

“Mahila Sanatkar: a women empowerment case study in India

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Abstract:

This study will present and analyse the case of Mahila Sanatkar, a craftswomen cooperative located in Hyderabad (India). Issues regarding women's empowerment and the internal relations of different stakeholders in the cooperative will be focused in order to depict the social and economic background of the experience. After that, it will be discussed problems and potential solutions to turn the cooperative into a self sustainable enterprise.

Este estudo va presentar y analizar el caso de Mahila Sanatkar, una cooperativa de mujeres artisanas localizada en Hyderabad (India). Cuestiones acerca de el empoderamiento de las mujeres y las relaciones internas de los diferentes actores involucrados en la cooperativa serán focalizados para diseñar el contexto social y económico de la experiencia. Después, serán discutidos los problemas y soluciones potenciales para tornar la cooperative un emprendimiento auto sostenible.

Introduction

The present article aims to expose and analyze the case of *Mahila Sanatkar* Mutually Aided Co-operative Society, a women cooperative located in Hyderabad (India) for training and selling traditional handicrafts. The study intends to discuss and systematize the information and records collected throughout 2006.

Located in the secluded outskirts of Hyderabad, *Mahila Sanatkar* has been offering literacy, social and handicraft skill building programs to underprivileged women. The enterprise was set up as part of empowering programs of the Confederation of Volunteer Associations (COVA) seeking opportunities in niche markets and fair trade organizations.

The main issues to be analyzed will be the economic and social effects generated by the enterprise which indeed achieved social results though it had a limited economic impact in the life of the beneficiaries' women. It is noticeable some social results such as skill building, self-confidence enhancement, the mobility acquired by the women, between others.

Although having the economic background of international cooperation funded by Cordaid and being technically backed by COVA, *Mahila Sanatkar* has been unable to reach an economic self sustainable level. Managerial and operational concerns, high drop outs of trained women can be pointed as some of the causes. Moreover, the intricate relations among the cooperative staff, the craftswomen, and COVA lead to constant tensions and problematic definition of roles played by each part.

The article will be structured as a study case in order to depict the background and context in which the cooperative is located: the Muslim community of the city of Hyderabad, a growing IT services providing city in south India.

Reports written by COVA including the participatory organizational assessment, board meeting presentations and ground observation of the cooperative will provide the information contained in this study.

This study intends to look for current theoretical approaches that may explain the causes of this gap between social and economic empowerment its tensions, and trade offs between social and economic benefits.

Research strategy

The present work is structured as a case study. Hartley (1995, p. 208-209) cited by Godoy (2006) defines a study-case as: “a detailed investigation, often with data collected during a period of time, about one or more organizations, or groups inside organizations, in order to promote an analysis of the context and the processes involved with the studied phenomenon.”

Merriam (1988) describes a study case as a holistic and intensive description of a delimited program, institution, a process, a social unit. To the author a study case denotes that the researcher is interested in the comprehension of social processes in a determined context rather than verifying hypotheses.”

Godoy (2006) stresses that study cases are useful in the generation of new concepts and have mainly a qualitative approach. Figures and quantitative data are wishful; however they are not essential part of a study case. Data can be useful but statistic extrapolation is not the purpose of this research strategy.

For having engagement of the researcher with the subject allied to ground action during the research process, this study has some characters of action research. Macke (2006, p. 211) suggests that action research may follow four essential stages a exposed here:

1. **Exploratory stage:** when it is done a diagnosis to identify the problems, the capacity to act and to intervene in the organization;
2. **Stage of deepening the research:** when the data is collected
3. **Action stage:** when plans and their execution are done based on the discussion with the groups that participate of the project;
4. **Evaluation stage:** a feedback stage when the knowledge generated is assessed and if needed the actions are redefined

All these stages must have reflection stages associated. A certain degree of openness is desirable once new elements of analysis may be introduced to the research. Even so it is needed clear objectives to avoid lack of focus.

