

Pooja Rajput's Chidiyaa brand is intended to evoke nostalgia in the wearer, bringing to the fore memories of beautiful times past



What is the story behind Chidiyaa?

PR: I am no fashion expert. I had no experience or formal training in fashion and didn't know anyone from the industry. I just needed a medium for self-expression and I believed the story could be well said through fashion. I would travel to a lot of artisanal villages and various craft fairs in Delhi and nearby. I loved picking up stuff for myself and admired the process of making these beautiful products, and I believed there were a lot of women like me, who wanted something unique, well designed, and ethically created.

What took you from computers to fashion?

PR: I have always been creative, and immensely enjoy that part of me. As a child I was always inclined towards art but coming from a middle class family our priority was always to get a stable job with steady income. That's how Computer Engineering happened; but my heart wasn't into coding. So, while the IT industry was at a boom and all my friends got placed in big corporations, I went on to pursue my Master's in Business Administration just so that I could do something more.





I got a job as a project manager with a leading insurance company. Project management is all about people, coordination and managing chaos, and I loved it. Even while I was doing a corporate job I always managed to keep myself creatively involved with all the people and HR engagement activities. Life was good, but I knew this wasn't my calling. I needed a more fulfilling medium of expression and so Chidiyaa happened.

The design ethos of Chidiyaa is a blend of traditional and contemporary styles. How do you strike a balance between the two?

PR: Traditional is beautiful, but you need to create something that is yours. So, you pick up some of what is already out there in nature and some of what you have created. Place them well, and unclutter the design, so that it shows and is not lost in the busy pattern. I have realized putting too much is not required; quite often just one or two elements are enough to create a beautiful design. Simple is beautiful.



I believe clothing is one of the many forms of self-expression. A person chooses what to wear according to her personality, her mood. I create designs I would like to wear myself - designs that are not over the top but still unique. Something free spirited, but still functional.

What does the Chidiyaa brand stand for?

PR: Chidiyaa is not a product, it's an emotion. It is the nostalgic feeling that makes you happy; that takes you to your childhood or the good old days. It does not make you sad that they're over, but brings back the fond memories. Chidiyaa is a community of women who think alike, who have a mind of their own but are still emotionally vulnerable. Chidiyaa is about the honest artisan who is making his living by doing what he does best.

How do you design a collection?

PR: Ideas mostly come from personal experiences, from travel. For example, I have always been fascinated by the moon and its many shapes, and that made me work on the crescent line. The challenge was to design the crescent motif and place it such that the end print is still wearable and minimal.

Our many motifs like the dragonflies, moon, and birds come from everyday life. A flock of birds flying together is something we see every day, but how wonderful would it be to see these on a dress or even a sari!

These ideas are converted into wooden blocks by artisans. Dyes are prepared using traditional techniques. It is a multistep process of hand printing, cleaning and washing before the fabric is ready for fabrication.

What did it take to establish your network of artisans across India?

PR: In the entire design process the artisan is the hero. If not for him I couldn't create what I imagined. To understand and value this is very important. Artisans who have been working with us over the years are now our family and understand our design philosophy very well. But this wasn't easy.

The first year of starting Chidiyaa was all about product development. I had to travel extensively to remote villages to understand different printing and weaving techniques and what craft would best suit my style. It needed a lot of experiments to finally come up with something that was close to the concept design.

Today Chidiyaa works with artisans using different printing techniques. We mostly do Ajrakh but are also now exploring something exclusive in Dabu and Bagru. We also work with the weavers in West Bengal from where

we source our handwoven linen. Our recent collection in Modal and Mashru silk with hand block prints has done very well.

What makes your brand stand out in such a competitive fashion industry?

PR: I design what I like to wear and I believe there are a lot of women who have the same need to wear clothes that are sustainable, high on craftsmanship, design and quality but still don't necessarily dig a hole in your pocket.

What is your positioning strategy?

PR: Chidiyaa is high on design and quality, yet it is not high-end luxury. It is for those who are looking for an exclusive product at a price they can afford. We are currently selling through our own web portal and an offline store in Gurugram. Marketing is mostly through word of mouth and social media. The plan is to explore more mediums of marketing and add more channels so that we can reach a larger audience.



We will open our first store in Delhi in January. I have tried to design the store to speak the story of Chidiyaa - simple, clean minimal and very unlike any other store you would find in a mall. We have live wooden wedges and rope fixtures, a spindle unit on the roof with blue linen threads, which has specially been designed by my artisan in West Bengal. You will find wooden blocks and cotton buds that are actually used in the making of our products.

How challenging is it to be an entrepreneur?

PR: If you are emotionally connected and value your artisan, your team and your customer, you build a seamless ecosystem where everybody is working to the common goal. The key is to prioritize and not invest in something that is not as important to you; focus on what's important, be it home or work. I am blessed to have a very supportive family that has been my pillar of support as I built Chidiyaa brick by brick.

How do fashion trends affect the wardrobe choices of women in India?

PR: Women in India are increasingly open to experimenting with new designs and fabrics. They carry Indian wear with as much ease as western attire. There are an increasing number of people who value handcrafted and are aware of the design and creation process of these garments. These are the people who invest in classics and are not defined by trends or brands. They know what looks good and what they wear becomes the trend. While we have large international fashion brands growing in India there is a good market for homegrown brands like Chidiyaa.

Social media has changed the dynamics of the fashion industry. How has it impacted your label?

PR: Social media can be a great enabler for anybody starting up as one can build a brand even if one doesn't have deep



pockets. However, there is no substitute to providing value and the right shopping experience for your consumer. Fashion perhaps is the fastest growing category in ecommerce. Chidiyaa started as an 'online' brand and we opened our first offline store only a few months ago. Social media is a primary medium for us to connect with our consumers.

What can we expect from Chidiyaa next?

PR: Chidiyaa is a young brand. We are blessed that our designs have resonated well with our consumers. We are grateful for their love. We would like to create newer experiences for them by bringing in contemporary designs on different fabrics. We are exploring relevant tie ups to reach out to more consumers who would be interested

in our products. Food and fashion are close to my heart. It is my dream to open a Chidiyaa Café someday!

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