

Leveraging skills into a craft through social entrepreneurship and jugaad innovation: the Chamar leatherworkers' Studio in Dharavi, Mumbai

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Abstract

In India, characterised by extreme income disparity and high levels of precarious and informal labour, social entrepreneurship could challenge the status quo by improving existing systems with creative solutions. The present chapter discusses the case of the innovative venture 'Chamar Studio'. It demonstrates how a social entrepreneur, by rehabilitating the traditional skills of leatherworkers, succeeds in enhancing labour conditions and re-claiming the identity of a low-caste community in Dharavi, Asia's largest slum. Working with leather is traditionally associated with the Chamar community and by the higher castes considered *impure*. Moreover, the notion 'Chamar' and their identity as leatherworkers, have long lastingly been used against a large group of people, which perpetuates the discrimination prevalent within the Indian caste system. Instead of disassociating from the traditional caste-based occupations and social stigma, with his 'Chamar Studio', Sudheer Rajbhar deploys the skills of leatherworkers to design and manufacture bags from recyclable rubber tyres. As a social entrepreneur, Sudheer improves the working conditions of the artisans; he also leverages the skills of manual workers into a craft; he provides a sustainable alternative for a scarce resource (leather); and he challenges severe social stereotypes. We expose why Sudheer's innovative, social entrepreneurship can be considered to be *jugaad*, or: frugal, flexible and inclusive.

Introduction

Emerging economies such as that of India typically face a scarcity of resources and volatility in the environment, as well as a formal economy from which many individuals are excluded (Prabhu and Jain, 2015). However, if cultural and creative industries can be engines for social empowerment and

knowledge creation, they have vast potential in India because of its diverse social and cultural capital. Especially cities in India can act as a common and free space, in which people can let go of rigidities arising out of social structures; in cities, ideas can mix and people from different backgrounds can interact (cf. Landry and Bianchini, 1995). The metropolitan area of Mumbai has expanded over the years to accommodate the inflow of migrants and new activities, resulting in several clusters, for example Bhiwandi, Malegaon and Dharavi. The process of colonisation and the subsequent independence of the country had already fuelled the rise of such clusters. Several of them are categorised as slums; there is little recognition of the economic, industrial and creative activity that has sustained there for many generations. Despite the vibrant economic activity, the living conditions of the inhabitants are harsh.

Dharavi, touted as Asia's largest slum, is one of the most densely populated areas in Mumbai and located in the middle of India's financial capital. Dharavi is an 'entrepreneurial slum', in which more than 30% of the surface is under some form of commercial use (Iyer et al., 2011: 9). Historically a fishing village populated by the *Koli fisherman*, the place became a hub for leather manufacturing. Working with leather is something that only people of the lower Hindu castes (also known as the scheduled castes) do, and is considered *impure* by the upper castes. The skills of leatherworkers are hardly ever recognized as valuable, and their lower-caste identity has always been used to perpetuate the discrimination prevalent within the Indian caste system. Apart from leather, Dharavi also houses workshops of pottery, textiles, rag picking and recycling works; These, mostly informal, enterprises produce goods worth more than those produced by the special economic zones (SEZ) in India (Iyer et al., 2011). Dharavi's business activity and entrepreneurial nature make it imperative to see it as an 'industrial township rather than a residential area' (Iyer et al., 2011).

In recent years, there have been efforts to raise an awareness of the working conditions and to better the living conditions in Dharavi, with several non-governmental organisations (NGOs), independent field agencies and self-help groups working in this direction¹. The 'Chamar Studio' is an initiative by an entrepreneur who started to work with the leather craftsmen and cobblers of Dharavi, with the goal of designing and manufacturing bags. The name directly refers to the *Chamar*, a Hindu Dalit caste traditionally working in the skinning of animals and the cobbling and tanning of leather. This venture is unique, because, instead of trying to dissociate from the traditional social stigmas of caste, The Chamar Studio aspires to bring the crafts and skills of the leatherworkers to the forefront, and to establish 'artistry' as their primary identity. In the following, we create empirical evidence about how entrepreneurship can alleviate poverty and the precarious labour conditions of a societal group, with the Chamar Studio as a case.

¹ Examples are Dharavi ART ROOM (<https://www.facebook.com/dharaviartroom>), the Society for Human and Environmental development's (S.H.E.D.: <http://shedindia.org/>), and the Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SHENA: <https://snehamumbai.org/>). Last consulted on August 7th, 2020.

Entrepreneurship in general and social entrepreneurship (SE) in particular often come in where government and institutions (including legal systems) fall short of creating viable living and working conditions for all citizens. Traditionally, SE has been studied in the US. Increasingly, SE scholars turn to novel contexts such as developing markets and study the new business models, organizational structures and “strategies for brokering between very limited and disparate resources to create social value” (Seelos and Mair, 2005: 244). In such contexts, for-profit and non-profit organizational activity are often combined (Dacin, Dacin and Tracey, 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that historical and contextual elements (including the lack of institutional arrangements) have a major impact on SE and the types of social innovations that come about in lagging economies (Prabhu and Jain, 2015), with the examples of India (Duflo and Pande, 2007; Banerjee et al., 2007) and neighbouring countries as Bangladesh (Mair et al., 2012).

