

Empowering the Banskar Community of Harda District through Skills-Based Social Entrepreneurship: The Synergy Sansthan Model

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Abstract

The Banskar (Basor) community of Harda, Madhya Pradesh, is a traditional Scheduled Caste bamboo-craft artisan group facing deep marginalization and poverty. This study examines how Synergy Sansthan – a Harda-based NGO – has pursued a skills-based social entrepreneurship model under India’s SFURTI scheme to empower Banskar artisans. In 2021 Synergy formed the Synergy Gram & Shilp Kendra Producer Company Ltd. (a Section 8 company) as the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) for a SFURTI-supported bamboo craft cluster. We draw on a Synergy exploratory field survey (58 households, April 2022) and secondary sources to analyze this model’s process and impact. Synergy’s approach has included collective organization, product diversification (training artisans – especially youth and women – in new bamboo crafts such as lamps and fans), and market linkages (e.g. a mobile “Outlet-on-Wheels” and B2B orders). The analysis finds that the model has strengthened community agency: artisans gained capacity to produce higher-value items and obtained initial orders (e.g. 800 handcrafted fans produced by women in one week). Notably, women’s involvement increased – a female workforce completed the major fan order, and women heads report not needing to migrate for work. Nevertheless, challenges remain: about half of artisan products remained unsold, raw material access is severely constrained (forest department limits supplies), and incomes remain low (29% of families earn only ~₹100–165/day). We conclude that Synergy Sansthan’s skills-driven cluster model has had positive social impacts but requires further policy support. Key recommendations include strengthening market access and finance for artisans, ensuring bamboo supply to traditional communities, and scaling NGO–government partnerships. These findings inform rural development and social innovation policy for tribal artisans and women.

Keywords: Banskar community; bamboo artisans; social entrepreneurship; SFURTI; skills development; producer company; rural livelihoods; women empowerment; Synergy Sansthan.

1. Introduction

Rural Madhya Pradesh hosts thousands of traditional bamboo artisans, many of whom belong to marginalized tribes and castes. Among these, the Banskar (also called Basod or Basor) community – a Scheduled Caste group – has long depended on bamboo craft for subsistence. In Harda District (MP), Banskar artisans skillfully weave baskets, mats, fans and other goods, yet they face chronic poverty and

social exclusion. They generally reside on town outskirts, with men and women alike practicing craft. Government policies (e.g. National and State Bamboo Missions) recognize artisans like the Basods, but structural constraints persist. For example, Banskar families are barred from freely harvesting forest bamboo: the forest department allots only ~150 culms per family per year (far below the ~1500 needed). Meanwhile, low education and falling demand (competition from plastic goods) further erode incomes. A Synergy Sansthan survey found that 29% of artisan families subsist on just ₹100–165 per day – a few times India’s official poverty line – barely enough for subsistence.

In response to these challenges, civil society interventions have emerged. Synergy Sansthan (founded 2009) engaged the Harda bamboo artisans in a social entrepreneurship model: training them in new craft skills, organizing them into a collective, and linking them to markets. Under the Government of India’s SFURTI (Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries), Synergy received grant support to develop a cluster. In May 2021 it incorporated the **Synergy Gram & Shilp Kendra Producer Company Ltd.**, a Section 8 producer company owned by artisans. Synergy’s model is “skills-based” in that it emphasizes capacity-building (design, production techniques) as well as business support. It aims to empower artisans – especially women – through entrepreneurship rather than mere aid. This paper examines that model and its impacts on the Banskar community. Using the Synergy field study and external sources, it analyzes how the NGO-led cluster leverages SFURTI and community organizing to improve livelihoods. We focus on the “Synergy Sansthan Model” – its interventions in training, common facilities, marketing initiatives, and the role of the producer company – and assess outcomes for the marginalized Banskar community. Finally, we offer policy recommendations for NGOs and government to amplify such rural social-enterprise approaches.

