

Award winning woman entrepreneur takes Indian creativity to the world

Indo-Singapore Business and Social Forum 2018 has awarded EPCH member exporter, Ms. Neetu Singh as one of Asia's greatest leaders and her firm, Sini Designs among Asia's Greatest Brands for 2017. Pricewaterhouse Coopers and United Research Services selected her after a Pan Asia survey. She was bestowed with this award at Marina Bay Sands, Singapore on 29th January 2018. She has won a State Award for being a Master crafts person in innovative jewellery and has been awarded for her entrepreneurship by Network 7 Media Group in 2017. But for fashion jewellery and textile accessories



Ms. Neetu Singh with her recent award at the Indo-Singapore Business and Social Forum 2018; and at her exhibitor stall at IHGF Delhi Fair-Spring 2018

designer, Neetu Singh, this is only a significant milestone in her eventful journey that started from a small town in Bihar, India. Her university education including a Masters in Physics brought her to Delhi after which her love for nature and its limitless inspiration, coupled with a desire to do something for women artisans, initiated her into the creative field.

Today, her persona and creativity are in perfect alignment with her work at Sini Designs that makes fashion jewellery, stoles, scarves, shawls, ponchos,

beach wear and apparel for the domestic market (Kolkata and Mumbai) as well as export markets in USA, Spain, Australia and UK. The raw material base comprises wool and modal; wood, recycled horn & bone, jute, shells, leather, and other jewellery components. She shared that she was happy with the business at the fair. Among new lines this time she introduced three different ranges in stoles and scarves that are made using three different techniques. One is hand painted, made by college going girls working with her NGO-Aastha Foundation; the other too is made by hand using foil printing, making the end product very soft; then there is a tie and dye technique using natural colourants like turmeric, coffee, tea and alta (an Indian traditional and therapeutic liquid in shades of pink and red, used for beautifying feet).

It all began in 2005 when Ms. Singh started an NGO called "Aastha Foundation" with an aim to "uplift, train and empower" poor women artisans. "I train them myself", she said adding that she has recently trained around 50 college going girls. She emphasised that the amazing skills of the artisans result in creating world class designs in quality that is in

accordance to international standards. Sini was made a brand in 2011 for showcasing excellent jewellery and accessories to apparel. Exports started in 2011. "For me, my journey of running an NGO and a private limited company is like venturing into unexplored terrains. Coming from a service class family, I have the privilege of being a first generation entrepreneur. I consider it as my biggest achievement. And using this as a means to do something for under privileged women doubles the joy," she concludes.

Desert Flower

Barmer - the home of Appliqué Embroidery



Team EPB in conversation with Mrs. Ruma Devi, President, Gramin Vikas evam Chetna Sansthan (GVCS)-a Fair Trade entity that with EPCH's hand-holding initiatives and provision of tools is growing and uplifting applique artisans from Rajasthan's Barmer district.



We will scale greater heights with such continued guidance and support from Export Promotion Council for Handicrafts (EPCH) for skill development & training as well as marketing guidance, besides offering artisans the platform of international trade fairs to connect directly with overseas buyers.

youngsters are seeking alternate professions. Ms. Ruma Devi, President of the NGO is fondly called 'didi' or big sister by the artisans and she has touched and changed many lives. Today, many artisans from Barmer are offered marketing platforms like EPCH's IHGF Delhi Fair to showcase their crafts and get market exposure.

Barmer, in Western Rajasthan, is a desert town located 153 km from Jaisalmer. Besides being a town with historical sites, Barmer, in a rugged desert terrain, is dotted with small villages around it where most of the populace lives in mud-houses that seem to be effortlessly brightened with typical local folk motifs. And this is where the desert flower blooms in the form of intricate needlecraft carried out by its colourfully attired, immensely skilled people who continue to carry out an ancient craft heritage and their clan's legacy.

Cut work, patch work, mirror work and typical Rajasthani folk motifs are common in this 98% hand labored work with the sewing machine restricted to stitching and fortifying corners / borders of the products. This craft is not taught in institutions but women in the Barmer area just know it just like a "must-learn" recipe in their households. Gradually, this was used to earn livelihood. Over a period of time, women received training to use their craft skills to make commercially viable products, customised for varied markets. The process not only made them earn a decent livelihood from the comfort of their traditional confines but built their confidence and empowered them. Encouraged, they are inspiring their younger generations to continue this craft tradition for gainful employment at a time when many

GVCS, a women oriented social enterprise registered in 1998 and connected with EPCH since 2012, strives to rectify aspects of the value chain that discourage women to continue a tradition and to create a society void of exploitation and deprivation. Significant support came with the Ministry of Textile's Comprehensive Handicrafts Cluster Development Scheme for the Jodhpur Mega Cluster.

Ms. Ruma Devi shared, "EPCH that has been a real support for us." GVCS is actively engaged with 11,000 artisans-7000 applique specialists and 4000 adept at embroidery. The prevalent embroidery techniques in this area are - soof, pakka, kambiri, kharak, kachcha and sindhi. "We also make products in Ajrak (a traditional block printing method native to Rajasthan) but only a couple of families are left that practice this art form," added Ms. Ruma Devi and informed that besides participating in trade shows they have also showcased products in fashion shows. She further shared about various training and skill development programs being organised by EPCH.

There have been many training programs in Barmer and hundreds of GVCS artisans benefited. EPCH's disbursement of money and tools is exemplary she said - in training of hand embroidery each participant was given a kit which included cash and sewing machine. Ms. Ruma Devi said, "for quite some



time we had been using only geometric designs but now have introduced new designs in garments which are being introduced by designers. EPCH had provided us designers to us. It is wonderful to get such space in this Fair.”

Talking about future plans for GVCS, Ms. Ruma Devi says, “soon we are going to set up a production facility of our own and the expectations are really high. Since we have been doing good, our target is to exceed the 20,000 artisan

numbers. Artisans used to work from their homes but now there are centers in which biometric systems are being used so they work for at least 6 hrs. so in a way that it gives a sense of formal employment and their quality of work and efficiency, both have gone up. Earlier artisans were only getting a few hundred Rupees for their work but now they can manage to earn enough to support their livelihoods and educate their children.■



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E-mails: njain@indianethoscompliance.com, arun@indianethoscompliance.com