

FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS POWERING SELF-RELIANT INDIA THROUGH INNOVATION

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ABSTRACT

A nation cannot become self-reliant unless its female population is empowered. Women play an essential role in the development of a society and economy. Countries develop and become better when more of their females are educated, and when this education is used for the greater good of the nation. India is leaping ahead of most other nations in terms of infrastructure and opportunities, but the mindsets also need to change at the same pace. If India wants to attain the self-reliant tag in a true sense, the most viable option is to empower women economically and to integrate them with the developmental goals of the nation and campaigns such as Atma Nirbhar Bharat. But, India's growth has not percolated into the development of women entrepreneurship. Women in India only account for mere six per cent of mass entrepreneurs. Out of these, only 27 per cent of business women register annual revenue of more than Rs 10 lakh. Furthermore, they contribute only three point zero nine per cent of the total industrial output in India. At the macro level, growth of women owned enterprises in India remains restricted. Viewing this, India's growth story can be considered as incomplete. Hence, for the inclusion of women, it is mandatory to understand the current situations and challenges of women entrepreneurs. Only then we will have to take appropriate actions, consequences of which should reach every aspiring woman entrepreneur at grass-root level.

Keywords: Entrepreneur, Empowerment, Women, Development, Economic, Self-Reliant

INTRODUCTION

Financial literacy, technology awareness, digital literacy and nurturing of an entrepreneurial mindset are some of the key areas of support for all categories of women entrepreneurs. If efforts are made to enable growth are mapped to varying needs of the segment, it can boost up the growth trajectory of India. According to the apex body, there can be 31.5 million women-owned enterprises by 2030, if efforts in this area are accelerated. If more women took up entrepreneurship, around 150 to 170 million jobs can be created within this time frame. Also if more women participated in the workforce, it will increase India's GDP by 16 to 60 per cent by 2025. There still are numerous women entrepreneurs who are contributing actively and paving India's way for self-reliance in their own ways. There are mentioned stories of some courageous women entrepreneurs who are contributing to economy by creating numerous jobs and hence are making country self-reliant.

1. BHUVANESHWARI SESHACHALAM- MANUFACTURING OPPORTUNITIES IN FORM OF DIAPERS

Bhuvaneshwari Seshachalam, Founder, Bouncing Peaches, maker of modern cloth diapers must have never imagined that even a single diaper can generate numerous forms of employment in the entire value chain. The chain of employment opportunities that Bouncing Peaches agitates is what makes every sale valuable. When a diaper is bought by a customer, the conscious choice that they make helps entire value chain which includes, labour workforce employed by fabric manufacturers, digital printing team, laminating team, small traders, sewing masters, quality analysts, packaging and delivery team etc. It is an entire chain of Indians generating employment for themselves without waiting for anyone.



Being a women entrepreneur, Sheshachalam strongly advocates the self-reliant movement. She feels that a life of self-respect and self-worth is closely inter-twined with financial independence of any individual. In these changing times, it is the equal responsibility of women to identify ways to be self-reliant while balancing a family. Her entrepreneurial journey began with a curiosity that turned into a business idea. When she was pregnant with her first baby; Bouncing Peaches started germinating in the mind of a first time mother. A prospective mother then learned few tips and tricks of motherhood from various online forums.

It was here, she stumbled upon a new kind of diapers that was being used outside India. These diapers made with modern cloth are neither inconvenient as traditional cloth diapers nor expensive as the disposables. She then extensively used those imported diapers and tested them on her baby for a year. When her word of mouth spread, she started sourcing and sharing these diapers with other people also. The diapers made with fabric technology were new and features never failed to impress new parents. After two years of research and comparing 35 odd international brands, Bouncing Peaches launched their signature brand Peach PERFECT customized to work overnight, trim with gentle elastics and proudly 'Made in India'. In less than three months post launch, the sales target of six months was met. It left the company stock out and hustling to gear up for the next spell of manufacturing. Incorporated in 2018, the startup has received genuine mentoring support from non-profit organizations like GAME and Cherie Blair Foundation for women in which helping up each other is the primary objective. Today, starting with bootstrap funding, Bouncing Peaches has reached to Rs 50 lakh yearly turnover and is catering to the needs of parents by manufacturing sensible diapering solutions.