We studied the case of the Chamar Studio with a qualitative approach, which allowed us to observe the activities of people in their natural setting and to question the social context in which phenomena occur. We conducted interviews with the founder, the workers, and two journalists who had written about the Chamar Studio. The first author had known Dharavi’s leather shops and workshops for longer; She started building rapport with the founder and workers of the Chamar Studio since early 2019. In 2020, both authors visited the studio. Only a few of the workers were comfortable in engaging in lengthy discussions. Therefore, data collection occurred in repeated visits to the studio, in which longer and shorter conversations would take place with the founder and/or the workers. Conversations were not recorded, but notes were made during and immediately after the visits. The coverage of the venture in social media, newspapers and magazines was examined and used as a means to triangulate findings.

The chapter is organised as follows: first, the industrial development of crafts in India will be contextualized; second, the growth of Mumbai and Dharavi will be described, with a focus on leatherwork; third, the Chamar Studio will be described, after which, fourth, we introduce our key theoretical concepts: social entrepreneurship and *jugaad*; fifth, the nature of the social entrepreneurship of the Chamar Studio, as well as its innovative and *jugaad* approach, will be explained. We will wrap up with a discussion and conclusion.

The industrial development of India’s crafts in cities

Creative industries’ researchers have argued that individuals, firms and industries tend to cluster geographically, commonly in cities (e.g., Shaban and Sattar, 2013; Chapain and De Propriis, 2009; Landry and Bianchini, 1995). Numerous western contemporary cities are considered to be creative places that encourage creative production; They allow culture and race to blend into creative ideas, and

they give people the space to live out their ideas, aspirations, dreams and conflicts (Landry and Bianchini, 1995).

Many of India's metropolitan areas carry along a history of industrial production and migration. Historically, during the colonial rule, India's industries developed primarily in port cities and other strategic locations that facilitated trade and an easy distribution of goods (Saikia, 2011). These include Bengal (the then capital of the East India Company), Bombay (Mumbai), Chennai, Surat, and Delhi. Mostly port locations, such cities provided access to international markets and became industrial and administrative centers. Railway and roadway networks assured the connections with the inner land. The infrastructure was adequate for bringing in raw materials from rural and surrounding areas for manufacturing and trade, and in distributing the final and imported products back to local markets (Saikia, 2011). In post-independent times, India has carried forward those colonial traditions, leading to the appeal of regions like Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai, which led to pulsating industrial activity and the influx of labor and raw materials (Saikia, 2011).

This trend of industrialization with pivotal roles for import as well as machine-made manufactured goods, has been harmful to India's traditional crafts sectors and craftsmen. The decline in the need for workers in traditional non-farm activities between 1901 and 1951 strongly hit workers with limited social mobility opportunities, such as female workers (Reddy and Sarap, 2017). However, the literature suggests that the traditional goods were not entirely supplanted by machine-made manufactured goods, and that the demand for traditional goods remained; this helped the crafts sectors to survive even through the difficult colonial period (Reddy and Sarap, 2017). Many artisans and workers migrated to urban areas with the hope to be able to sustain their work. Those massive migration processes in the 18th and early 19th century led to the emergence of several urban clusters, for example Bhiwandi, Malegaon and Dharavi in Mumbai, Surat in Gujarat, and Tirupur in Madras (now Chennai). Clusters developed in those areas where resources were available (Reddy and Sarap, 2017). Craft activities are highly reliant on natural resources, such as the raw materials deriving from fauna and flora, as well as forests. Similarly, the climate is also a factor which affected the location processes; the warm and moist climate of Mumbai, for example, is essential for the spinning and weaving activities which have led to the growth of the cotton textile industry in the region. With cheap and skilled human capital abundant in well-connected locations such as ports and railway hubs, many crafts sectors blossomed in India's industrialized cities. Nonetheless, craft workers (of which there were, and still are, many) suffered low wages and low appreciation for their skills (Reddy and Sarap, 2017).

In order to promote the growth and establishment of its industries, the Indian government has a tradition in formulating five year plans ever since its independence. Even though they entail a rather severe focus on the large and heavy industries, from the second plan onward (1956-61) also crafts sectors have been included in the plans. Nevertheless, policy makers have been "confounded over what to do

in dealing with a traditional sector like crafts apart from suggesting that this could generate employment and income” (Reddy and Sarap, 2017: 113). Such an institutional void paves the way for private initiatives to come up with solutions, as the Chamar Studio provides for leatherworkers.

The leather industry in India

Leather is one of the most widely traded commodities globally, steered by the demand by the fashion and footwear industry, as well as the furniture, interior design and automotive industries. The leather industry in India accounts for approximately 13% of the world’s leather production, good for jobs for 4.4 million people. India is the second largest producer of footwear and leather garments in the world, and the second largest exporter of leather garments. The leather industry in India has a long history².

