



Stitching courage in the tapestry of life: Brijesh Raja Chauhan

Brijesh Raja Chauhan, hailing from a small village, defied societal norms and started a tailoring enterprise despite initial resistance from her husband and ire in the Thakur community. Her success inspired a wave of entrepreneurship among women in her village. Later, she opened a cosmetic retail shop, employing and mentoring local girls. Her journey is an example of the delicate balance women often navigate while striving for empowerment in their communities.

Brijesh Raja Chauhan, married into a Thakur family runs a beauty parlour and tailoring unit. Hailing from a small village in Lalitpur, where schooling was limited to only 8th grade, she started looking for ways to earn. In her pursuit of a source of income that can help her stand on her own feet. Brijesh learned the art of stitching and sewing from her sister during her teenage years in Indore.

Work4Progress is a flagship programme of Development Alternatives, supported by "la Caixa" Foundation that focuses on creating dignified and meaningful livelihood opportunities for marginalised women and youth in rural India through enterprise development.

Defying Tradition: Tailoring Against Norms

After marriage, she moved to Orchha with her husband's joint family. Her husband worked a poorly paying government job that was always just enough to make ends meet, and savings were meagre. She felt her children were being robbed of their childhood as they had to grow up too fast in the face of growing financial worries. This inspired Brijesh to pitch the idea of starting a tailoring and stitching enterprise to her husband but faced swift disapproval. Despite the financial strain, he was reluctant to let his wife work in a profession like tailoring. This hesitancy stemmed from the longstanding societal norms amongst the Thakur community that considered tailoring undignified.



Driven by her determination, Brijesh, in a moment of courage, chose to go against her husband, and started her tailoring enterprise in 2015. Whispers and gossip about a Thakur woman running a business had evoked in her village. Assumptions about her supposed misery were made and judgements about her husband's inability to provide for the family questioned his "masculinity". Brijesh remained steadfast, and the belief she had in her craft and her abilities was unwavering. Brijesh's husband too was witness to the transformation he saw in his wife despite the challenges and social stigma. While he was still not entirely supportive of her choice to work, as the fruits of her labour became evident in the form of increasing revenue and recognition, he began to see the potential in her enterprise.

Empowering Through Skill Transfer: Stitching Success Stories

Starting with only Rs 10,000 as her seed capital, she was the sole tailor in her village, catering to the clothing needs of the community. However, her determination and success soon caught the eye of others, this time positively, inspiring a wave of entrepreneurship especially amongst the women in the village. Her influence reached far and wide, and she proudly proclaimed, "Poore gaon ko sikha diya ([I] have trained the entire village)" highlighting the numerous girls she had tutored in the art of stitching. These young

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women, once eager apprentices, transformed into skilled tailors themselves and gained the confidence to establish their side businesses.

However, life's journey for these girls mirrored Brijesh's own story. Despite the initial enthusiasm and success, they eventually quit their tailoring ventures after marriage. Yet, just as Brijesh had defied conventions and began her enterprise after marriage, some of her trainees found the courage to do the same by starting their own shops or small-scale side hustles. She wholeheartedly supported and encouraged the aspiring entrepreneurs, even giving away some of her materials to help them start their businesses. Among the shops that opened, one is situated near the Orchha railway station, and two others that have opened in nearby villages becoming a testament to the impact of Brijesh's mentorship. Numerous others have opened up in villages that her students got married into, but she cannot take a count for certain as she is not in touch with all of them.



'The Chauhan family welcomes you', reads Brijesh's wall next to her shop

Diversifying into Beauty: A New Dawn for Brijesh

In 2018, when her friend invited her to a 'beautician's seminar' being held at the nearby Sreenath Palace in Orchha, she was initially hesitant as she would have to first seek permission from her husband, but her friend managed to convince her. At the seminar, which she describes as a new dawn, she was dazzled by the ocean of possibilities in the beauty industry and the words of the hostess, "Aap bhi kar sakte hain! (You too can do it!)" left a mark on Brijesh. Simultaneously, more and more tailoring shops had mushroomed in her village, and she had felt that her erstwhile sole tailoring shop was now amidst competition from almost every gully in her village. Recognising both the words of the hostess and the growing competition, Brijesh ruminated on starting something new in her tailoring shop.

Still hesitant that her husband would not approve it, her friend convinced her by telling her "You already thread eyebrows so meticulously! What is stopping you?". Her friend was able to inspire courage in her and she decided to enrol in a beautician's course in Orchha.

According to Brijesh, the course was not up to the mark, but it helped her identify what she needs to learn. After trial, error and several YouTube videos, Brijesh felt more confident in her abilities. Now all that was left was adding another dimension of a beauty parlour.

In 2019, she took a bold step and opened a small cosmetic retail shop. It was a modest beginning, but it laid the foundation for her dreams to flourish. Development Alternatives, through TARAGram Orchha, was active in her area and she had heard that she could seek a loan through them. She was approached by one of their field coordinators and a loan of Rs 10,000 was approved in 2019, through a Microcredit Facility (MCF). While the amount could not



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cover the entire cost of her set-up, with Rs 8,500 of the sum was utilised in the purchase of a parlour chair alone; she invested Rs 4500 from some of her savings to purchase the other required cosmetics.

She was able to timely pay off the loan and many new customers started frequenting her shop, with unique demands. She sought another loan of Rs 20,000 through the MCF in early 2020 and invested it entirely in the maintenance and repairs as well as restocking new cosmetics.

TARAGram Orchha also provided her with basic training on managing finances and provided her with a ledger to track her expenses. Although, she says that she still finds it tedious to do it neatly every day. She has tried to cut expenses by finding cheaper suppliers in Jhansi, but that came with its own challenges as the only times she was allowed to go to a different city was when she would go for shopping with her friends once a month. During these shopping visits, she would inquire with many vendors about where she could find cheaper suppliers.

The shop now also has a variety of clothes on rent for special occasions

At present, her earnings are approximately Rs 20,000 a month with Rs 10,000-15,000 in profits depending on the season. The best time of the year is during the marriage season as bridal make-up alone helps her double her profits. She has purchased a few lehengas and rents them at Rs 2,000 a day. In the future, she is keen to take another loan of Rs 10,000 to experiment with the sale of sarees as an additional service.

Mentorship and Selflessness: Nurturing Others

She had employed two girls at her beauty parlour, providing them with an opportunity to learn and earn simultaneously. One of these girls had been with her for two years, and the other had been part of her team for three years. Both of them eventually got married, and their paths diverged from the beauty parlour.

Brijesh sitting proudly on her parlour chair

Currently, Brijesh has one girl working with her, and she continues to mentor and tutor her without charging any tuition fee. Instead, she selflessly imparts her knowledge for free, realising the importance of supporting and uplifting others, especially those who seek to build their careers. If she were to charge for their tuition, she estimates it would be around Rs 1,500, which would also serve as their salary, as they effectively work for 4.5 hours each day.

She has invested her hard-earned money in her children's education and well-being, prioritising their future and ensuring they have the best opportunities to succeed in life. Brijesh has personally tutored her daughter in cosmetics. When her daughter has free time, she willingly lends a hand at the parlour. The mother and daughter share a beautiful bond of support and collaboration.

Brijesh's journey is one of resilience, perseverance, and compassion, and brings to the fore the delicate balance that women have to maintain amidst the many societal and cultural norms. While she dedicates her efforts to building a successful beauty parlour, she is committed to empowering others by equipping them with skills and knowledge to pursue their dreams. Through her selfless mentorship and determination, she continues to inspire those around her. She has left an indelible mark on the lives of the girls she tutors and her children, creating a legacy of empowerment and hope for the future.

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