This study therefore is a study case. It cannot be considered action research *per se* once the four stages proposed above are not completely fulfilled. The assessment of the changes implemented has not been fully achieved

The data used here comprises primary and secondary data. The primary sources comprise ground observation, minutes of meetings, meeting notes, presentations to the staff and the board of directors of MS. The secondary data entail report of activities, internal participatory assessment report, newspaper articles about the experience, balance sheets, and managerial records.

The primary data and ground observation had been done between October 2005 until May 2006. This included meetings with the managers of COVA, and MS, with the designer working at the cooperative, members of the staff. The ground observation of exhibitions had been conducted, as well as some visits to the central unit of production. Due to barriers of language few contacts were done with the member artisans.

By March 2006, the results of the analysis of the organization had been presented to the board of directors of COVA. Some of the findings and insights are used in this work.

By April 2004 some recommendations on the business model had been done to the management of COVA and MS. At the end of May, the period of study had been finished and it had not been possible to evaluate the result of the changes done.

Background and context: Hyderabad

Located in the southeast of India, Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh state, houses a population of approximately 6.1 million inhabitants considering the metropolitan area (5th biggest of India). An exception in south India, the city houses a large Muslim community. The sources vary about the precise proportion of this community. However, it is believed to be 40% of the Hyderabad's population against 12% of the Indian average.

In recent years, Hyderabad has become a promising and fast-growing IT centre. The early 90s made cities as Mumbai and Bangalore boost the number of companies based on the new economy in India. Bangalore has been the milestone in this process. However, the increasing cost of living and the collapse of the infrastructure made other cities in India grow over this industry based on the three main advantages of the country: low costs, high skilled labour force, and a considerable part of the population can speak English .

The capital of the Andhra Pradesh state has now some leading companies in the industry as well as branches of the main IT Indian companies.

Apart from this Hyderabad has a big divide in the population. While some areas concentrate luxurious houses and commercial buildings, the so called "old city" has several "bastis" (slums) and several poor communities with messy and bustling traffic jam. In this part of the city, there is a big shortage of health facilities, water & sanitation infrastructure.

In the year 2001, the Andhra Pradesh state (AP) was ranked as the 10th most developed within Indian states with a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.416 as shown in the table below. The HDI takes into account three key measures: life expectancy, education enrolment, and GDP *per capita*.

Human Development Index for India — Combined						
States/UTs	1981	1981	1991	1991	2001	2001
	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank
Andhra Pradesh	0.298	9	0.377	9	0.416	10
Assam	0.272	10	0.348	10	0.386	14
Bihar	0.237	15	0.308	15	0.367	15
Gujarat	0.360	4	0.431	6	0.479	6
Haryana	0.360	5	0.443	5	0.509	5
Karnataka	0.346	6	0.412	7	0.478	7
Kerala	0.500	1	0.591	1	0.638	1
Madhya Pradesh	0.245	14	0.328	13	0.394	12
Maharashtra	0.363	3	0.452	4	0.523	4
Orissa	0.267	11	0.345	12	0.404	11
Punjab	0.411	2	0.475	2	0.537	2
Rajasthan	0.256	12	0.347	11	0.424	9
Tamil Nadu	0.343	7	0.466	3	0.531	3
Uttar Pradesh	0.255	13	0.314	14	0.388	13
West Bengal	0.305	8	0.404	8	0.472	8
All India	0.302		0.381		0.472	

Note The HDI for 2001 has been estimated only for a few selected States for which some data, including the Census 2001, was available. The assumptions that have been made for HDI 2001 are indicated in the Technical Appendix.

Table 1: Human development Index per state in India

It is needed to take into account that the Andhra Pradesh HDI comprises many rural areas and different environments than Hyderabad, even so, it is believed that this proxy may throw light in the human development situation of the AP and Hyderabad among Indian states.