India’s leather industry is strongly tied to the caste-based system. The society has been traditionally divided into a hierarchical caste-system, based on lineage and occupation (Sinha, 1986). It is a form of social stratification in which people are born into a particular caste and in which social mobility is restricted. The four main castes are the *Brahmins* (the priests and teachers), the *Kshatriyas* (the rulers and warriors), the *Vaishyas* (the traders), and the *Shudras* who were supposed to serve the upper castes (Kamble, 1983). Furthermore, the *Dalits* (like Chamar, Pasi Mahar, etc.), *Chandalas* and *Adivasis* are considered to be the impure ones, and were kept outside the purview of the caste system (Kamble, 1983). According to Srinivas (1996), the concepts of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ are inherent to the caste system, leading to a number of ‘untouchable communities’ that until today have been excluded from other work than menial jobs, including cleaning and leather tanning activities. The caste-based oppression implies that members of the lower castes are denied access to resources. The religious sanctions inherent to the caste system have led to a practice that reserved several artisanal activities to the lower castes who have to serve the upper castes (Sinha, 1986). *Dalits* like the leatherworkers (the Chamar) had the responsibility to serve the village and perform tasks deemed unhygienic by the upper castes (Sinha, 1986), for example working with leather, which is a material derived from dead animals.

Furthermore, India’s leather industry has traditionally been related to the ‘self-sufficing Jajmani System’, wherein leatherworkers in villages flayed, tanned and made leather goods like shoes for their ‘*jajmans*’ or patrons (Sinha, 1986). The Jajmani System or this patron-client relationship originates in religion and is deeply entrenched within the societal structure. Because leather manufacturing was highly reliant upon the demand of the patrons as well as the army (Sinha, 1986), as observed by Wisner

² Sources: <https://www.ibef.org/exports/leather-industry-india.aspx>; <https://www.investindia.gov.in/sector/leather>; <http://www.makeinindia.com/sector/leather>; <https://leatherindia.org/indian-leather-industry/>. Last consulted August 7th, 2020.

(1936: 34-35)³: “leatherworkers approximated the position of slaves of any of the menial castes of the village.” A system of reciprocity was instituted by religious sanction: on the one hand, the Dalits (and Shudras) were supposed to serve their Jajmans or patrons in every way; on the other, the patrons must foresee in life maintenance for their servants (Sinha, 1986). If one of the patron’s animals would die, it would become also the property of those working for him. The Dalits, particularly the Chamar, would then utilise the hide and sometimes even the flesh of the dead animal (Sinha, 1986).

Before the Indian Rebellion of 1857, leather (also for the British army’s equipment) was typically imported from England (Sinha, 1986); this trade was historically in the hands of the Muslims because the Hindus considered it to be religiously impure (Sinha, 1986). However, when this trade was disrupted, domestic leather procurement took over, leading to the opening of several private tanneries in Uttar Pradesh and other parts of the country. By 1899, the domestic trade of raw hide and skins from Madras had taken such a leap that prices of raw materials increased beyond what tanners in villages could pay (Sinha, 1986; Gadgil, 1971). This trend caused the breakdown of the Jajmani system and led to disputes over the rights of ownership over dead cattle. Many leatherworkers shifted towards agricultural work, or they moved to the urban tanning industry (Sinha, 1986).

One location in which the leather industry took a giant leap, is Dharavi in Mumbai. Initially a creek inhabited by the indigenous fishermen community of ‘Koli’, the area dried up because of the expansion of Mumbai. The outbreak of the plague in 1869 caused the British government to expel the polluting and waste industries to this then distant creek region. Being unregulated land and mainly used as a rubbish dump, Dharavi attracted immigrant communities to settle and started to develop (KRVIA SPARC Report, 2010). Among those communities were the Muslim leather tanners from Tamil Nadu, as well as potters from Saurashtra, and artisans and embroidery workers from Uttar Pradesh (KRVIA SPARC Report, 2010). Attracting increasingly more immigrants, Dharavi became a site where the recycling of dumped goods created a livelihood for the majority of its inhabitants (Weinstein, 2014). As such, in the second half of the 19th Century, leather production by the Muslim immigrants started to become an established industry in Dharavi. Ever since, Dharavi kept attracting leatherworkers that escaped the penurious circumstances in the villages and hoped for a better livelihood in the Mumbai area (Weinstein, 2014). In recent years, generations of leatherworkers have created their independent businesses of finished leather goods such as shoes or bags (KRVIA SPARC Report, 2010).

In terms of health and safety, leatherworking is not optimal. The Factories Act of 1948 aims to formulate laws and policies governing occupational health and safety and sets rules regarding the hours of work, pay, health, safety of the workers. This act has categorized the leather industry as a ‘hazardous industry’ (Nihila, 1993). Leather is toxic when it is being processed: tanning the leather requires the

³ Wisner, 1936 quotes the Laws of Manu (Chapter I, Verses 87-91), p 34-5

usage of heavy and sharp hand tools, contact with chemicals, and the inhalation of toxic gases (of which some combinations are lethal) during many hours a day (Nihila, 1993). Furthermore, the working conditions frequently include working in cramped spaces with dim lights and poor ventilation (KRVIA SPARC Report, 2010). Despite government regulations, most workers in the industry do so on an informal basis, without any registration. This impedes a clear monitoring process.