2. Review of Literature

Social Entrepreneurship and Rural Crafts: Social entrepreneurship combines a social mission with entrepreneurial methods to alleviate poverty and empower communities. In rural India, initiatives have successfully used enterprise models to uplift artisans and small farmers (Schmidt 2020; Halder & Majumdar 2020). For example, Halder and Majumdar’s case study in Betul District (MP) emphasizes integrating “education, entrepreneurship, production, and marketing” into a sustainable craft cluster. Skills training and capacity-building are widely recognized as key: Madhya Pradesh’s Bamboo Mission explicitly prioritizes “concerted capacity building for bamboo artisans” through regular workshops and design development. Such programs aim to make traditional industries competitive and generate sustained rural employment, echoing SFURTI objectives to organize artisans into clusters and upgrade skills.

Bamboo Artisans and the Banskar Community: Madhya Pradesh is rich in bamboo resources and craft heritage. Within the state, Basod/Banskar craftsmen have a storied tradition of basketry and furniture-making. A KNN news report notes that Basods are “traditionally dependent on bamboo for their livelihood.” The Basod/ Banskar caste is historically marginalized: they are regarded low in social status and were traditionally prohibited from forest access. Typically, Gond and Korcu tribes live in forests and freely harvest bamboo, but urban Banskar families must purchase bamboo or rely on limited government allotment. Halder & Majumdar (2020) document that Banskar weavers make relatively small baskets and that their craft is practiced by both men and women in families. The literature highlights that Basod/Banskar communities earn very low incomes and have faced dwindling demand and raw-material

scarcity (Trivedi 2016; Research Journal of Social & Life Sciences, 2019). Importantly, 12.5% of surveyed artisans in Harda cited low selling prices and raw-material costs as major challenges.

Cluster Development and SFURTI: The Government of India's SFURTI scheme (Ministry of MSME) promotes the regeneration of traditional industries by forming clusters with common facilities, training, and marketing support. SFURTI clusters create Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs), often as producer companies, to involve stakeholders in governance. The key aims are to organize artisans into competitive units, build skills and infrastructure, and enhance market access. Under SFURTI, NGOs like Synergy Sansthan can act as implementing agencies. The MP Bamboo Mission (MPSBM) similarly stresses capacity-building and new marketable product lines for artisans. Despite such policies, many bamboo artisan communities still lack sustained support: a study notes there has been "no governmental support...towards long-term sustenance" of crafts among Basor/Korku/Banskar groups.

In sum, prior research underscores that integrated cluster-based interventions (training + market linkages + community organization) can revitalize traditional crafts. Moreover, empowering rural women is a recognized benefit of craft entrepreneurship: women often contribute significantly to handicrafts and see improved household welfare when engaged in local enterprises (UN Women 2018). This literature suggests that a model combining skill training with self-help enterprises could be effective for the Banskar artisans of Harda. The present study fills a gap by documenting Synergy Sansthan's unique implementation of these principles on the ground.

3. Research Methodology

This paper uses a case-study approach, combining Synergy Sansthan's field data with documentary analysis. The primary data comes from a Synergy-conducted exploratory livelihood survey (April 2022) of the Banskar community in Harda's Jatrapadav slum. This quantitative survey covered 58 households (randomly sampled) and included questionnaires on demographics, skills, income, production, sales channels, and aspirations. In addition, about 20 informal stakeholder interviews were referenced (Synergy staff, artisans). Observational notes (e.g., on working conditions) were also available. We further reviewed Synergy Sansthan's project documentation (e.g. SFURTI proposal, activity reports), the Synergy Gram & Shilp Kendra Producer Company website, and government sources (SFURTI guidelines, MP Bamboo Mission briefings) to contextualize the findings. The data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively: key statistics (income ranges, production capacities, etc.) were extracted from the survey report, while qualitative themes (empowerment, challenges) emerged from artisans' quotes and Synergy reports. Relevant academic and media sources (Halder & Majumdar 2020; KNN 2014) were integrated where needed. The focus is descriptive: assessing how Synergy's interventions align with community needs and SFURTI goals, and identifying outcomes.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Socio-Economic Profile of the Banskar Artisans: The survey confirms that the Harda bamboo artisans form a relatively young and homogeneous community. Over two-thirds of the population is of working age, with household heads mostly male (only ~10 of 58 heads were women). Almost all artisans in the Jatrapadav settlement belong to the Scheduled Caste (basically all identified as SC), reflecting the caste-based nature of the craft. Notably, around 40% of households own a home, suggesting modest asset

