

Eye of the Needle

Overcoming the Harsh Realities of Thar With a Crafts Revolution





Eye of the Needle

Overcoming the Harsh Realities of Thar With a Crafts Revolution

Author:
Ankita Shah

Publication of:
Urmul Desert Crafts

Design:
Lok Priya

Publication By:
Urmul Trust

Photo Credits:
Urmul Team

Year of Publishing:
2020

Visualization:
Aakriti Shrivastava, Aastha Maggu,
Lok Priya, Rani T. Sable, Shwetambra Ujjain

Urmul Trust would like to express our deep gratitude to Accenture and Charities Aid Foundation for the continued support to *Skills to Succeed* programme.

udc@urmul.org | www.urmul.org



Content

In Search of BELONGING (Page 12 - 23)

- ▶ Community profile
- ▶ Migration: what was left behind, what was brought along
- ▶ Camps
- ▶ Allotment of land
- ▶ Conditions in thar
- ▶ Migration: what was challenged (livelihood)
- ▶ Geographical coverage

The Lightest POSSESSION (Page 26 - 35)

- ▶ Nashida, origins
- ▶ A tradition, her loom, hand me down, marriage, dowry etc.
- ▶ What survives migration/ what was accepted
- ▶ What survived in turn helps in survival of the community
- ▶ Old work
- ▶ Contractors prior to urmul
- ▶ Ends on a connecting note introducing urmul's initial contact

NEW beginnings, Old FEARS (Page 38 - 51)

- ▶ Urmul, inception, objectives
- ▶ Potential and establishment of ICP
- ▶ The residue of migration - (trauma, fear, resistance)
- ▶ Challenges and overcoming challenges in setting up

PORTRAIT of a MAKER (Page 54 - 67)

- ▶ Dresses
- ▶ Houses
- ▶ Jewellery
- ▶ Festivals
- ▶ Day in the life

WARP & WEFT of a Changing FABRIC (Page 70 - 85)

- ▶ Taankas, techniques, motifs wrt different communities and villages
- ▶ Collaboration between urmul and women in the creative process
- ▶ Development of work and effect of change in life, confidence, income, status
- ▶ Process illustration from conception - development - finished product - sale - impact on women
- ▶ Economy of embroidery
- ▶ Processes and protocols, advent of new brands, trainings, exposure
- ▶ A new life through art

New ASPIRATIONS, New CHALLENGES (Page 88 - 97)

- ▶ Stories of current generation
- ▶ Aspirations of women, a widening of horizon
- ▶ Aspirations for urmul
- ▶ Craft development
- ▶ Challenges for women
- ▶ Roadblocks for urmul

Like KHEJRI In THAR (Page 100 - 103)

- ▶ Story of resilience
- ▶ Note on comparative stories of migration and evolution where art and culture don't survive
- ▶ Story of a collective revolution - one where women support women, urmul supports villagers as artists and as inhouse members, team supports team, art support life





At the heart of every revolution is someone who said no, someone who did not accept what was and what had been, and expected better from the world.

When the communities from the Thar regions of Pakistan crossed over into the Thar in Rajasthan, they were given shelter in refugee camps. A few years later, land was allotted to them across Western borders of Rajasthan where they had to start life from scratch. These regions were harsh and supported no livelihood possibilities. With meagre income earned through ad-hoc labour work, each day had its own challenges and the next was unimaginable. All this, while the communities were still recovering from migration, from leaving their property, livestock, and many hard years of building a home behind.

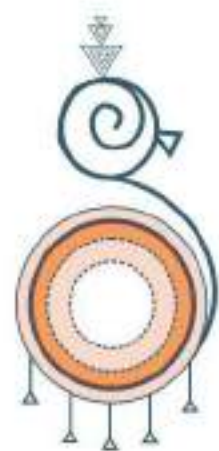
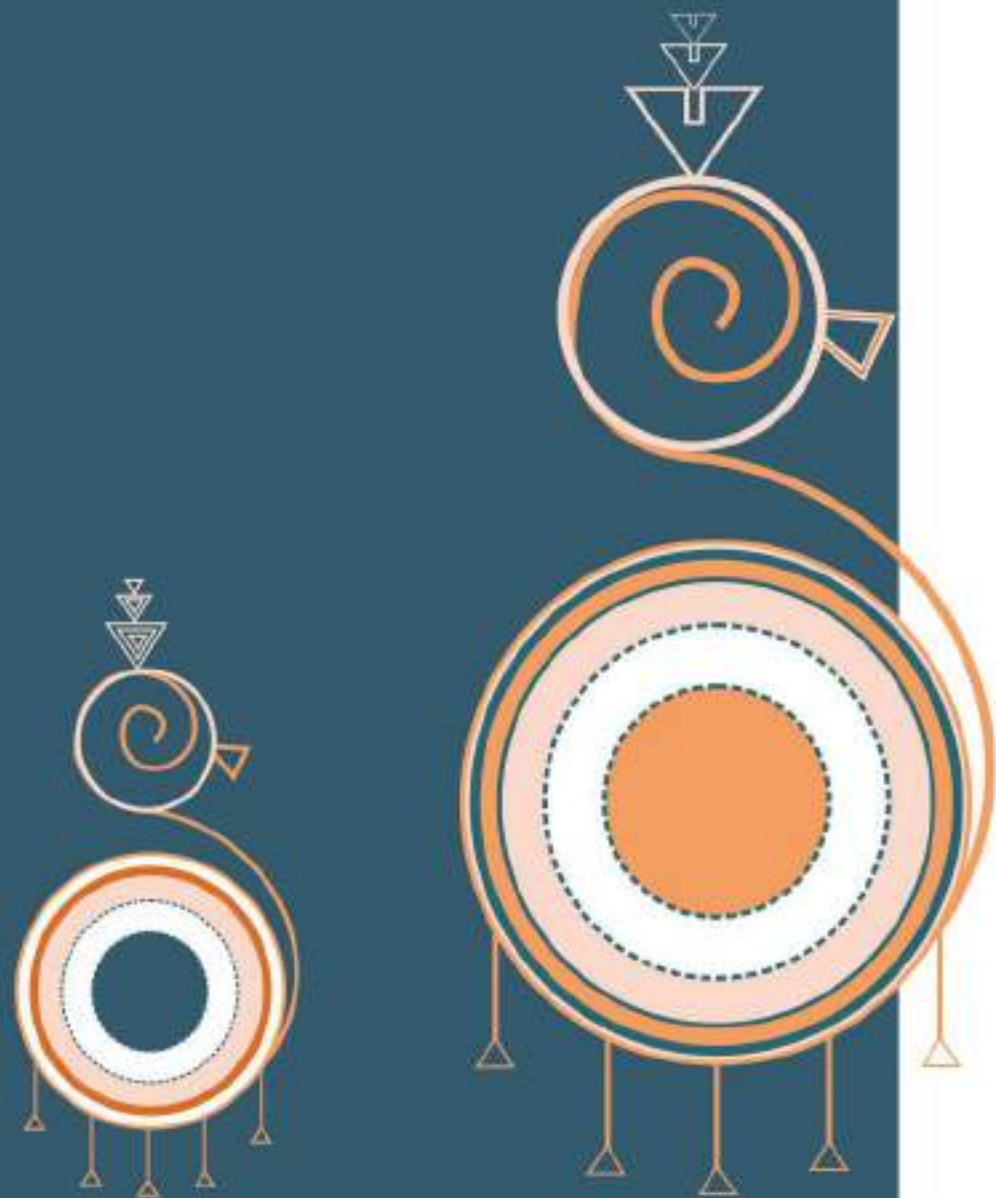
It was around this time that a demand for embroidered apparel and furnishings emerged from urban and foreign markets. Contractors rushed to communities like these where embroidery was a cultural heritage, known by every girl and expressed in every element of their homes and clothing. With no option for livelihood, women took to embroidery work for these contractors at unfair wages and bad working conditions, but it helped them sustain their lives.

With interventions from URMUL, an organization that has been working in this region for over three decades for social and financial upliftment of the communities, the women became a part of their income generation program where they found better working conditions as well as fair pay.

This book attempts a compilation of oral histories of this journey. I've brought together many conversations I had with four generations of women in the Bikaner region as well as the people at URMUL.

This book pays homage to the lives of women who said no.

Introduction



To the women who have transformed Thar, their lives, and those of their families, to the women who still have many battles to fight, thank you for giving me the time and a chance for conversation. I was a stranger and you bore your soul, and I'm thankful for every bit of the time I spent, it was my privilege to be in your company. My special, special thanks to Parubai, Chandni, Purubai, Anti, Manju, Bhawri, Dheli, Tarabai, Chandni from Deli Tali, Kenkudevi, Mohini bai, Rangubai, Manidevi, Sahudevi, Harudevi, Kasturidevi, Dhapudevi, Meeradevi. To the men I met here who have stood by the women - especially Poonamji and (tarabai's son?)

To Anshul Ojha, firstly for believing strongly in the need for this journey to be told, to be shared, to be documented, for sharing the vision with me and then for trusting me with it, for giving me the freedom to visualize and the space to narrate it in my own way. The entire URMUL family for your fervour and commitment - especially Perna Agarwal, Hemaramji, Sunil Lahiri, Mulji and <<brother's name>>, Laxmi, Shweta, Santoshji, Kamlesh, Kanniram and Champalal, Gulabji, Komal - for giving your time to talk to me. To Lok Priya for conversations, company, and for visualizing this book with me. To Rani for making sure this book moves beyond the first draft and goes into print. The Ojha family, Arvind ji for the keen eye that spotted kashida many years ago, to you and Sushila aunty for your dedication and persistence to better lives of people and for instilling values in your children and the entire Urmul team to work "with" communities.

To Ramneek Singh, for being the bridge to URMUL, for listening to the first drafts of my time spent in Bikaner, for an unlimited supply of chai and quiet through my writing hours. To my family for their unwavering support, and mom for trusting me at every phase of my life.

And last but most importantly, to Sanjoy Ghose.

Acknowledgement



1 In Search of BELONGING

The notion of home is closely linked with a sense of belonging. But one of the most concerning issues in the world today is the impairment of this relationship. Violence, persecution, harassment and oppression across the world have led to a startling number of people being uprooted from their homes and ripped off of their identities. Over the past five decades and more, South Asia especially has been caught in conflicts arising out of national, regional, ethnic, religious, linguistic and economic differences. A pertinent cause of persecution of minority groups and the rising refugee crises is the resistance in accepting and living in cultural heterogeneity. India is also home to a startling number of refugees. The partition of India in 1947 led to the displacement of over 14 million people, their homes, their families, their identities. In search of belonging, Muslims in India fled to Pakistan and Hindus in Pakistan fled to India, hoping to find safety in religious majority. This event was the bloodiest catastrophes in human history, where close to a million people are estimated to have lost their lives. The partition's trauma continues to haunt those who survived and its violent nature has created an atmosphere of hostility and suspicion between India and Pakistan that plagues their relationship to this day. The tension never really ended in 1947, and for the years to come, many more people from either side of the border continued to be displaced in search of a place they could feel safe in.





Parubai was one of the 90,000 people who left their homes in Pakistan in 1971 in hopes that on this side of the border, they would feel safe and at home.

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.

— Warsan Shire

Parubai, 58 years old, crossed the border as a ten year old laden on a camel with two siblings and bundles of basic material her family had carried hurriedly; her father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, walked afoot for what she recalls was a 15 hours journey from Bahawalpur into the Thar desert in India. Her family's main occupation was farming and animal husbandry, but she says they left their cows and goats there to rush for India when they came to know the border had opened for a brief period. She says that communities like hers, that belong to a lower class and religious minority were being harassed by both the common folk and the police. Members from the Hindu community would be arrested without any reason for extortion of money or livestock.