In recent years, the leather industry in India has been challenged: In 1996, pollution led to a city ban on tanning causing the leather industry to buy its hides from remote Deonar (KRVIA SPARC Report, 2010). This meant that leatherworkers either had to shift towards the edge of the city or go through hassle in getting the raw material. Furthermore, a ban on the sale of cattle (the so-called beef ban) and drastic tax reforms like the introduction of Goods and Services tax which cut down the profit in the leather trade, caused severe challenges to the leatherworkers ever since 2015. It is in this context that the Chamar Studio started off.

The Chamar Studio in Dharavi

Dharavi has been described as an entrepreneurial slum because of its self-sufficing nature (Iyer et al., 2011: 9). The Chamar Studio is one of the unique, entrepreneurial initiatives involving the leatherworkers of Dharavi. In depth discussions with Sudheer Rajbhar, the founder, helped us understanding the work of the Studio and the many ways in which the Studio influences the lives of its workers. Originally from Uttar Pradesh and growing up in the slums of Kandivali in Mumbai, Sudheer Rajbhar has seen society and its stereotypes from the worst angles. Himself belonging to the Bhar caste, categorised as the Other Backward Class (OBC) by the Indian Constitution, Sudheer is familiar with the derogatory tones referring to his and other low castes, and the prejudices and exclusion in the Indian society. After obtaining a degree in arts, Sudheer worked as an artist's assistant and exhibited his own work in celebrated exhibitions and festivals in Mumbai, for example the Kala Ghoda Art Festival. Drawing inspiration from his childhood in the slums, his work has generally been introspective, making use of collected leftover items as keepsakes. In 2015, Sudheer decided to start his own business that is on the intersection of an arts project and a social enterprise. He kick-started with a project that entailed the production of simple white cotton bags (or *thailas*) on which the word 'Chamar' was printed in different languages. By exhibiting these bags in a Mumbai-based curatorial art space (the Clark House Initiative), he sought to draw attention to the precarious labour conditions of the low-caste workers, and to see how people reacted to the word 'Chamar' in an artistic context.

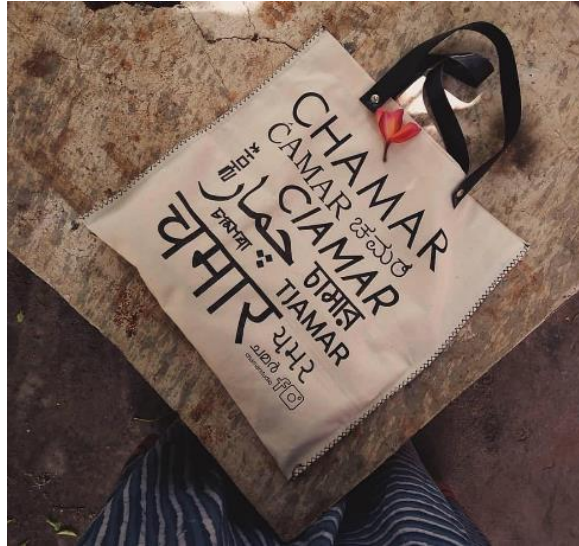


Figure 1: Cotton Bag or Thaila (Source: the Chamar Studio Instagram page)

Enthused by people’s reactions, Sudheer decided to start a brand that would put in light the creativity and skills of the cobblers, leatherworkers and other workers from the Dalit community: the ‘Chamar Studio’. He had the sensitivity to recognise the cobblers and leatherworkers as artisans: they have the skills to manufacture and fashion leather, which, if adeptly applied, can be creative and productive at the same time. While ‘Chamar’ has commonly been used as a slur against the people belonging to the lower caste with whom people from other castes would disassociate, Sudheer, trying to break the stereotype, seeks to give positive attention to the skill associated with this notion, which is the skill of the leather artisans. Around that time (2015), numerous leatherworkers experienced difficulties in obtaining the raw material that sustains their livelihood because of the introduction of the beef ban in India. Leather became scarce and thus expensive. In 2016, Sudheer started experimenting with an alternative material for the leather. He reckoned that (used) rubber could be the cheap, a more eco-friendly and less toxic alternative or leather, and suitable for bag production. Rubber does not lose its main qualities after being recycled; in the form of the glossy rubber sheets that are a component of rubber tyres, it was available at a local firm.

Together with a friend, who is a cobbler by profession and engaged with the municipality’s waste management department, Sudheer started training the workers in waste segregation, hygiene practices, and stitching bags from the recyclable rubber sheets. The first batch of the Chamar Studio products was presented in a collection named ‘Bombay Black’ and entailed backpacks, satchels, handbags, and tote bags that carried traditional local names as ‘Lady Batwa’, ‘Khisa’, ‘Jhola’ and ‘Bora’. Even if manufactured from a new material, the products have the typical zigzag suture that was used for the leather products. Priced between Rs. 600 to Rs. 6000 (the equivalent in US dollar is 8 to 85),⁴ the bags

⁴ To put the price of the products in perspective: the average monthly salary in a city like Mumbai was around US dollar 592 in 2019 (DEUTSCHE BANK RESEARCH, 16TH May 2019, ‘Mapping the World’s Prices 2019’, https://www.dbresearch.com/PROD/RPS_EN-PROD/PROD000000000494405/Mapping_the_world%27s_prices_2019.pdf)

are simple, minimalistic and utilitarian, having the sheen of soft leather and a classy finish because of the black colour. Dharavi, the hub for informal leather work, became the centre of the Chamar Studio's operations thanks to the social entrepreneurship that Sudheer manifested.

