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Pair to help weavers profit

Whitewater professors taking U.S. business skills to India

By RICK BARRETT

rbarrett@journalsentinel.com

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Whitewater - When two University of Wisconsin-Whitewater business professors head to India, they will face a daunting task of helping silk-sari weavers find a way out of poverty that has driven some of them to commit suicide.

Living in villages and urban slums, the weavers are paid a pittance in a country booming with economic prosperity. More than 50% of the weavers' children are malnourished, aid groups estimate, and fatal diseases such as tuberculosis afflict entire families too poor to afford medical care.

It hasn't always been that way, as the weavers were once considered valued artisans who made silk garments from colorful, hand-dyed threads. Until recently, weaving was second only to farming in the nation's most common occupations.

Dating back as far as 5,000 years ago, saris were originally worn by men and women. For centuries they adorned India's wealthiest families and, recently, U.S. actress and model Elizabeth Hurley wore an \$8,000 sari at her wedding.

But sari sales have taken a beating, partly because they've fallen out of favor with India's increasingly westernized middle class. Also, production of the hand-made garments has largely been replaced by cheaper goods made in Chinese factories.

Some of the traditional skills have been left in the dust, said Keith Recker with Aid to Artisans, a non-profit group that assists weavers and other crafts people in developing nations.

"The issue is no matter how refined and amazing your cultural heritage is, you have to keep up with changing markets. Not everything will survive just because it's museum quality," said Recker, who has helped artists in countries such as Cambodia sell their products to stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue and Bloomingdale's.

Educators to the rescue

The UW-Whitewater professors, Jerry Gosen and Sameer Prasad, want to assist the sari weavers any way they can - whether it's finding new markets for their products or helping them get out of weaving and into another occupation.

Gosen, a business management professor, is taking a sabbatical to work on the project. He's headed to India in December for his first time and is taking a pragmatic approach to his mission.

"I don't know if I can reach the lowest level (of the weavers). But if 20 percent of a community gets better skills, they have more money to spend. That raises the whole community," Gosen said.

Prasad, also a business management professor, is from India and has contacts there.

If he and Gosen can develop business strategies that help the weavers, Prasad said, the strategies could be propagated across India and other nations where people have been left behind by industrialization.

Prasad has helped U.S. companies work with the military supply chain.

"The question is whether we can apply what we learn in a textbook on strategic management to a crafts person," he said.

When they're in India, the professors will connect with the Working Women's Forum, an organization of poverty-stricken women that's fought for higher wages and access to business loans. Working with the group is the best way to reach large numbers of weavers.

But sari distributors might not welcome the efforts since currently they pay very little for hand-made products that can sell for much more in the right business circles.

The hard-bargaining sari buyers and wealthier weavers, called *gaddidars*, often double as money lenders. They profit from keeping control over the poorer weavers.

"There are going to be some people who see us as a threat. There might be some resistance," Gosen said.

Even in the U.S., it's difficult to sell a hand-made silk garment for a price competitive with factory-made goods.

Prasad has tried to help the weavers from India sell hand-made scarves here.

"The problem is the (wholesale) cost to get a scarf is about \$22. Then a store has to mark up the price, and a customer has to be willing to pay \$50 for a silk scarf or go to Wal-Mart and buy a copy for \$10."

Besides helping the women, the professors also stand to gain valuable lessons for the classroom.

"We need to constantly check our relevance to what's happening in the real world," Prasad said.

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