Many of these refugees who arrived in India brought with the stories of their daily reality of discrimination and persecution they faced in the form of abductions, unwarranted arrests,

abuse, forced conversions, and caste and class based oppressions at the hands of fundamentalists. In an already unstable law and order situation, they were afraid life would get even more strained with the likelihood of a war between the two countries. They had no choice but to escape the constant sense of insecurity and look for safe haven in India.

Majority of the people that crossed the border from Pakistan into Rajasthan belonged to *Thar Parkar* (literally meaning beyond the Thar) district of Sindh, Umarmkot, Mirpur Khas, Hyderabad, Rahimyar Khan and Bahawalpur. They belonged to many different caste-based communities such as the Meghwals, Bhils, Sansis, Jogis, Odhs, Rajputs, Brahmins, Malis, Rabaris, Sonars, Jats, Nais, Darzis among others. As *The Nowhere People*, an unpublished report by Seemant Lok Sanghathan notes, many of them were landless Dalits and Tribals, in addition to which they were mostly illiterate and poor. In Pakistan they worked mainly as landless labourers in the fields of landlords.

Upon arrival, they were put in 24 refugee camps by the Government of India in Barmer district of Rajasthan. The Indian government provided for the basic sustenance of the several thousand people for over the next 15 years in these camp settlements, offering them monthly rations of food and water, with clothes and other necessities. Parubai recalls

that her people were naïve to have mistaken that this is how they would be spending the rest of their lives, without having to work ever again. So in 1986, when the Government decided to finally move them out of the camps and rehabilitate them, the people were uncertain about life that would follow and unprepared for the hardships coming their way.

As a part of the rehabilitation package, the Government offered land and cash to the refugees. However this was offered only to those who had acquired ration cards, which was mostly the head of the families. Each of these registered people were given 25 bigha

land which roughly converts to about 10-12 acres of land. However, as Parubai points out, this was not distributed according to family size, and eventually meant each small unit of a family got barely anything to farm and live. The locations these lands were offered in comprised of Barmer, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, regions that were harsher parts of the Thar desert. To make things worse, in almost all cases, the land distributed was undeveloped, uncultivable, and of poor grade in both the Indira Gandhi Canal area and the arid zone. This was not the only issue, the whole rehabilitation process was marred with corruption. Some refugees were actually given much less land than what had been officially

In the search for belonging, Parubai and many like her had left their homes and their lives only to arrive to another difficult period of their lives, rife with challenges and deserted from a way of life that is dignified, respectable, and peaceful.

allotted. Some people been allotted land but the land had not been actually acquired and was privately owned by someone else. In some cases, the allotted land was officially declared as 'irrigated' but it was actually largely or totally arid, but yet the owners are forced to pay instalments as owners of 'irrigated' land.

The geographic isolation of the Thar Desert by mountain ranges and plains contributes significantly to the weather patterns that shape its distinctive, hot, dry environment. Thar Desert and more specifically, the regions where refugees were rehabilitated come under an arid zone that has a high temperature, low humidity, low rainfall, erratic and poor textured soils. Water scarcity is a serious problem in the region with good rainfall expected only in an interval of three to four years. Annual rainfall in the region is particularly low, measuring from 4-20 inches. Rainfall data of the last 100 years shows the region has dealt with famines in 61 seasons with 24 of them being extremely severe. The environment around the Thar effectively absorbs all the rain that is carried in the

monsoon clouds before the clouds can reach the desert which makes the resulting monsoon winds hot and dry. Dotted among the sands of the Thar, are several salt water lakes that bring no particular relief to the extreme lack of drinkable water in the Thar Desert. The main source of water for irrigation and drinking needs remains the Indira Gandhi canal. Even then, it has not proven sufficient for the dense population in this region.

Of the total cultivated 15,73,029 hectare land in 2016, crops on 10,95,230 hectare were destroyed due to the failure of monsoon. Crop loss and low purchasing power have pushed the region into poverty.

Given this natural harsh, arid land and conditions, the region is a drought-prone region. This year, even before the onset of summer, over 5,000 villages in nine districts in Rajasthan — Barmer, Churu, Pali, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Jalore, Jodhpur, Hanumangarh and Nagaur were declared 'drought-affected' by the state government. With agriculture and cattle rearing being the only means of

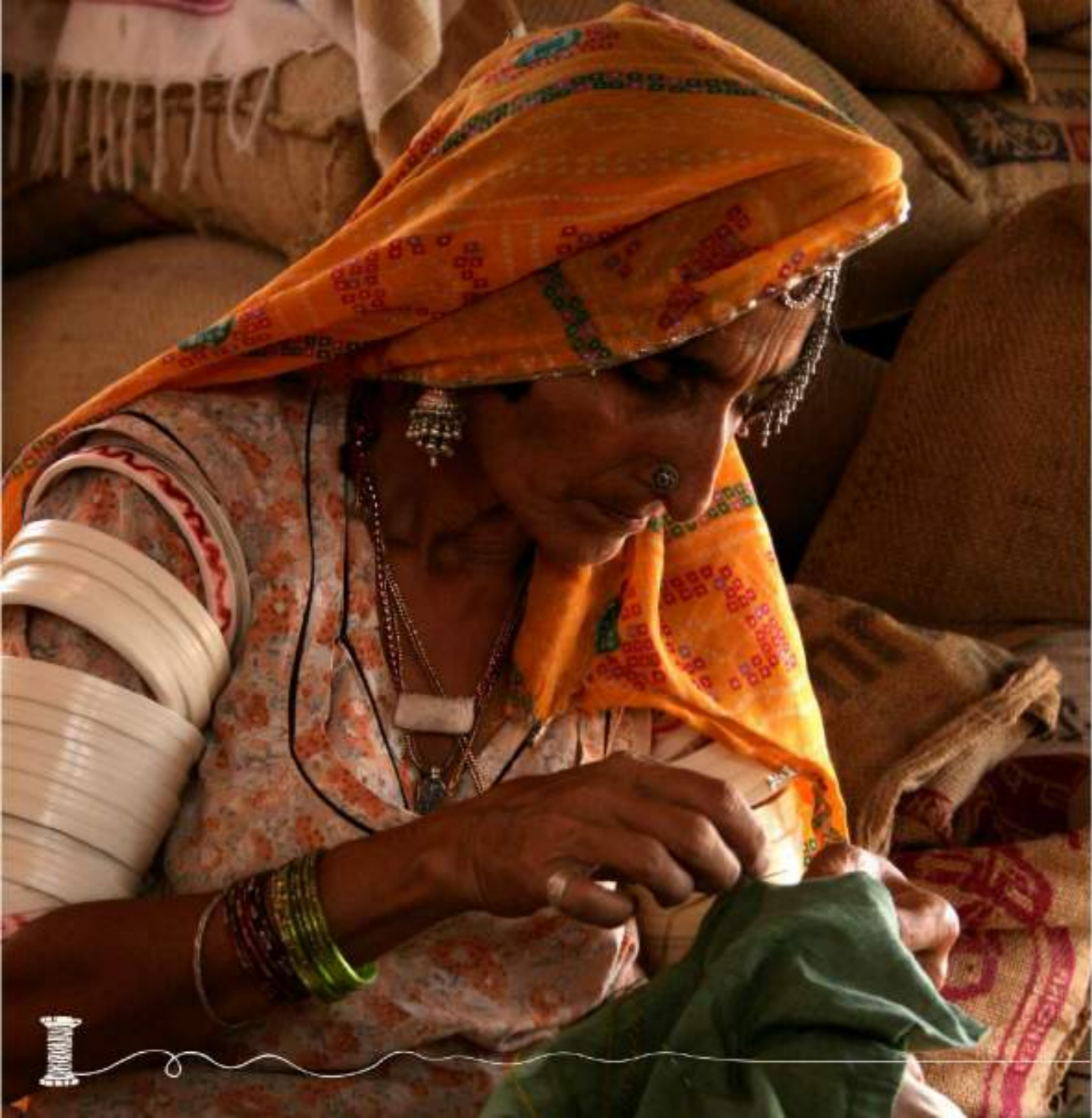




livelihood for locals of Thar desert, persistent drought has forced residents to migrate to other regions within the state while many others continue to cope with cascading effects of drought, which hampers agricultural production, results in shortage of drinking water and fodder, and affects both, human and animal health. The drought of 1987 caused by the failure of the south western winds was considered to be the worst drought of the century for all of India, the worst hit regions being Gujarat and Rajasthan. The precipitation this year was less than 50% of the normal and this drought came in succession after 3 or 4 years of recurring situation in the state of Rajasthan, which accentuated the distress to an unimaginable level. There was a severe shortage of drinking water and animal fodder in both the rural and urban areas of Rajasthan. This drought situation worsened life and stunted any little progress the people were making in their new lives.

Parubai recalls the tough years of the new life in Dandkala, around 130 kms westwards from Bikaner, where her family had been given land. These memories still cause her shivers, "There was no water. Life was tough. The PWD was doing some construction work in these areas back then. We would go to

them and beg for work. On some days we would manage fourteen rupees a day through labour work at these sites, but it wasn't enough for us to feed our families. So we would be at their feet to even give us meals and water. I remember, on many days when there was neither work nor food, our children and I survived on khejri berries." For these refugee children, education was not even a possibility. Survival was of utmost importance, which meant risking health and safety at an early age to help their families scrape some money for a living, with the risk of being exploited for labour and the likelihood of being married before the legal age. In times like these, one doesn't think beyond how to make the next meal possible. This was a period devoid of hopes and aspirations for the people. Parubai says, "Someone from my in-laws side had once said, 'you know you have a son, the son will take care of you when he grows up, he will work hard, and you will one day have a daughter-in-law and she will also take care of you.' I said my son is so young and he is not even getting one roti a day, how will he ever find a wife, who will give a daughter to us when we ourselves are starving. I could not think of surviving tomorrow and here she was telling me to live in the hopes of my son and daughter in law taking care of me."



When the refugees arrived to their new homes, their happiness was marred by the uncertainty of life in what looked like a grossly challenging region for both vegetation and animals, for a community that was traditionally dependent on essentially these two. Thousands of families that had come from across the border for a better life, now had to find a way to survive in the harsh reality of the Thar desert in absolute lack of water and absence of rains. In Sanskrit, they called this region Marusthal, that translates to "land with sand dunes", but also to it less technical and a more symbolic connotation, "land of the dead"