Key concepts: social entrepreneurship and jugaad

Entrepreneurship is commonly associated with the presence of lucrative opportunities that are being discovered, evaluated and exploited by imaginative individuals (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). In recent years, entrepreneurship scholars have started to empirically shift away from a dominant focus on high-growth, wealth-creating businesses and start-ups, to enterprises that address entrenched societal problems and catalyse social as well as economic value (Tobias et al., 2013; Seelos and Mair, 2005). For example, with one-tenth of the world's population living in extreme poverty and poverty on the rise, still, in some countries⁵, entrepreneurs have been challenged to engage such a massive number of poor people. The entrepreneurship research field has identified at least two ways in which entrepreneurship does so: first, by firms (frequently within mature economies) that create a market in serving the needs of the poor while still making a return on their investment (e.g., Prabhu and Jain, 2015; Prahalad and Hammond, 2002); and second, by entrepreneurial solutions to alleviate poverty, or entrepreneurship as a means that can help individuals to "break the cycle of poverty" (e.g., Bruton et al., 2013: 683). The Chamar Studio can be marked as a form of social entrepreneurship of the second type.

Regardless of its many competing definitions (Choi and Majumdar, 2014), social entrepreneurship (SE) can be considered as an umbrella term for "the rapidly growing number of organizations that have created models for efficiently catering to basic human needs that existing markets and institutions have failed to satisfy" (Seelos and Mair, 2005: 241). It combines "the resourcefulness of entrepreneurship with a mission to change society", not rarely in relation to the Social Development Goals (Dacin et al., 2011; Seelos and Mair, 2005). While the creation of social value has longer been considered as a by-product of the economic value that many entrepreneurs seek to create, in SE it is the other way around: social value takes centre stage, while economic value creation is mere needed to allow the business to achieve self-sufficiency (Dacin et al., 2011; Zahra et al., 2009; Mair and Marti, 2006). SE commonly seeks to strike a balance between "doing good versus doing well" (Prabhu and Jain, 2015: 860). In order to survive, social entrepreneurs must find a poise (across a wide range of possible ratios) between their social motivation and a personal need to capture an economic return, or "part of the value in financial terms" (Seelos and Mair, 2005: 244). Choi and Majumdar (2014: 364) have suggested to view SE as "a conglomerate of several sub-concepts" that "describe to a good extent the value achievement" (368) by SE, namely (1) social value creation, (2) the social entrepreneur, (3) the social entrepreneurship

⁵ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/30418/211330ov.pdf>; last consulted August 7th, 2020.

organization, (4) market orientation and (5) social innovation. It is ever more clear that many social entrepreneurs are inherently also innovators that develop new solutions. In India, for example, the phenomenon called ‘Gandhian innovation’ is based on the principles of sustainability and affordability: it relies on the premises that the Earth provides enough to satisfy everyone’s need, and that innovations should benefit everyone (Prahalad and Mashelkar, 2010).

The idea and concept of ‘jugaad’ is widely prevalent in India and is used as a colloquial term in everyday contexts. Originally, the term symbolises any trick, connection or combination that engenders the means to an end (Monier-Williams, 2005). However, the literature also describes ‘jugaad’ as ‘creative improvisation’ (Krishnan, 2010), and as a ‘concept, process and product’ all at the same time (Sekhsaria, 2013). From the innovative use of household items to unique entrepreneurial ideas; jugaad is commonly used in daily conversations and work environments (Chaturvedi, 2014). While, on the one hand, positively, it can refer to reconfiguring materials and finding solutions (Sekhsaria, 2013), on the other, the concept can have a more negative connotation when referring to achieving something by undesirable means (Birtchnell, 2011). However, in emerging markets such as India, Africa or Brazil, jugaad often assists innovative entrepreneurs to working in ‘resource constrained settings’, saving time and money, and providing affordable solutions to consumers (Rajdou and Prabhu, 2013). These affordable ‘constraint-based innovations’ (Saraf, 2009) frequently target the marginalised by addressing their basic requirement and needs (Prahalad, 2009).

Prabhu and Jain (2015) have typified the mode of entrepreneurial innovation that is increasingly prevalent in India as *frugal*, *flexible* and *inclusive*. Defined as “the art of overcoming harsh constraints by improvising an effective solution using limited resources”, the jugaad approach to innovation can be found in different types of organizations, including social enterprises (Prabhu and Jain, 2015: 847). Such a jugaad approach to entrepreneurial innovation is typically unconventional, yet context-friendly and bottom-up, with entrepreneurs making an “ingenious use of existing resources and technologies rather than pushing the technology frontier per se” (Prabhu and Jain, 2015: 845; Chaturvedi, 2014). In this manner, it is distinctive from the innovations in advanced economies that classically rely on research and development to deliver more benefits, at a higher cost, to a small niche of consumers (Prahalad, 2012).