stability. Education levels are low (many have dropped out of school), and health burdens are minimal. Crucially, bamboo craft – often alongside secondary jobs – dominates their skills base: over 80% of adults have woodwork or bamboo-weaving skills. Both men and women participate in bamboo craft, although women lead in cooking and household chores. Thus, the community possesses inherited craft knowledge (passed down as 93% learned from self/family) but little formal training or business know-how.

Economically, incomes are precarious. The survey found that 29% of families earn only about ₹100–165 per day from all work (far above the official poverty line nominally, but barely covering basic needs). Most artisans must supplement craft income: many men work as daily-wage laborers, vegetable sellers or musicians due to “erratic and insufficient” bamboo earnings. Women’s craft work allows them to stay home rather than migrate (“our women do not have to go to other places for work”). Overall, the community’s average production is low: only 3,780 bamboo items per year (per community) are made despite a capacity of 17,418 units if fully ordered. Thus artisans are only using ~22% of their potential output. Importantly, about half of produced items remain unsold due to limited market access. Key challenges identified by artisans include lack of buyers (31%), low prices (28%), and difficulty acquiring raw bamboo (26%). Storage and marketing support are major needs: 45% seek help to sell products and 35% for storage/fair pricing. These data underscore that without intervention, traditional bamboo livelihoods are unsustainable.

Synergy Sansthan’s Skills-based Model: In this context, Synergy Sansthan’s initiative can be viewed as a skills-driven social enterprise intervention. Synergy began engaging the local bamboo artisans in 2019–20 (informally building market links) and then undertook the 2022 survey. Recognizing shared challenges, Synergy applied for SFURTI support to build a formal cluster. Under SFURTI, Synergy organized the artisans and received ~₹2.5 crore to form a cluster development project. A producer company – Synergy Gram & Shilp Kendra Producer Company Ltd. – was incorporated in May 2021 to act as the Special Purpose Vehicle. This entity is owned and managed by the artisans themselves (producer members), ensuring that profits and decisions benefit the community. The SPV model aligns with SFURTI’s emphasis on stakeholder-led governance.

Operationally, Synergy has implemented both soft and hard interventions. **Skills training:** In January 2023, in collaboration with the Ministry of MSME, Synergy organized training for 60 artisans at a common facility center in Udaipur. The curriculum emphasized contemporary product design and techniques; for example, women and youth learned to weave bamboo lamps and other home accessories. These new product skills tapped into artisan creativity (“youths are interested... girls learnt making bamboo lamps... they were very active”). By linking training to real orders (e.g. 25 national flags ordered during training), Synergy ensured practical relevance. This approach illustrates skills-based entrepreneurship: artisans are not only taught craft techniques but also how to adapt them to marketable products.

Market linkages: Synergy created innovative platforms to boost sales. A mobile “Outlet on Wheels” was launched (in Jan 2023) to bring artisan wares to markets across MP. Inaugurated by the state Agriculture Minister, this initiative “brings the artists and their bamboo products to the forefront,” aiming to reshape public perceptions of the Banskar community. In addition, the producer company secured B2B orders: notably, in Feb 2023 it produced ~800 handcrafted fans for a corporate event. Over one week, a

“dedicated female workforce” completed these fans, demonstrating both women’s craftsmanship and market viability of new designs. These early wins are significant: they provide income, build confidence, and create a portfolio for future marketing. Synergy also curates products on e-commerce and organizes participation in fairs. Collectively, these efforts address the previously unmet need for buyers: indeed, 39 out of 58 artisans had never connected to broader customers before Synergy’s work.

