

Value Addition through Labeling in Hand-loomed Cloth Products

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As part of efforts to create new opportunities for income generation and livelihood improvements at the pilot PAs, a value chain study conducted in 2004 identified traditional loomed cloth as a particularly high potential business area. Evidence from the five Nishorgo site appraisals conducted in 2003 and early 2004 showed that the ethnic minority populations living inside and nearby the Satchari, Rema-Kalenga and Lawachara PAs each maintained active traditions of cloth weaving. At the Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary's northern boundary, the appraisals also indicated that the Rakhain villagers had still maintained cultural traditions in weaving. Also throughout all of the Nishorgo sites, a range of other traditional handicraft activities remained in weaving baskets and other implements using bamboo and other natural products. The Nishorgo team over subsequent years worked to expand opportunities associated with handicrafts of different kinds. This chapter aims to tell the story of how that work proceeded, and what lessons were learned.

Starting Assumptions and Subsequent Adaptations

When work on handicraft value chains under Nishorgo began in 2004, the team had decided that particular attention would be paid to identifying market opportunities that capitalize upon the perceived value and uniqueness of traditional cloths, while working to avoid a value chain subsidized by the project or any participating NGOs. Bangladesh is home to one of the most successful handicraft social businesses in the world: that of Aarong Enterprises. In addition, among the Bangladeshi clothes and cloth designers that have received global recognition for fashion, some have taken fashion inspiration from the ethnic minority groups of the country. So the Nishorgo team believed that the opportunity existed for women engaged in this practice to maintain their culture and use their skills to improve their income-earning possibilities at the same time.

Handicraft and Cloth: Target Market

The JOBS assessment (2004) had recommended that handicraft markets focus on cloth development for the export market, with a particular attention to meeting international demand for the then-fast growing area of home decorative products (bed covers, curtains, pillow covers). This strategy posed the immediate problem, however, that the total potential number of women cloth producers throughout the entire Nishorgo PAs numbered only in the low hundreds, principally across the Tripura, Monipuri and Rakhain populations. So the potential participants in a cloth value chain would likely be too limited to meet orders of a large export market buyer. The Tripura ethnic communities became a particular focus of attention in 2005 and into 2006, as the project team searched in particular for income generating opportunities that would be of broad interest to the women of those ethnic minority communities. Throughout other areas of the northern Nishorgo sites, a range of poultry rearing, homestead gardening and other farming practices had been encouraged, but were of limited interest to the ethnic communities near those sites.

In the context of these constraints, and in light of the potential presented by the excellence and familiarity of the hand woven cloth produced by the women of the Satchari, Rema-Kalenga and Lawachara communities, the Nishorgo team had decided to target a market characterized by these traits:

- Interested generally in ethnic products from minority communities
- Interested in practical and yet stylish household products that would incorporate swatches of such ethnic cloth
- Willing to pay a higher price for such household products due in part to an association with the story of the women producers and their role in the forest Protected Areas, as well as their use of the hand-loom as opposed to the more common machine loomed products.

In light of the limited cloth production, the target market did not include exports, principally because the limited number of women living throughout the ethnic minority communities around Nishorgo sites would not provide the production potential to meet a steady supply for export.

Handicraft and Cloth: Conception, Product Design

With this target market in mind, the Nishorgo team sought to identify lead firms interested in expanding supply of high quality ethnic cloth to meet their market potential. Aarong was approached at that time, but it appeared that the prices Aarong would be willing to pay for the much more time consuming and expensive hand loomed Tripura cloth were too low to be of interest for the weavers. Two other lead buyers were approach and similarly only expressed interest in buying at prices below that considered reasonable for hand-loomed cloth.

While these retail outlets offered inexpensive and high quality products, none of them took advantage, or tried to take advantage of the unique sourcing story of the Nishorgo products. In light of the absence of such interest, the Nishorgo team decided to go further into an entrepreneurial area and create sample products that might demonstrate proof of concept about this value of labeling. An open tender was offered to firms and individuals to propose designs that might be used to meet our target consumer's needs. Review of competitive bids from Bangladeshi and foreign designers led to selection of a design contract to a Balinese designer and artist, who came up with a range of initial products incorporating high quality leather together with the Tripura ethnic cloth in a line that would be called the "Tripura Gift Collection". The design blended the unique Tripura hand-woven cloths into a range of household products (purses, coin boxes, pencil boxes, jewelry boxes, wallets) incorporating leather as well as the cloth. The items were designed for sale to wealthy Bangladeshi and foreigners.

