

Features » [Sunday Magazine](#)

Being the change

ASHISH KOTHARI



Dhokra art pieces being made at Hazaribagh Urban Haat. Photo: Ashish Kothari The Hindu

Dhirendra Kumar's initiative has come as a timely answer to Jharkhand's livelihood crisis, says Ashish Kothari.

“My sons have come back to work with me,” said Sikandar Ansari. “They had gone to Ranchi to work in a Maruti showroom, but now they prefer to earn on our handlooms.”

Sikandar's village Upar Konki in Jharkhand is one of several settlements that are challenging two “development” dogmas: that one needs large-scale industrialisation to provide employment, and that rural-urban migration is inevitable. How are they doing it? With a little bit of help from a remarkable State government initiative, the Jharkhand Silk, Textile and Handicraft Development Corporation Ltd (Jharcraft).

When in 2006 Dhirendra Kumar, an IFS officer, took charge as Special Secretary in the Department of Industries in charge of sericulture, handlooms, handicrafts and khadi, he found all four sectors in doldrums. Silk production was floundering because of inefficient supply of cocoons and poor marketing. Handloom cooperatives, some created back in the 1940s, had become defunct. Across in India, the handloom sector had been displaced by powerlooms and textile factories. Kumar also found that other crafts of the region were dying out due to lack of support.

“There were two ways to go,” says Kumar, “one, to continue as an ‘implementer’, providing some charity support to handlooms and other crafts; second, to become a ‘facilitator’ in their empowerment so they could increasingly become self-reliant. I chose the latter, though my colleagues told me it would not work.”

With the creation of Jharcraft and his assuming charge as Managing Director, Kumar's first task was to revive the silk sector. One major breakthrough was to localise the entire chain of silk production from the elite seeds to commercial cocoons, yarn production, and cloth-making, within Jharkhand. Over 1.25 lakh farmers (mostly adivasi) are now engaged in sericulture, their incomes having multiplied several-fold. Villagers were trained to master the full chain, more productive (but not labour-displacing) technologies were introduced (such as solar-powered yarn machines), new product designs were brought in, and marketing links provided. Surpassing Kumar's own targets, Jharcraft jumped from just 90 metric tonnes annual production in 2006, to 1025 tonnes in five years. Now its target for the 12th Five Year Plan is 8,000 tonnes!

In the cotton handloom sector, 120 cooperative societies were revived, and elsewhere, self-help groups were created. Weavers were given new looms or credit to repair old ones, access to good quality raw material, technical innovations to produce finer yarn for saris and shirts, designs for new products to supplement traditional ones, and access to marketing.

Over 40,000 weavers are now engaged in cotton, silk and wool work, with incomes having doubled or tripled on

average.

Manzur Ahmed, chairman of Barhu village's Primary Weavers' Cooperative Society, observed that "before Jharcraft came along, weaving was more or less dead. Now there are 102 members, with a daily income of each being at least Rs.250, whereas elsewhere, it would be about Rs.150. Outmigration has significantly reduced."

In Upar Konki village, a self-help group was formed in 2011, and has excelled in the production of the specialised *dobhi* saris and fine cloth for shirts. Like Sikandar's sons, in Bhagaiya block some 40 per cent of weavers who had migrated out have reportedly come back.

At Jharcraft's Urban Haat in Hazaribagh, craftspersons are provided on-site training and production facilities. Over 10,000 women have been trained in Kantha embroidery. Jharcraft promotes products made of bamboo, cane, papier-mâché, leather, jewellery, lac, terracotta, jute, grass, and various adivasi art forms. A special focus is on the amazing dhokra metalwork that has 4000 years of history in this region (but dwindling of late); over 400 artisans now make a living from it. Women have been trained in the wax designing that gives the final product its distinctive pattern, earlier a male prerogative.

Jharcraft has innovatively used various State and central schemes, and partnered with several institutions for technological, design, marketing and other inputs. It has also facilitated health insurance cover for about 75,000 people, and education for artisans' children in several villages. It is now integrating environmental concerns: solar energy, natural dyes in leather and clothes, non-lead based processes in terracotta, facilitation to organic farm products (like turmeric). The entire tussar silk value chain is certified organic, and villages have been encouraged to protect over two lakh hectares of forest linked to silkworm rearing. There is still a distance to go, e.g. acid dyes are still being used on some of the clothing.

Jharcraft products are sold across India, artisans are facilitated to sell directly at fairs. Many of the products are affordable for the ordinary middle class consumer, avoiding the elite bias of many other organisations claiming to promote traditional crafts.

According to Kumar, some 80 to 85 per cent of the sale price would "go back" to the producer, and the 15-20 per cent that Jharcraft keeps, goes back into further development of the sector. This is possible partly due to State and central government's support, which shows the crucial importance of the public sector in facilitating rural livelihoods.

Over 2.5 lakh families are already benefiting from various Jharcraft activities. With further expansion and new sectors like bamboo housing planned, this may multiply several-fold. Kumar is confident that this is the answer to Jharkhand's livelihood crisis, not large-scale industrialisation.

Ironically, though, the same State government has been pushing large-scale industrialisation and mining. These contradictory policies are one of the biggest challenges to achieving decentralised, community-based well-being of the kind Jharcraft is demonstrating.

Another challenge is to reduce dependence on people like Kumar, and make the craftspersons' organisations self-reliant and self-governing. Then there is the difficulty of ensuring processes that strengthen local institutions, rather than fall for the temptation of rapid growth in numbers.

As Jharcraft moves towards becoming bigger (its aim is to reach Rs.1000 crore turnover by 2017), it will need to ensure that every artisan is involved and benefiting equitably. These will be formidable difficulties to overcome. But at least Jharcraft has demonstrated that with adequate foresight and will, transformations for the better can be achieved.

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