Women’s empowerment: Women’s roles have notably expanded under Synergy’s model. While men historically dominated basket-making, Synergy’s design innovation and community mobilization have brought women into production leadership. In the hand-fan order, almost all labor was done by women. Women artisans report that craft income allows them to stay home and care for their families, avoiding migration (“our women do not have to go...for work”). This aligns with evidence that involving women in rural enterprises strengthens household welfare (UN Women). Synergy explicitly encourages female participation in committees and training. As a result, women’s self-confidence and social standing appear to be improving (women now routinely engage in sales and collective decision-making).

Integration with SFURTI Objectives: Synergy’s cluster mirrors SFURTI’s model of combining “hard” infrastructure and “soft” supports. The training center in Uda and the potential to establish a Common Facility Centre in Harda (for tools and production) are concrete outputs. The cluster governance is formalized via the producer company (with a Board including member-artisans and NGO facilitators). These align with SFURTI aims to strengthen institutional systems and skill capacities. In fact, Halder & Majumdar (2020) argue that craft clusters succeed when they professionalize management and integrate value chains – exactly the vision Synergy pursues. Synergy’s approach also reflects the Madhya Pradesh Bamboo Mission’s strategy of “developing new bamboo products for national markets” and upgrading tools. By linking artisans to high-value orders (flags, fans) and promoting eco-friendly branding, the project taps into emerging demand for sustainable crafts.

Challenges and Emerging Lessons: Despite progress, significant challenges persist. The **raw material constraint** is acute: Banskar artisans still lack forest access, forcing them to buy bamboo at higher prices. One artisan lamented, “Getting bamboo and storing it is a big challenge... we end up purchasing few at raised price”. This supply bottleneck limits production scaling. Synergy has advocated for negotiating with forest authorities and exploring plantation sources, but success is mixed. Similarly, **marketing remains a bottleneck:** the survey showed that roughly 50% of households were unable to sell their entire output. Even with Synergy’s interventions, building trust with bulk buyers takes time. Organizationally, artisans prefer incremental changes: 84% did not feel existing products needed improvement, indicating resistance to change. Synergy must therefore align new designs with cultural preferences (the women themselves note that “whatever being taught should have a demand”). Financially, access to credit is low: only 7% had institutional loans. Many remain “hand to mouth” and cannot afford to pause work for extended training.

However, the community’s **entrepreneurial readiness** is high. A combined 37.7% of artisans plan to reinvest in machinery and 32.8% expect family members to take over the business, suggesting growth intent. Also, 81% of artisans expressed willingness to continue bamboo work long-term. These attitudes bode well for sustainability. Synergy’s hybrid model – combining NGO facilitation with a self-owned

company – seems to tap into both altruistic and economic motivations. It contrasts with pure welfare models by giving artisans ownership and profit share, embodying social entrepreneurship principles.