In the following sections we will discuss the Chamar Studio along the key dimensions of SE (Choi and Majumdar, 2014), and explain why Sudheer’s innovative entrepreneurship can be considered jugaad, or: frugal, flexible and inclusive.

Social entrepreneurship and *jugaad* innovation in the Chamar Studio

1. Social value creation

The social mission, or the creation of social value, is considered to be a prerequisite for SE (Choi and Majumdar, 2014; Zahra et al., 2009; Seelos and Mair, 2005). Even if the concept of social value is complex and ambiguous (Choi and Majumdar, 2014), several aspects of the Chamar Studio are clearly socially motivated.

Firstly, Sudheer improves the economic lives and precarious working conditions of some of Dharavi's leatherworkers in a number of ways. He decided to find an alternative to the costly and toxic process of leather manufacturing and came up with the idea of using recyclable rubber tyres. Relying on the skills of the cobblers and leatherworkers, he was soon able to fashion bags out of the rubber sheets, which entails cutting parts of a readily available, recycled material, instead of the time-consuming and unhealthy preparatory processes of tanning and crusting leather. Also, Sudheer creates a working system that allows flexibility for the artisans. Most of them are engaged in some other form of daily work, and in their remaining labour time, they stitch the bags from out of their homes or workspaces, mostly in Dharavi and Santacruz East, or in the Chamar Studio workspace. As suggested by one of the workers (albeit not in these words), this flexibility improves their work-life balance.

Secondly, by relying on the typical cobbler's stitch or the zigzag suture pattern, Sudheer effectively deploys the skills that leatherworkers master in a creative process; at the same time, he creates challenging work and supports the workers in improving their skills. As the artisans become more apt with practice, they become able to complete more complex designs in a shorter time, which is satisfactory not only for the workers, but also for the entrepreneur who sees a challenge in expanding product lines as well as the business.

Finally, by leveraging the traditional skill possessed by and associated with the Chamar community, and naming his studio/brand after them, Sudheer seeks to combat social class disparities and to create respect for the skill typically associated with a lower caste in India. Out of the conversations with the workers, it became clear that the idea of becoming more respected on the basis of their traditional work, appeared far-fetched. However, regularly working with the Chamar Studio has given them the hope to being able to pursue this further. Sudheer's intentions and efforts, thus, actively tap into social value creation and stretch further than those of many regular fashion designers or creative entrepreneurs.



Figures 2 and 3: Cobbler's stitch: criss-cross suture (picture by Megha Chakraborty)

2. The social entrepreneur

Social entrepreneurs are crucial in initiating social entrepreneurial activities: they are often innovators that envisage and realize social innovations and/or social change processes (Choi and Majumdar, 2014). In the Indian context, social innovators have been found to “making ingenious use of existing resources and technologies, employing a mindset that combines improvisation with pragmatism and developing solutions for communities that have traditionally been underserved” (Prabhu and Jain, 2015: 844; Ahlstrom, 2010). In the case of Sudheer, as exposed in the previous sections, there is a clear interest in improving the economic lives of a lower caste community in India. In order to achieve this, he unambiguously relies on creative improvisation (cf. Amabile, 1983) and an entrepreneurial mindset (McGrath and MacMillan, 2000). As an artist, Sudheer is accustomed to create artworks and design objects with an aesthetic value, to which, with the Chamar Studio, he adds a functional and a social dimension. His entrepreneurial mindset is reflected in his proclivity, on the one hand, to advance his enterprise by including increasingly more workers (cf. infra), and, on the other, to work towards the usage of a novel bio-degradable organic raw material for a more sustainable approach to fashion.

3. The social entrepreneurship organization

Different from membership organizations that focus on advocacy, or activist movements and other more punctual and loosely structured initiatives with a social objective, social entrepreneurship activities are commonly coordinated through an organization that can possess various legal forms, and be located in several sectors, including the public sector (Stephan et al., 2016; Choi and Majumdar, 2014; Mair and Marti, 2006). In its ambition to roll out its social mission, the Chamar Studio is confronted with some coordination and strategic issues typical for a young entrepreneurial organization that recognizes the opportunities to expand. Yet, in order to develop a sustainable and viable business with a social mission

in an environment such as India, it has been suggested that “a deep knowledge of the nature of the problem and the lifestyles and socio-cultural context of the communities or customers that one is dealing with” is needed to achieve a social venture’s objective, as well as passion, commitment and local knowledges. These assets are more likely to spur social entrepreneurship compared with new technology or large amounts of capital (Prabhu and Jain, 2015: 851).

The Chamar Studio makes the working and living conditions of its workers a main goal. Many poor people are in multiple occupations as a way of risk-spreading and of being capable to foresee in the daily needs of their families they must accommodate (Banerjee and Duflo, 2007). This is not different for the cobblers and leatherworkers in Mumbai, who are often the breadwinners of a multi-generation household. The Chamar Studio wants to engage workers in such a way that it does not hamper their routines; yet, also, Sudheer developed an income-generating way in which workers can occupy “what would otherwise be wasted time” (Banerjee and Duflo, 2007: 161). One of the primary associates and Sudheer’s friend, Sachin, needs to support his own growing family. He has thus created a workspace in his own home from where he works and also trains/teaches other workers for the Studio.

