

# The Urmul Trust: Leading the Villagers Towards Self-reliance

*Representing 11 different organizations working towards social and economic change in the lives of the people in more than 560 villages, Urmul Trust leads the poor towards self-reliance by making available to them a package of development services that they themselves decide on, design, implement and eventually finance*

## UMBVS AT A GLANCE

The Urmul Marusthali Bunker Vikas Samiti (UMBVS) is an organization registered under the Societies Registration Act. It was set up on 30 January 1991 with the following objectives: (a) ensuring the economic development of the *bunkar samaj* (weavers' community) through income generating programmes, based on their traditional skill of weaving and (b) ensuring the preservation of traditional art forms through regular skill enhancement, proper provisioning of incentives and technological up gradation. It is a hybrid—a co-operative in essence with the norm of one member, one vote, and a society in form. It has a membership base of about 170 weavers belonging to the Meghwal caste, spread over a dozen villages in Jodhpur and Jaisalmer districts in western Rajasthan.

The UMBVS carries out an entire range of activities for the benefit of its members—sourcing of raw materials, dyeing, organizing the production in the villages, design development, running a tailoring unit and retail showrooms as well as marketing. The product range comprises intricately woven woollen and cotton pattu (traditional blankets) and value-added products such as home furnishings, women's and men's wear, and accessories. It has an annual turnover of Rs 60 lakhs and has physical assets in the form of vehicles, dyeing and tailoring machinery, office equipment and two large campuses in Phalodi and Pokhran. Its sponsors and partners include various government agencies, national and international development support organizations, and academic institutions.

The UMBVS also implements social development programmes in health, education and natural resources management in the areas of its operations. Its work in the social sector has enabled it to earn respect from other sections of the society, who earlier treated them merely as *rangai-chapai waalas* its social reform work among the Meghwals has resulted in reducing alcoholism among the weaving community, and in reducing indebtedness by avoiding unnecessary expenditure during marriages and other celebrations.

## EVOLUTION OF UMBVS

The genesis of UMBVS is in the drought relief work carried out by the Uttari Rajasthan Milk Union Limited (Urmul) Trust in the villages of Bikaner district during 1987–88. The organization provided wage employment to the poor women who had spinning wheels lying idle in their homes. It accumulated large stocks of woollen yarn spun by the village women. Sanjay Ghose the creator of Urmul and his colleagues in the Trust met the master weavers in Bhojasar and Phalodi, in the neighbouring Jodhpur district and gave them the idea of hiring skilled weavers from this region and hosting them in the Urmul campus in Lunkaransar, not only to convert the yarn to *pattu* on a piece-rate basis (and use the revenue earned by selling them to fund the rural health programme of the Trust) but also to train some neighbouring villagers in weaving.

The first group of weavers who spent time in Lunkaransar had the benefit of learning the art of dyeing and design from NID-trained Girish and exposure to marketing in the metros from LSE-alumnus Tarun, and also the warmth and caring attitude of others in the Trust. Some of these weavers went on to take up leadership positions community based organizations (CBOs) in future by undertaking crucial responsibilities in dyeing, design, production, marketing and accounts.

However, when the concept of promoting a CBO owned and managed by the weavers was floated at a *sammelan* (a consultative gathering of about 100 weavers, the Urmul Trust leaders, representatives of development funding agencies and other like-minded NGOs) in Lunkaransar in early 1988, some of the weavers expressed apprehension at taking

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up the proposed responsibilities. But the Trust remained steadfast in its belief of creating a self-governed organization of weavers and it received support from a few of the younger weavers. A 15-member committee, comprising these five promoter weavers, two representatives of the Trust, and some *vyavasthapak*s (traditional intermediaries between the

weavers in the villages and the market) was formed in mid-1988, with a mandate to reach out to villagers in the vicinity of Phalodi and Pokhran and convince them of the idea of a weaver-owned CBO.

In spite of the weavers' doubts about reposing their faith in the old cliques of *vyavasthapak*s, the committee succeeded in convincing a critical mass of potential members about adopting democratic decision-making processes in the CBO and organized a *sammelan* of more than 70 willing weavers in June 1989, in which they collectively chose the name—the UMBVS—for their CBO and formulated the principles and modalities with which it would be governed.