Gender inequality and women empowerment in India

India is considered by United Nations Development Program (UNDP) a country of middle level of human development. In the ranking of the Human Development Index (HDI). The country stands at the 126th position (out of 177 countries studied), close to countries as Namibia and São Tomé e Príncipe. The HDI ranges from 0 to 1 being 1 the highest possible level. The index is a comparative measure compounded by the life expectancy, access to education and income per capita. The HDI for India is 0.611 while Norway's score is 0.965 (the highest among the studied countries) and the Niger figures at the bottom of the list of 177 countries with 0.311. (UNDP 2006).

The gender related development index is the adjusted version of HDI considering the inequalities between women and men (UNDP 2006) If considered the Gender Development Index (GDI) the position of India is 122th out of 166 studied nations. The score for India dwindles from 0.611 (HDI) to 0.591 (GDI). In other words, the women situation is more vulnerable in comparison to men. (UNDP 2006).

According to the World Economic Forum report "Women's Empowerment: measuring the global gender gap" launched on 2003, the country figures as the 53th out of 58 nations in terms of gender equality. This study is based on five critical areas to the women empowerment:

1. **Economic Participation:** the presence of women in workforce in quantitative terms;

2. **Economic Opportunity:** the quality of women's economic involvement. The access to skilled and well remunerated jobs and the gap between women and men salaries;
3. **Political Empowerment:** the equality of women in the decision making positions (formal and informal) and their voice in the policy making;
4. **Educational Attainment:** measured by the enrolment to primary, secondary and tertiary school, years of study
5. **Health & well-being:** access to healthcare, sufficient nutrition and fertility facilities.

(World Economic Forum 2005, p. 2)

Jeejebhoy cited by Rao (1998, p. 3) argues that the women autonomy is multidimensional but some factors like decision making, access to economic resources, and mobility are “closely related in all settings, irrespective of region or religion” to measure women's autonomy.

The points raised above enable to understand the current position of women in Indian society and also to visualize possible criteria to define social and economical aspects that have positive impact on their empowerment.

India in spite of several gender oriented policies still has many gender related problems. Sen (2005, p. 224-237) examines the gender inequality under a classification that comprises:

- 1- **Survival inequality:** this character refers to the chance of survival of women in comparison to men. Some countries with gender bias in promoting services have a lower female-male ration. The Indian female-male ratio was at 0.93. As a matter of comparison, Sub Saharan Africa stands with 1.022
- 2- **Natality inequality:** refers to the “sex specific” abortions, .i.e. abortions undergone by parents who prefer male babies. This phenomenon lead to the creation of the concept of “missing women”. By the year 1991, the female ratio of the population under age 6 was 94.5 girls per 100 boys while in 2001 the ration was 92.7 girls per 100 boys. Raising the evidence of sex selective abortions.
- 3- **Unequal facilities:** measure the access to school, social participation, employment access, or the opportunity to women to enter politics or commerce.
- 4- **Ownership inequality:** the ownership of property such as land, homes or means of production of women in comparison to men.
- 5- **Unequal sharing of household benefits and chores:** the accumulation of tasks by women which are in many cases considered responsible for house work and child care. Even if they have equal access to work it is taken for granted, in some societies that women are responsible to housework.
- 6- **Domestic violence and physical victimization:** assault on women such as rape. The author points that, this feature is high even in developed countries. In Indian case, there are still problems related to dowry issues and a high level of violence against women.

The inspiration for implementing MS reflects the spirit filling the gender gap. Asya Kathoon, manager of MS remembers the initial steps of the cooperative: “we surveyed

many areas and found that the most affected are the women. When we went there for relief work, we were told that instead of doing relief work we should do something that will not create problems (...)So we created a platform to empower women economically." (India Together, 2007)

A report of COVA reveals some issues that are reflected in the work of the artisan women::

” A realistic look at the socio-cultural milieu of the strata of society that most of the members come from, demonstrates that there is very little right to self determination or decision making that they can exercise on their parts. What they can do or cannot or for that matter whether they can step out of their houses for work or not - is more often than not determined by husbands, brothers, parents or in-laws.

