

A NATURAL ROUTE

SCALING NEW PEAKS

Rashmi Bharti is building a system to help the local communities of Kumaon become self-sufficient.

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Brought up in the hustle and bustle of city life, Rashmi Bharti is a mathematics graduate who spent her college years in Delhi University's North Campus. In a world very different from hers, people of the villages in a border district of Kumaon in Uttarakhand were trying to make ends meet by selling wool-based products like carpets, rugs and shawls in local markets.

Most were unable to earn enough to sustain themselves and ended up moving out of the area in search of work. 45-year-old Bharti's world collided with that of the Kumaonis in 1997, when she and her husband Rajnish Jain shifted their home base to Uttarakhand.

Local problems, global solutions

Living in the shadow of the majestic mountains, Bharti and Jain soon found that a number of conditions were hampering the economic progress of the people of their locality. They set up a social organization, AVANI, to help local communities access basic infrastructure amenities like electricity.

AVANI was set up as the Kumaon Chapter of The Social Work and Research Center, also known as the Barefoot College, based in Rajasthan.

The organization focuses on capacity building of the rural communities, enabling them to handle their own issues. They began with a project of solar lighting and charged households



HELP ON THE HILLS: Rashmi Bharti (standing) at one of her manufacturing units in Kumaon.

a nominal fee to provide them with solar lanterns. During the execution of this project, the couple realized that many local families earned meager incomes and could barely afford to pay any money for technology upgrades.

Having studied the local economics, Bharti and Jain found that the reason for the poverty was that the handicraft industry—which the locals were dependent on to generate a living from—was slowly dying out.

There were a number of factors which were leading to this problem, and the entrepreneur couple was determined to address the problems. One of these was that the craftsmen



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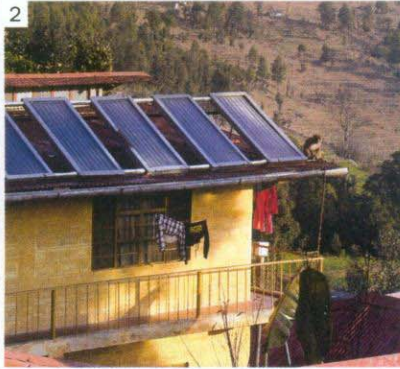
could only sell in the local markets and earnings from these sales were small.

Systematic changes

The solar lighting program has expanded significantly over the years and locals who have neither a college degree nor technical know-how have been trained from scratch to make and maintain solar lights. The organization has also worked at improving the livelihoods of the communities by enabling the locals to maintain specific systems that improve water management and farming in the region.

Again, the local handicraft industry dealt mostly with wool-based products, but to help the community expand its products portfolio, AVANI trained locals to work with silk. They were trained in processing techniques for silk, weaving and working with the fabric. The colors used in these textiles were natural dyes. The organization also has a line of natural products that the local communities work on that has been added to its product line.

“We worked on the premise that everyone can do everything if they are provided with the opportunity. We also believe you have to trust people, so we never look for professional



qualifications; instead we help train the labor force," explains Bharti.

How the business functions

When Jain and Bharti first moved to the mountainous region, they had to travel up to 200 km to make a long distance phone call. Poor connectivity with public transport also was, and continues to be, a hindrance in the region.

The couple set up a website for AVANI in 1999 which helped in creating awareness about their initiative and helped them with marketing efforts.

In the early days, AVANI was supported by a U.K.-based charity, Find Your Feet, which works towards encouraging self-sufficiency and independence in poverty-ridden communities of India and Malawi (in south-east Africa).

AVANI is now completely self-sustained and operates from the earnings from its various operations.

The product line of textiles, including wool and silk products and natural dyes, developed into a business managed by the locals called the Kumaon Earthcraft Self Reliant Cooperative or Earthcraft.

The organization now exports soapnut powder as a natural detergent along with some of its other products.

These are available in various retail outlets, like Fabindia, Osho World and People Tree. Events and exhibitions have been another way for the organization to make its products visible and available to people.

Green moves

The organization boasts of having zero waste and also a low carbon footprint; it even received a UNESCO Seal of Excellence for its products.

"AVANI is now established as a green brand," says Bharti. Its products were showcased at the Ethical Fashion Show in Paris and are also a part of the sustainable textile collection

GREEN ROUTE: 1. A solar panel manufacturing unit
2. Solar water heater at AVANI
3. A worker at the weaving unit

at the London School of Fashion. The organization provides the craftsmen with raw material for their products and helps them earn a living from the sale of the products.

It has a turnover of ₹40 lakh and is looking to expand that to ₹2.5 crore by 2016. For expansion and growth, the organization is looking to raise funds and will also consider debt as one

of the options to aid its growth.

Overcoming challenges

One of the biggest challenges faced by Jain and Bharti on their journey so far has been retaining employees and working in an area that is poor in infrastructure.

Due to the rising cost of living and competitive salaries offered by the government, it is often difficult for them to match the pay scale of their senior employees. Creating a presence for the brand in the textile world and gaining visibility for the initiative has been another challenge for the couple.

Speaking at the Indian Merchant's Chamber Rajni Bakshi, author and freelance journalist, spoke about Bharti's efforts with Earthcraft, saying that an organization like AVANI and Earthcraft is "crucial to our future because it's an enterprise that simultaneously fosters ecological renewal, livelihood generation and an unfurling of human creativity."

Bhavna Doshi, President of the Ladies Wing of the Indian Merchant's Chamber that felicitated the efforts of Bharti, adds that a social organization being an enterprise as well must work towards earning some profit. "Though dividend for any enterprise is only money, for a social enterprise, the focus is on many more things," says Doshi.

Bharti reaffirms that the satisfaction and life lessons she has picked up on her journey so far have been her biggest takeaways from the social organization she founded and runs. That, she feels, is all the fuel she needs to scale more peaks in the future. ■