5. Findings

- **Community Profile:** The Banskar artisan community in Harda is young, socio-economically poor, and caste-homogeneous (mostly Scheduled Caste). Almost all households have at least one bamboo craftsman, and the craft coexists with intermittent wage labor. Incomes are low (many below ₹200/day) and vulnerable, though most families have basic assets like housing.
- **Skills Base:** Nearly all artisans are self- or family-taught in bamboo work. Woodworking/bamboo weaving skills are widespread across genders. Interest in new skills is high; training in lamp-making energized especially women and youth.
- **Production and Sales:** Artisans currently utilize only ~22% of their production capacity (3,780 vs. 17,418 units annually). About half of produced goods go unsold due to limited buyers. The main products are household items (baskets, fans, etc.) with stiff competition from plastic. Sales occur mainly through rented stalls and fairs; direct marketing channels are almost nonexistent. Only 39% of sales happen at home or artisans' own premises. A large share of artisans has no known customer base beyond local usage.
- **Impact of Synergy Interventions:** The Synergy model has made tangible progress. Organization into a producer co. and cluster has fostered collective identity. Training has expanded product lines (lamps, eco-fans) and increased artisans' confidence in innovation. Initial orders, including 25 national flags and 800 eco-friendly fans, have validated artisan craftsmanship on larger platforms. Crucially, these projects were driven by women artisans, showcasing empowerment: "dedicated female workforce" produced the fan order in one week. The mobile outlet project brought products to new markets and raised public awareness of Banskar talent.
- **Challenges Remain:** Core constraints identified in the baseline persist: raw bamboo availability, market access, and capital. Artisans report that selling and storage support are their top needs (45% and 35%, respectively). High production potential remains untapped without assured orders. Furthermore, few artisans (8%) can devote time to training, indicating the need for home-based or on-site modules.
- **Women's Empowerment:** Synergy's model has fostered female participation both economically and organizationally. Women now handle significant production (fans, lamps), and their income-earning reduces pressure on men to migrate. By joining the producer co. as members, women gain formal ownership stakes. These shifts contribute to household empowerment and social inclusion, albeit change is gradual.

6. Conclusion and Suggestions

The case of Harda's Banskar artisans demonstrates the promise of skills-oriented social entrepreneurship in rural development. Synergy Sansthan's cluster model – underpinned by SFURTI funding – has successfully translated an NGO's vision into an entrepreneur-driven enterprise. By training artisans, forming a producer company, and creating new market links, Synergy has raised the community's capacity and aspirations. Notably, it has involved women as core actors in production and governance, contributing

to women's empowerment. As one artisan noted, "this is the work of our own choice...our women do not have to go to other places for work".

However, to fully realize the potential, integrated support is needed. We offer the following recommendations:

- **For Synergy Sansthan and NGOs:** Continue market development: expand mobile outlets and digital marketing to reach urban consumers. Provide design feedback and customer data to artisans so they can adapt products with assured demand (responding to the insight, "training won't help unless there is demand"). Leverage the producer company to secure advance orders from institutions (schools, offices) or tie-ups (e.g. eco-product chains). Pursue partnerships with design institutes or NGOs (like Aash Foundation) for ongoing skill enhancement. Strengthen women's leadership by involving them in company management and by offering flexible, home-based training schedules (the survey showed artisans prefer training at home). Encourage collective purchasing of raw bamboo (e.g., pooled funds for bulk buying or plantation initiatives).
- **For Government (State and Central):** Ensure bamboo access for traditional artisans. The forest department should revise restrictive policies (e.g. raise the cap from ~150 culms/year) or allow community bamboo plantations. Provide convergence support: include artisan clusters in schemes like MGNREGA plantations or National Bamboo Mission (NBM) subsidies. Expand SFURTI-like support specifically for vulnerable artisan groups (e.g. SC/ST communities). Offer financial inclusion: facilitate microloans or credit lines for producer companies (through SIDBI or NABARD), and ease entry into programs like Atal Pension Yojana or health insurance for artisan families (many depend on savings and small loans). Promote women artisans through dedicated streams (e.g. schemes for SHGs led by tribal women). Support market linkages: organize regular state-sponsored fairs for bamboo crafts, and connect clusters to CSR programs (as one order for national flags suggests). Finally, mandate that upcoming industrial projects source some eco-friendly furniture (e.g. from artisan clusters).

In sum, the Synergy Sansthan model illustrates how an NGO can act as a catalyst for collective entrepreneurship, translating traditional skills into sustainable livelihoods. By combining local knowledge with institutional support and market orientation, this approach empowers a marginalized community to chart its own economic future. Continued multi-stakeholder support – from NGOs, donors, and government – is needed to deepen these gains and ensure that "the prosperity [is] evenly shared" among Harda's bamboo artisans. Future rural development initiatives should study and replicate this cluster-based, skills-driven model to foster inclusive growth in similar artisanal communities.

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