So even as we seek to empower the women and enable them to have more control over their own lives, we should take care not to isolate them from their families. Rather the approach should be one of eradicating poverty and improving the standard of living of the entire family.” (Aman 2004, p.3)

Case description

Confederation of Volunteer Associations

Confederation of Volunteer Associations (COVA) is a network of over 800 organisations working in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Jammu

& Kashmir to promote communal harmony and community empowerment. By the end of 2003 COVA comprises 15 networks, 7 organisations, 1 trust having Community Based Organisations (CBOs), Voluntary Organisations (VOs) and institutions as members.

The institution works for the of the secluded communities of the old city of Hyderabad tackling problems derived from poverty as the lack of gainful employment, or effective political voice, illiteracy, which can be fuelled by sectarianism, extremism, and narrow minded religious views (COVA 2005 p.3)

The vision of COVA is:

“Communal harmony, peace and social justice through sensitization of all sections of society and empowerment of the marginalized and poor.”

The mission of the organization is:

COVA aims to create secular platforms in the form of networks for localised needs of harmony and empowerment involving local people, Community Based Organizations (CBOs), Voluntary Organizations (VOs), and institutions, cutting across communities and working on the principle of service to humanity.

COVA endeavours to strengthen its member organisations to ensure harmony and sustainable development, and make them self-reliant and self-sustaining.

COVA works with several publics such as children, youth, women, and community in general having programs oriented for peace and conflict resolution, advocacy programs, networking and skill building programs.

In this study, one specific area is focused: the women empowerment initiatives. COVA concentrate its actions in this area through two main programs: *Roshan Vikas* a microcredit and thrift institution and *Mahila Sanatkar* a training and production institution in the sector of traditional handicrafts.

The women empowerment initiatives have as objective “Empower women and girls belonging to marginalized sections and living in deprived areas to claim their basic rights and enable them to improve their social and economic conditions” (COVA website)

Roshan Vikas (RV) is a mutually aided cooperative which acts in the microcredit sector oriented to underprivileged women. In 2005, RV had 193 self help groups and about 4000 members in several trades.

Beyond the microlending, RV has been working with training, health care awareness about HIV/ AIDS and tuberculosis; social welfare programs which offer educational scholarships to members; trainings on cooperation principles, record and bookkeeping information and accounting principles; and a consumer cooperative which promotes collective purchases of commodities.

The COVA staff and board of directors has a clear intention to promote links between the RV and MS, making the microcredit of the first flow in the second generating a virtuous cycle where MS would have and diminished on COVA's injection of working capital to hold the productive activities.

Mahila Sanatkar

Mahila Sanatkar is a mutually aided cooperative located in Hyderabad with 50 active members spread in 8 production centres. The name of the cooperative comes from the junction two Indian *Mahila* means women in Hindi, and *Sanatkar* comes from Urdu, another widespread language in India, and means industrialist. The junction of the words means "Industrialist Women".

The organization was founded in 1999 as an initiative of COVA promoting inclusion of women through an enterprise approach and trainings in handicrafts such as tailoring, design workshops, tailoring courses, hand embroidery among others. Promoting innovation in design and products, introducing entrepreneurship and managerial concerns to the craftswomen are also part of the agenda.

Besides this, MS promotes entrepreneurship trainings, health awareness, and .microcredit via RV.

MS promote trainings in beadwork, crochet hand embroidery, and *zardozi* (an Indian embroidery technique). There are also trainings in tailoring and stitching garments. The trainings have no cost for the beneficiaries. COVA bears the expenses through grants

The product line comprises several items such as jute bags, mobile covers, eyeglass covers, Indian garments, bags, pouches, cushion covers.

