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Empowering creativity

“Art is a medium of both creation and recreation”. Truly said by renowned Chinese writer Lin Yutang, art is something through which we not only make artistic creations but are also at the same time recreating our true potential of hidden talent. And no one knows this better than Harish and Rashmi Closepet, founders of Itsy Bitsy, a hobby, arts and crafts store. It is a one-stop shop for hobby, arts and craft supplies for people from all walks of life. But what makes this popular arts and craft chain interesting and inspiring is that it began with a vision to empower women in rural parts of Karnataka. Despite having no background in arts, the Closepets saw value in arty delights in home while working for a Chinese import company in Singapore and were inspired to work with artisans back home in Karnataka. In an e-mail interaction with **Alen Paul**, the founders of Itsy Bitsy speak about their passion. Excerpts:

What reasons made you leave everything behind in Australia and come back to India to begin something new?

We moved to India from Australia in 2004. It was a difficult decision to make, but the drive to return to our homeland and do something for the country overpowered all other questions and challenges. While working with a Chinese export company in Singapore, we realised how much we appreciated, alongside foreign buyers, the artsy handicraft delights of India. The same was with Australia. Indian handmade products were highly appreciated there as well. We always wanted to move back to India at some point to set up a sustainable structure and work with rural women to empower them by creating enough opportunities.

What comes to your mind when it comes to defining the creative culture of arts and crafts in a cultural country like India?

India has always been a creatively-inclined country. We have a rich history of traditional art and crafts, which started ages ago. Every state in our



Harish and Rashmi Closepet, Co-Founders, Itsy Bitsy

country has a different art or handicraft form, which is unique and beautiful in its own way. The first things that come to our minds are the embroidery and *zardozi* art. These forms require immense patience, skill and training. We also believe the Mughals have had a huge influence in handicrafts, especially with beads work, block printing and the exquisite *Bidri* art. Interestingly, besides local skilled artisans, a lot of Indian homemakers have indulged in and even today, do handmade work like sequin art, sewing and stitching.

To what extent do you feel the women in both rural and urban areas have been empowered through creating handmade arts and craft products in India?

Firstly, the handicrafts industry and the handmade arts and crafts sector are two different spaces. They are generally viewed and understood as the same. Handicrafts industry is the second largest employer in the country (an estimated 7 million artisans are engaged in craft production to earn a livelihood), after agriculture. However, the handmade arts and crafts industry is still in its nascent stage in India and Itsy Bitsy is currently the market leader in this space. What we have done is create employment opportunities in villages and towns, where there was no other means of livelihood for women. We set up a structure that did not force rural women to leave their home towns and move to urban areas to have a

decent living. We realised that rural women were emotionally attached to their families and decided to create jobs for them in their own places. We strongly believe that with government's support and a separate bracket for GST for handmade arts and crafts industry, a huge percentage of rural and urban women can be empowered.

How can the design industry in India create the best social and sustainable opportunities for the rural India, especially for the youth?

Today, the design industry goes beyond creating something on a computer screen. It includes handicraft and handmade art and craft sector. Whether it's the art-themed luxury hotels and resorts in India, or the colourful embellishments made by Itsy Bitsy, art, craft and design are offering a new experience to all. The Indian handicraft and handmade products sector have a potential to double in the next five years. However, although Indian handicraft and handmade craft products are universally appreciated, the industry has received minimum support from the government and corporates in India. It becomes even more challenging to create employment opportunities in this space, especially for the younger generation, with digitisation and other lucrative options available. The industry needs to build an ecosystem of rural-urban partnership, re-invent and reinforce "Made in India" and empower young businessmen from urban areas to create jobs and sus-

tainable opportunities for their rural counterparts.

Every organisation faces big and small challenges when running such creative industrial chains. What challenges did you face while maintaining the growth of Itsy Bitsy?

We still remember those days when people would enter an Itsy Bitsy store and ask for bangles. The concept of an exclusive art and craft store was not readily accepted, and this was the biggest challenge then. Introducing a completely new retail format, taking it beyond traditional "behind-the-counter" stationery stores was definitely strenuous. The next roadblock was to understand customer demographics and to acquire the right customers. Then, as we started growing and opening more stores, we realised that our customers had to be educated on how to use the products. We conducted lots of free workshops in schools, apartments and stores, alongside tons of giveaways and contests. Creating an inspirational space for people to think outside the box and get lost in a creative world was the most challenging for us.

What opportunities have been created by this organisation for the empowerment of women?

Itsy Bitsy has nearly 2,000 rural women employed, directly or indirectly, across different facilities in Karnataka. It feels special to be able to impact and empower so many lives. Majority of the women are from lower income backgrounds and come with history of domestic violence and daunting pasts. They now work with us in the factories with a dream to provide for a better life and secure future for their children. They have an outlet to step out of their houses and socialize. They are not only financially independent but are also emotionally strong. Many of them have built their own houses too.

What kind of products do your various stores offer to the interested artistic customers who love the idea of decorating their homes

with art and craft pieces?

We retail more than 10,000 products across categories such as arts supplies, paper crafting, kids craft, sewing, home décor and a whole lot more. We are a one-stop solution for soap, candle, paper flower and wreath making. Our most loved product, chalk paints is great for up-cycling walls and furniture. Advanced crafting forms, like decoupage and altered, allow you to further decorate homes with handmade pieces. One can find here everything, starting from a wooden/metal base to a craft varnish to give the final touch to your project. Paper crafting and scrapbooking supplies are perfect for wall décor.

Do you believe that the modern industries have decreased chances for the artisans, who excel in their talent but have been shunned away with the advent of cheap and rapid products?

Yes, we certainly believe that industrialisation has decreased chances for the skilled artisans and handicrafts industry at large. Modern retail demands mass and identical production. Customers today look for affordability and accessibility, which unfortunately results in automation and machine-made products. It is extremely challenging to keep labour costs low and produce exactly identical pieces, when it comes to making handmade products. One way, we believe, that can keep the artisans and handicraft alive is when customers learn to appreciate the exclusivity and imperfections of handmade creations.

What have you planned to expand this artsy company further to international/global level?

Many of them are not aware that Itsy Bitsy's home brand, Little Birdie, exports handmade flowers and embellishments to over 35 countries. We are making huge efforts to expand global footprint and introduce our products in many more countries. The vision is simple. The more the business grows, the more opportunities will be created, and more lives will be impacted.