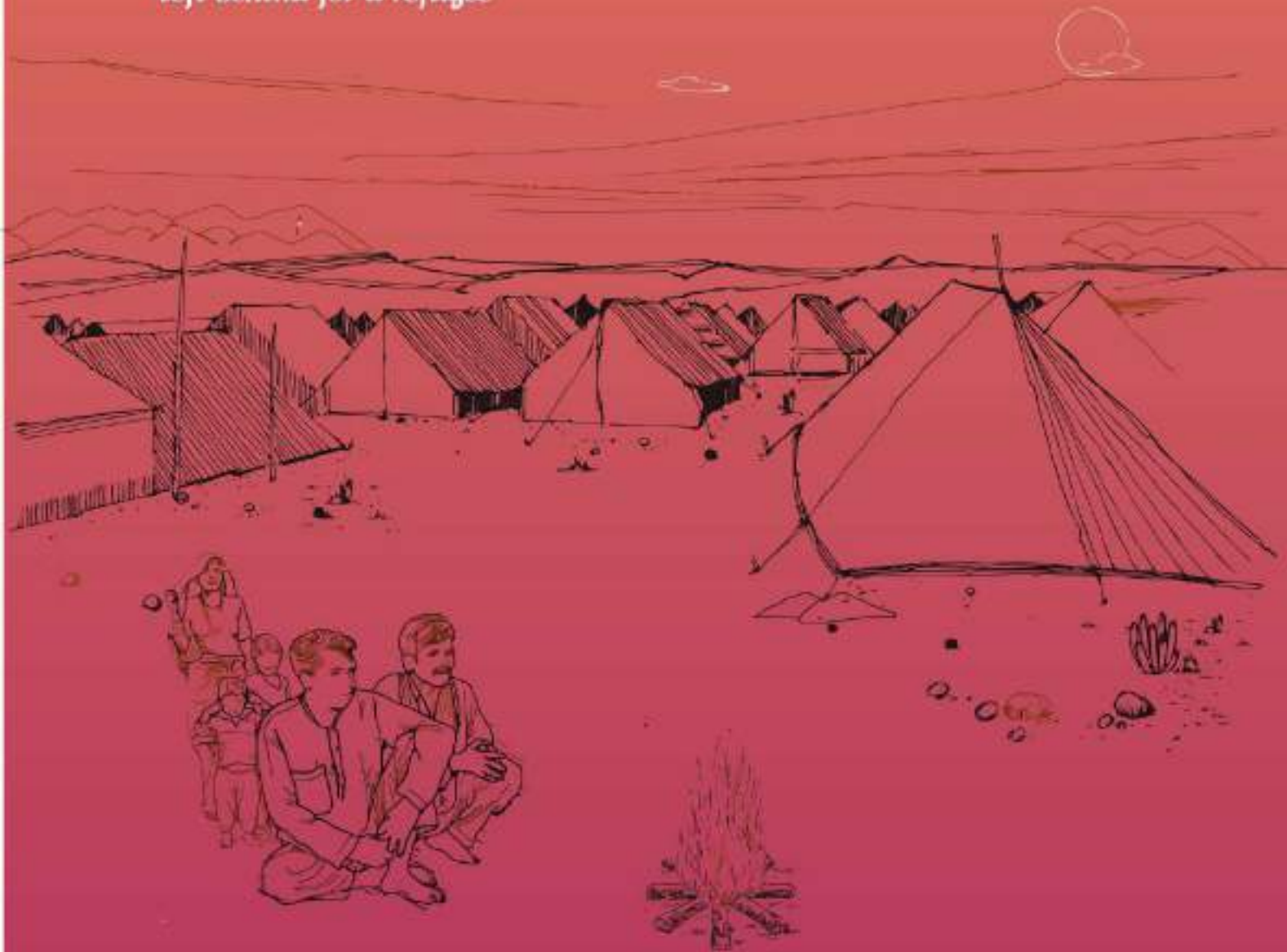
Photo Info:

*Above/
Left/*





In the long, slow, and arduous trail of uprooting, leaving, drifting, arriving, resettling - much is left behind for a refugee



2 The Lightest POSSESSION

Left behind are their loved ones unable or unwilling to leave

Left behind are family members and friends "disappeared" or killed or lost to starvation and disease.

Left behind are homes, possessions, land

Left behind is their sense of identity

Left behind are their social and professional roles

Left behind often is their culture, their mother tongue, their tradition

Left behind are their roots in a place where they felt at home, where their ancestors once lived and flourished

The long, slow, and arduous trail is cumbersome, the baggage not meant for walking afoot or swimming across, often their previous identities seem to be a burden to the new lands that welcome them, and they find that along the way, they have consciously and subconsciously thrown off their own belongings, cut off their own umbilical cords, unlearned their own songs, to make it to the other side. What they bring with themselves is a fractured sense of who they once were accompanied by trauma that often doesn't get addressed in their new homes.

The 90,000 people received sustenance support for the time they lived in the camps and the money and land to resettle, but did not receive no medical or psychological support to cope with the hardships of migration and the identity shift. Years later, today, medical facilities even for other health disorders, illnesses, pregnancies, etc. are far and few.



KASHIDAKARI

The skill was not merely a dexterity they had acquired from a vocation received as a hand-me-down, but rather it was a creative ingenuity gained from generations of practice, one that had now become as primitive to them as learning to walk.

Embroidery is a technique as old as fabric itself. The migration of people from Afghanistan, Greece, Germany, Iran and Iraq into the pre-partition India, brought many embroidery techniques to this region in the 16th or 17th century. Kashidakari, the Persian word for needlework, or its short version Kashida, is often used to refer to embroidery in the regions of Sindh and Thar in Pakistan. When they people moved into India, they brought with them both the word and the work.

Kashida was practiced in the communities in and around Sindh, as a traditional skill, passed from generations from mothers to daughters. The women would embroider their own clothes, other home items such as pillow covers, bedsheets, handkerchiefs, and decorative items such as covers for bottles, kajal makers and anything else that piqued creativity. Kashida was done not only for daily use or for décor, but was also ingrained into

the significant cultural and social events of the community, such as festivals and weddings. It was a ritual that the women (the bride's family and/or the bride herself) would embroider bedsheets and pillow covers and other items that was brought into the new house by the bride as dowry. To know kashida and to bring embroidered items was said to be a sign of having an aesthetic sense and being cultured. None of the women had got any formal training of it. As the daughters grew eight or ten years old, they would begin to show interest in needlework, having watched their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, doing it all the time. Learning would begin by watching. And then slowly, as they grew older, they would pick up the needle and thread and practice, under the guidance of other women in the family and neighbourhood. Soon enough, as teenagers, they would have learnt it enough to embroider a whole bedsheet by themselves for their wedding in a few years. With kashida, the

It is not always that art survives when people migrate, but here it did. Although it is always that art gives back to the artist much more than it takes.

patterns, the choice of colors, and the stitches, would largely be inspired by traditional designs but applied with individual creativity. The designs often required symmetry and spacing, even geometry to a large extent. But all of the pattern making and pattern stitching was entirely done without the use of any ruler or measuring tape or tracing paper. It was done entirely by hand, under the supervision of two naked eyes, counting the warp and weft of the fabric.

Years later, unknowingly, what survived the long, slow, and arduous trails, the refugee camps, the unforgiving Thar, was the lightest possession that had accompanied the women - Kashida: the dexterity of their hands, their creative expression, their heirloom that they carried without as much thought in their clothes and their bags, on themselves, on their camels.



TARIBAI – Survival of the Artist

"When I crossed the border into India, I would have been around 6 or 7 years old. I remember very little from that time. When we were still living in the camps in Barmer, I was married. I would have been around 16 then. A few years later I lost my husband and even lost two sons. Only one son survived. I've seen very tough times. You can see my hair has turned white because of all the pain I've suffered. It was kashida that saved me. I must have been 10 or so, when I started learning the taankas (stitches) from my mother and my bua (aunt).

We embroidered all our clothes, our household material such

as bedsheets, pillow covers, handkerchiefs. In fact, for our weddings, there is a ritual that the bride brings embroidered furnishings and clothes. For my wedding too, I brought embroidered material.

We were in the camps in Barmer when some contractors came to know that women in our community were very skilled at embroidery. Until then, no one had thought that one could make money by doing kashida. We always did it for our own liking and for ourselves. So, when they contractors said they would give us some money if we made the designs they wanted, we were very relieved because there wasn't any other way to make a living. Agriculture was very unreliable. These contractors would bring different kinds of pieces, from clothing to furnishings to décor, and ask us to embroider the designs they wanted on them which was often given on tracing paper. They would then sell it to customers around India and even export some of this. Depending on the piece and the design, the wage per piece would be around ten rupees, twenty rupees and if the work was elaborate then maybe sixty rupees. It was not really the fair wage for the kind of time and effort we were putting in. They would ask

us to embroider big quilts and bedsheets, around 3-4 meter big, but give us as little as 10 to 25 rupees. We didn't really fight back. We were not educated or aware to know what our work's value was. We didn't have any union or organization to fight this collectively. Something was better than nothing at all. So, we continued to work for them. In fact, to make more money, many women, some even very old and with failing eyesight, would hoard more work from multiple contractors and work really fast and haphazardly, just so that they could make more money. But the kashida was really bad in both quality and design. The fabric was sub-standard, the thread we were given was not of good quality, and even the designs were very rough. When I look back now, instead of helping us, this kind of work only undervalued our art, our skill. The overworking and rough quality also led to our skill, our techniques, our health getting slowly deteriorated over time. And the exploitation was growing to such an extent that they would often tell us the pieces never got sold and so they can't pay us. We were left with no option but continue working on their terms because there were hardly any other ways to make a living."

At the heart of the refugee crises is the question: what then survives?

OASIS

While kashida in itself was the first flicker of hope for the refugees, especially the women, the contractors had tried hard to make sure that the people got only a drop of the ocean. It was the contractors who were in contact with the market and the customers outside. The contractors fully knew and understood the potential of kashida, its demand, its value both in India and abroad. Yet they very carefully left the artists out of the entire eco-system. The

refugees were scattered in multiple villages, they had no means of education or orientation to business, the women were hardly ever allowed to go out, they didn't have the capital or accessibility to credit schemes to start their own production - there was no way they could possibly eliminate the contractors who were the middlemen and capitalize on kashida on their own.

Urmul Trust, initiated by URMUL Dairy (Uttari Rajasthan Cooperative Milk Union Ltd.) in Bikaner, was already working towards building and bringing social and economic change in the lives of the people in western Rajasthan since 1983. This work began with developing a dairy by working with livestock owners. But soon the organization realized they had to shift focus medical and health access and then even further into areas of education. Urmul Trust understood that working to alleviate their life and empower them meant comprehensively responding to the regional challenges. And one such regional challenge was the very harsh conditions of the area which was aggravated by the great drought of 1988-89 that was a setback to the erstwhile livestock and agriculture related plans of Urmul. The life-threatening conditions demanded that the plans be reviewed and quickly respond to the

abject poverty and hunger that was brought upon the people of this region. The one immediate way forward was to build a sustainable income generation programme that made the people self-sufficient and improved their lives. While looking for possible opportunities of generating income, Urmul discovered the traditional weaving techniques that were known to people from this region. Similar visits to the village-settlements of the erstwhile refugees, led them to an embroidered lehenga (skirt) laid outside a hut for drying. It was discovered that all the women who had come from Pakistan in 1971, and now their daughters, daughters-in-law, know the extremely intricate and alluring embroidery as on this lehenga. They called it kashida.

Sometimes, the oasis emerges from within.

But even in the driest parts of the world, the winds change and the fault lines shift to make way for water from a rainfall thousands of years old. A strong current was already working its way through this desert, preparing for a ground-breaking journey that would transform the lives of the people and bring an old art form of kashida and the artists, rightfully to the fore.





It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks.

- Dina Nayeri



3 Old Fears, New BEGINNINGS

Urmul Trust was not only opening its doors for those who were in need, but in fact going out there, far, far along the untrodden paths where no other help had reached only to empower the people whose lives had been famished.

What Urmul Trust had begun was a very planned and collective revolt with the people of the villages against the inhuman conditions that had pervaded this region for decades. At the heart of this revolt was an undying faith in people's capacities and their understanding of progress and development. There is danger in approaching social work with an attitude of knowing more about what the people need than the people themselves. There is also danger in approaching social work with a rigid singularity in objective that is unyielding to the intersectionality of challenges. Urmul Trust had been very careful and aware of these dangers and stayed far away from any approach or logic that would be an imposition on the communities instead of a solution. Their work continued to remain expansive, the approach multi-level. They understood that comprehensiveness and collaboration were the only ways to sustainably alleviate problems. Which is why, a decentralisation followed and another seven organizations off-shot in different areas in the region to thematically address issues in health, livelihoods, education, governance, and advocacy interventions, with a focus on the vulnerable and marginal sections of the society - women and children.



URMUL Family

These organizations that were the offspring of URMUL were:

URMUL Trust

Urmul Trust established in 1986 in the harsh and inhospitable region of rural Rajasthan in the Thar Desert, has been innovating models for inducing community-driven socio developmental changes by devising programs, strengthening them, sustaining and finally handing them over to communities.

Urmul Trust works across verticals ranging from governments and NGOs to Panchayati Raj Institutions, SHGs and other civil society organizations.

