



Nila Moti

- An Idea that Grew

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It all began in 1992, when we created the Nila Moti Foundation and a shop in our farmhouse in Switzerland, selling beautiful objects and textiles delicately handcrafted in India. The profits were to go towards the construction of a crafts centre, dedicated to promoting womens' activities and handicrafts in rural areas of Rajasthan.

In 1993, we started to file the paperwork for setting up a Trust in India. This was followed in 1997 by the official recognition of the Nila Moti Trust by the Central Government in New Delhi. Moreover, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) gave permission to transfer funds from Switzerland – the benefits of sales from the shop – to the Nila Moti Foundation in India for the construction of a crafts centre in Khimsar.

The Nila Moti Trust purchased 3000 sq m of land opposite the Police Station and the Hospital in Khimsar, District Nagaur, Rajasthan. The objective was to find a

centrally located area, within walking distance for the women who worked there.

You may ask : Why Khimsar in Rajasthan?

Our friends, Gajendra and Priti Singh of Khimsar, gave us tremendous support and have been instrumental in the setting up of the Nila Moti Trust. The construction of the five buildings took three-and-a half years. Many people from the village were employed. It created a lot of expectations and aspirations to find jobs at the crafts centre. It was felt that it would be wise to start in a slow and steady manner. The idea came to seek advice from experts who had been in a similar situation.

In January 2001, seven months prior to the opening of Nila Moti Trust, a four-day meeting was held in Khimsar, attended by hundreds of women from the village and nearby villages. They brought their needlework as well as that of their mother's or grand-mother's. Their applications were carefully recorded, with details of the ladies, their family and social backgrounds, etc., etc.



Based on this, we decided upon following criteria:

Priority was to be given to young needy mothers, chosen from different backgrounds and castes, to widows, and to women whose husbands were absent or handicapped.

On 15th August 2001, the buildings of Nila Moti Trust in Khimsar were inaugurated. Initially, fifteen young mothers from different social backgrounds were employed and ensured of a regular income. Now today, in 2012, we have 77 staff members employed in Nila Moti Trust. This includes four people working as gateman, driver and shop-in-charge, and four people working part time. The women who work at Nila Moti are drawn from an age group between 25 and 44 years. The majority (90 per cent) are illiterate young mothers, two of them severely handicapped by polio; and widows form 40 per cent of the total.

How do the women benefit? What is it that we can we offer to a young, needy mother?

Many advantages : chief among them a regular income and decent working conditions. From these, she gains self respect and empowerment .

The integration of a new person is accomplished gently. When a new woman joins, she is free to try her hand in different departments. She may feel that she is good at machine stitching and begin there, but after some days may prefer to work in another department. We allow her the time and space to find out which activity puts her at ease and makes her happy, and where she has the potential to develop good skills.

The Nila Moti Trust also communicates its values which form the rules by which work is undertaken. These include : Honesty, respect for one another, commitment , punctuality and strictly no politics.

As we grew, we learnt many lessons. An attempt to combat illiteracy through Hindi classes held in the morning was not successful. It met with resistance from the women, who said that they were 'too old' for school. Again, when we suggested the idea of yoga we encountered protests from the teacher and from the women! The teacher thought it would be of no use to teach yoga to women who were illiterate...the women claimed that their daily work at home gave

them more than enough exercise. But this idea became unexpectedly successful. Yoga was started on the basis of a one week trial, and turned out to be a hit! Two years later the yoga teacher left. Now some of the Nila Moti women are teaching yoga, and the classes, held at nine in the morning, are very popular.

Along the way, we have also faced challenges, such as the introduction of weaving. The Delhi-based NGO, TARA (Technology and Action for Rural Advancement) made the looms for us. Seven ladies have learnt the craft and are working together making interesting materials used as fabrics for jackets, coats and other products. We created different departments when women gained competence in their fields and were capable of heading groups. These different departments of production include : Tailoring, Animals , Beadwork, Gudri and all handwork, Weaving .

Quality is of importance. Selling the high quality products of famous Indian artisans in Switzerland set the standard for our own production in Khimsar. Slowly and surely we have learnt to quilt and stitch, assemble and finish little treasures. The women have gone far in developing skills, and their natural talent has made the rest.

To be able to converse with Indians and foreigners, the women felt it necessary to learn languages. Hence, in 2011, Hindi and English lessons were successfully introduced. In the evening at home, some children help their mothers with their homework.

Nila Moti has become like a family for many of the women who work here, particularly for the widows. They help each other and share their problems.

Looking to the future, our next project is the biological treatment of textile dyeing waste-water. Here, the Nila Moti Trust is collaborating with the Jaipur-based block-print and textile engineer, Mr. Vikram Joshi, for the creation of an ecologically-sensitive system for treatment of textile dyeing waste-water. The Shristi Eco-Research Unit (SERI) in Pune is designing an eco-friendly system using plants and bacteria. The dyeing unit will be inaugurated during Diwali 2012. ■