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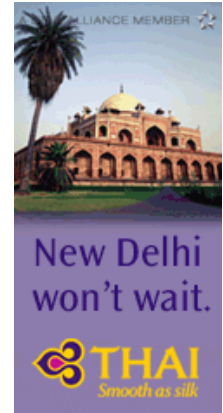
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Earthentree Sells Eco-friendly Toys, Made in India

By ASHFAQUE SWAPAN
India-West Staff Reporter



A toy for a child is a special thing.

Yet all too often, the act of giving a toy in the U.S. can be rich in irony, if it's one of those mass-produced, cheap playthings that fill rows of shelves in giant stores.

For Kirkland, Wash.-based Deepti Shankar, there was a disturbing dissonance between giving a gift to someone as precious and innocent as a child and the fact that the gift had a strong chance of being mass produced at some sweatshop in a Third World country and, in addition, if it was made of plastic, posed a hazard for the future for that very child.

So two years ago, when her daughter Tara was born, she chose to give her a few colorful rattles made by artisans in Channapatna, a rural town near Bangalore.

"We grew up with these toys. So when my daughter was born — I've always been very environmentally conscious — I thought about these toys and I got them, and it was very well appreciated," Shankar told India-West during a phone interview.

The toys were not only beautiful, they were made in an environmentally sustainable fashion — particularly relevant now since Earth Day was just marked on Apr. 22 — and in addition, their sale supported artisans in India.

"The defining moment was when she was about a year old, she began to pick up on colors very quickly because she was playing with the stackables that we sell and I knew that we were on to something," she said.

Shankar discovered that she wasn't the only one who liked the toys.

"I used to go to the park with my daughter and I would just talk to other moms about what I am doing, and they would come home and they would just fall in love with the toys," she said. "And that's just how I started getting small shipments."

From her home, Shankar started Earthentree, which sells toys that were made from environmentally sustained halloween, and painted with vegetable dyes.

Earthentree employs 30 toy makers in Channapatna. Prices range from \$4.50 for a bird whistle to \$64 for a 20-piece train. They're sold online at Earthentree.com and an increasing number of specialty retailers in Seattle, including the Seattle Symphony, Darvill's Bookstore on Orcas Island, and Bellevue Botanical Garden's Trillium gift shop.

To be sure, it's still a relatively small operation, but Shankar is all set to expand it into a million dollar business.

Recently at the Green Festival in Seattle April 12-13, Earthentree got an enthusiastic response. "I am getting tremendous amount of response," she told India-West. "I am getting emails every day for wholesale enquiries and retail and things like that. People are really looking for something meaningful."

For her, it's not just about making money, it's being part of something that was meaningful and worthy, Shankar said.

"Being very socially conscious and being around people who have been doing such tremendous amount of work, that was always my need to do that," she said. "I've done a lot of work on folk and tribal art as well. So this is always in the back of my mind, to be doing something (worthwhile).

"Because of that, I just found the right means, and having my daughter was a huge inspiration. Being a mother made me realize what other parents like me are looking for."

Shankar said her toys were a salutary antidote to the consumer-driven ethos in the Western world.

"Every household is like Toys R Us. We live in such a materialistic environment that we don't value things anymore," she told India-West. "The fact that here was a toy that had a story, you know, it was not just a wooden toy or a handmade beautiful object, it had a whole story behind it, it has a history behind it . . . you are not just buying a toy, that really appealed to me, and I think that's what appeals to everybody as well."

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