

# **Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan–Qasab: Empowering the Rural Women through their Handicrafts**

*Responding to widespread concerns about the economic crisis in Kutch and its impact on the rural craftswomen, the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) aims at empowering the rural women of the region*

## **QASAB AT A GLANCE**

Qasab, a Producer Company, was registered in August 2010. It has a membership of about 1,200 women, who are traditional embroidery artisans, belonging to Nakhatrana, Pachcham and Khadir areas of Kutch district in Gujarat. The company provides its members a complete set of services from sourcing raw material, organizing production in the villages, design support and marketing. The USP of Qasab is its high quality products (furnishings, accessories, women's wear, etc.), embellished with traditional authentic embroidery of the various communities inhabiting the region. Qasab sells its products to buyers, both within and outside India, and runs two retail outlets in Bhuj.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF QASAB**

The Kutch district of Gujarat, bound by the sea and the desert, is an arid region with low annual precipitation and frequent droughts. It has a population of about 15 lakhs that is predominantly rural, with dry-land farming and animal husbandry being the main sources of livelihood. The different communities based in this region have a rich heritage of exquisite handicrafts, especially embroidery. During consecutive droughts in the mid-1980s, a large number of households in the villages began to depend upon craft production for their survival. The status of women in the rural areas was poor, as was evident from the hardships they faced, the restrictive social norms, and their low health and education levels.

In response to widespread concerns about the economic crisis in Kutch and its impact on the rural craftswomen, the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) was founded in 1989, with a broader goal of empowering rural women in this region. It interacted with women in the villages of different *talukas* and mobilized them to form *mahila mandals*, to take up issues of concern to them. The handicrafts

sector was identified as an appropriate area to begin work in these villages. Although the women depended on their craft skills for sustenance during droughts, neither did they earn much income from their work nor did they derive any sense of pride because of the rampant commercialization of handicrafts, over-production of low quality goods, distress selling and the dominance of middlemen.

KMVS lacked expertise in the craft sector; therefore, it entered an MoU in 1990 with Gujarat State Handicrafts Development Corporation, a dominant player in the handicrafts sector, so that the embroidery work produced by the members of *mahila mandals* could be purchased directly from KMVS, thereby eliminating middlemen. This vital marketing link enabled KMVS to learn about the handicrafts trade and its market as well as to gain the trust of the women, especially because they began to get better return for their work. Later, with its participation in the Special Training and Employment Programme (STEP) of the Department of Women and Child Welfare, KMVS conducted a survey and identified women with varying levels of skill and income-generating needs and formed a *Karigar Sangathan*, comprising 1,150 skilled craftswomen in 35 villages, spread over three *talukas*. Training programmes were organized to enhance the capacities of women with

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low skills. By strengthening the production and marketing processes, through the provision of management, marketing, design support and training, not only did KMVS succeed in making women independent and self confident (because they had to move out of their villages for various activities related to their work), but also made them inter-dependent. They pooled their grant from Development of

Women And Children In Rural Areas (DWCRA), to create a revolving fund and used it as their working capital. When STEP was discontinued in 1996, the *Sangathan* took a loan from Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) through KMVS for its working capital needs, and with support from the handicrafts unit of KMVS, actively explored independent marketing avenues.

Around this time, KMVS thought that its handicrafts activities had become strong enough to be organized as a full-fledged market activity, which in turn required the production of high quality products to compete in the market. Those among the founders and senior employees of the organization, who were more interested in handicrafts, began to focus exclusively on this by setting up a separate office. From 1996–97 onwards, the *Karigar Sangathan* started marketing under its own brand—Qasab (meaning 'craft skills' in Kutchi). The focus of Qasab was only on traditional embroidery of the different communities in Kutch, ensuring thereby that their cultural identity was reflected in their work.

The next four years were spent setting up various systems—quality norms (multi-tier quality controls), design (professionals were hired to design the products, but the design

in embroidery was done only by the craftswomen), adding more staff, pricing (based on 'what the community values'), marketing (building markets with trust, working with about 25–30 buyers; 60–70 per cent of the earnings are from exports). Post the earthquake in 2001, Qasab experienced a few significant changes—some of its key staff shifted to the newly promoted Crafts Resource Centre; and two *taluka sangathans* in Nakhatrana and Pachcham were registered in 2003, to handle the tasks (in a decentralized manner), that were previously managed by the executive team of Qasab. However, owing to the difficulties faced because of the new multi-layer structure, it was decided in a *chintan* sabha (brainstorming session with the members), to revert to the earlier structure three years hence.

At this juncture, KMVS decided to give a formal legal identity to Qasab, partly in response to the auditors' suggestion of the need for reflection of complete transactions and sources of funds accurately and partly to create a greater sense of ownership among the members of Qasab. After detailed deliberations, both internally (with the craftswomen and staff) and with outside experts, it was decided to register Qasab as a Producers' Company by simultaneously undertaking a systematic change management process to change the mindsets of both the crafts producing women and the employees of Qasab.

### KMVS AT A GLANCE

KMVS was formed in June 1989, when it was registered as a Trust and Society under the leadership of Sushma Iyengar. Its founder sponsors comprised Jan Vikas—a

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Gujarat-based NGO, Goa State Horticulture Development Corporation (GSHDC) and the Commissioner for Women and Child Development who constituted the first Board of Trustees and the General Body. Later, the community based organizations (CBOs) of women

in Kutch also found a place on the Board. KMVS was conceived as an independent organization of poor rural women, which would work towards developing women's self image, self-esteem, ability and confidence, to address issues of concern to them; and their human, educational and financial resources through its collective strength. Its goal/aim was to "improve the socio-economic and political status of rural women in Kutch, at home and in society, and also to enhance their dignity of work and livelihood." It, therefore, sought to empower women to an extent, where they would be able and confident decision-making partners in development initiatives at the village, community and regional levels.

The area of operations of KMVS extends to all the *talukas* of Kutch district. It works in various sectors for the socio-economic welfare of women in this region, such as handicrafts, farm-based livelihoods, environment and ecology, human resources development and capacity building, strengthening village *panchayats*, community radio and rural tourism.

KMVS believes in working with national financial resources as a matter of principle and has made use of funds from various government agencies and financial institutions and from private Indian trusts and other NGOs for its development work. Only after the earthquake in 2001, has it started accessing foreign development funding.