

THE WINDS OF PROGRESS

Smita Rai is the person behind Namchi Candles, a small brand from Sikkim that is making waves in the regional market

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When you meet Smita Rai for the first time, you essentially meet a young, thoughtful woman who is smiling through every problem and ensuring everyone is looked after. But this gentle and cheerful presence also doubles up as the Founder-Leader who spurs into action and motivates the members of Namchi Designer Candles into action.

Early Bearings

In 2013, the State government of Sikkim conducted vocational training courses for the first time for candle making. Several women who were homemakers enrolled into the course, but most treated it as a one-time activity and abandoned it immediately after. However, there were a handful like Smita, who decided to make something out of it. She says with much enthusiasm, 'I assumed a position of leadership

in this otherwise group effort and invested in a business that is flourishing today'.

As a child, the temporal-yet-engulfed form of candles fascinated Smita. Even when she grew up, the fascination did not leave her. The training course conducted by the State Government of Sikkim came as a sign, she decided not only to grab it with both hands, but make the most of the opportunity. When the Government announced the vocational training courses, Smita decided to turn her childhood fascination into what is today not only a form of livelihood for the women at Namchi Candles, but also an active occupation for Smita, to whom entrepreneurship isn't news.

No Stranger to Enterprise

Smita has been running a café in Namchi itself for several years. Namchi is a small town at a driving distance of three hours from the State capital Gangtok. In her own words, the candle business opens at 10 am and shuts by 3:30 in the afternoon, but the food business keeps her on her toes until late evening.

While Namchi Candles began as a 15-member team, the government's training initiatives have yielded a total workforce of upwards of 65 presently. In fact, Smita says, the government trained a record number of participants by 2015 (a massive 100 people) and

several of them approached her to be absorbed into the operations of Namchi Candles.

On a Growth Trajectory

The purpose of any business is to expand and flourish. And Smita's aim for Namchi

Candles is no different. The women have already begun their research and development with incense. Says Rai, 'The two – candles and incense – go hand in hand. So, the same women who engage in the candle-making process have also added this additional prowess to their repertoire!' The product is still under R&D and is slated to hit stores sometime next year.

The 65-to-70 members of Namchi Candles aren't all artisans. While design inputs are welcomed from every member of the group, and feasibility accepted before production is implemented, sales, distribution channels and even accounting are handled by dedicated staff. About 20 to 25% of the sale is reserved to plough back into the business, while the rest is divided among the staff in equal profit share.

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also sells online on the Bangalore based platform, Giskaa.com. Among other expansion plans, Smita has shown intent to start exporting to European markets in the next two to three years.

Learning Vital Lessons

Smita had already known about the entrepreneur network Startup Harbour for a while. When they mentioned the commencement of a formal

pedagogy for entrepreneurs in the region in partnership with the IEF Entrepreneurship Foundation, Smita didn't have to think twice. She enrolled immediately. And while her acquaintance with the entrepreneur network was scant until then, today she is among active members of the local entrepreneur community, and rather vocal on the WhatsApp group that has been set up for the local entrepreneurial community.

Smita believes that several concepts of business are often alien or ignored by new entrepreneurs on account of lack of scale or income in the beginning. They do not realise that every bit of their investment – whether in terms of effort, skill, time or just monetary – it matters and goes a long way in making the business successful.

On the subject of being a woman entrepreneur in Sikkim, Smita beams. She says rather proudly, 'Sikkim is ideal for women to pursue entrepreneurship. It is safe and the society treats entrepreneurship as a respectable way of making a living. It helps the cause further that our men respect women'.

Inspiration

Smita derives a great deal of strength from the women who work at Namchi Candles. She attributes the grit, determination and belief of her colleagues in the business, and craft to eventually give them earning and recognition to be the greatest source of inspiration. 'The women were just regular homemakers, today, all their thought, their effort into making Namchi Candles a household name makes me want to give it my own 100% too!'

She is dreaming big and aiming high too, 'I want Indians to walk into souvenir shops abroad, see the Namchi label and brim with pride that an Indian brand has become a household name in foreign lands and is equated with high quality of artisanal expertise.'

The writer is Chairperson, IEF Entrepreneurship Foundation