In order to develop the quality and the design, MS had hired a professional designer, which creates new products and patterns. This person, also provides design workshops and had created MAHAC the brand of MS products

The MAHAC brand focuses the niche markets and in middle term the export markets. The conception of the brand is intended to be in the cultural heritage of Andhra Pradesh and Hyderabad traditional crafts and also to reflect the communal harmony “The various stages right from the weaving of fabric to value addition to detailing and tailoring would be collaboration between members of different religious communities.” (AMAN 2004 p. 6)

These marketing options have some implications to the production, and to the work of the artisans. By one side it has a higher profit margins, and succeeded can avoid the competition of other retailers. The MAHAC also has a social purpose which can be used for selling better the products.

However, the option for niche markets and high income consumers increases the need for better skill of the artisans and also reinforces the need of tight quality control. The cost of

raw materials has a considerable increase in comparison to standard products. The cost of raw materials is the highest cost of production in MS due to the characters of the fabrics and detailing the products.

The products are sold mainly in exhibitions promoted in partner companies, crafts fairs in Hyderabad and other locations in India. There is an outlet for sales in the main production centre. However, this shop has not been successful to trade the stocks and production of crafts.

The 8 production centres are divided by the nature of the task done. Some activities are done in the central unit. This unit concentrates the activities of cutting, tailoring, and printing as it requires more skills. These activities are performed by a group of wage paid workers which will be called as the staff of MS

The cost of salaries paid to staff members was borne by Cord aid grant as of September 2006. Part of the working capital comes from banks under market credit conditions, these loans are destined mainly for the working capital of the production centres. Sales are also responsible for part of the revenues though insufficient. The remaining deficit which includes also part of the salaries paid to artisans is borne by COVA.

COVA in turn has no more interest to bear such losses. The intention of the confederation is to spin off the enterprise and scale up the activities. With the deficits being covered by COVA the members of MS has been behaving as wage paid labourers rather than owner and entrepreneurs.

As mentioned above, the initiative had a considerable success into promoting awareness campaigns, literacy programs, and advocacy through events such as women's day celebrations. MS has also achieved meaningful results in terms enhancing voice and mobility of beneficiaries, their self esteem in broad sense.

Nonetheless, during the period observed, MS had not been self sustainable and the deficits had been borne by COVA. Some reasons are pointed to the loss incurred:

In spite of the years of practice and women trained MS seems to go on the wrong way on what refers to the dependence on grants. In the year 2003, MS received 315,160.00 Indian rupees in grants (equivalent to USD 7,825.20). In the year 2004 this value came to 585,512.00 (USD 14,537.85) and in 2005. By the year 2006, the amount of grants came to 562,060.00 Indian rupees (USD 13,955.55). This numbers show that MS was going in the sense of the dependence on grants instead of self sustainability.

Stakeholder analysis

The stakeholder approach will be used here to present the profile, interests and potential benefits the internal groups of MS. External stakeholders like donors, suppliers, government and so forth will not be included in this analysis.

According to Freeman (1984, p. 31) stakeholders are those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist. Stakeholders analysis have a high level of descriptive

accuracy and describe organizations as a constellation of co-operative and competitive interests possessing intrinsic values. (DONALD and PRESTON 1995 p. 86).

The stakeholders involved for the effect of this analysis are as follows. The concerns were collected during ground observation and from Mukerji (2003):

COVA management

COVA has a main objective to make MS self sustainable, and independent both financially and in terms of organization. The “mother organisation” expects MS to be able to raise new orders and execute the current orders on time.

To COVA, if MS reaches an economically self sustained level would mean piloting an initiative of high social impact and possibility of replication in other locations strengthening the image of the organization in the networks it takes part.

COVA manages MS, and bear part of fixed costs (rent, water, and facilities), and also pay some artisans on regular basis.

Staff

The staff is composed by persons with a socio economic level a bit superior than the craftswomen. These workers perform their tasks in wage paid basis despite the

entrepreneurial character of MS. This happens as their salaries were funded by an international cooperation agency.

They have as aim to keep a stable employment position and continued work and wish to keep promoting trainings continuously to beneficiaries. From the financial point of view they represent a high fixed cost. On the other hand there are essential part of the production process doing quality control, improving craftswomen's skills.

