

Building livelihoods with bamboo; Livelihoods for the Kotwalia.

Charu Chandra and Yogesh Chandra Bhatt

The Kotwalias are one of a number of tribal groups in southern Gujarat whose traditions and practices have remained unchanged over many generations. Radical changes in society means that many tribal groups are struggling hard to maintain their identity, and they are often in need of basic support such as food and healthcare.

Various organisations attempt to nurture the heritage and livelihoods of native tribes, including the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) whose work with the Kotwalia is an example of how a development initiative can bring a positive change to tribal communities who are far from mainstream society.

Historically this community has never owned land or any other natural assets. Only 6% of Kotwalia families own any farm land, and two thirds of these own less than one acre. The Kotwalias have always been considered 'untouchable' and even other tribal communities will not share water, food, or assets or have close social relationships with them. They have to build houses outside the villages, and are not allowed to participate in village discussions.

Traditionally the Kotwalias were experts in bamboo crafts. This was once a major source of income, but changes in the market gradually forced them to take contract labouring jobs, and farm work has become their major livelihood. This work is mainly done in groups, paid on a piece-rate basis. To be sure of work they have to take a loan from the contractor, without which there is no certainty of work, and they have to repay double the loan amount. The only method of repayment is to work in the sugarcane fields. Wages are paid at the end of the 6-8 months sugarcane cycle. Over 97% of Kotwalia families migrate for more than four months every year and, in over 95% of cases, two or more family members (this and other data were obtained in 2012 from the Tribal Development Department, in Gandhinagar).

If a labourer has to stop working before the contract is finished, they do not receive any pay and the loan amount increases by four times. These severe conditions mean the whole family has to migrate together with their cattle. The children help their parents by taking care of younger family members and fetching water. The families live in plastic tents in nearby fields without any basic amenities. The contractor

charges them Rs20 a day for the living space, and the people work for 14-16 hours a day for an average of Rs40 a day or about 20 US cents, with deductions for any absences. Their appalling living conditions have reduced the life expectancy of the Kotwalia people to below fifty.

Generally Kotwalia families return to their villages in the monsoon and continue their traditional activity of making bamboo baskets and selling them to neighbouring farmers. To make the baskets, they use green bamboo which they gather illegally from distant forests. If caught, they are threatened, beaten and harassed by forest officials.

The Kotwalia's long period of migration has many negative effects. It restricts their access to registration for welfare schemes, and for healthcare and voting. Children have limited access to education as they are helping their parents; the Kotwalia community has a literacy rate of 29%. Less than 20% of the children go to school even until the age of 11, only a few go to secondary level and well under one per cent go any higher.

Their lack of income and land means that most Kotwalia families, which on average have 6-8 members, live in a single room house of under 300 square feet, which is built from bamboo mats and cow dung mixed with soil to strengthen the walls. Lack of proper nutrition and care during pregnancy means to high rates of maternal and child mortality and their constant moving means that families are unable to take up the benefits of government schemes for which they are eligible. Child marriage is common; the average age of marriage for a boy is seventeen and for a girl is fifteen.

Since 1998 AKRSP has helped the Kotwalia community by forming Self Help Groups (SHGs) to initiate the habit of saving and to bring them out of their vicious cycle of debt. In 2002, as a possible alternative to working on sugarcane fields, they gave cattle to four families as an experiment. The community had no previous experience of rearing cattle so it was a challenge for the Kotwalia and for AKRSP. Although the experiment was successful and attracted more families, it could not be sustained due to the lack of fodder in the dry season, and some people felt that livestock rearing was too difficult.

In another pilot AKRSP started group farming with 11 families on 11 acres of land, which they rented for Rs15,000 (\$250) a year from the village council. The first year went very well and farmers got a good yield. This boosted their confidence, but there was bad weather the following year and this forced the families to continue working on the sugarcane fields. In 2004 AKRSP introduced fishing to some young Kotwalia people. They were trained, and the government Tribal Department gave them equipment and ponds, but this also failed because of their ignorance of fish rearing and marketing.

In 2006, AKRSP started to build on the Kotwalias's traditional skills. They organised three months training on bamboo furniture for thirty young Kotwalia people. The high quality and innovative designs attracted some exciting offers. They restricted themselves to a limited range of what they knew, in spite of demand for newer decorative items, and over time demand grew and brought in a good income, which encouraged other Kotwalia people to learn how to make bamboo furniture and to secure a good livelihood.

In 2008 AKRSP proposed a larger programme to the Tribal Development Department. This covered six Kotwalia villages in Bharuch District. 150 Kotwalia youths were to be trained and given tools and help with product development and marketing. They had to be from poor families, and between 18 and 40 years old, and to be willing to work in a group. Preference was given to people with prior experience of bamboo work or carpentry.

Twenty five participants were selected and trained in a 90 day programme which included using different tools and machines, designing new products, and quality control. Afterwards tools were provided to groups of five and they started production in their own villages. The finished products were sold by AKRSP, initially in government exhibitions and then through shops. Gradually the team learned that bamboo products are niche items that are bought by high-income customers, so they increased the emphasis on high quality and a good finish.

In 2010 AKRSP opened a Common Facility Centre (CFC) to improve the quality and quantity of bamboo products. It was decided by the community and AKRSP that the basic work would be carried out in the villages, and the assembly and finishing at the CFC, in order to standardize the final products and improve their quality. They

decided to sell under the brand name 'Vinan', which means bamboo weaving in the Kotwalia dialect; this gave their products a definite identity.