URMUL Marusthali Bunkar Vikas Samiti (UMBVS)

Urmul Marusthali Bunkar Vikas Samiti was established in 1987 in north-west of Rajasthan with a goal to nurture the poor and weaker sections of weavers in Thar of western Rajasthan without an intermediary by providing direct access to the weavers to international and local markets. Over time,

their focus has been expanded to education, children rights etc. The organization is currently working on Library Project, Community Eye Health Programme and many others.

URMUL Seemant Samiti

Urmul Seemant Samiti is the eldest daughter in the Urmul family, having grown out of Urmul's first step away from where it was born 1987 at Bajju, Kolayat block, a village just under a hundred kilometres west of Bikaner. Urmul Seemant Samiti focuses on children's education, organizing collectives of women and other community groups to oversee and actively participate in implementing various programmes.

URMUL Vasundhara Gramothan Samiti

Urmul Vasundhara Gramothan Samiti emerged in 1991 with a purpose to sustain daily employment for individuals surrounding Lunkaransar. It has now expanded to more intricate details of weaving with expertise on dyeing and new professional designs. Over

time, it has learnt to cater to the demands of urban markets and presently, aims to sustain itself through portrayal and exposition of its versatile products.

URMUL Jyoti

Urmul Jyoti traces its origin to Urmul Rural Health Research in 1986 and soon followed a transition to a registered society after a decade. Over time the organization has focused on east-west Rajasthan desert districts of Bikaner, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Barmer, Churu and Nagaur. Urmul Jyoti is known for expanding its role beyond boundaries by providing aid to 4000 people every year across borders. Urmul Jyoti Hospital today operates 24*7 with an adequate infrastructure and provides the opportunity to villagers to understand the process of surgery through live screening.

URMUL Setu Sansthan

Urmul Setu Sansthan emerged in 1994 with an objective to benefit the residents of Lunkaransar block and Chhatargarh block in Bikaner district along with Saradarsahar block of Churu district. Urmul Setu Sansthan had been focusing towards service delivery in the areas of health, education and training community-based persons as healthcare providers and teachers. The activities of the organization have so far concentrated on

primary education, healthcare, group organisation, agriculture, animal husbandry, income-generation, water, sanitation and capacity building of local governments as well as advocacy.

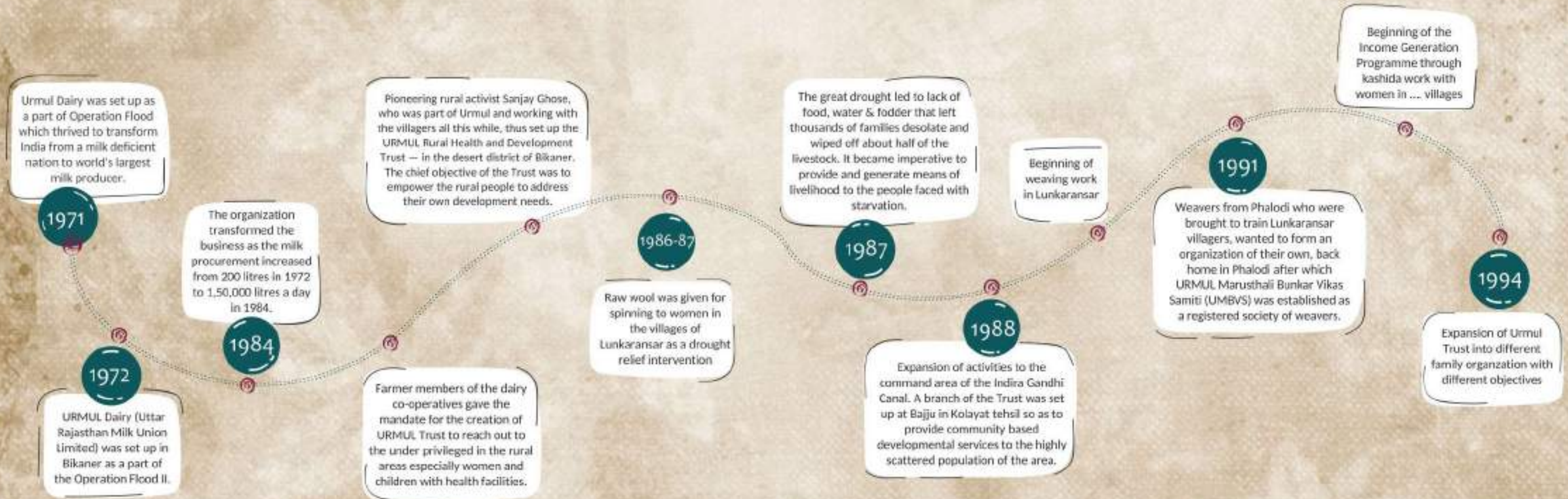
URMUL Khejadi

Urmul Khejadi established in 1998 in Jayal, Nagaur district of western Rajasthan was named after the significance of Khejadi tree, emerged to mobilise individuals towards a positive change. Urmul Khejadi's enterprise is to transform passive, fragmented, unorganized, and exploited labour into collective entrepreneurs who can act together to augment their own common property resources.

But the moment of finding the embroidered lehenga left for drying was not simply serendipity. When one charts the 40 years journey of Urmul through the time of early 1970s working in the villages in Bikaner and then expanding both its activities and its presence further deep to align with the needs of the villages, then that one moment of discovery of kashida ceases to be a surprise. One begins to clearly see that it was but a logical step albeit organic, in the unflinching presence and steady progress this organization had made in its journey in the villages of Thar.



The Journey of Urmul





RESIDUE

Any organization working in the social development sector needs to be around for a long time with persistence and adaptability as key skills to make any lasting difference to the community it is working with. Urmul's journey was no different. In fact, their work was constantly met with challenges that were specific to the social and cultural context of this community. The villagers were still carrying the trauma of the discrimination they faced prior to 1971 which had probably only aggravated in their struggles of surviving in Thar for the years post rehabilitation. This trauma, accompanied by their existing social and gender norms, had made it very difficult for them to trust anyone who was an outsider, even if these outsiders were in fact trying to help them.

When the work had initially begun and site visits were being done for trainings and onboarding, the team would rarely be allowed past the village "utaaro", a chowk at the entrance of the village. Parubai says, "Earlier they wouldn't allow girls to even step out of the house or let anyone from outside step into the house. Some people with ill-intentions or perhaps nothing better to do, would spread rumours amongst the men that women should

not be allowed to work with outsiders who were bringing us opportunities, because they would then leave the men and elope with one of these strangers, or they will commit something that dishonorable if we expose them to these outsiders. Who would have taken us starving women? Did we really have an option there? We had to take our stand and tell them that our children are dying of hunger, we had to do it for them if no one else"

This fear also came from the very limited exposure to anything that was beyond their means. *Sunil Lahiri*, a Project Director at Urmul who has been working in the Bajju campus for over 24 years, shared similar experiences from the initial years of interactions with the villagers "We called someone to come and cook at the campus kitchen. When the cooker whistled, many got afraid and ran away. They didn't know what a cooker was or looked like."

"Earlier, women and men both would protect other women and would fear that they would be misled or exploited. When they would come for training, men would accompany them, either a father would come or brother or sometimes even multiple men. They would

stand nearby and watch what's happening. They would try to cross the training area several times to eavesdrop on the conversations. There was a clear fear. The women would not even speak to strangers. This was so ingrained into the daily psyche that even if there was a stranger passing by and stopped for water, they would not step out for help. In the evening, their husbands were infamous to try and find out who came in the day by seeing the footmarks on the sand. This attitude was also getting passed on to the younger generation. When young girls would see our people, they would run away. The women would shout and scream at our people, asking them to leave. Some of these people had also presumed or judged that the women who worked with Urmul from our in-house team, were not honorable, dignified women, but in fact had been thrown out or run away from home. In their company, the women from the villages would surely be spoilt.

Then there was the caste issue that was creating a boundary. The villagers would ask you your caste or judge you from your appearance. If you would say you're SC, ST, they wouldn't even let you come near them. They would not feed you food or water. On the other hand, someone from a high caste would be treated better."

The resistance to move out of the villages also proved a big hindrance to the initial

trainings for the Income Generation Programme.

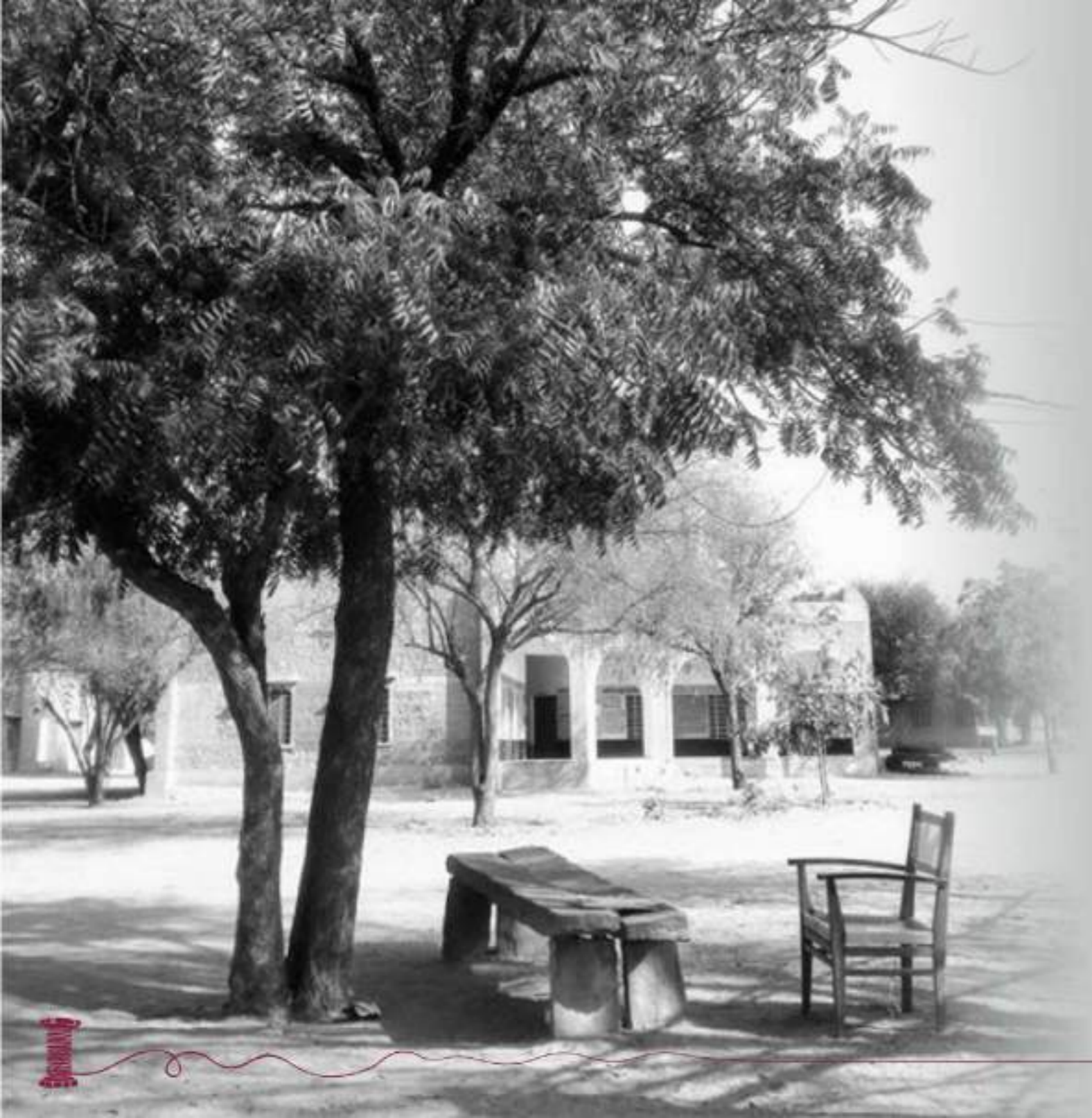
Santosh ji, 54 years old, has been working with Urmul for close to 20 years now, particularly in the areas of training and site visits. She says it was very difficult to bring the women to the center in Bajju from their villages for trainings. "Earlier, no one would be willing to get out of

their homes, or their villages. They found it very difficult to trust an outsider. They would tell us they'll work right from their homes and if we wanted to do the trainings, we should do it in the village itself. 'Our husbands won't send us to Bajju' was a common problem."

