture funds look for returns but Avishkaar also looks for social impact. It normally exits in two to three years, confident that the organisation set up with its assistance is strong enough to grow on its own.

The venture funds paid twice the price the artisan paid for a share. Barely five years down the line the value of each share has increased five-fold — from Rs 100 to Rs 500. Though there are 1,100 shareholders, the number of workers associated with Rangсутra exceeds 2,000. Sumita is confident that all of them will gradually become shareholders. Shareholders get dividends, and in the last three years Rangсутra's dividends increased from 10 per cent in 2008-09, to 15 per cent the following year and 25 per cent in 2010-11. The turnover too has soared — from Rs 30 lakh in 2006-07 to Rs 10.5 crore in 2010-11.

Beginning with three groups of artisans, Rangсутra today has 30 groups, each with 25 to 200 skilled artisans, working with it. They are all producers. But in Bikaner, Rajasthan, where it has a large unit, they are producers as well as shareholders. Rangсутra helps with designs, colour combinations and gets the bulk orders.

Mahila Sannathkar, in the old city of Hyderabad, works with 25 to 30 artisans whose forte is aari embroidery, and quality stitching and tailoring. In the Sunderbans, West Bengal, 200 artisans specialise in silk-batik. Everything is handcrafted. If the cloth happens to be from power looms, it is embellished with hand-embroidery. Rangсутra's range of products include tussar silks, soft *mumuls*, tie-and-dye fabrics and an assortment of handmade linen fashioned into stoles, women's and men's apparel, handbags and soft furnishings. Recently it began working with *mochees*, or leather artisans, for footwear and bags.

CAPTURING GLOBAL ATTENTION

In 2010-11, Rangсутra got orders worth Rs 2 crore. For these bulk orders it had to augment the strength of the existing groups, and increase their capacity by speeding up work while, at the same time, maintaining quality. New groups were also created. Today, artisans in nearly 2,000 homes across the country are working for Rangсутra.

Driven by commitment and the desire to excel, Sumita and her two young designers — Ritu Suri and Ruchi Tripathi, both graduates of the National Institute of Fashion Technology, are constantly on the move, motivating the artisans, giving them new designs and searching for new groups of artisans and fresh markets. While Rangсутra's biggest buyer is Fab India, it also exports in small quantities to France, the Netherlands and the UK. A few years ago, Olivia, the owner of an exclusive Paris boutique called Numanu,

came to India and worked with Rangсутra artisans to produce nearly 300 short winter-jackets for the fashion-conscious French. The jackets were tailored in India, with the soft hand-woven woollen material from Bikaner, silk lining from the Sunderbans and embroidery from other units in Rajasthan.

Though Numanu later closed shop, other foreign buyers looking for exotic, exclusive garments and soft furnishings are knocking on Rangсутra's doors. Currently it is developing soft furnishings — largely applique cushion covers — for a UK shop called Monsoon. It will participate for the second consecutive year in the ethical fashion show in Paris. In several countries, designers and fashion houses are promoting ethical trade practices, where the artisans and craftspeople are direct beneficiaries of their creations — this is in line with Rangсутra's ideology.

Of course, the challenges have been many. Production was not on time and there were hiccups in production quality, says Sumita. So a close monitoring model was evolved, and through incentives and penalties, the artisans became more professional. Embroidery has to be uniform, and when there are bulk orders and work is handcrafted, this is not easy. Fab India is satisfied with Rangсутra's quality. While it may overlook slight variations in colour or the sizes of the flowers embroidered, it looks for accuracy in sizes. To help meet this requirement, the cutting of *kurtas*, dresses and other apparel was centralised in Bikaner. The uniformly cut material is sent to Bajju, also in Rajasthan, for tailoring. There is also close super-

vision of the finishing work — stitching of buttons and so on.

WORK, AND INCOME, COMES HOME

As most of the work is done in homes and not under controlled conditions, the garments are dry-cleaned both to ensure they are spotless and that the colours don't bleed.

The waste material, leftovers of *kurtas* and cushion covers, are recycled to make hand-embroidered bags, mobile covers and patchwork bedspreads.