Around this time, one particularly active export firm that had worked in both leather and cloth, expressed interest in expanding sales of this product line. The firm was already in the business of selling both leather products and ethnic cloth products within Dhaka and to Germany, and seemed to offer the best available opportunity to push ahead with expanded sales of the new line of products. Throughout 2007, this firm expanded its interaction with producers at the three PAs as it refined the products it designed for sale. A range of complementary materials were developed, including a brochure that explained the context of the Tripura community's

culture and work in conservation, and a stall layout. Terms and prices for buying contracts between the company and the women were worked out, much of this with the intermediation of the project team to ensure that all sides understood those terms. A particular emphasis was put on quality control and the use of quality yarn inputs to meet both color fast standards and standards for health and quality. (See color photo of the Collection in the color insert.)

Tripura Cloth: Establishing the Value Chain

Sales of the new Tripura Gift Collection began in 2007 and continued through 2008, with sales by the NGO to select fairs and special events in well-to-do areas of Dhaka, as well as a stall inside the Radisson Water Garden Hotel. The stall placement in the Hotel was aided by the Radisson Water Garden's interest in and social commitment to Nishorgo as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility.



Radisson Water Garden Hotel gift shop selling Tripura Gift Collection items. [P K Pasha]

The Collection items sold steadily throughout the period and beyond the end of the project, and the women of the three sites continued to maintain increased production levels throughout this period. Sales of the Tripura Gift Collection continued into 2009, although in late 2009 the single firm that had handled the value chain shifted out of this product line. Its owner had assessed by then the cost of a booth at the Radisson and the difficulty of maintaining sales directed to the upscale market was too expensive when compared with the volume of sales. For a time after that, the Gift Collection line was made available within a number of shops in the upscale Gulshan area, but sales slowed in late 2009.



This label was attached to Tripura Gift Collection items to enhance product value.

The Gift Collection certainly demonstrated a willingness to buy from the target market group that was considerably higher than the cost of similar items that did not carry the “story” of conservation and of the women’s ethnic background. But prices were necessarily high for hand-woven cloth produced using the traditional back-loom of the Tripura. Production cost for a piece of cloth of dimensions approximately 4.5 feet by 7 feet (approximately 1.5 x 2 m) was 5,000-7,000 taka, principally because it took a full month to make the piece. Consumers can purchase the same size cloth machine made in Bangladesh for 800-1000 taka, even one imprinted with indigenous patterns. So consumers would only pay the higher fee, both for the cloth itself and for the gift collection made from it, if the product was in some way associated with the feelings of protecting nature and conserving the Tripura culture.

Tripura Cloth: Dynamics within the Tripura Community of Producers



Tripura women soon realized the fact that quality control was instrumental for the successful marketing of their woven clothes. [Nishorgo Support Project staff]

Within the Tripura communities of Rema-Kalenga, Lawachara and Satchari, a number of issues emerged from the process. There certainly existed a sufficient awareness of the traditional weaving skill amongst young Tripura women so that learning about how to adjust to meet market needs was not difficult to execute. However, the readiness to respond to buyer demands differed greatly amongst the women at the three sites. Women from some villages (particularly Dolubari village near Lawachara) were more market aware and responsive than those in more remote villages. Most young

Tripura women produce their own cloth, so the critical shift was whether they would produce for the market in addition to producing for their traditional needs. The Lawachara community, with more contact to outside visitors, was far more ready to make this shift than at other sites.

The process of producing traditional cloth from their own homes was particularly attractive to the women of the Tripura communities because it allowed them to avoid a level of harassment that they had perceived in leaving the village to work in urban areas.

The women, especially at Lawachara, became extremely sophisticated in their quality control and adaptation of new market products. Initial market designs were brought to the villages and explained in training courses, but within the course of the first year, the buyer needed only to fax his requested designs to the women, and they would produce the patterns without error, often suggesting improvements or adaptations.



Tripura women taking part in training on weaving at Lawachara. [P K Pasha]

There existed a gap in raw material (thread) quality between what the women in the villages had been using and what was required for the export market particularly in terms of color fast products and products that would be child-friendly, with no negative health effects. Within a short time, the lead firm supplied all the necessary raw input thread to the community to ensure that these conditions were met for final product.

