

When Business and Social Missions Align

Innovations Case Commentary:
Bareeze and CARE Foundation Pakistan

Quick: What's your favorite Pakistani brand?

Unless you're from the Southeast Asian country, chances are nothing will come to mind. More than retail, commerce, and entrepreneurship, Pakistan's global trademark recently has been tragedy. Seema Aziz, the cofounder of the Lahore-based fashion house and textile producer Bareeze, has spent the past two and a half decades trying to change that.

Since 1985, Aziz has led the growth of an internationally recognized company that designs and produces high-quality fabrics for women, men, teens, and children. In so doing, Aziz has inspired Pakistani entrepreneurs eager to replicate her quality and socially conscious business model and, thereby, her story. Interestingly, as recounted in her case for this issue of *Innovations*, Aziz's story is one that goes beyond textiles and international markets. At the same time that Aziz built Bareeze, she founded and grew CARE Foundation Pakistan (Cooperation for Advancement, Rehabilitation and Education, not related to CARE in the USA), a nonprofit organization that has set up more than 200 schools throughout Pakistan. The CARE Foundation is one of Pakistan's foremost public service organizations, just as Bareeze is one of its foremost brands. Together, the two ventures represent a 21st-century entrepreneurial template that balances the importance of a global focus and national brand with "giving back" to local communities and building national pride.

Creating the First Internationally Recognized Pakistani Brand

In Pakistan as in many emerging markets in the 1980s and 1990s, foreign anything had a strong appeal—foreign movies, snacks, electronics, cars, and, especially, clothing. Aziz points out that, for decades, smuggled foreign fabric found a ready market in Pakistan, despite its high cost relative to domestically produced goods.

Elmira Bayrasli writes and works on economic development issues. She blogs for Forbes and is a project leader for World Policy Journal.

When Aziz's father acquired a Swiss embroidery machine in the mid-1980s with the intention of producing fabrics incorporating European-quality needlework, she and her brother decided to try to use the machines to produce European-quality products for the domestic market.

From the outset Aziz and her brother focused on the business of building a national brand for Pakistan. Without any formal design training and only the embroidery machines inherited from their father, they committed to producing designs that would proudly boast a "Made in Pakistan" label. "You're never going to manage unless you sell it with a 'Made in France' stamp on it," one shopkeeper at Lahore's foreign goods market, Shadman, told her when she brought in her samples. Aziz was determined to make it through quality. The challenge was that, even to Pakistanis at the time, "Quality from Pakistan" was seen as an oxymoron.

Changing that perception was not easy. When Bareeze brought high-quality, domestically produced textiles to market—products completely different from the low-grade output of other Pakistani textile companies at the time—some buyers even doubted they were really local. "We built a reputation as a shop that sells imported fabric and calls it Pakistani," she told me. "I would have to show them the designs and carefully explain the process before they'd believe it to be Pakistani and then exclaim, 'Oh! Then it's too expensive!' They were willing to pay any price for foreign manufactured fabric but reluctant to pay for a Pakistani product of the same quality." Though Aziz and her brother managed to turn Bareeze into one of Pakistan's most widely admired retailers by the mid-1990s, she had to go beyond the normal parameters. Aziz had to shift perceptions, which she knew wouldn't happen overnight.

Sitting across from her large wooden desk, which was neatly kept except for a pincushion, calculator, and Blackberry scattered in the center, Aziz recounted to me on a visit two years ago her focus on constant improvement: "The concept of a chain or brand did not exist in Pakistan when my brother and I launched Bareeze." Nor were there businesses. "Business owners would sit in their own shops and sell the products themselves." In order to manage their brand, Aziz and her brother made every store look exactly the same as the original. Additionally, they trained all the employees and documented all procedures and rules, creating a standards manual. "People initially did not always want to go by these rules, and we ended up having to manage a lot of franchises ourselves," she said. With determination, Aziz gradually built brand awareness and, more importantly, trust.

"Fashion," she said, "is a fast moving world. You can't sit back on your laurels and say 'we're very good now.'" That she doesn't sit back or accept "good" easily was evident from the rapid pace of her speech that rarely allowed her to complete her sentences. It is also evident in the equal effort she pours into CARE Pakistan.

Internal strengthening

Improvement was a big reason Aziz launched CARE Pakistan in 1988, following floods near her hometown, Lahore. "Two, or was it three, of us went out to help

with food and water,” Aziz said about going into the affected areas back then. “At that time it was not fashionable to go.” She and her companions quickly realized that food and water were being streamed in through various relief agencies, but no one was focused on the homelessness situation. Aziz identified a handful of families who had lost homes and promised to help them rebuild their lives.

In doing so, she received a sobering lesson in the lives of Pakistani’s poor. “Hundreds of dirty, half-naked children with runny noses and matted hair ran after me every day,” Aziz said. “Why do these children follow me around?” she asked one of the villagers. “What should they do?” came the reply. It was then that Aziz realized the village had no school. She set out to build one. “The biggest difference between me and those villagers was that I was educated and they were not,” she said. That was not something she could live with. Hence, CARE Pakistan was born.

Aziz intended CARE Pakistan to be a vehicle to create “equality of opportunity.” As such, she structured the non-profit organization to build and operate schools with community engagement. Though each child would be given uniforms and school supplies, they would be charged a small fee of 10 rupees, or 11 U.S. cents. “I did not want any child to grow up thinking that he/she was educated on charity,” Aziz once told a reporter, “because in CARE...we firmly believe that it is their right and our duty.” She also believes it is her duty to oversee the quality of teaching and materials being used in “her” classrooms. “I won’t allow anyone to teach in my class unless I have seen the lecture first.”

CARE Pakistan’s first school opened its doors in 1991 with 250 students using Aziz’s personal funds. The following year, 450 enrolled, and demand for other buildings grew. In two years, Aziz raised money by appealing to friends and anyone she came across to open ten more schools in nearby villages. A few years after that, she raised funds for 20 more. It was then that she channeled 10 percent of Bareeze’s profits to support CARE Pakistan. That helped provide her nonprofit with a stable revenue stream. It also helped provide a model for other Pakistani entrepreneurs eager to start businesses but also to “give back” to their country. It is a model that is not waiting for Pakistan to improve; it is bearing the responsibility to improve Pakistan.

Aziz, like many in Pakistan, recognizes the importance of building community, not just enterprise. Community is customer base. It is also human capital. Nurturing Pakistani talent to fill the jobs that innovators like Seema Aziz create is critical. CARE Pakistan is working to create a much-needed alternative narrative to the tragic cycle of insecurity and failure that has plagued Pakistan for decades.

The government itself has recognized that entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs like Aziz can play a vital role in providing vitally needed services. In 1998, Lahore’s municipality asked Aziz to take over their schools. Despite the ensuing bureaucracy and resistance from the Lahore teacher unions, she took over ten and then, only when she felt she could guarantee a quality education, took on more. Today, CARE Foundation educates over 150,000 students—one half of one percent of all school-age Pakistani children, not a large number in a country of 180 million

people.

Still, Aziz is not impressed. “In the context of this country, it (150,000) is not large enough,” she said. Sixty percent of Pakistan’s population is under the age of 25; little over half of that population is literate. According to the OECD, only 6 percent of Pakistanis graduate from college. Aziz is ready to do more, but says she needs more resources, both in human and financial capital, to deliver the quality education she believes Pakistan’s children deserve.

“The children are ours, the country is ours,” she says. “It is the duty of a society, not a single person or entity, to look after its people.”