It was only and only persistence and presence of Urmul in the same site and situation as the

villagers, that led them to a slow and steady build-up of faith. Without a formal or expert support in the areas of addressing trauma, addressing mental health and gender sensitivity, Urmul worked tirelessly and often alone, to bring about a shift in thinking and a final acceptance that felt like being welcomed into a family.





INCOME GENERATION PROGRAMME

The Income Generation Programme (IGP) was built to establish the economy of embroidery. Through this programme, fabric was sourced, designs were made, dresses were cut and stitched, and sent to the women for kashida. The pieces would then be sold to the market and the women would receive a fair wage towards their work. One of the biggest changes IGP brought about was the awareness of fair wages and fair working conditions amongst the artists who were getting paid exceptionally low for their work and had to work three to four times their capacity to be able to make more money. Sustained employment for women, higher wages, addressing exploitation by the middlemen and promotion of the craft of embroidery were some of the main objectives of the programme.

Efforts began in 1990 with a training programme funded by District Rural Development Agencies (DRDA) for 20 women of Sheruwala village. In 1992-93 a grant for a

Craft Development Center by DCH provided the much need infrastructure consolidation. Now the organization could reach out to more women, had space to hold meetings, stock its production, as well as display intricate embroidery creations of women. Another 44 women from the villages of Bandhali, Bijeri and Dandkalan joined the project making a total of 64 women. Dastkar a craft organization, consistently provided design support to the producers for 10 days a month for two years. In 1993, 20 embroiderers from 2DO joined making the total to now 84. In 1995, 42 women from 2AD, 1BD chaks joined. And in 1998, 53 women in three more groups joined making the total membership of the embroidery programme to 179 women. However 42 women from three villages of Sheruwala, Bijeri and Bandhli left the project after working for 5 to 6 years. Most of them were from the Rajput caste and men in their society did not approve of the women leaving their homes whatsoever.



The initial challenges that came way were mainly on two fronts: 1. Getting past the boundaries that the villagers had made around themselves, 2. Building or finding the right direction in the design and production capabilities.

In the beginning, given that Urmul itself was new to this industry, they had to reach out to advisors and partners like NID. Designers like Laila Tyabji came to the villages, stayed here and conducted two-month training camps. Urmul mobilized the women in the tough circumstances where they were not even being led past the chaupal. Parubai had to fight with her husband and entire family to step out with her children to stay in Bajju for a one-month training. There were many women who had to stand up against their norms. The fight was not between villagers and Urmul, but in fact between patriarchy and survival.

Urmul has been a pioneer in structuring and formalizing the embroidery industry in India. Through this formalization, there

were small but persistent structural changes being made to the gendered way of life in these villages. The revenue mechanism and the production processes were put into place by Urmul and an economy based on embroidery had begun flourishing. It was imperative to work with own tailors. So, tailors also joined this cluster, mainly from Ghantiali. They were used to stitching shoes and work with leather. This too was a disappearing profession. Then they were trained to work on cotton fabric and were added to the supply chain. In some ways the fabric from the weaving looms in Urmul's other villages were also integrated in the supply chain.

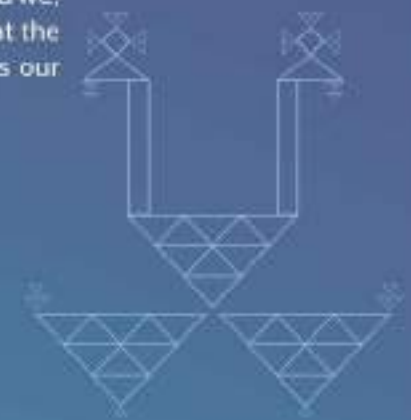
As the programme itself flourished, so did competition. The economy had not only opened but also was steadily expanding. In the center of this whole movement, were the women who had made a living for themselves and their family, found a way out of the horrifying way of life, all with the intricate art form of kashida they knew so well.



4 Portrait of a MAKER

*Artist, maker, leader, thinker:
there are many sides to her. The women
I have the privilege of meeting in the course of
writing this book have one thing in common: they are
confident about their work.*

It's a delight especially in the times when women often suffer from self-doubt and what has come to be known as the impostor syndrome. The women I meet are sure of themselves, they are certain of what they can do and are always willing to do more, if opportunity comes their way. On my way to the first site visit to Dandkalan, we are joined by Chandni and Manju, two young artists from the village, at the Bajju market. Before we continue our journey, suddenly they are reminded of buying a big bottle of Mountain Dew for the road. And to my delight, they are also very insistent on making a stop everytime we cross a little shade, so that we could have the cold drink while it's cold. They are concerned we, those of us who are not locals, are not accustomed to the heat the way they are. The maker is thoughtful. The maker welcomes our company even though our arrival is last minute.





When I reach Dandkalan, the women in the centre welcome us with warmth and hot tea. The women are being taken through the new processes and protocols for a new project from IKEA. There is more record-keeping now and more paperwork for taking holidays or leaving or rejoining and such. This rarely ever excites even us city folk working in corporates, but for the women, this briefing is only a sign of more work coming their way and so the overwhelming nature of this is doused by the excitement of both regular work and regular income.

The women are across different age groups. The younger, unmarried girls are wearing salwar kameez and dupatta whereas the married women are wearing ghagra, kanchali (short kurti) and chunari, with the chunari covering their head as a veil. The kanchali and ghagra are made of printed fabrics devoid of any embroidery. When I ask them why their own dresses aren't embroidered, the younger generation tells me it's not something they like to wear. But soon there is mention of embroidered woollen skirts and we're

shown an old, antique piece which is a heirloom of Parubai, worn for many years by her mother-in-law, with over ten different kind of embroidery patterns on it. This ghagra is entirely woven with wool. I'm told that two generations ago, wool was the staple fabric, and the weaving was given to Meghwal community as they were experts in woollen weaving. After the clothes were woven, the embroidery was done by the women. In the villages I go later, I also discover heavily embroidered kanchalis that women used to wear in their weddings and special occasions. These kanchalis have big arms so that the bangles or arm cuffs can pass through without being removed.

As soon as an elder or a senior in relation enters their vicinity, as if out of a natural reflex the women pull the chunari to cover their face. This tradition is also said to have been developed because of the climactic conditions of the place and women began covering their faces because of the extremely sunny weather. The chuniri is ofcourse transparent, but

often brightly colored. It is no less than balancing a couple of pots on their head, that the women walk and work with this colored veil always covering their sight. It is discomforting to me even though they seem utterly comfortable, having become used to this colored sight. I spend many hours before I can look into their eyes and talk to them. But when I do, I'm sure I will remember their conviction.

As an outsider perhaps, my view of their ivory bangles covering their arms almost upto the shoulders is another moment of awe and discomfort combined. Doesn't it bother them while working? They say they don't even remove it before sleeping or bathing. It's become a part of who they are now, as much as their own skin.

The ivory bangles or their cheaper plastic alternatives are also a sign of marriage. Perhaps it's because of this association that removing them incites more superstition. I'm told that usually it's 17 bangles on both upper arms and nine on the lower arm, a total of 52 on both arms. Sometimes, instead of these bangles, I find metal arm cuffs with variety of designs on them, which again cover their entire upper arm.

When the chunari is not covering their face, I notice the borla resting on the middle parting of their head. It is a spherical ornament, often accompanied by sheeshphool that is a jewelled head-band. Most of the first generation married women are not seen wearing the upper arm bangles, upper arm cuffs, borla or sheeshphool. In the villages I visit, Parubal is the only one sporting all of these things and carrying them beautifully. The ornamentation of the younger generation is minimal, that includes the kanauti with ear-chains, a couple of neck-chains which have amulets, rings, a quirky and large nose pin, and anklets. Neck Jewellery was largely minimal for all of the women in their working attire. They usually sported a thread/chain with a metal plaque amulet of Baba Ramdev. Sometimes instead of one deity there may be impressions of many of them or only the symbol of the deity, for example, footprints of Vishnu. Such amulets are called madaliya in Rajasthan. They may be of different shapes: rectangular, square, round, in the form of yoni or in the shape of a temple. I didn't see any woman wearing a nathni, which is probably saved for special occasions like weddings and festivities.

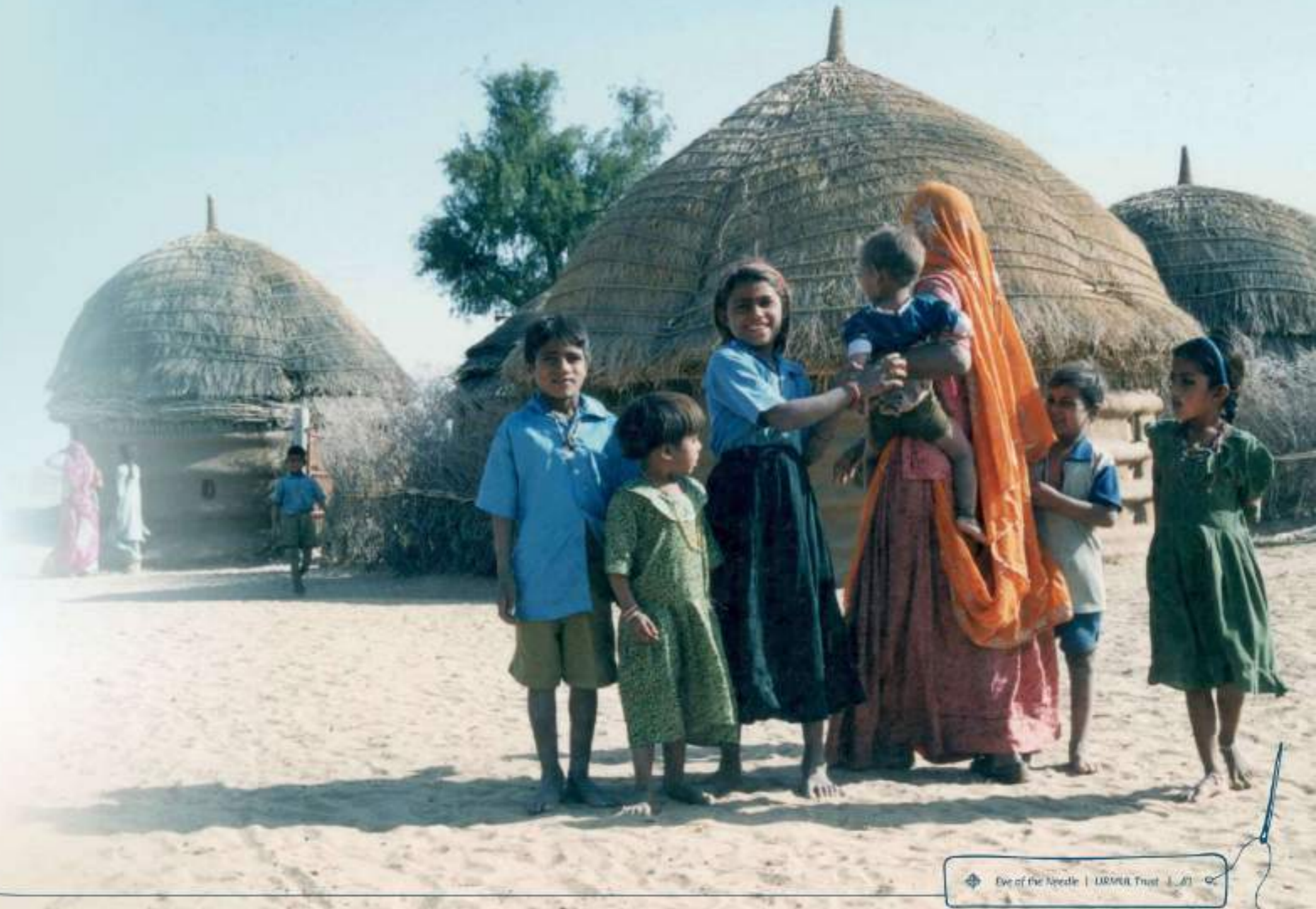


Homes

The women paint their houses by taking elements from nature like flowers, plants, birds etc. Even the aangan are often painted with similar motifs. The colors chosen are bright colors such as red, green, blue, yellow. Even though the house are small, people manage to have a small pooja space in one of the rooms.

