

Where the shoe fits

Tata International's affirmative action programme has boosted women from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes by providing them with jobs at the company's leather complex in Dewas

Who would have imagined that the fashionable footwear on display on the high streets of Paris, Milan and New York is painstakingly handcrafted in Dewas, a small town in Madhya Pradesh, India? What is even more incredible is that these shoes have been crafted by women whose own reality is far removed from the world of style and glamour.

This is the paradox that plays out on the production line that Tata International (TIL) runs in Dewas, which employs a large percentage of women, mostly from the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities. The company's Dewas journey began in 1975, when a world-class leather complex was established in a place that did not at first have the supporting infrastructure to further the business.

Initially, shoe uppers were made in Dewas (in the late 1980s). Manufacture of the full shoe was but

a logical extension. Says N Mohan, global head, leather products, and chairperson of the affirmative action committee at Tata International: "When we started our footwear journey in Dewas in 2006, we faced three challenges that we were determined to overcome. First, Dewas had no industry, making it difficult for us to find skilled labour. Second, we had to match skill sets with customer expectations. This was particularly important as more than 95 percent of the footwear we create is sold in overseas markets. Third was the challenge of women's empowerment, since we had decided that we would predominantly employ women."

The reason for employing women, Mr Mohan explains, was their superior sense of quality, besides the dexterity of their fingers, making them more capable of working on intricate designs. The decision has had far-reaching consequences. The entire community

has benefited from the labour of these women. The hard work and commitment demonstrated by them in such ample measure has helped lift the community and directly or indirectly fuelled many dreams.

This is a far cry from the status these women held just five years ago. Today they are more confident about themselves and their future. Many of them dream of running the factory themselves in five years. Others aspire for a better life for their children. A large number of these women have spoken of the respect that is accorded to them ever since they took up employment with Tata International. They are proud to be Tata employees.

TOUGH BEGINNINGS

But it wasn't easy for the women to traverse the distance between the four walls of their rural homes and the factory. Women in Dewas face a lot of social pressures; household chores and supporting the family are seen as their core responsibilities.

Tata International actively sought to reassure the families that the safety and security of its women employees was one of its priorities. Towards this end, the company met families and invited them to see the



The Tata International team receiving the 'Tata Affirmative Action Programme 2015' award for their Navchetna initiative (for best practices in the employability category), which has been a standout in empowering women

production facilities and the other conveniences provided to the women.

“From the very beginning we had intended to give employment to underprivileged women,” says Mr Mohan. “We had to act in a responsive manner towards them. We needed to be a responsible employer, almost like a parent, and be conscious of this responsibility.”

The company opened bank accounts for the women and provided them ATM cards, assuring them of financial freedom. It also held discussions to educate them about financial literacy, and advised them on where to invest, the importance of saving money, etc.

TIL negotiated with dealers to provide 40 women with scooters at discounted rates and interest-free loans. It was a small gesture but it paved the way to real empowerment for the women, and became a symbol of all that they could

aspire to. For one of the women, afflicted with polio in both legs, the scooter spells freedom and ease of movement. Besides the scooters, some employees were given cycles at a nominal cost.

THE BUSINESS CONNECT

The beauty of the company's affirmative action programme is that it is closely linked with the business. “If you want a business to grow, it must be profitable before it can be sustainable,” says Mr Mohan. “We are not just in the business of selling shoes; we are here to sell a concept, a lifestyle choice, so each pair of shoes we design and create must deliver quality. It was not easy to produce a fashion product in a place like Dewas, but we were determined to do it, and that became our unique selling proposition.”

Tata International spared no effort in its attempt to make

its labour force competent. The company created a brand called Navchetna, in partnership with the central government's Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP), to train the women.

While the partnership with DIPP was discontinued later, the company continues to focus on improving the skills of its people through Navchetna. All of this has been made possible, to a large extent, by the unstinted support of Tata International's board, which has been a great enabler in balancing business and societal imperatives.

Through Navchetna, Tata International sought to help traditional artisans and cobblers understand modern ways of shoemaking. The initiative also enabled the company to hire people who had a flair for working in the shoemaking industry, and make them employable.



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The new recruits are put through an intense training programme in Dewas. Once trained, they are given gainful employment at the company’s units. Incidentally, the Navchetna initiative has been recognised by the Tata Affirmative Action Programme jury for two consecutive years — in 2014 and 2015 — as one of the best practices in the employability category.

