

Toying with an Idea



Figure 2 Rekha with her toys

Rekha Badhani, 32, is a housewife and a mother of a daughter. Her husband is a reporter for a local news channel (*Samachar Plus*). Even though both love their daughter, Rekha always made it a point to save and support all educational expenses of her daughter, who has recently joined *Navodaya Vidyalaya* at Roorkee. As such, Rekha has been toying with many ideas for the last few years, to augment the family income.

She had learned hand-bag making before marriage, at her home in Ramnagar. Shifting to Kotabagh after marriage, she learned knitting and additional skills in hand-bag making – at the Skill training center run by *Kashtkar Vikas Samiti* and the Himalaya Trust. She also offered her skills as trainer for sewing classes here in May 2016.

For toy making, she had a two-week training in the summer of 2016 and a two-day refresher course later. Soon after training she started procuring raw material from Haldwani and selling the toys to family friends locally. Even though the trainer could teach them only three toys (monkey, doggie, love-bears), with the help from Ms Maya Negi (President, *Kashtkar Vikas Samiti*, Kotabagh), she learned making many more toys - like baby dinosaur, squirrel, teddy bear, elephant, rabbit etc. Idea for a squirrel emerged from the waste material from other toys.

She has always found toy making more fun than sewing a lady's suit. For one, profits are better for the toys - and much more importantly, client never complains of "this being a little tight here and loose there!". She also finds toy making a more creative pursuit than sewing garments and knitting. Every monkey can (and should) have a different face. There is a creative space for trying out new ideas. She finds it very rewarding when she sees a child petting one of her toys.

Rekha's current plans are to rent a big room in the village by June 2017 - and start a toy making unit with the help of three other trainees and friends – Ranjana, Prachi and Ruchi. She thinks that if they procured raw material in bulk from Saharanpur, they will have a good margin for savings. With practical help from Ms Maya Negi, they hope to create a market for soft toys in the nearby tourist spots: Corbett park, Kaladhungi, Ramnagar, Nainital etc.

The toys are washable because they contain *lacron*, a synthetic nylon wool. Eyes of the toys are locked from within and cannot come loose and hence, safe for young children. She hopes to create wildlife

series for tourists visiting Corbett park: Baby Dinosaur, Tiger, Elephant, Monkey etc. Squirrel could be ideal for cars. Teddy bears, Love bears, Doggies etc. are quite useful for children at home or in the class rooms.

She has sold about seven toys in last 2-3 months for a total profit of about 1500/-. She is using this money to support her daughter's education and is hopeful of taking it up on a larger scale with help of other women. Rekha concludes: women must go beyond sewing a suit and knitting a sweater. Creativity in craft is nothing new. It was just forgotten. We need to bring that spirit back, when women created items not just for utility – but also for the joy of making it.

However, Maya Negi, who has facilitated handicraft among women in this region for about three decades, approaches the issue cautiously: We must generate demand, create a unique brand image and ensure adequate marketing networks.

Toys for everyone



Figure 3 Saroj Pal with her pet monkey

Saroj Pal, 27, from Ginti Gaon is continuing her MA (Hindi) studies as well as various handicrafts at home. She also runs a beauty parlor, owned by her sister in law. In 2016, she attended a bag making and toy making training at Kotabagh, organized by *Kashtkar Vikas samiti* and The Himalaya Trust. She occasionally makes a lady's suit too, on order. While bag making gets her Rs 60-70 per piece, suit making may get her Rs 150; But toy making is the most profitable craft at present: Rs 200 – 250 per piece – and it involves mostly hand sewing.

Renu Pal, 26, also from Ginti Gaon, did the toy training with Saroj. Renu too makes, bags, toys etc. But not as much as others. Her family does not support her well. She has three young children. There is not enough space at her home to work and make toys. So, many of the twenty plus trainees of the toy making training at Kotabagh, are considering making handicraft groups, renting a workplace and take up toy making seriously as a creative and profitable pursuit.

These trainees are from two clusters: Bajuniya Haldu and Ginti gaon. Maya Negi thinks that these two groups can collaborate and produce toys, which can be sold locally. She thinks that women's groups near tourist spots can be encouraged to sell the toys. For example, Corbett park is offering marketing stalls to local women's SHGs, at various spots. These women's

groups can sell not only Jam, Honey etc. to the tourists, but also various handicrafts and toys. Since toys have an aesthetic appeal, profit margin is enough - to make sure that women who make them as well as those who sell them, both get a reasonable profit.

Ms Maya Negi is setting up a women's cooperative in Haldwani, which will specialize in promoting and marketing handicraft produced by women's groups in this region.

Even though designs for soft toys can be accessed on internet, this group is planning to invite an expert for a refresher course soon; they hope to develop special toys: toys that blink, make sounds and interact in other ways. Toy making for them is not just a handicraft but also an excellent opportunity to socialize with other women and have a good laugh, when someone attaches the monkey's tail, to neck rather than hips!



Figure 4: Toy makers of Kotabagh: Tanuja, Renupal, Rekha, Maya, Pramila, Neema display their toys and hope to develop a niche for it

So, the challenges in the coming years seems to be: will the handicraft groups sustain long enough to evolve their unique style and brand image? Will the leaders in these groups have entrepreneurial vision to develop markets on par with supply?