The hut like structure in which the villagers lived is called jhopada. Jhopada is the kachcha style of housing present in the villages. It is a circular structure made up of blocks made of mud and finished with cow dung and mud mixture inside and outside. The floor is smoothened with mud and cow dung paste as well. The roofing is done with a widely available plant in that area called kemp, structured with bamboo. Kemp is dried first as it becomes stronger and more flexible, and then used for roofing. A unique feature of the jhopada is that it would be cold inside the hut during summer and hot during winter as the mud has the capacity to circulate air in and out of the structure. The doors are usually narrow letting in one person at a time. 2 to 3 jhopada's put together constitute the house, made up of the kitchen, the rooms for family and then often rooms for guests and pooja. In some cases, the houses also have pakka structures accompanied by kaccha kitchen structures. The pakka structures, made of brick and cement, also have terraces that give a view of the entire village and of the courtyard in the house.

The houses are often structured with cavities and shelves built into the walls. Therefore furniture is almost negligible. The one furniture hoarded in large quantities is the manchasia cots which are used for sitting and sleeping. These are iron frames with seating made of woven rope. Other furniture includes boxes for clothes and wooden frames for utensils, sometimes even aluminium frames.





The houses have a bathroom and toilet facility, which usually is an additional structure to the house. All kashida centres in the villages have toilets. The lack of adequate and proper drainage system has affected the disposal of garbage and waste, which often finds itself in open lands.

When we sit down to eat or work, or simply chat, dhurries are laid out with ease. In almost every house, I've seen a huge pile of durries and quilts and bedsheets, some of them made with "qatrans" ie waste fabric, stitched together beautifully with running stitches over them.

Water and electricity problems still persist though in much lesser degree than earlier. The Indira Gandhi canal has been a relief since 1985. The water from the canal is supplied to the houses every 15 days to the individual tanks that are placed outside the house. This water is used for drinking and household activities. For irrigation, there are community tanks where water arrives from the canal. This has changed the daily reality of the women. They no longer have to walk long distances to bring water. The time saved is used to complete other chores or spent in kashida. But it is not only about time. The irregular and scanty rains that were a constant cause of worry and on which all source of water and life was dependent is no longer the only resource of water. The canal has proven to be a great relief in the lives of the women, in improving their health and those of their families, and in supporting the livestock and agriculture, which in turn led to prosperity of both dairy and farm produce. I see little earthen pots with water for birds dotting almost every green landscape, hung to a branch. The villagers have made sure no bird or animal remains parched.

Electricity is produced mainly through wind and solar energy. Though its presence is punctuated through the day, inciting no specific response among the women. They are used to its intermittent presence.



A Day in their Lives

Parubai lives in a joint family, with several grandchildren constantly running around her and asking for her attention. She starts her day early in the morning at around 5am. I find her churning the curd of the milk they had collected the previous evening in a large earthen pot. She has tied a rope to the wooden churner and put the other end to the leg of the cot. This helps in creating a circular movement and possibly also reduces the manual effort. Her daughters-in-law are till then finishing other work and preparing breakfast and tea. The youngest of her grandchildren likes to be fed by her hands, so she sits him down near her and patiently feeds him each morsel of food. Occasionally, the older one notices that the youngest is being fed, and feeling left out starts throwing a fit, complaining to his grandmother, "Why didn't I get breakfast yet!" Once the children are fed, they leave for school, unless it is a Saturday or Sunday in which case I find them hanging around, playing, running and often falling down and crying because they're hurt. The women in the house, whether it's Parubai or Chandni, give a lot of freedom to the kids to fool around. The courtyard, which is a rarity in

cities, is a 24x7 playground for the kids without leaving line of sight of their mothers and grandmothers. The lack of facilities of internet and television leave them quiet alone and undisturbed when it is time to eat. On a working day, both Parubai and her daughter-in-law Chandni finish work by 8am, to settle in long, airy room in their home that is now a working centre for all the women in the neighbourhood. It is this time of the day that they look forward to the most. The women assemble there and pick their designated pieces, or the pieces they'd left unfinished the previous day, and begin work. Parubai and Chandni both are the guiding forces to the women. Soon conversations begin, as Parubai in her loud shrill voice is talking about a woman who is not able to birth a boy. The conversations that ensue when making embroidery are unfiltered. There is gossip, there are arguments, there are jokes and funny remarks and there is no one who ever dare say, don't speak. The centre turns into a beautiful space where people can speak their mind and laugh as loud as they would like to. It's not only that the conversations

are unfiltered, but they also are unwired. As a conversation progresses, not only are women talking and responding across to different women at different corners of the room, not only are the women leaving one conversation and entering another parallel conversation, but the thin walls of the big houses allow them to even talk to a husband or a father-in-law or a child who is at the other end of the house or across another room. At one point, I'm left so confused about who's really talking to whom and what conversation should I be following, that I start to wonder if there can ever be "private" conversations here. The thin walls make them almost impossible. All conversations are malleable. All conversations open for anyone.

It is not even an hour into the work, that the first of the many chais that will come in the day, arrives in a kettle accompanied by saucers like bowls. The women break for lunch or when someone comes to call them from home for something urgent or if they have to tend to a child. The women also break to take a quick nap or simply lie down to rest. The women break for bathrooms and break for taking calls. As evening approaches, women are retiring for the day.

Parubai and Chandni also close their work. Around 6pm, they both go to feed the cows

and milk them. Then the preparation of dinner begins, as also naturally, another round of chai. In an hour or so, dinner is ready. Roti is laden with home-made ghee, with curd on the side, both made by Parubai in her early hours of the morning.

Before we are off to sleep, Chandni wants to apply henna on her hands, because the next day is Janmashtami, a festival they celebrate with great fervour. I tell her I can barely hold my hand with the kind of stillness she has in hers, but I attempt at a few simple designs with the henna cone. She tells me they prepare this themselves, as there are henna trees around. The cone is runny and the henna's watery texture makes my meagre skill look even worse. But Chandni is still happy or is just being nice to me. I draw on both her hands and an hour passes without us realizing. We speak about why I'm not getting married and if I believe in God, and both my answers leave them a little startled, but it doesn't take away their warmth.

The maker of kashida is a hard-working woman. She is thoughtful and refuses to be bogged down by the challenges life has thrown her way. The maker works immaculately on the craft and color matches their skirts and chunaris perfectly. The maker also milks cows, makes food, churns ghee, and

feeds children with her hands. The same hands then wear henna and rise in the morning with more color and fragrance. The maker is sure that she is smarter than the men. The maker has expressed she would like to finish her studies, do all the paperwork, not be afraid she is being cheated because she cannot read or write. The maker likes to gossip. The maker likes to help another woman who is messing up the stitch. The maker rests. The maker works. The maker works a lot in a lot of different ways. The maker looks frail and thin but is strong. The maker loves chai.

The maker is all of their beautiful work, all of their beautiful time.







5

WARP & WEFT of a Changing Fabric

The women are skilled in various taankas ie stitches, although in each village, this culminates into a specific kind of design ranging from Sindhi, Soof, Kharek to Pakka, Kaccha, Khambiri.

Soof

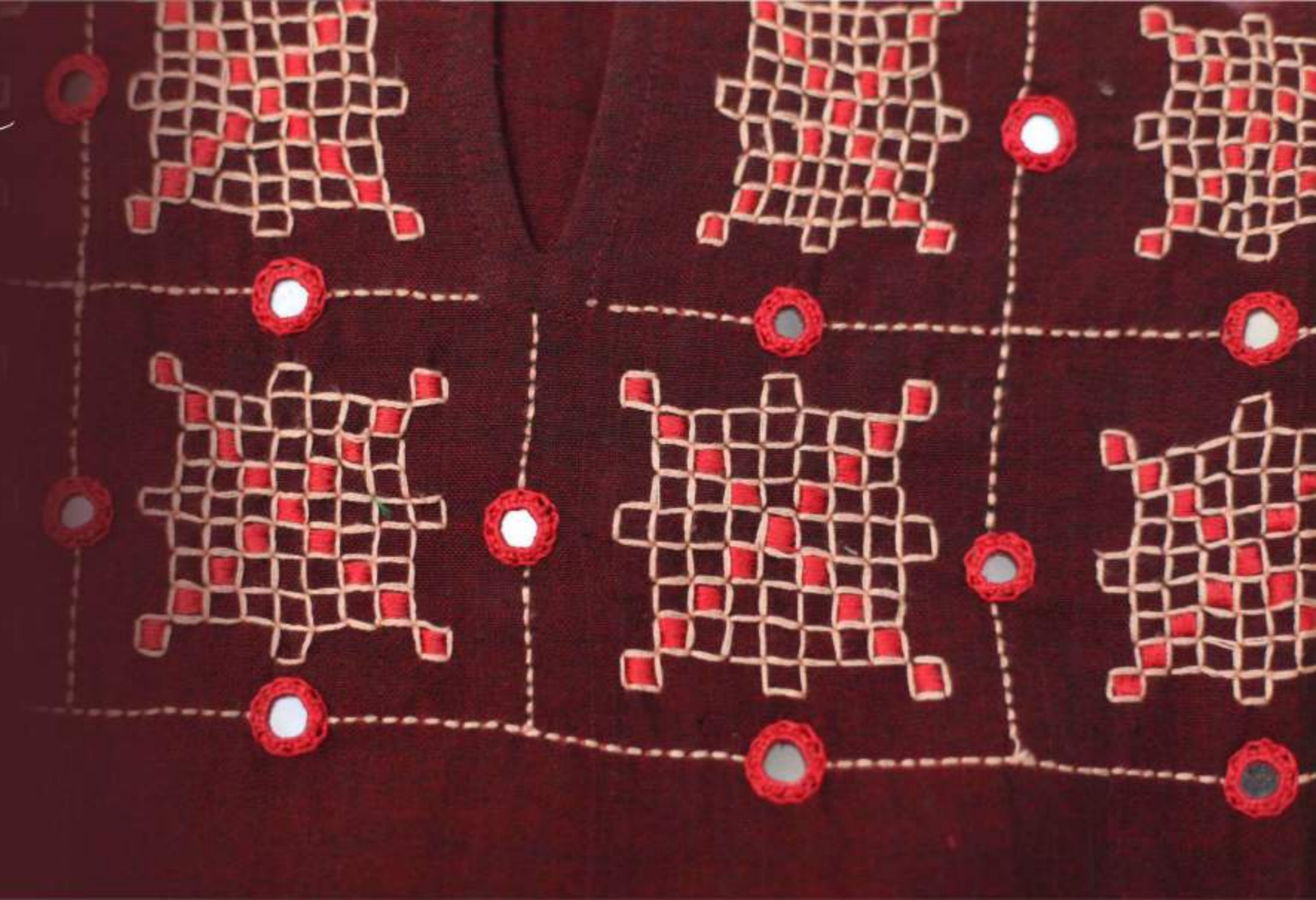
Specialized mainly by the women in Deli Talai and 2DO, soof embroidery is a form of "counted thread" embroidery. This means that the motifs are never traced or drawn on the underlying fabric. The women count the number of threads on the fabric and work out the design instinctively with their imagination. As is obvious, the base fabric needs a cloth which has a basket weave, where the warp and weave have to be of the same count. To do this work on silk is even tougher as it strains the eye to count the thin threads there. The word Soof is said to be based on the triangle motif, which is called 'suf'. The patterns in soof are usually series of triangles and diamonds. The stitch used is the satin stitch which is worked from the back of the cloth. It can often strain the eye as the artist peers at the threads, counts the warps and wefts, and then executes the work on the reverse with her imagination. This technique requires an understanding of geometry, a knowledge of colours and great attention to detail.