Tata International also selects people and sets them up as entrepreneurs. “We have set up an incubation centre through which we select entrepreneurs, and give them machines and orders that they can fulfil,” explains Mr Mohan. “Where there is no order, we make sure their costs are reimbursed. We even pick up the tab for the training costs.”

What about the customers TIL caters to? “Our customers are aware that the shoes are made by women from deprived backgrounds,” says Mr Mohan. “We tell them that they are partners in our journey towards improving the quality of life of people. They appreciate that effort and support our affirmative action programme. They realise that for us this is not just about doing business. The easiest thing is to get a mass order from a supermarket and produce a product which is commoditised. Our customers know how proud our employees are of the work they do.”

Many of these customers, big brand names in the West, have

played a significant role in giving a fillip to TIL’s commitment and progress on the affirmative action journey. They include names such as the Brown Group in the United States and Bugatti GmbH of Germany, which together account for over 80 percent of Tata International’s footwear business.

The faith reposed by the Brown Group in TIL’s operations, evident in the manufacture of their Naturalizer branded footwear, has gone a long way in establishing the company as a preferred partner and supplier and helped it in its efforts to create world-class products in Dewas.

GETTING INTO BOOTS

Mention must also be made here of Fenili Calzature srl (leading bootmakers in Italy) for helping TIL create fashionable boots. The boots made by TIL have since been supplied to famous retailers like Aldo, Next, A Jones and Dune, and brands such as Steve Madden, Bata Europa and Clarks. Similarly, Bugatti has lent invaluable support in creating excellent city shoes for the European market. What is heartening is that these customers increase their orders year-on-year, proof of their faith in TIL’s affirmative action initiative.

In FY15, Dewas made a grand total of 900,000 pairs of shoes. This year the employees are determined to make at least 1.2 million pairs. The efforts of its women employees have

contributed to helping the company’s business grow at an annual rate of 45.5 percent over the last five years. TIL’s goal now is to export 10 million pairs of shoes by 2018.

“One of our priorities is to make the business profitable and then sustainable, and we have a long way to go,” says Mr Mohan. “The break-even target for the factory is the making of 5,000-6,000 pairs of shoes a day. Today we are at only 3,000-3,500 pairs a day. That said, our people are fully supportive of our business goals.”

The company recently made it possible for 40 of its women employees to visit its units in Chennai, and 60 more women will soon benefit from this opportunity. Mr Mohan wants to ensure that at least 50 percent of the women can avail of this learning experience. Earlier, notching up another first, a batch of 40 promising women working at the footwear plant in Dewas were selected to undergo training in China. This was a path-breaking initiative not only in Madhya Pradesh but for the footwear industry in India as a whole. The experience was transformational for the participants.

The exposure gleaned from this learning exercise yielded rich dividends as the women picked up best practices and lessons that they could imbibe in order to improve their own productivity. They also discussed the initiatives they would like to introduce in Dewas to ensure improvements and more efficiency.

Nor was the company content to only achieve its business goals. A survey commissioned by TIL revealed that 49.5 percent of Dewas’s population consisted of women; of these 26 percent hailed from

scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, offering the company ample scope to make a difference. TIL saw the opportunity to work towards ensuring a more inclusive society.

“We wanted to be profitable; we also wanted to create an inclusive society, one where scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women can work with others, ensuring successful integration,” says Mr Mohan. “About 35 percent of our workforce comes from these communities. A strong business linkage, encouragement and mainstreaming are at the heart of any successful affirmative action initiative. The important thing is to make a difference to people’s lives. As we grow further, it will mean more opportunities for everybody.”

THE COMMON GOOD

Tata International’s affirmative action programme in Dewas, which operates under the Utkarsh brand, has over the years enabled many young women to earn their livelihood and support their families. It has resulted in improved economic conditions and social recognition. Better standards of living and awareness about healthcare, hygiene and children’s education are changing the lives of many women for the common good and more.

In a country where large swathes of the population are still discouraged from working outside the home, the TIL initiative to employ scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women offers a shining example of how corporations can achieve their business goals while making a meaningful impact on society. □

— Cynthia Rodrigues



Women from the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes work at TIL’s Dewas leather complex, stitching together shoes and their lives