Vinan products soon received a positive response, demand increased, and prices doubled within six months, which encouraged the Kotwalia youths. This project has brought about a visible change in their lives and they now have more choices and wider exposure to the wider world. The main objective was to provide a sustainable livelihood opportunity and break the vicious cycle of poverty and sugarcane labour. 121 of the 150 artisans who were trained, have taken up bamboo furniture and craft making. About 30 have permanently given up sugarcane harvesting. By 2012, 31 artisans were working at the central common facilities centre, and 50 were working in their villages. About 40 of them still work for the sugarcane contractor as they are still in debt to him. The trained bamboo artisans used to earn an average of Rs8,000-10,000 per year on sugar cane but they now earn between Rs36,000-40,000 per annum, or around \$700. Their incomes have more or less quadrupled. Those who are still migrating for labour work as well as making bamboo furniture are now away from home for much shorter periods.

Credit has always been a major problem for the Kotwalia, and AKRSP and the community decided to include a savings and credit programme for the artisans. The fund was started with a grant of one lakh rupees from AKRSP, and 40% of the net profit from furniture manufacture is kept as a revolving fund for loans. Only two bamboo artisans have taken loans from sugarcane contractors since this started. Under their own scheme, the artisans save fifty rupees or a little under a dollar every month out of their earnings, and they can borrow at 12% annual interest. The groups have savings accounts with banks and 22 of the artisans have their own individual bank accounts with the Development Credit Bank (DCB).

Before the AKRSP, project, the Kotwalia community had very limited access to the benefits of government schemes, but this has radically changed. Only 27 of a sample of 35 artisans who were asked about their experience before and after the project even had ration cards to entitle them to low cost food, and all of them now have these cards. Less than half had voting cards, but nearly all of them now have them, and most of them also have official health cards, and are registered at a NGO hospital

Most of their families are more settled, so that their children can go to school without interruption, and their families also have enough income to buy study materials and uniforms. Before the bamboo programme, most of them took loans to pay for their daily subsistence, but now they are able to spend and when necessary to borrow for education, house repairs, business, and health-care. Their annual income was below Rs10,000, but nearly all of them are now earning over Rs25,000 every year.

Alcoholism continues to be the biggest social problem. Over three-quarters of them spend 10% or more of their annual income on liquor. The international organization “Alcoholic Anonymous” is assisting AKRSP’s work on this.

The project has had its ups and downs. The Government’s Tribal Development Department support ended in October 2010 but the success of the project motivated the AKRSP team and the Kotwalia people themselves to continue and enlarge it.

Certain factors contributed significantly to its success. The Kotwalia people already knew how to work with bamboo. It is readily naturally available but is not easy to work with because of its fibrous structure. The Kotwalias are proud of their traditional expertise, and this helped them to accept the project. They never wanted to work in the sugarcane fields and they were themselves eager to escape their vicious cycle of poverty. The bamboo project of AKRSP provided them with a better livelihood, it encouraged financial inclusion, and most importantly it provided stability. The community have taken over it over themselves.

The roles and responsibilities of the staff and the community were clearly defined; the people produced the products and the AKRSP professionals were facilitators. There were no communication problems and critical decisions were taken after open discussion. Both groups felt accountable to each other, which lead to a high level of trust. The community owns the business in financial terms and its representatives are operating signatories of the accounts.

No programme is perfect and it can always be improved. One challenge is the irregular availability of labour. Most Kotwalia people still work in the sugarcane fields for eight to ten months a year, and the families are scattered in different locations. One of the biggest challenges for AKRSP was to engage with young Kotwalia people and to convince them to take up bamboo craft as a regular full-time

activity. They worked on bamboo for some time every year, but they did not want to lose their links with the sugarcane contractors as they did not believe that the bamboo business would be a sustainable livelihood for them as it is so dependent on customer demand. Also, none of them wanted to leave in the middle of the sugarcane harvesting, so AKRSP had to wait until the season was complete before recruiting new artisans. The Kotwalia people community were doubtful as a result of their earlier failed experiments. AKRSP organized exposure visits to build community's confidence, as well as that of the AKRSP team, by showing them that many other organizations were working very successfully with bamboo. This helped develop their understanding of the future of the bamboo initiative, its scope, and its sustainability.

It was difficult at the beginning to persuade the community to accept accountability for tools and kits maintenance, production security and maintenance, timely delivery of products to customer, and so on, . AKRSP had continually to remind the community that the project was theirs, not AKRSP's, but with time this has ceased to be a problem.

AKRSP is promoting a producer company to promote bamboo craft and furniture. The local informal groups of ten or fifteen artisans will do the primary production at the villages, assembling and finishing will be done at the regional centres, and finally storage and assembly of the final products will be done by Vinal, the Producer Company, which will also be responsible for marketing.

To ensure the success of the producer company, AKRSP is preparing a five-year plan which covers business promotion, community development and the eventual exit of AKRSP. The plan's major focus is on social development. Regular training will be provided to build the people's skills in identifying and buying raw material, design, accounting, marketing and management. Different teams will be made responsible for different functions.

AKRSP is also planning to expand the project to Kotwalia people in other areas, to increase the number of artisans. They plan to set up partnerships with specialised agencies to deal with design and tool development. In addition, they will associate with other craft promoting agencies for marketing and a website will be developed for selling online.

The Kotwalia and AKRSP had first to identify the most suitable livelihood initiative that was acceptable to the community, then to identify and train people for bamboo training and then to set up the Common Facility Centre . The project has had a major impact on the entire community, not just on the artisans. There are challenges to be faced in the future but it is functioning successfully and the community and the AKRSP team have a shared vision of its future. This case shows how the traditional art of a community can be enhanced by professional intervention to bring benefits for all. It proves that a successful and sustainable social enterprise can be developed even with the poorest community if project staff are totally dedicated and the community shares in the vision of its own development.