2. POONAM GARG- EMPOWERING PEOPLE THROUGH ART

Till few years back, Poonam Garg, a resident of Bengaluru was living a comfortable life with a routine day job. Her dreams then took her towards entrepreneurship and she turned her passion into a full-fledged business. Reminiscing the advent of her journey, Poonam says, "I quit the safety and comfort of my job with Madura Coats to nurture my passion, which was fabric handicrafts. I started my journey by conducting craft workshops. Very soon, I realized an urgent need to create craft products that are both practical and functional for the artist community and I made canvas as my first medium." Today, her business, canvas2craft is a setup which provides a platform to artists and craftsmen to create useful products.

Poonam told Canvas2craft is her dream entrepreneurial venture in which she makes canvas pouches, potlis, purses, and home décor items for her customers to showcase creative skills of artisans in the form of painting and thread art. The single biggest inspiration has been the desire to use her skills and creativity to create something unique and commercially successful product.



According to Garg, it is impossible for any community, society or country to be self-reliant without empowering its women who are able to make a living for themselves. She says, "Self-reliance is the solution of most of the ills plaguing our women. These issues primarily are domestic violence, poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, mental and physical health issues." Therefore, her platform is obliged to provide employment to skilled women. "My platform is promoting Indian art through handicraft. Besides that, we are empowering talented women by providing them employment, and by helping them in overcoming language and social barriers. Such products are used as return gifts on various social events," she informs. Asking about challenges, she tells us that one of the constraints in selling the artifacts is their uniqueness. The products are meant for artists, craftsmen, and connoisseurs of art but usually don't hold a mass appeal. Lot of things and processes in the industry are not streamlined. In addition to this, corona virus lockdown has also cut down the revenue by one-third. Despite pandemic's impact on the business, Garg is planning to expand her business through major e-commerce portals. Talking about her plans she informs, "Currently, I am selling though my website www.canvas2craft.com. In next three months, my plan is to make products available on few major e-commerce websites. I am also working on research and development to add to my product range." Till now Garg's business is getting good support from couple of NGOs who

provide vocational training to women in this field. "My experience of working with NGOs is limited to this. Recently, Global Alliance for Mass Entrepreneurship has agreed to support me by providing mentorship," she adds.

3. PRIYANKA KAUSHIK- DEVELOPING A SELF-RELIANT SILK ROUTE

An entrepreneur is a person who makes a difference by creating value using their instincts and making money as a result of it. Now, when the country needs more job creators, women have much important role to play as significant stakeholders in the collective population.

With years of extensive work experience in India's fashion industry, Priyanka Kaushik founder of Noi Mohi is contributing in making a self-reliant India by empowering weaving community in the north-eastern states of India.

Significant data shows that Assam accounts for almost forty three per cent of the rural weaver households present in the country today. This comprises of 10.9 lakh weavers followed by 3.4 lakh weavers in West Bengal and 2.1 lakh weavers in Manipur. However, as an industry they are dealing with many challenges and raw material price rise is one of major hurdle among them.

Kaushik says, "This is a good reason for us to focus and pull all our resources in the right direction and emerge as leaders in sustainability and practice the slow yet gradual movement. It is especially important now more than ever when signs of unprecedented changes are inevitable.



According to the latest census, 63.5 per cent weavers in India are women; 66.3 per cent earn less than Rs 5000; 23.3 per cent have bank accounts; and just 3.3 per cent are insured. Few less than that are aware of such insurance policies. Considering these facts, Kaushik's firm is constantly working towards betterment for artisans' community.

"In a relatively short time, we have managed to organise a small group of artisans in rural Assam that have now bank accounts. This has integrated with technology in linking the backward and forward supply chains and domestic and international buyers and also increased income of our weavers and allied crafters by 15 per cent. We spend considerable amount of time engaging with our artisans on skill upgradation and development as well," she proclaims.

Kaushik's journey is a road to self-discovery which was ideated during Lakme Fashion Week 2012. She tells, "In the finale show, I experienced stillness amidst utter chaos and felt an urgent need to do more with my life. After working in IMG for several years, I became capable of running a Fashion Week with ease. I learned and got everything I needed from my job. Afterwards, new and more meaningful ambitions in life came to light."