Another story goes that the word 'suf' comes from the word 'saaf' which means neat and clean. A beautiful and meticulous soof design is characterized by the detailing, neatness, and the symmetry. Fine, single-colour threads are used for the embroidery, and the stitches appearing on the main face are often a centimetre long. Successive stitches are only one thread of the fabric weave apart, which makes for a dense patterning. Some primary motifs are lath, soof and leher. Lath are the band like satin stitches while soof are the triangle motifs. Leher refers to the wave-like chevron design which is typically seen in this form of embroidery. An array of simple and complex geometric designs including flowers, leaves, trees, fruits, birds and animals are created with these basic motifs. Traditionally, soof has been worked on a variety of articles including garments, bedspreads, wall hangings, quilts, torans, cradle cloths, animal trappings and cushion covers.



Khaarek

'Khaarek' literally translates to dry dates, and this design employs geometric motifs inspired by the date palm. Khaarek is also a counted thread embroidery technique. Here, the artist works out the structure of the geometric patterns with an outline of squares in a dark colour. Then the spaces are filled with bands of satin stitch that are worked along the warp and weft from the front. Expertise in khaarek is measured by how fully the dense embroidery is worked in, until the underlying fabric is no longer visible. Also, all the squares with the motif must be of the same size. In older times, cross stitch was also used in khaarek style. Khaarek embroidery usually fills the entire fabric with the end result being a cluster of bar like shapes. Cotton threads in bright colours add vitality to the base fabric. The design is usually accentuated by green, white, pink and yellow within a stark black outline.

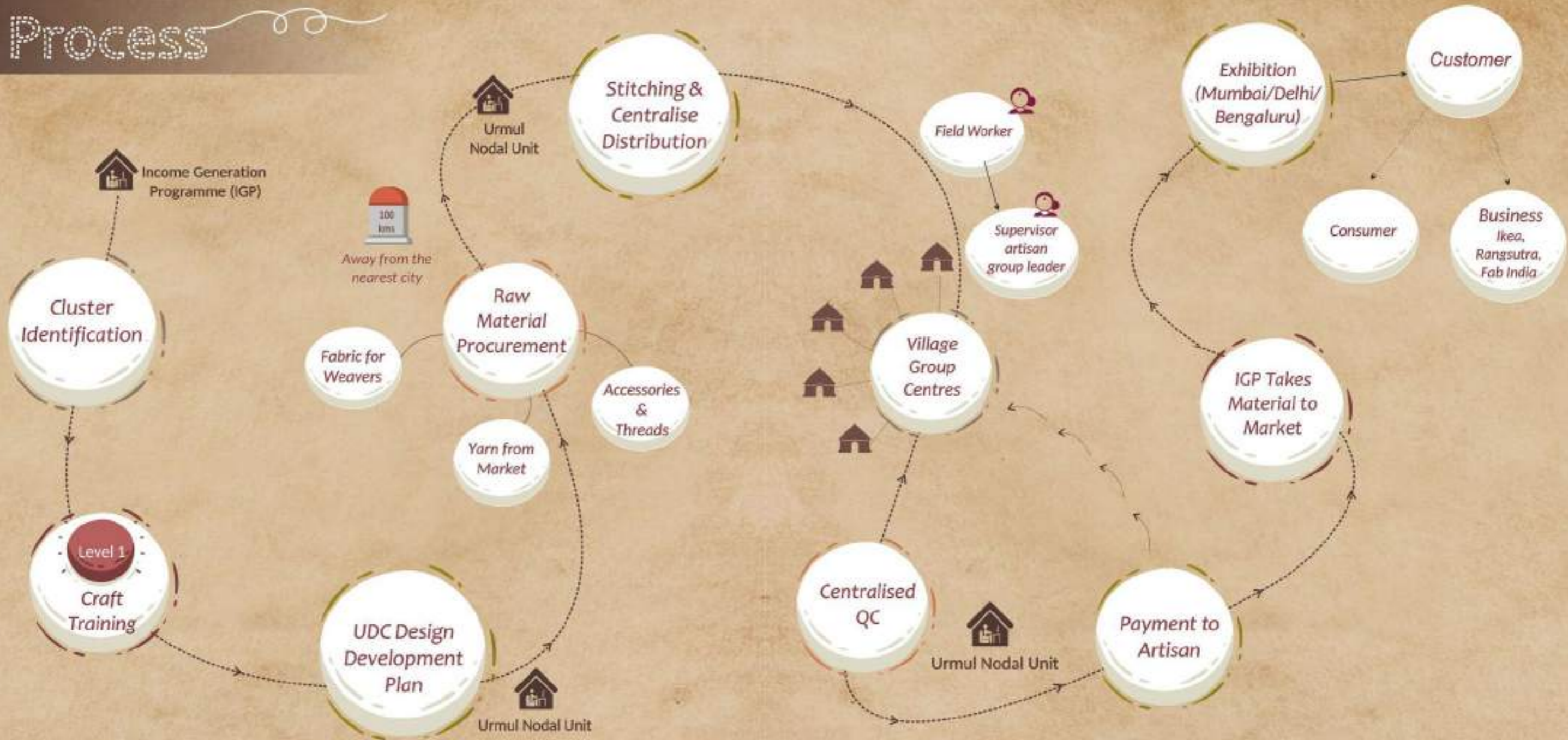


Paako

Paako means solid. This technique employs tight square chain and double buttonhole stitch embroidery. It is often finished with black slanted satin outlining. The motifs of paako are primarily floral arranged in symmetric patterns which are sketched in mud with needles beforehand.



Process



Connected Like Warp to Weft

The work at IGP is collaborative. The artists and IGP team works together like threads of the same fabric. One of the most important founding values that Urmul Trust was built on was to have faith in the ability of people to bring about their own upliftment. The work at IGP is rooted in that value.

The skill set that the women come with, is further enhanced by the trainings offered to them in areas of finishing, quality development, new techniques, and even business management. For example, the training equips them to make a very clean soof so that it doesn't come undone when it reaches the customer or when the customer uses it. But care is taken to make sure the trainings enhance the work, and not change its essence. When it comes to developing the design, the team works with the women to explore traditional designs that they have been making and contemporize it to a certain extent. The designers are specially instructed to work alongside the artisans, drawing inspiration from their own work, without changing their traditional patterns. There is also

great effort and attention put in developing traditional products in their original forms such as khaleechis which usually have heavy work and are heavy pieces. These are done for special orders or special exhibits, but more importantly to make sure that the original designs are never forgotten even by the women themselves. It is not only the area of design, but the entire process of the product development that the women are involved in. There are special sessions conducted for the women where they are explained the entire process, given details of the way costing is arrived, and disclosed fair wages. Women are often also taken along for exhibits in other cities, or to meet the organizations that are giving them orders. If the women go for trainings where they learn new techniques and designs, these new skills are also used in development of designs for IGP.

While working on a qatran (waste fabric), one of the woman says the material of this fabric could have been better as it isn't really allowing her to do a good and clear sample. The women don't shy from giving feedback.

Weaving a New Story

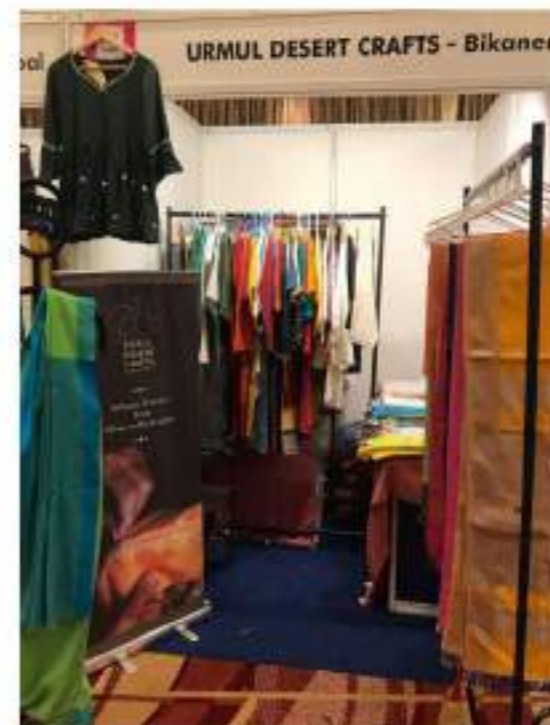
IGP had for the first time created an economy of embroidery. The weavers in Lunkaransar were producing the fabric (in addition to fabric sourced from wholesalers) and the tailors from regions like Ghantiali had joined as well to enhance the supply chain. Keeping transparency and fair wages at its core, IGP was slowly and steadily not only changing the process of production and sales of embroidered apparel, but also opening up the market for other brands to join and create options for work.

The tailors and the women have always been given the option to take up other orders or leave and start their own enterprise. IGP's objective has always remained making the income sustainable and exclusivity has never been its condition. As the work and visibility developed over the years, many other producers and sellers entered the market and showed interest to work with the women. One such producer group that was formed was Rangсутра, made up of Urmul and other smaller groups. Today this company is a lot ahead from the independent income generation groups. Brands like Reliance, Pantaloons, Jaypore, have entered this region

to work independently also. So artists have choices now. This is only because of the existence and advantage of healthy competition. Women have more options to work with and increase their sources of income.

In this growing landscape, Urmul remains at the top observing and monitoring the work, keeping a check and balance on the whole economy. It is investing resources on regular trainings, ensuring the artists are updated about legal changes to do with wages and working protocols, and even providing them the right briefing for new orders. This kind of knowledge has ensured that the artists are never going to be cheated. Because Urmul is paying them a fair wage, the entry of a middleman or contractor who pays them lesser and gets away with it reduced to negligible. Even if Urmul doesn't have orders/ongoing work, their presence is perennial. It is this constant presence that has given them a stature of an elder brother. This elder brother is not just an employer, but more importantly a guardian for the family's well being, health, education, livelihood. If there are issues in other orders, or in personal

matters, and if the people need help or advice, Urmul is always present by their side. This is probably the biggest difference between Urmul and other "brands" that work here: there is immense and honest social involvement in the case of Urmul. Their people are connected to the artists on field and regularly paying them visits. If there is any profit made it is invested back into the project in strengthening the social structures of these villages. Other brands are usually concerned about developing the product and increasing their shareholder's profits. But IGP's primary objective is to make profit so that it can be invested back into the village, so that a good training center can be developed, or marketing plans can be expanded, to eventually increase the orders artists get.



It took many years for Urmul to come to a stage where the women implore them to take them out for trainings so they can tour new cities, or tell them secret desires of finishing school that they would not tell anyone else. It has taken as many years for the women to not only become breadwinners of their family but become independent. They have, with their own sole effort, taken themselves out of the troubling period of their lives. It has taken time, but their hard work, their creativity have sustained and survived. Nothing happens in a day, but often when times are tough even a day feels like a lifetime. The women have endured many lifetimes like these. Look at the dexterity in their hands: the needlework is uncompromising, but so is their skill to write their own destiny.







