



RASHMI BHARTI

Recipient of the Award for Application of Science and Technology for Rural Development - 2024

Born: February 11, 1967

Rashmi Bharti has been working in the field of rural development for the past 33 years in India, in the states of Uttarakhand and Orissa. She has worked in the field of alternative education, community health, renewable energy, natural resource management, strategic planning, fund raising and creation of sustainable livelihoods in remote rural areas through revival of traditional craft.

The Genesis: Rashmi grew up in Delhi with a keen interest in art, philosophy, maths and science that was nurtured by her parents and teachers. She is an artist by practice and completed her graduation in Mathematics and Science from Delhi University.

In search of a meaningful life, Rashmi and her husband, Rajnish moved to the Himalayas in 1991 to live in this beautiful region, while working with rural communities. The following years took them to the jungles of Orissa and then back to Delhi where they met Bunker Roy who became their mentor. Rashmi Bharti worked with Roy with the network organization of Tilonia and in 1996 she was able to follow their dream of living and working in the Himalayas.

A Milestone: It was in 1999 that Rashmi and Rajnish co-founded Avani that is based at Tripuradevi, a small village in Pithoragarh district, Uttarakhand. Avani completes 25 years in 2024 - a milestone. Avani has been working with the creation of livelihood opportunities through development and dissemination of appropriate technology, revival and preservation of traditional handloom skills and conservation of biodiversity and natural resources.

Their first initiative involved the installation of 3000 solar lights in 25 unelectrified villages. To enable the poorest of the poor families to access technology, Rashmi Bharti decided to start an income generation activity based on the traditional craft of hand spinning and hand weaving of Tibetan sheep wool with the Shauka community. An enterprise that began with 20 families of Saukyura village grew into a self-sustaining enterprise benefiting 2200 producers in 64 villages pre COVID. This enterprise has generated almost Rs. 6 crores as cash income for local youth including producers and managers of the program.

Producer Owned Cooperative: Rashmi has been the Founder and Chairperson of the producer owned cooperative, Kumaon Earthcraft Self Reliant Cooperative, since 2005. Both Avani and Earthcraft are based out of a small village in the Pithoragarh district called Tripuradevi. The production is decentralized and ensures that work reaches remote villages of the area empowering socially vulnerable women and school drop out young girls.

The brand AVANI produces and markets exquisite, high quality, naturally dyed handlooms in silk, linen and wool, natural dye powders and natural crayons and lifestyle products. The products are eco-friendly, fair trade, zero waste and with a low carbon footprint.

The adverse impact of synthetically produced dyes on the soil and water pollution as well human health is well documented. Their choice of using only natural dyes was to protect the fragile eco system in the Himalayas while creating a stable source of income locally.

Natural dyeing is both a science and an art. It requires precision and practice for replication. They are using plant matter to produce color. The quality of water, the raw material and the dyeing conditions all impact the resultant color.

Small and marginal farmers are cultivating and collecting natural dyes leading to increased forest cover, wastelands reclamation, prevention of soil and water pollution while creating a beautiful sustainable product. Primarily, they collect myrobalan, marigold, pomegranate, eupatorium and walnut locally. Eupatorium is also an invasive species of the region and is now being used to extract color. This has led to its removal from the forest cover, thereby linking economy and conservation.

Demystifying Science: Rashmi Bharti has demystified the science behind natural dye cultivation, processing and the application. In this journey many rural women and men have been trained in the science of natural dyeing and its application on textiles, art supplies, wood stains, printing paste and wall paints. This story of circularity and sustainability is now being taken to other parts of the country where small farmers are growing natural dyes as a source of supplementary cash income and more importantly, they become direct actors to impact climate change.

Rashmi Bharti’s innovative work in natural dyes, connecting farmers, color and climate change has brought her many accolades. She was one of the three global finalists for the St Andrews Prize for Environment in 2022, where she received the runner up award for her work with Natural Dyes. Her products have been showcased at the Ethical Fashion Show Paris and the Ethical Fashion Forum, London.

Her Belief: Rashmi Bharti believes that all of us have a spark, that it just needs the right circumstances to ignite it into a flame of self-expression and self-discovery, which is something she took to heart from the lessons learnt from the people who inspired her. This is how local action contributes to global change. Rashmi Bharti believes strongly in “Leaving this Earth a little more beautiful than we found it.”

Highlights:

It took many years to train a group of rural youth who have now become the master trainers in natural dyeing of textiles. They have also been taught to make extracts and pigments.

Avani works in 108 villages and hamlets reaching more than 20,000 people till today. A group of rural scientists are now providing training to other rural youth across the country to grow, process and color with natural dyes.

Rashmi Bharti pioneered the cultivation and extraction of indigo pigment from three-altitude-specific varieties of indigo in the Central Himalayas, in India and has also innovated 100% beeswax crayons with natural plant-based colorants.

Awards & Recognitions:

2018 : Nari Shakti Award
2013 : T N Khoshoo Award for Conservation and Livelihoods
2011 : IMC Ladies' Wing Jankidevi Bajaj Pursakar for Women Rural Entrepreneurship
2006 & 2007 : UNESCO Seal of Excellence

Contact details:

Rashmi Bharti
Co-Founder & Founding Secretary, Avani Society
Tripuradevi PO, Via Berinag,
District Pithoragarh - 262531
Uttarakhand, India
M: +919411105252
E: rashmibharti@gmail.com; rashmi@avani-kumaon.org
W: www.avani-kumaon.org