On International Labour’s Day in 2019, Sudheer launched a project which he labelled ‘Blue Collar’. Blue collar jobs refer to the manual labour executed by the working classes for which no education is needed. Blue as a colour is for the Indian Dalit community symbolic for social justice and empowerment, associated with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a social reformer who had fought for Dalit’s rights since before the independence of India. With the Blue Collar project, the organization expands to a larger group of workers, namely the cobblers sitting in the local railway stations in Mumbai. While staying in the stations for days of 12 hours and more, many of these people only receive a few clients for shoe polishing or stitching. The Chamar Studio has arranged that also those cobblers can use the ‘in between’ time for creating rubber bags for which the material and training are provided by the organization. According to Sudheer, this strategy leads to a more efficient use of the time and skills of workers, and to a greater visibility of the social enterprise, which adds to its social mission to improve workers’ economic lives and create an awareness not only of the precarious situations, but equally so of possible solutions. Hence, a major challenge of the solutions to social problems as those that the Chamar Studio seeks to create, is to scale up and eliminate poverty at a larger scale. While, typically, social ventures lack the resources to extend their solutions to larger contexts, and to generalize to other groups than the one initially targeted, the resources of the Chamar Studio are mainly the abundant human capital available, as well as waste materials. Small scale models as the Chamar Studio could serve as an inspiration for other social entrepreneurs, who may benefit more from *scaling out* rather than *scaling up*, for example by training others who could take the applicable elements and tailor them to their own circumstances (Prabhu and Jain, 2015).

4. Market orientation

Market orientation in SE can imply “commercial activities, which generate earned-income to ensure the sustainability of social entrepreneurial activities and self-sufficiency of the organization” as well as “commercial activities directly linked to the social mission to ensure the most effective and efficient distribution of social services and products” (Choi and Majumdar, 2014: 368). The Chamar Studio mostly works on demand, based on orders received through their website and their social media channels. The selling proceeds are equally divided between the artist and the leatherworker. Social media as Instagram play an essential role in the marketing of the Chamar Studio products. Sudheer regularly places updates of the different Chamar Studio projects and media coverage, in order to interact with a potential clientele. One of his unique strategies has been to label the bags with traditional local names, ensuring a familiarity to a local clientele. At present, distribution at the international level has been very limited, which points at Sudheer’s considerations of developing a gradual, sustainable project. Sudheer has chosen to portray the bags on an Instagram page with pictures of the artisans holding the bags in their daily workplaces or living spaces (figure 5). The Chamar Studio insists that all its products are androgynous and not conforming to any gender norms. Everyone can use the bags according to their needs. In all of this, there is an effort to make potential customers realise that, despite the longstanding stereotypes, an occupation is more than work: it is a creative practice and the result of skilled craftsmanship, a tradition sustained throughout many generations of artisans. All in all, the market promotion by the Chamar Studio is frugal, comparable with that of other social enterprises that do not rely on large advertisement budgets but use the web, social media and viral marketing tactics to spread the information about their products (cf. Prabhu and Jain, 2015).

It is a delicate balance to seek for the attention needed to create a market of demand for the Chamar Studio bags, while safeguarding its social mission and avoiding the brand to become trending or a hype so typical in the fashion and design industries (Bhatti and Ventresca, 2012). The Chamar Studio has been covered by local and international media, including lifestyle magazines such as Elle India, Livemint, Harper’s Bazaar India, Scroll, The Hindu and The Asian Age, to name a few. While such media attention can easily be considered as a recognition of the project, it can equally turn a product into a fad or fashion (Bhatti and Ventresca, 2012) and lead to pressures onto the production capacity of the social enterprise. Also the fact that the Chamar Studio has begun supplying and showcasing its products in the stores of Le Mill, a multi-designer boutique in Mumbai, and in the Paper Boat Collective, which is a small lifestyle boutique in Goa, can be seen as a strategic move that adds to the viability of the business and labour security for the workers; at the same time, it detaches the bags from the environment where they were made, putting them on display in an environment of luxury goods, priced accordingly. The ways in which conspicuous consumption (acquiring luxury goods to display economic wealth) affects SE is far from understood, and particularly relevant when social entrepreneurs develop products that can be considered as artistic or design objects that only exist in limited batches.



A cloth tote by Chamar Studio

Figure 2: Featured in Elle Magazine (Source: the Chamar Studio Instagram page)



Figure 3, 6 and 7: Artisans representing products of the Chamar Studio (Source: the Chamar Studio Instagram page)

5. Social innovation

Social innovation is commonly associated with SE, and the non-traditional, disruptive aspect of SE that sets it apart from regular service provision (Choi and Majumdar, 2014). The innovative aspect comes natural when social entrepreneurs seek to find impactful solutions for social problems that occur in society. The typical Indian *jugaad* approach to innovation and entrepreneurship tends to be highly frugal, flexible and inclusive (Prabhu and Jain, 2015), what can undeniably be said about the Chamar Studio.

