



Tropentag, September 17-19, 2013, Stuttgart-Hohenheim
“Agricultural development within the rural-urban continuum”

Himalaya Nettle in Uttarakhand – Reflections on a Promising Business in Rural India

BÄRBEL HÖGNER

University Frankfurt am Main, Ethnology, Germany

Abstract

In large parts of Uttarakhand (India) the rural economy depends on checks sent home by villagers who left in search for a better future in the city. With the ambition to preserve local cultures as well as to keep the huge Himalayan forest areas populated, the state government developed various schemes in the last years to enhance “business”-opportunities for the mountain farmers.

This paper describes one of the projects initiated in 2007: The production of textiles made from wild nettle. In consultancy with GIZ’s regional programme for “Rural Economic Development”, the value chain concept was implemented. State institutions and NGOs choose women of the Bhotia tribe as ideal weavers for the experiment since their knowledge out of a historical trading with wool seemed to ensure the envisioned outcome of the enterprise. The women were trained for a maximum participation within the nettle’s value chain: From collecting and breaking the fiber to washing, drying as well as spinning and weaving. As a first step towards the professionalisation GIZ recently sponsored a motor-operated carding machine.

Nevertheless selling the final products of pure cloth and simple scarfs resulted difficult. Though of precious quality regarding the nettle’s natural and handmade touch and causing curiosity among potential clients, the Indian market turned out “not to be ready” for the fiber. International customers claimed the results to be “interesting, but too scratchy”. In the light of disappointment among the producers who felt overloaded with the extensive work process, the problem of “marketing” was diagnosed as the final problem to be solved in the value chain. Research in design to cater for urban tastes was announced as a solution.

Seen from an anthropological perspective the focus on elite conceptions of trade appears little fruitful. Using this case of nettle as an example, I will argue that for a truly successful “business”-approach an understanding of the rural work culture among the actors at the initial stage of any value chain is necessary. Studying and acknowledging conventional economic practices is a crucial step towards an effective implementation of the concept.

Keywords: Anthropology, India, natural fiber, rural development, value chain concept