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MASTERS' UNION × SEWA LUCKNOW

Post-Read

Trust, Craft, and Four Decades of Empowering Women Artisans

Why This Immersion Matters

Most organisations that survive four decades do so by systematising themselves until the founder becomes optional. SEWA Lucknow has done something rarer: it has grown to over 7,500 members while the relationships at its core, between its founder and the women she works with, remain as personal as they were in 1984. Meeting Runa ma'am gave students a rare vantage point on what that actually looks like in practice, and why it is so hard to replicate.

Breaking the Middleman's Hold: About SEWA Lucknow

SEWA Lucknow, formally the Self Employed Women's Association, Lucknow, is an autonomous association of chikan artisans registered in February 1984 under the Societies Registration Act. It exists because of a 1979 study by UNICEF and Literacy House, Lucknow, which found that women and children working in Lucknow's chikankari industry were more severely exploited than in any other craft in the state's unorganised sector. The organisation's founding purpose was to break the hold middlemen held over artisans' wages by building a production system that gave women direct access to markets, higher pay, and a measure of control over their own work.

That purpose still shapes what SEWA does today: training members in purchase, production, management, marketing, and accounting; upgrading craft skills to improve the quality and range of their embroidery; and building a collective platform strong enough for artisans to negotiate wages rather than accept whatever a trader offers. The organisation is also part of the Ambedkar Hastashilp Vikas Yojana, the Ministry of Textiles' scheme for artisan development, connecting it to a wider national effort to protect India's craft economy.

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From a Health Camp to a Movement: Who Runa Banerjee Is

Runa Banerjee was born in Lucknow in 1950 and completed a Master's degree in History at the University of Lucknow. Long before SEWA existed, she was already doing grassroots work, educating women and children in her locality. The turning point came in 1979, when she organised a health camp for the poor and a woman she was treating told her, in effect, that medicine meant little without food to go with it. That moment redirected her from welfare work toward building sustainable livelihoods instead.

She and a friend, Sehba Hussain, first started a single-teacher school for artisans' children charging a nominal fee, which would later grow into SEWA's Montessori school. In 1984, prompted by an artisan asking her directly for work, she launched a mission called "Earn While You Learn" with 31 women, renting a single room for the purpose. That group has since grown to more than 7,500 members, with an estimated 8,000 women trained by the organisation over the years. Her work has been recognised nationally: she received the Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian honour, in 2007, and was one of the 1,000 women collectively nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 as part of the PeaceWomen Across the Globe initiative. She has also been credited with helping riot-affected women in Gujarat take up chikankari as a livelihood after 2002.

What the Session Was Built Around: Meeting Runa Ma'am

None of that history fully prepared students for what it was like to actually sit with her. What stood out most was her warmth and humour, and the ease and empathy with which she spoke about people, qualities that made the session feel personal rather than like a scripted institutional visit. Her stories, about supporting women artisans, running the school, and connecting individual children directly with people willing to fund their education, showed something a case study cannot fully convey: that building an organisation like SEWA has meant earning people's trust and staying involved in their lives over decades, not years. Her belief that the world is quietly full of good people helping others, offered without cynicism after forty years in this work, was one of the more striking things students heard all immersion.

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A Lifetime Built on Trust

It is worth sitting with what it actually takes to sustain an organisation this way for four decades. SEWA's model was never just a business plan, it was built room by room and relationship by relationship, starting with 31 women and a rented space costing seventy-five rupees a month. The credibility that now brings national recognition and government partnership was earned the slow way, through decades of showing up for the same community. For students thinking about building anything of their own, this is a rarely taught lesson: trust compounds, but only over a timescale most business plans do not account for.

A Moment of Vulnerability

At one point, Runa ma'am briefly shared her own experience with cancer. It was a quiet moment, and a deeply moving one, a reminder that a person can carry real difficulty of their own while still bringing warmth and generosity to everyone around them. It left students with a simple but easily forgotten truth: nobody fully knows what another person is carrying, even someone whose presence feels as open and giving as hers did.

What Students Take Away

Students left the session with immense respect for Runa ma'am, and with a good deal to reflect on about the kind of entrepreneur, and the kind of person, they want to become. Understanding SEWA through the relationships behind it, rather than only through its numbers, was the point: an organisation's impact is real, but it is the people who built and sustained it, one relationship at a time, who make that impact possible.

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Questions Worth Sitting With

- Ms Runa Banerjee redirected her work after a single conversation in 1979. What would it take for a student building something new to stay that responsive to what the people they serve are actually telling them?
- SEWA's growth, from 31 members to over 7,500, took four decades. What parts of that timeline could realistically be compressed, and what parts probably should not be?
- Trust-based, relationship-led growth is difficult to scale by its nature. Is that a limitation of SEWA's model, or the reason it has lasted this long?

Glossary

SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association)	An organisation of self-employed women workers built to help them secure fair pay and direct market access, bypassing exploitative middlemen. SEWA Lucknow is its Lucknow-based chapter, focused on chikankari artisans.
Chikankari	A traditional hand-embroidery craft associated with Lucknow, believed to have flourished under the patronage of the Nawabs of Awadh, involving dozens of distinct stitch techniques.
Middleman system	An intermediary layer between artisans and the market that historically captured most of the value of artisans' work, leaving the artisans themselves underpaid.
Ambedkar Hastashilp Vikas Yojana (AHVY)	A Ministry of Textiles scheme supporting the development and welfare of India's traditional artisan communities.
Padma Shri	India's fourth-highest civilian award, given for distinguished contribution in any field, including social work.
Societies Registration Act	The legal framework under which nonprofit associations like SEWA Lucknow are formally registered in India.

Source: [SEWA Lucknow](#)