6

New Aspirations, New CHALLENGES

"I want to finish my studies", exclaims Chandni in the car, on our way from Bajju market to Dandkalan. Manju joins her demand. "Me-too"

On the way, Purna who is the Income Generation Programm (IGP) Program Director along with Chandni and Manju plan as to how they will try to convince the rest of the family. At Dandkalan, before Purna leaves, Chandni nudges her and gives her a reminder of the most important conversation she is supposed to have. Chandni knows that Purna's voice has more weight in this scenario, than her own. As the scene plays out, the husband and mother-in-law at first are hesitant and think there's no use to this ambition, but soon give in.

The current generation of young women who had to leave their school a decade ago to be able to support their family working, are themselves returning to reclaim their right. It is work, travel, and exposure that has seeded this thought inside them that knowing language, math, science, the basic workings of the world, will only enhance their working skill and improve their confidence before other men in the family who are often more educated than them. Take for example Chandni's husband Poonam, who does all the book-keeping and administrative work for the training centre at Dandkalan, which mainly involves reading and writing and counting: three things women may know but find little confidence claiming.



Widening Horizons

When you walk further, the horizons naturally widen and something that was beyond your vision, appears.

For the last many years, women who had crossed the border as young girls, such as Parubai and Tarabai, had only one aspiration: survival. Their lives and their dreams were bound by the limitations of finding the next square meal and making a life that was not dependent on agriculture. In their struggle to make a living, health, education and dreams, were left far behind. But after all these years, the possibilities are opening up. Women are sufficiently able to look after their basic household needs, and are now moving forward to fulfil aspirations to pave a better life for themselves. When I met Sunil Lahiri, he had an interesting story to share. A girl in the village had eloped with a boy. Her cousin, who was pursuing her bachelor's degree was being forced by her parents to get married in the fear that she too, would otherwise elope. The girl was harassed to such an extent that she registered a police complaint to stop her parents from forcefully get her married. Since Sunilji has been working here for over 20 years

and mainly looking at education programmes, the SP reached out to him and requested if he could intervene. He says he went and spoke to the girl and she genuinely wanted to finish her studies and marriage was not on her mind. But the parents were very difficult to convince. "I had to eventually ask the girl to give a written statement of her plan to study and express that she had no plans to marry or elope. They were finally convinced. But before leaving I also told them that if she were to elope or anyone else does it, you cannot really do anything. You can only trust people to do the best they can."

The women are fighting really hard to educate themselves and to aspire to do more. Anyone who's interested in studying or completing their studies, Urmul helps them by filling open school forms for them. Urmul also put up education camps where they taught women who had left their studies mid-way. These women are also able to teach their children now.



When I ask Manju what she does with the money she earns, she says I keep it for myself and for my daughter. Manju, 24 years old, originally from Dandkalan, is married in Pugal, 70kms from here.

"Pugal also has a center there to work. But my in-laws don't support me. They tell me to take care of the livestock or the farm. They say, kashida is not going to solve your hunger, farming will get us food. But I can't do farming. So, I come here. My husband supports me, but not my in-laws. I have to fight them and come. Sometimes they stop talking to me. But if my bus is about to arrive, I leave. I take my bag, my daughter and leave for the dandkala. The bus fare is 75 rupees. I always keep 100 bucks with me, if I ever have to leave"

"I was 13 when I learnt kashida from my mother. Back then I did it for myself, for home, not for making money. Then slowly I also started working with Urmul. It's not that I don't like farming, but the conditions are very hard and kashida is easier for me. When I go out in the fields, it's feels like you're burning, walking through fire. Parubai's daughter, Matribai would go to Urmul for work and I would insist on accompanying here. We would get 300 rupees a day as wage and food to eat. Initially, the money I made as a child, I gave it to my mother and she saved most of it for my own wedding. Growing up, I saw that it was kashida that could help us become self-sufficient, it would help us take care of our expenses, our homes. So even after marriage, I keep coming here whenever there is work, to make money

"Who will pay us for making these samples?" she asks me in the voice that knows exactly what she deserves.

for myself. I don't give it to my mother or my husband. Often I buy clothes for myself and now I've started saving up. I'll make my daughter a designer and retire Siddhi (the in-house designer)"

Manju works quietly and with focus, that she has probably acquired with deep practice because her 18 month daughter demands her attention quiet often. She speaks with a fierce voice and an absence of fear of being judged. Everything about herself, such as taking the bus and travelling with her 18 month daughter to her native village to work, saving up money for herself, admitting she doesn't like to work on the field, and being very diligent at work, feels at first like she is going against the grain, but then around her are women who have worked hard to make way for daughters like hers, and Manju has learnt the best from them. Manju is also curious about other places, something the generations before her couldn't think of because they had a lot of other things to worry about. The horizons are expanding. The first and second generations have worked hard enough for the third to find that they don't have to worry about their next meal, so their minds are occupied by dreams for their children, prospects in other cities, education in

other cities. There is a subtle but visible shift in the thoughts that occupy their minds, in the expanse of the aspirations, and the confidence to dream.

The awareness about the process that they have acquired has helped them be more confident about negotiation for themselves and really looking to do more work. Anti tells me that the money she makes is used in buying all the supplies at home. "I want more such work to come, and good companies to enter this market. That would mean we could earn more and do quality work." What Kashida has given them is also the choice to work in a better working condition. "I prefer working in the shade, I don't want to work in the fields in the heat as the condition there is really really bad, especially in the months summer. I really like embroidery work and even the money that we make from this is better than the other options we have. Slowly with the money I'm able to save, I want to redevelop the house, add extensions, and make it bigger. I have six children, three boys and three girls. One of them is over there, doing kashida, one is in Bikaner, studying. She wants to join the police force."



New Aspirations, New Challenges

As the women aspire for more, so does Urmul. Development of the craft, innovation in design, building an independent identity and with it a distinct brand for the women, are some of the key goals for Urmul. They conduct regular training programmes onboarding new girls into IGP and expanding the skill set of the existing members. These trainings happen at Bajju as well as in other cities, often also in association with the organizations giving them the order. Urmul is also planning to set up a website that hosts the products and gives a glimpse into the journey these women have taken.

But with the increasing options to work and the ambition to make more money, there is a slight deterioration in quality. Earlier there was lesser work, and each piece was done with great care. But with deadlines that come with taking multiple work from multiple parties and payments that match quantities completed, women often rush through and that impacts the quality of the embroidery. On the other hand, women also feel that each piece takes them anywhere between 4 to 12 hours to complete depending on the intricacy. Since they don't get to work continuously, a piece often gets completed over 2 to 3 days, lowering the effective daily wage. Further, in villages where there are no centres, the women take the pieces to their homes, which risks soiling and damage. Often if the woman has an emergency and is not at her home, the vyavasthapak doesn't have any access to the piece and is not able to even move the



work to someone else. Hemaramji who heads the production at IGP tells me that these issues can be resolved if there is a training centre. When asked, the women also offer a similar solution. Training centres enable women to work in a focused manner, away from the chores at home. The timings and protocols are often like typical offices, which helps them generate a schedule for themselves where other work whether at the farm or at home, can be managed. A training centre also means constant supervision by the vyavasthapak and early visibility on any mistakes, which further helps lower defects. With centralization, their own income will get better because more work will get done. They will be undisturbed and will be able to focus. It will work like an office. Working together also motivates everyone and strengthens the sense of community. Urmul is planning to build training centres in more locations, depending on the rise in orders.

Hemaramji adds, "Currently, the orders don't come in regularly. Most of the work happens in 6-7 months in a concentrated way, from July to December mainly. The remaining months, there are no orders, so no work. Before an order even gets to the artisans, there's a lot of process in between, the purchase order comes, the fabric and threads need to be in place, and so on. Everything has to be ready before it can be sent to the artisans and sometimes that ends up taking time, making their timeline even more concentrated. But

once a website is set up, there will be direct orders. This will regularize the work and we will be able to avoid the risks of relying on any one or two main clients.

While things are progressing, not all women are progressing at the same rate. Some women are still not allowed to leave the village to take further trainings or go to other cities for trainings. This limits their growth.

The other problem that Urmul faces is the costing of the product. Because the center is located at Bajju which is remote, the costs of people working here and the costs to bring facilities such as electricity, internet, water, is higher than in other central locations. The major cost often becomes that of administration because the area is difficult to work in. Communication facilities, transport, living conditions are really bad, and any work that may otherwise get done by one person in a day at any other location, takes more time and people. Even salary expectations are more because employees come from outside and stay here, bearing costs of food and travel. GST has made it even worse with the cost to consumer being even higher. Often the value the hand-embroidered products are not understood by people. The rising costs only add to the existing customer base also moving to machine-embroidered products which compete at much cheaper prices and sometimes even fool people by being marketed as hand-embroidered.

After spending close to thirty years in these villages enabling a sustainable livelihood program, Urmul is at a cusp where a traditional art form has been revived and the women are aspiring beyond the traditional bounds. At a juncture like this, one can underestimate the collective abilities of people that has led to the upliftment of several villages. Challenges can be overcome if one reminds oneself that much worse has been dealt with. When people come together, they can do anything.







7 Like KHEJRI in THAR

UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Section's survey (November 2017) based on interviews with 60 displaced Syrians and some members of the host communities illustrate the important role that intangible cultural heritage can play in coping with displacement and enhancing bonds between refugees and host communities. It also demonstrates the ways in which displaced people find ways to continue to transmit and recreate their intangible cultural heritage. The interviews showed that this intangible cultural heritage provides a sense of belonging, mitigates psychological, social and economic resilience, and, in many cases, helps mediate conflicts by fostering intercultural communication and mutual appreciation. These elements, alone or in combination, form part of people's individual and collective identity and memory, cement social cohesion, and provide groups with a sense of continuity. The survey also said that there is little reason to doubt that this heritage is also heavily affected as a result of war, destruction, death, displacement, and the associated disruptions to the social, economic and cultural fabric of communities. The report adds that mainstream humanitarian organisations do not incorporate culture as part of their assessments of disasters, emergencies, or displaced peoples and refugee needs. Culture and cultural heritage are also not part of their programmatic agendas, nor of their advocacy efforts for refugee rights.



Where the spirit does not work with
the hand, there is no art.

- Leonardo da Vinci



Urmul with its approach that was wide ranging and comprehensive has been able to address health, education, livelihood challenges building strength into the community. It is through this uniquely multifold model and the openness to work 'with' the community, instead of 'for' the community, that Urmul was able to create a passage for the cultural heritage to survive. In turn, this cultural heritage provided a sense of belonging and community to the refugees. Through the livelihood programme, the people's collective identity and memory has survived, as well as their lives have found continuity.

But at its core, this story is of resilience. Like the tree of Khejri. Known as the lifeline of the desert, it shows great resistance to the harshest of weathers, poor soil, arid conditions. It survives dry seasons, drought conditions, and remains green all year round.

The root system of Khejri is long, deep & well developed, securing a firm footing for the plant and allowing it to obtain moisture from ground-water. By adding organic matter through leaf litter decomposition, it rejuvenates poor soils. It coppices readily & profusely. The tree boosts the growth and productivity of the companion plants. Because of its extensive root

system, it stabilizes shifting sand dunes and is also useful as a wind-break. Because it is the only tree species in arid regions, it provides much needed shade & shelter to the farmers working in the fields as well as to the cattle & wildlife during the summer months.

The women are resilient like the tree of Khejri. They've survived in the harshest conditions, stood tall and deep rooted, made themselves self-sufficient. When they grew, they supported other women in their family and in the village to grow with them. They provided much needed support to the men in the family who were and are still struggling with the uncertain reality of rainfall and therefore agriculture.

Perhaps it was kashida that helped this tree grow. Perhaps it were the trees that bore fruit of Kashida. It will soon be half a century since the time the people crossed the border.

The women have not only made a life for themselves and the generations to come, but they have uplifted their people. Manju's daughter will one day be a head designer at a firm. An artist is the most courageous of people. I believe in her dream with as much ease as she unplucks a needle from her sleeve like a magician and sews a mirror firmly into the fabric.



