



Weaving a new life

The latest corporate sustainability initiative of Taj Hotels leads to a sea change in the lives of weaver communities in Benaras

An hour's drive from the Taj Ganges hotel in the northern Indian city of Benares takes you to the dusty villages of Sarai Mohanna, Nevada, Gaura and Madanpura — home to some of the master weavers of the famed hand-woven Benarasi silk sarees. Enter Ramji's house and an unusual sight greets you — the otherwise bleak and bare walls are now adorned by a framed photograph of some women staff from Taj Mahal Palace & Tower in Mumbai — the flagship of Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces — resplendent in golden beige and turquoise blue bordered Benarasi sarees. These sarees are the work of Ramji and his colleagues and are their pride and joy. Eighteen months ago, the Taj Hotels commissioned and started working with weavers from Benares to create these splendid new uniforms for the front office staff of ten of their luxury hotels, thus helping them weave a new web of life.

Over the years, copies of Benarasi sarees made on power looms have flooded the market, and the presence of unscrupulous middlemen and other factors have led to large scale unemployment among these weavers. The number of weavers has dwindled considerably, especially the younger generation who have shied away from the profession. Most of them have moved to cities, some have gone abroad in search of alternative employment, and

those that are remaining are so steeped in poverty that they have barely one square meal a day for their families. An NDTV report revealed that some of the weavers sold their wooden looms as firewood, and often sold their blood for money in an act of desperation.

Lending a helping hand

When Taj Hotels learnt about the plight of the weaver communities in Benares through the report, they resolved to take up the task of providing them steady work as part of their corporate sustainability - building livelihoods initiative. It was decided that the frontline staff, managers and executives from 10 of the Taj group's luxury hotels would sport custom-made sarees, traditionally hand woven by the weavers from Benares.

Taj Hotels has in fact, always been closely linked to preserving India's heritage, and championing the cause of and promoting rural arts and crafts over the years. They have worked with weavers from Assam as well as craftspeople from Paramparik Karigar, whose products they display at Khazana, the retail chain outlets at some of their hotels. "Within this framework we are looking at how to create a sustainable platform for the livelihoods of the Benares weavers," says Sarita Hegde, director of public relations, Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces.

The first steps

Ms Hegde explains, “In the initial stages, we noticed a terrible sense of gloom among these weavers because they had not just lost their means of livelihood, but lost it to the invasion of the power loom which was one of the biggest threats to their profession.” The first step was to identify a few villages, and the second was to take care of their basic need — provision of food. Thirty kilograms each of *dal* (pulses) and rice were given to each weaver family.

Next, a health camp was set up to address the issue of malnutrition among the women and children of Sarai Mohanna, Nevada and Gaura villages (Madanpura was added later). The weavers who had failing eyesight were fitted with glasses. The company also tackled frequent power cuts by providing the weavers with solar powered lighting at their homes. Water pumps were repaired or replaced, and new ones were provided where none existed. Financial assistance was provided to repair some of their looms, which were in a state of disrepair.

The company also initially paid for the design or Jacquard cards that are required while weaving. Each card costs about Rs1,600. Slowly, as the number of weavers increased and many more Jacquard cards were required, it was decided that the older weavers who were already reaping the benefits of the project could afford to pay back for the card. So, for each saree woven by them, Rs100 was deducted from their payment for a total of 16 sarees, until the cost of the card was recovered. This money helped pay for the cards for the weavers who were newly recruited into the fold.

The company put into effect certain processes in order to eliminate middlemen and to ensure a seamless transaction.

Chamundi Silks in Bangalore was identified as the wholesale silk yarn producer who would provide the yarn as per the colour and specifications provided by the designer.

The yarn is weighed and then distributed directly to the weavers. Taj Ganges serves as the collection centre and the weavers bring the finished sarees to the hotel. The sarees are weighed again and immediate payment is made to the weavers by cheque. The company has ensured that each weaver has a separate bank account.

Future moves

Taj Hotels has currently placed an order with the weavers to produce 650 sarees for the ten hotels. They propose to get these sarees made for the housekeeping staff of the same hotels. They also plan to commission another 100 sarees or so for the Lake Palace Udaipur in Rajasthan and may subsequently add two more of their palace hotels to the list, which will ensure a continuous stream of steady work for the weavers on an ongoing basis.

