

Connecting the Marginal to the Consumers – The Amar Khamar Story

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Amar Khamar is an initiative that works with the objective of offering organic products directly from the farm to the doorsteps of urban consumers, online, using state-of-the-art digital technology, without any middlemen. What makes Amar Khamar, which means 'my farm', distinguished from its peers is the profile of its sellers. It works mostly with the smallholder women farmers from remote villages, who sell traditional products like rice, lentils, turmeric and spices. Working with the objectives of small-farm-based entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurship and empowerment, Amar Khamar also provides a face to the farmers and is ready to spread its reach with fuller store and stronger network of farming community in near future.

IMI Konnect: *What motivated you to start an organization focusing on organic farming and that too with women farmers in rural areas?*

SC: I co-founded a management consultancy firm in Germany in the year 2014, which was founded with an objective of offering consulting services with not-for-profit spirit, to international agencies who are designing their projects or trying to understand what is happening with their money in a particular project. So this took me to many places not only in India but in Africa also where focus of our clients was on socio-economically disadvantaged community. Globally, they are largely agrarian. Development is a major necessity for the bottom of the pyramid irrespective of their location and as I was into management consultancy, I thought

my experience would help me to start working for a sizeable change to reduce the demand and supply mismatch.

One of the major problems faced by the farmers in developing world is the lack of connectivity to the market. Most of the organizations who are buying from them are buying at the minimum cost and selling at a very high price, thus making the entire process grossly unremunerative for the farmers. To make agriculture profitable it is of utmost importance to offer farmers better remunerations. Organic farming is much more difficult and laborious than doing farming with fertilizers. So why will a farmer do it? It can only happen with larger market access and Amar Khamar's motto is enhancing the market reach of the farmers.

* Founder, Amar Khamar

IMI Konnect: *What exactly does Amar Khamar focus on?*

SC: What prompted Amar Khamar is the fact that in last 20 years across the world there was a drastic improvement in usage of technology and the idea that you can take advantage of it in the 'development initiatives of the future'. Reach of technology in terms of mobile phone is really vast at the village level as it is affordable. The price of a mobile is within the reach of the village community.

What we try to do in Amar Khamar is not that what is already done but do something which is contemporary in the urban space also. Here an urban development gradually spreads into rural space. So there are three major factors behind establishing Amar Khamar: first is our experience of lack of market access to the farmers, second is the understanding of disruptive technology and third is the drive to make a creative change.

IMI Konnect: *That means the organization is here for helping the farmers on technological aspects as well as increasing marketability?*

SC: Yes, Amar Khamar works with the philosophy of creating entrepreneurs. The men and women who are associated with Amar Khamar have the understanding of business, price and market and they are even aware of customer preferences. It also helps them differentiate their products from rest of the products available in the market. They also have a feeling of direct presence in the market. Further, we have not-for-profit nodal organizations

connected with Amar Khamar who can transform themselves fully or partly as social enterprises. Many organizations who are training or teaching on agriculture also face the difficulty in continuing training when the donations are not coming as they don't have any other alternative revenue model. We have farmers' group who are associated with not-for-profit cooperatives who are involved in training. Now they have the additional responsibility of ensuring quality, packing the product and operating the nodal terminal that we have from where the farmers can directly know their orders. So it serves both the purpose, it helps sustainable farming and at the same time it is a pure entrepreneurship from the absolute bottom of the pyramid.

IMI Konnect: *Can you elaborate on the revenue model of 'Amar Khamar'?*

SC: Amar Khamar is a social enterprise. The revenue model solely lies on the fact that when 1Kg rice is sold, the farmers know the exact price break-up. As a facilitating platform, Amar Khamar receives a small percentage of the price as a compensation to its expenses.

IMI Konnect: *Do you have any plan to collaborate with major agri-retailers?*

SC: No plans for such collaboration as it does not match with our working philosophy. We are trying to give face to the farmers and their products. If you buy from Amar Khamar, you can see the farmer from whom you are buying with all other relevant details. Today the agrarian community remains backward but we have to go

back to them. We are creating a node in North Bengal with a Women Cooperative who are producing superior quality spices, mushrooms, etc. We are also extending to the Eastern part of West Bengal. So gradually we are in the process of making a network of farmer-managed online market where every node has the responsibility that every farmer knows the entire price construction. Thus we strive to ensure complete transparency and fair mechanism of price settlement.

IMI Konnect: *Do you have any storage facility as storage is a critical aspect of farming?*

SC: No, we have a totally different model where farmers have to own his or her own inventory and Amar Khamar do not manage inventory on their behalf. The moment an order is placed by someone from somewhere the system searches for the product which we group under self-help group or farmers' interest group. It will then search the cumulative sell of each group of that particular product in the market. Then it will go to the lowest selling group. Then it will go to the farmer whose sell is the lowest in that group. So we try to make the selling an even process across the farming community by distributing the prospective customers. Thus it is a distributive model and not an accumulative model. At times when the product is coming from North Bengal or some other far away places, we offer them a transit storage point so that they can overcome their locational disadvantage. On the other hand, if a farmer wants to remove any product from the

list of the digital platform of Amar Khamar he or she is free to do so.

IMI Konnect: *How many farmers are associated with Amar Khamar approximately?*

SC: 280 farmers in total are working with Amar Khamar at present. A number of Self Help Groups are also actively associated with our organization. The number of such Self Help Groups are 48.

IMI Konnect: *Why did you choose Sundarbans? What was special about it?*

SC: One reason behind choosing Sundarbans was that we were involved in developing 'a knowledge centre' where most of the farmers were women, since the last 4-5 years approximately. We had witnessed the hardship and challenges faced by them because of the river, the isolated location and other geographical constraints. Despite these obstacles, the Sundarbans also offer huge potential with its vastly available fertile land and natural competitive advantage on agrarian products. However, logistics is a major problem as our products have to be transported through various islands like Sandeshkhali, Dhamakhali and Hingalganj, increasing the transportation cost as well. Hence the primary reason of selecting the Sundarbans was the challenge and the secondary reason was the acquaintance and discussions with the local people along with the determination that we can be change-makers.

IMI Konnect: *Amar Khamar sells only traditional products. Do you have any plan to venture into processed food market?*

SC: Very soon Amar Khamar is going to come up with newer products on its digital shelf. We are trying to set up a commercial processing unit owned by the farmers and value added products like Bori, Chire, Muri along with Dheki Chata Chal (hand-pounded rice) are on the offing. Soon we are going to offer organic vegetables on our website. We are also planning to add honey which is largely available in the Sundarbans. We are going to take help from outside experts to make things work. So from January 2019, the store of Amar Khamar will be fuller with more farmers offering more products from different corners of West Bengal.

IMI Konnect: *What is your take on the future of start-ups in India?*

SC: The overall scenario on start-ups is very encouraging I would say. In Calcutta and around India, you can feel a positive vibe and increase in entrepreneurial spirit of people. There is an increasing trend of fresh graduates from leading colleges trying their hands in start-ups as they are eager to have hands-on experience of running a start-up.