Shortly thereafter, the team of promoter weavers relocated from Lunkaransar to Phalodi. The Urmul Trust provided them with the start-up support (financial and material) and deputed personnel to help the weavers in some important functional areas. Later, in 1990, it helped them in the long process of legal registration. In due course of time, the under-study weavers mastered all the functions of the organization and took over the work from the Trust personnel. Apart from the Urmul Trust's help in accessing foreign aid, the UMBVS also made use of a part of its first year's profit and financial assistance from the government and international NGOs, to build its campus in Phalodi in 1994. Subsequently,

another large campus was constructed in Pokhran in 1999, using their internal savings and bilateral donor assistance. All weaving related operations were shifted there whereas Phalodi became the centre of its steadily growing social development and NRM activities.

The five promoter weavers, who played an active role in the formation of the UMBVS, took over as *prabhandaks* (managers). Although it was very high, the weavers collectively decided on a membership fee of Rs 1,000 each (to be paid in installments) so as to generate a sense of ownership among them as well as their investment as owners in their business. Stringent norms (with penalties of 10 to 50 per cent of the wages) for members and *vyavasthapaks* were agreed upon and strictly enforced, to ensure quality and punctuality. The members, through the Weavers Committee, determine the wage rates for different products (based on the skill and time required) and the quantum of bonus, in their annual consultation with the CEO and relevant staff of the UMBVS. The various services provided to the members include provision of raw materials and collection of finished goods in their village, mandatory member savings of five per cent of their earnings (returned with interest every three years), insurance (50 per cent of the premium is paid by the UMBVS), provision of credit to meet important needs of the members and awards for the best performing weavers.

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The General Body, comprising all the member weavers, plays a crucial role in electing representatives to the Governing Board (in the elections held during the annual *sammelan*), selection of *vyavasthapak*, and deciding the terms of trade and wages.

Of the 11 members in the Board, only one is the ex-officio representative of the Urmul Trust. Initially, in 1991, when UMBVS was registered, the 12-member Governing Board included all the five *prabhandaks* but this was subsequently amended to separate the managerial and governing roles. Now these *prabhandaks* comprise the Management Committee they and nominate one among themselves to the Board.

The leaders of UMBVS acknowledge the role of the Urmul Trust in systematically inculcating in them the values of collective decision-making, autonomy of the General Body, and the principles of democracy and equity. These values are reflected in the organizational design of UMBVS. The leadership of the CBO has not only demonstrated its responsibility towards the weavers but also to the marginalized communities, inhabiting their area of operations in Jodhpur and Jaisalmer districts, by expanding the work of UMBVS into the social arena. They have been trying to enhance the quality of life of the poor by taking up projects in education, health, local governance, and into non-weaving, income-generation activities such as NRM.

### URMUL TRUST AT A GLANCE

The Urmul Dairy, set up in *Bikaner* district in 1972, as part of the Operation Flood programme, promoted the Urmul Rural Health Research and Development Trust in 1984, to reach out to the underprivileged in the rural areas, especially women and children and to provide them access to good health care. Its Board of Trustees includes farmers' representatives, the Chief Medical and Health Officer, Principal of the Bikaner Medical College and the District Collector. Initially, the Trust was funded by the Dairy when its health programmes were mostly intended for members of the village-level milk societies in Lunkaransar block of *Bikaner* subsequently, this was discontinued and the Trust obtained funding from various government agencies, and national and international development funding agencies.

Urmul Trust, during the course of its work, promoted many smaller NGOs, mostly in the districts of Bikaner, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Nagaur and Churu in western Rajasthan, and now represents a family of 11 different organizations working towards social and economic change in the lives of the people in more than 560 villages. Its mission is to lead the poor towards self-reliance by making available to them a package of development services that they themselves decide on, design, implement and eventually finance.

The development interventions of the Trust family are in the sectors of collective mobilization, access to health and education, empowering people on food, fodder and water security, supporting farm- and crafts-based livelihoods, promotion of human rights and public advocacy.