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IN SYNC WITH MOTHER EARTH

Community-based NGO Avani integrates local skills, resources and the participation of community members to create beautiful textiles. **Brinda Gill** reports.

In remote mountainous regions, hours away from the nearest railway station and with some villages accessible only on foot or on horseback, change often takes place very slowly. Yet, as they say, where there is a will, there is a way. And gloriously showing the way at Tripuradevi, a remote village in Pithoragarh district in the Kumaon Himalayas in Uttarakhand, is Avani.

Avani, a community-based NGO, has brought about a change in the economic fabric of the region by tapping the traditional textile skills of the people while respecting their environment, culture and social fabric. And its efforts have seen the little known mountainous region produce a range of beautiful stoles, mufflers, shawls, saris, jackets, garments for men, women and children, and home furnishings. The textiles are handwoven with hand-spun yarns that have been dyed using natural dyes, and their beauty has been appreciated by textile lovers and designers in India and abroad.

THE FOUNDING OF AVANI

Avani was founded in 1997 by Rashmi Bharti and Rajnish Jain, who moved to the area from Delhi in 1996, with an aim to create livelihood opportunities through whatever means were existing such as technology, farm-based activities or traditional crafts. Avani was established as a branch of The Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC), Tilonia, Rajasthan, popularly known as the Barefoot College, founded by Padma Shri Bunker Roy. SWRC is a voluntary organisation working in different fields for the upliftment of rural people.

The aim of Avani (the word 'Avani' is derived from the Hindi word for 'earth') is to involve the local community in all aspects of the organisation, and to integrate and work with the community members from the grass-roots level rather than from above. In the past two decades, the organisation has been successful in developing a textile and garment product line that is specifically



produced in Kumaon by the Kumaonis, while gradually growing from a single product to multiple products with every stage of production providing livelihood to a different skill set and forming linkages.

THE BEGINNINGS

Rashmi and Rajnish first gained the confidence of the local community by using solar lights to light up their own house. They hoped to bring solar energy to the area as it had erratic electricity supply. Seeing the functioning of solar energy, a few families warmed up to them, learnt about solar lighting systems and helped in illuminating 25 villages in the district.

As Rashmi and Rajnish observed that some families could not afford to pay for solar lamps, they realised that there was a need to increase the financial capacity of the locals. Incidentally, one of the villages the couple was working with on the solar programme was of traditional artisans from the Shauka community. They used to trade with Tibet and traditionally wove textiles with hand-spun Tibetan sheep wool yarn. Seeing their textiles, the couple decided to work with this traditional skill and take it forward as a sustainable livelihood option.

Avani thus started working with 20 families weaving carpets with new designs woven with hand-spun wool. They also started working with spinners to improve the quality of spinning to produce fabric that would be suitable for garments for the urban market. As the young men in the region were involved in other occupations or had migrated to urban centres for work, the couple concentrated on training women and elderly men. In due course, they started working with members of different communities who wove textiles with hand-spun yarns of natural fibres such as hemp. The production centres were located close to the artisans' houses. Over time, Avani started working on product development and marketing of the weaves.



PROCESS AND PRODUCT

The foundation of Avani's philosophy is that the process of production of any textile is as important as the product itself. In keeping with this approach, before they took the first step, they examined what its impact would be on the soil and water of the area. In continuing a local tradition, they thought of concentrating on natural dyes and spent the first year only experimenting with natural dyes for textiles.

Systems to conserve water and energy were put in place, as both resources are scarce in the area. Rainwater harvesting systems were designed, and the water used for natural dyeing and growing vegetables. Solar-powered spinning wheels were installed in unilluminated villages to improve the productivity of household spinning. Further, Avani started paying villagers for picking up fallen pine needles as a fire prevention measure and to generate electricity. The machines used to iron finished textiles were powered by electricity produced from pine needles.

NATURAL DYES

In keeping with local tradition, the organisation's work has nurtured the traditional skill of natural dyeing through intensive training and

UNIQUE INITIATIVE

RESEARCH AND EXPERIMENTATION WITH A VARIETY OF LOCAL PLANTS CONTINUES TO OBTAIN NEW COLOUR TONES.

experimentation to increase the natural dye colour palette. Earlier, the colour palette was limited to browns, yellows and pinks; however, artisans now create a variety of colours (such as orange, red, blue, violet and green) from natural sources, i.e., plants.

Eighty per cent of the plants such as turmeric, marigold, myrobalan, pomegranate and eupatorium used for dyeing are indigenous to this area. The plants are grown and collected by women's groups, thereby further involving the local community and providing additional income to the villagers. Indigo and shellac, which are required for obtaining blue and red colours respectively, are sourced from other parts of India and processed at Avani. Research and experimentation with a variety of local plants continues to obtain new colour tones. Avani is now a pioneer in the cultivation and pigment production of altitude-specific natural indigo in the Kumaon Himalayas. Also, more local farmers are now expressing interest in indigo cultivation.



WILD SILKS OF INDIA

Once the processes for hand-weaving textiles with hand-spun woollen yarns were in place, the team started working with the hand-spinning and weaving of silk. Subsequently, the cultivation of wild silks such as *eri* and *muga* was initiated as the host plants for silkworms of both these silks are indigenous to the region.

The cocoons of *eri* silkworms were collected in the wild from castor plants or from *eri* silkworms which fed on leaves picked from these castor plants. Cocoons of *muga* silkworms were similarly collected and hand-spun. With the cultivation of silk established, the cocoons were obtained (after the moth had broken out making the finished product, i.e., ahimsa silk) and processed and the yarn hand-spun for hand-weaving silk textiles and fabrics. This project of silk cultivation was halted four years ago and now the entire silk yarn is sourced from Jharkhand and Assam. Currently, Avani sources reeled *muga* silk from Assam to meet production needs and *tussar* silk yarns from other parts of the country.

UPGRADING THE PRODUCTION

Avani has worked towards upgrading the skills, materials and tools to revive and upgrade the local traditional craft of natural dyeing and weaving, and to make it a viable livelihood





opportunity. This has been done by guiding artisans to spin finer yarns, expand the fibres used that now include different types of wool including pashmina (from Ladakh and Tibet), natural silk and linen (that is being dyed at Avani), expand the colour palette of naturally dyed yarns, and create a variety of textiles that they had not produced earlier.

Avani also introduced frame looms to produce wider textiles; weaving was traditionally done on the pit and back-strap looms. Local tailors have been trained to stitch high-quality garments and home accessories. To scale up their work, in 2005, Avani organised the artisans into a cooperative named the Kumaon EarthCraft Self Reliant Cooperative, popularly referred to as 'EarthCraft', which markets its products under the brand name 'Avani', and kids' products under the brand name 'Goraiya'. Rashmi is the Founder and Honorary Chairperson of EarthCraft.

PRODUCT MARKET

Avani is producing textiles which are contemporary, of a very high quality, and sold in the domestic and international markets. About 60 per cent of the products are sold in the domestic market through exhibitions, online sales and at stores (The Shop and People Tree at Delhi; and Either Or at Pune), and 40 per cent are exported to countries like Japan, Canada and the US.



<http://avani-kumaon.org>

The acceptance of the products in the foreign market with very high-quality outfits has given EarthCraft the confidence that their products can compete on their own while providing a fair wage to the artisans in a very remote rural area. The work has brought livelihood, a pride in their skills, and a gentle change in the fabric of local communities, while stemming migration to cities for work for the people of Kumaon and showing the way of nurturing local skills and resources for bringing about change. It has shown that working with appropriate technology and traditional textiles can successfully result in the holistic development of local communities. ■