While Taj spends close to Rs4,750 for the entire outfit, the weavers make about Rs1,800 per saree. Now that the weavers have been on board for a while they have increased their speed and make about five sarees a month (each saree now takes about 7-8 days to weave; earlier it took 15 days) earning about Rs9,000. Before this initiative, they would earn anywhere between Rs700-800 per saree and payments were neither consistent nor timely due to the presence of middlemen.

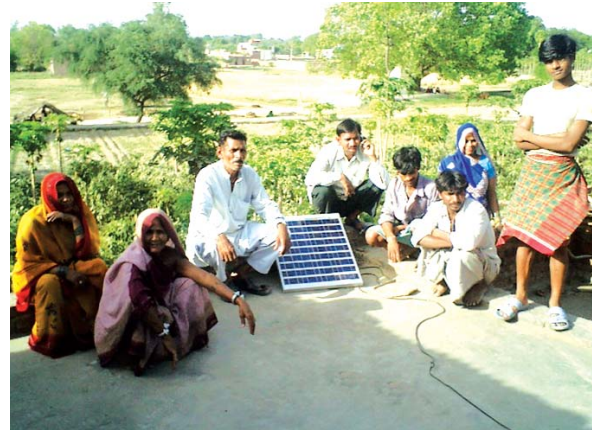
Designed to succeed

Jay Ramrakhiani, a fashion designer roped into this project by Taj Hotels, has designed the gossamer beige, gold and turquoise blue-bordered





Water pumps to take care of the water needs



Solar powered lighting for the weavers' homes

outfits that are now worn by the front office staff. Taj Hotels is also looking at making custom or designer sarees (*jamdanis*, *tanchois*, etc) and perhaps even furnishings that they could sell through their Khazana outlets, which retail various artefacts, handlooms and textiles, to provide sustainability for these weavers.

Mr Ramrakhiani has been very closely involved with the weavers and is very passionate about the initiative. He has trained the weavers himself to ensure uniformity as well as the high quality standards of the sarees as mandated by a luxury chain like the Taj. He regularly visits and even counsels the weavers. “We started with only five weavers initially — Afzal, Ramji, Anil, Chauthi and Chandan have been with us from day one. Later on, we trained another 24 weavers and now we have 67 weavers who work for us. We gave them a design and colour palette, a scheme and a weave texture and they put the whole thing together,” he says with pride, happy with the finished product.

“It was very difficult initially and I had a tough time trying to break into the community. We had to talk to each one of them and give them the confidence. Huge accolades are due to Taj Hotels for providing the community with the basic amenities and support. The bonus came when we gave them the yarn. It’s then that they realised that we were serious and here to stay,” Mr Ramrakhiani adds.

While they did face many challenges and difficulties on the way, the results are proof of the project’s success. In fact, Taj Hotels has already received very positive feedback about the attractive sarees from their staff and guests as well. “The first lot of sarees were launched at the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower in Mumbai in April 2008, when the front office staff adorned them. It was given to us on the first day of basant or spring to signify a new season in more ways than one,” says Ms Hegde. Taj hotels in Kolkata and Hyderabad have

also received their sarees. And Taj properties in New Delhi and Bangalore are next in line.

Mr Ramrakhiani has created two different saree designs for the managers and the executives. For the managers, he has chosen the motif of a *peepal* (sacred ficus) leaf, which is considered spiritual and is symbolic of Benares. The design for the executives is the paisley or *ambi* motif. He has maintained the same colour palettes, but introduced a subtle difference in design — the managers have a more pronounced and richer herringbone texture weave in the saree. Explaining the reason for this, he says, “I didn’t want too much of a differentiation between the hierarchy levels. The group is going global and world over, the tendency is towards a flatter organisation where people work more as a team, so I wanted the colour palettes to be strong yet identical, but with a texture in the weave which would distinguish between the two levels.”

A new hope

“What is heartening to see is the younger generation of weavers, who we were hoping to harness, coming forward to take up this initiative,” says Ms Hegde. For Mr Ramrakhiani, witnessing the improvement in the lifestyle of these weaver communities over the last eighteen months has been ample reward for his labour of love. “Their coffers are now full with yarn and food, and their children are going back to school. When we met Ramji on one of our visits, he had even dyed his moustache, and had worn a freshly starched kurta. Now weavers from other villages come to us in droves requesting us to give them work,” he says with a smile.

And a smile is what the Taj initiative has given back to the weavers of Benares. And though it is not possible for Taj Hotels to provide employment to all, the hope is that the success of the project will encourage many more NGOs and corporate houses to connect and derive a common benefit. ●

Jai Wadia