With this discovery, Kaushik started working with Eri Silk also known as Ahimsa Silk. She recalls, "I became an ardent admirer of Eri silk over the years. This gave birth to Noi Mohi, an innate expression of my imagination. Noi means river and Mohi earth in Assamese. Hence, it is a clothing experience that is co-created with rural household handloom artisans of north-eastern India and nature alike,"

As every business faces challenges during early years of its inception, Noi Mohi also had a face-off with them. Kaushik was returning to her roots in Assam to work with women in the rural region. Hence, the major obstacle was an access to funding. She tells, "There are schemes that one may avail, but they don't come without challenges. Women have rarely been benefitted from schemes such as Mudra Shishu loans. Still, banks don't feel comfortable in giving loans to women entrepreneurs."

Secondly, there is lack of innovative solutions in terms of skill development and training programs. Thirdly, there is a need of smart buyers-seller platforms that can help in bridging the gap. She feels that if top entrepreneurial stalwarts from across the country volunteer as mentors specifically for women entrepreneurs in the rural sector, it will boost women entrepreneurship.

Today, world is moving to era of ethical consumerism which is substantially visible as commercial decisions are being made by fashion retailers across the globe to venture into slow fashion. This has opened new avenues for rural artisans. Noi Mohi works with rural household artisans and co-creates handloom products using Tat Xal (traditional looms), dyes and material found locally.

Going forward, the brand's goal is to provide livelihood to families of 100 artisans within two years. Also, the aim is to expand to 1,000 artisans families within 5 years. Another goal is to double the income of artisans, and allied craftsmen associated with Noi Mohi. Lastly, the brand wishes to create awareness and address fundamental issues of mindsets, social biases, and obstructions related to women.

4. ETASHEE BY AMNA ABBASI: A PLATFORM BASED ON CIRCULAR ECONOMY

A firm believer of circular economy, Amna Abbasi founded Etashee in 2014. She started it with an aim of using fashion for good. Talking to SME Futures, Abbasi elaborates about her platform, "Fashion changes more than once in a season. You could throw away or donate your old clothes. However making money out of it sounds like a best idea. Therefore, Etashee is all about repurposing old clothes or accessories."



Currently Etashee is focussed on buying and selling of pre-owned clothing and accessories for women. However, Abbasi's roadmap for the company includes making products for kids' and men's section too. She says, "My plan is to make a section available for kids and men too. Crossing the boundary and developing a robust marketplace is what Etashee looks for itself in a couple of years."

As a women entrepreneur there are many challenges that one faces in the field. Talking about her challenges she recalls, "The biggest challenge I faced during this journey is to create equilibrium between your instinct and what the numbers or data have to say about. I try not to get distracted by constantly assessing the situation and make the best call well in time."

Asking about the contribution of women entrepreneurs in self-reliant movement, she concludes, "Self-reliance is often mistakenly considered as doing everything yourself. It is rather about being financially independent. Women in India are dependent upon their male counterparts for their financial needs. Major portion of women self-reliance can come from education. I am certain change is in the air."

CONCLUSION

Concerning people longing to become a fashion entrepreneur, the paper may help to understand the challenges that a fashion entrepreneur may be confronted. In that sense, it may be beneficial to be aware of the challenges and at best be prepared to react according to that. The supportive concepts may be interesting and worth to approach. For current entrepreneurs, this review is an opportunity to look around, review experiences and compare the own experiences with the outcome of the paper. For universities and research institutes, it could be also useful to understand the challenges fashion entrepreneurs are faced and which factors could influence a company creation and for communities it may be of value to examine how a region can be restructured or redeveloped and how the creation of new firms and jobs can be supported.

Based on the findings the following conclusion can be drawn:

1. Business administration research in relation to fashion has to be increased and applied to the fashion industry.
2. The situation at fashion academic education institutions needs to be improved, entrepreneurship has to be seen as an integrated part.
3. Fashion design entrepreneurs have to be better prepared and supported in the prestart-up phase, in the start-up phase and in the growing phase.
5. It would be fruitful to strengthen the whole textile and apparel industry by making it possible for fashion entrepreneurs to gain ground and to achieve a sustained position in the fashion industry.

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