First, many Indian innovators are *frugal* in the sense that they make use of the scarce resources they have access to in an effective and economic way, and they are proficient at taking the cost out of the successive steps in an innovation process (from idea generation over development to the marketing of products or services) (Prabhu and Jain, 2015; Prahalad, 2012). Sudheer clearly does so by synergizing an alternative, available raw material with the traditional skills of many workers who seek for additional revenues. Second, many Indian innovators are *flexible* thinkers and doers; they improvise and explore different options in an effectuation-like style (cf. Sarasvathy, 2001) with the ability to adapt to volatile and changing circumstances (Prabhu and Jain, 2015). The Chamar Studio has until today the features of a project-based enterprise, where subsequent projects with a similar objective lead to business growth. In this, Sudheer masters the approach of an artist, creatively conceiving projects and addressing opportunities that come forward. Third, innovators in India that are *inclusive*, aim to develop goods and services for underserved communities and individuals that are constrained in their payment capacity. Including those excluded groups not only as customers, but as “members of an ecosystem producing and distributing these services, thereby augmenting their income and contributing to their development” (Prabhu and Jain, 2015: 848), is precisely what the Chamar Studio accomplishes. With his social enterprise, Sudheer is an actor in a market-based economy who does not primarily seek for the development of a customer base of previously disqualified consumers, but he taps into a widely available human capital resource (skilled labour), and in doing so, he tries to include a poor community into the formal economy (cf. Bruton et al., 2013).

Discussion and conclusion

The Chamar Studio in Dharavi, Mumbai, is an example of an innovative social enterprise that, context-friendly, bottom-up and by creative improvisation (Prabhu and Jain, 2015), addresses social problems “through the use of local and cheap technologies combined with clever organizational and logistical arrangements” (Prabhu and Jain, 2015: 848). We have exposed how it achieves its social mission through five components, namely social value creation, the social entrepreneur, the social entrepreneurship organization, market orientation and social innovation (Choi and Majumdar, 2014). Likewise, we have illuminated how a *jugaad* approach, so typical for innovative entrepreneurship in India, characterizes the Chamar Studio’s activities.

Social enterprises often maintain peculiar models of value creation that can include economic, social and cultural value (Seelos and Mair, 2005), all in order to have an impact on society, be it at the local or global level. The typical social entrepreneur has been depicted as a social hero with “entrepreneurial talent” (Seelos and Mair, 2005: 244) who possesses, next to an altruistic motivation, also the determination to change society (ibid.). Many of the case studies in social entrepreneurship research have focused on the success stories of social entrepreneurs, who become heralded as archetypical examples, leading to a social entrepreneurial identity/stereotype and community (Dacin et al., 2011). In the case of Sudheer Rajbhar of the Chamar Studio, the Indian *jugaad* approach and his association with fashion and art add additional layers to his social entrepreneurial identity, seeking to blend functional, social and aesthetic imperatives in a series of subsequent projects that fledge as an artistic portfolio. It does not surprise that a *jugaad* or frugal, flexible and inclusive approach to entrepreneurial innovation reflects the business of Sudheer so effortlessly: *jugaad* requires a mindset and culture, and has a “natural affinity” with creativity (Amabile, 1983), as well as with an effectuation logic of business development (Prabhu and Jain, 2015: 858; Saravathy, 2001). While it has been suggested that *jugaad* can be applicable to other contexts than the Indian one, for example in relation to the recent maker movements in western societies (Prabhu and Jain, 2015), future research could scrutinize if artist-entrepreneurs are typically more frugal, flexible and inclusive compared with other entrepreneurs. With our case study, we bring creativity into the equation, and into the SE literature.

Additionally, in contrast with SE-studies that consider how enterprises create a market in serving the needs of the poor (e.g., Prabhu and Jain, 2015; Prahalad, 2005), this case study considered how local resources in the form of the skills of the poor can be addressed in order to attenuate poverty. The study focused on workers rather than consumers. If this can be considered a contribution to extant SE-literature, it must be credited to Sudheer Rajbhar, whose vision is in line with that of thinkers such as Nobel prize-winner Muhammad Yunus, who believes that the poor have skills that remain underutilized, and set up Grameen Bank in Bangladesh in order to accommodate for such a social failure.

One major challenge to social enterprises, including the Chamar Studio, is the growth challenge. Particularly in India: while many social enterprises have the motivation and commitment to act *jugaad*, they experience difficulties to scale up (Prabhu and Jain, 2015). At the organization level, scaling “grassroots-generated innovations” (Prabhu and Jain, 2015: 860) while striking a balance between doing good and doing well, is a recurring challenge. Also at the aggregate or societal level, replicating and scaling the models of social enterprises to a level that really, severely, impacts society, remains tough (Seelos and Mair, 2005). While scaling up may not always work out favourably, or not be an effective strategy for social enterprises, *scaling out* could be an alternative. However, the ways in which processes of scaling out are set in motion and become successful, are to be investigated. The same holds true for the sustainability of social innovations within localized communities; while positive, social change

needs entrepreneurial motivation, capacity and opportunity (Stephan et al., 2016), the antecedents of SE's long term effects (in context), are far from understood.

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⁶ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>, consulted August 7th, 2020.

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