Many of them cite turning MS into a successful model organization like Self Employed Women Association (SEWA)¹ as part of this group had visited SEWA.

Craftswomen

This group is compounded by low income strata of Hyderabad, in several cases, widow, or abandoned by their husband.

In general terms these women has few notion about the broader agenda of COVA and MS (Mukerji 2003, p. 12) They have little education and no exposure which, in conjunction with social restrictions, constraints their access to the labour market. The work at MS therefore are their sole source of livelihood.

¹ SEWA is renowned initiative taken in India which comprises several activities such as microcredit, housing, healthcare oriented for Women. Some staff members of MS had visited SEWA projects at Ahmedabad and Lucknow. More info about SEWA can be found at www.sewa.org.

Their major aim is to have continuous work to be done resulting in continuous income and salaries paid. Most of them show willingness to work and mention that the orders to MS are not regular. They also show interest on acquiring new skills at workshops and trainings

Looking to the aims of the stakeholders, it is clear the conflict between dependency and emancipation of MS from COVA. From one side, staff and craftswomen intend to have regular income while COVA intends to create an independent structure and organization for MS.

Conclusion:

1. The results reached by MS go beyond the mere financial figures

The MS study case raises questions about the feasibility of self sustained business models for the poorest communities. The social impact of COVA programmes is undoubtedly meaningful. As exposed above the activities promoted by COVA enhance self esteem, promote the right of mobility, access to economic means, and some campaigns have been successful to promote voice and participation as well as raising awareness on women's rights. These benefits are a sufficient argument to say that COVA doing some work for the empowerment of the member artisans of MS.

The lack of social impact assessment regarding the intangible and non economic results drives to a situation where staff, COVA, and craftswomen feel lacking motivation. In spite of the financial deficits, some artisans trained by MS run activities single businesses which result cannot be measured.

Walker, Fay and Mitchell (2005, p. 48) state that social impact assessment (SIA) should bring about a more ecologically, socio-culturally and economically sustainable and equitable environment'. The first Principle of SIA practice is stated as 'Equity considerations should be a fundamental element of impact assessment and of development planning'.

They also emphasise the need to assess and address distributional effects 'The improvement of social wellbeing of the wider community should be explicitly recognized as an objective of planned interventions, and as such should be an indicator considered by any form of assessment.

Such kind of analysis can draw a more realistic picture over the results achieved by MS making stakeholders visualize the result and purpose of the activities and the broad range of elements that constitute women's empowerment.

2. The organizational structure mixing training and production makes it hard to visualize the social impact and have conflictive objectives.

The current structure of MS mixing training and productions turn difficult to visualize the cost of each single activity and makes harder to visualize the purpose of forming enterprises. In other words, many women just regard MS as a training and social space. To them trainings are enough and there is no interest to take the response of managing an enterprise.

Training and workshops have different and sometimes conflictive purposes and have been competing to the use of resources. For example, the design workshops and trainings consume raw materials stocks and generate finished products stocks which, in many cases, couldn't be sold. This lead to shortage of working capital to the enterprise side, and the products done in workshops are not always meeting the quality standards required.

The staff activities are essential for both sides: the enterprise and the trainings. However, the fixed wage basis does not instil the workers to emancipate from COVA. Fixed salaries can be paid for training purposes but when thinking about a small scale business, the remuneration strategy has to be different.

MS needs a strategic definition to what is the core activity done. It is possible to keep offering trainings and forming micro enterprises, however these activities has to be separated, if possible trainings and production should happen at different venues.

The current study can be useful for donors to define a clear scope of activites and duration of a grant. It is needed also to observe the networks that the NGOs have beside the grant conceded. In the MS case some grants created a perception that the enterprise could rely just on this soured of money, resulting more in dependence than emancipation.

For NGOs and for social projects, the MS experience can be important to clarify the importance of assessment methodologies and data to track results and monitor goals established for interventions.

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