Seventy per cent of Rangсутra's workers are women. Working part time (three to five hours) from their homes, depending on their skills they earn about Rs 3,000 to Rs 5,000 a month. Earlier, when work was irregular, they made only about Rs 500 to Rs 1,000. Skilled male workers working full time can earn up to Rs 10,000 a month. The payment piece rate is the same for men and women. The work and money have given women more say at home. Women now want to send their daughters to school; some have become group leaders and have a greater say in their villages. Some of the women who had migrated from Pakistan are able to tap their embroidery skills to produce works with the *Sindhi kadai* — *pukka* and *soof*. A 60-year-old grandmother has taught it to her children and grandchildren in Rajasthan. Retaining their cultural identity, the traditional embroidery used for making personal trousseau is now market affiliated and kept alive.

Markets are reaching rural women and men with special skills, and transforming their lives.

► Barely five years down the line the value of each share has increased five-fold — from Rs 100 to Rs 500. The number of workers associated with Rangсутra exceeds 2,000.

PHOTOS: USHA RAI

Riots shatter Britain's Blitz spirit

Racial and cultural tensions surface amidst anger and violence

VIDYA RAM

Sivaharan Kandigh, 39, sat in his old Mercedes Benz van outside the shell of his shop on Clarence Road in the London borough of Hackney on Tuesday morning, his eyes glazed over with disbelief. He fled the conflict in Sri Lanka 11 years ago and set up a small newspaper shop in London which, over the years, with hard work and the help of family, had grown into a mini-supermarket.

"It was the shop for the community; if you lived here this is the shop you'd come to," says Jason, 35, who lives on the street.

Now the refrigerated aisles that once held dairy and fresh products are bare and shelves are empty. All that is left are a few cartons of Twinings tea.

"They took everything, even the (surveillance) cameras," says Kandigh as he stares into space. He had closed shop early afternoon on Tuesday, following warnings from the police about potential violence — violence that had been spreading across the country since Saturday.

But the metal shutters he pulled down proved no hindrance to the mob that attacked his shop that evening. Later that evening, he watched on Sky News the



A jeweller's shop in Birmingham is targeted during Monday's violence in London. AP

devastation of his shop. "I know everyone on this street. Who would do this," he wonders. The confusion and mixed emotions among the sizeable crowd that had gathered outside his shop following the third night of violence and looting in London was palpable. Anger, disbelief, and confusion reigned as racial, class, cultural and even neighbourhood tensions

swirled and the violence spread to other cities across the country, from Manchester to Birmingham.

"I can tell you one thing; it wasn't the local gangs that did this. They knew these shops. They used to hang out on this street just there," says an angry resident, pointing across the road from the wrecked shop.

"These are people coming from elsewhere... troublemakers. It's mob rule," he added.

Kandigh speculated whether it was because he was the lone Asian on the street that he had been targeted. (Not a single other shop was touched on the street. All other attacks on Hackney's banks, department stores and cheap clothing stores happened on the main shopping street, a couple of hundred metres away).

While some people embraced Kandigh and pledged him all the help they could provide, others silently swept up ash: the remnants of two cars that had been burned to shreds.

Still others muttered under their breath about those who had come to clean up the streets — largely white, middle class people who had coordinated on Twitter for the London-wide riot-cleanup campaign.

"They're supposed to be paying people to do this," shouted one angry man as the cleanup group had headed towards Clarence Street. There were also those that castigated the British media over their portrayal of the riots, seen by many as steeped in racial stereotypes.

"They just show them as black yobs," was how David, a mixed-race lighting technician who lives on Mare Street, in the heart of Hackney, put it.

Travelling around London, where many shops and banks have been shutting early each day, one encounters suspicion, fear, disbelief.

Passengers on buses look uncomfortably at their fellow travellers: could they be one of the troublemakers? Police vans that zoom by, sirens screaming, are glanced at apprehensively: where are the rioters striking now?

Others mull over stories of friends, or friends of friends, who've been caught up in the troubles; the parents of a one-year-old who fled their home in leafy Croydon as the looting drew closer and closer to their house; a colleague and his housemate who grabbed the first things they could when rioters set fire to their building above a shop in Clapham Junction, a largely middle-class shopping district.

What of the so-called Blitz Spirit — the determination with which Brits proudly proclaim they supported each other through the Second World War bombings and which, according to the tabloid newspapers at least, is still embedded in society? London today seems rather in the grip of disunity, of a breakdown in social consensus so profound that it took 16,000 police officers out on the

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