The positive benefits of pride associated with this market line were certainly a non-market benefit of the process. As the women's cloth sales increased and awareness of the Tripura Gift Collection rose, the women received increased attention, both through the press and through visits by tourists and official delegations to their village. This process certainly increased the willingness and readiness of the women to speak out about their work, their culture and the National Park near them.

The role of the Nishorgo team – and particularly the NGO partner RDRS working in the northern Nishorgo sites—was central to growth of sales. RDRS served as an effective interlocutor between the Dhaka lead firm and the women of the community, helping to explain the demands of the market where necessary, and providing a platform for the women of the multiple and dispersed Tripura communities to come together to share lessons and techniques.

Efforts at Cloth Improvements with Other Communities

Attempts to apply the lessons learned from the Tripura community to other indigenous communities associated with the PAs required some new adjustments. The team had assumed that a process similar to that for the Tripura could be undertaken with the Rakhain community of forest villagers living on the north side of the Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary. There, however, conditions were different in two important respects. First, the cultural knowledge of traditional weaving had largely disappeared amongst the Rakhain. In the villages of that area, there was only one woman alive – and she was quite elderly – that even knew how to do traditional weaving. The young girls had no knowledge at all, so expanding production for the market would require an extensive initial investment in capacity development. This amount of time and resources was beyond the scope and resources of Nishorgo. Expansion of weaving by the Rakhain community was made more difficult by a second factor: the low prices of ethnic cloth being imported from Myanmar, and the adoption and use of that imported cloth by the young Rakhain women and girls themselves. Essentially, cheap market prices for ethnic cloth (all of it machine made) had created conditions in which locally made cloth was no longer part of the Rakhain culture.

The Monipuri throughout Bangladesh and India have also produced cloths and cloth products for sale. Indeed, at Lawachara, the Monipuri community on the east side of the Park already had well established cloth trading stores, with the produce coming in from India's Monipuri State to the east of Bangladesh. Within that small community, too, home weaving was no longer a part of the process of making clothing known to the young women. What is more, the women were not interested in weaving since they could get what they considered acceptable machine made cloth through their own community stores.

Lessons Learned

Consistent sales of labeled “Tripura Gift Collection” products over a three year period made it clear that target consumers were willing to pay higher than normal prices in return for the cultural and environmental associations of the Collection. In this, and in the readiness for a lead firm to join with the Tripura women producers to generate a high quality product line that met sustained sales, the core concept of the Nishorgo cloth market pilot was proven: if a product can

be closely associated with both the environment from which it comes and the people who have created it, then the willingness to pay of consumers can be increased.

However, the high cost in labor of hand loomed Tripura cloth and the small production potential (due to the small number of Tripura women at Nishorgo areas) made the Collection sales and profit margins more difficult to sustain. Without a larger production base, a more widely recognized label or brand, and better defined target markets (domestic or foreign), it would be difficult to maintain profit within the value chain.

Ethnic groups at all Nishorgo pilot sites saw rapid loss of cultural knowledge, including in the area of handicrafts, and that called for more judicious assessment of the potential for building livelihood improvements associated with culture. For the Rakhain, there remained little cultural base to build upon in this particular area of cloth development. Even for the Tripura, their culture was and is under threat. Young women have ceased to wear traditional necklaces, and rarely wear traditional cloths except for ceremonies or cultural events. Any interventions to create marketable opportunities must be aware of this rapid rate of cultural loss.

The pool of potential producers – the size of the production base – for a branded or labeled product was small when it only included the Nishorgo pilot sites. Success in such branding would require a linked or similar product from many more sites. Such a national effort may be considered across the full network of Protected Areas, where all products made by households working to conserve the PAs might receive the “Nishorgo brand”. Although quality assurance was not an issue for the pilot Tripura Collection, this is more likely to be an issue for a wider range of products from dispersed and diverse communities around the entire PA network.

Conclusions

As co-management of PAs moves from pilots such as Nishorgo into a broader approach applied throughout the PAs of the country, opportunities exist in particular for taking this labeling concept for products or services from ethnic minority groups to a more viable market scale. The benefits from cloth sales to the Tripura women were evident not just in the revenue generated, but in the impact on cultural pride and strength. It would appear appropriate to explore options for such a mix of market expansion and cultural protection on a broader scale across the country’s full PA network.

References

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