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Her business demands the personal touch.

Rasheeda Bhagat

SHE is not in a business where "deals can be struck across the table". Nor is hers an establishment where you can hire "marketing or purchasing managers. You need to have the right people working with you on the right wavelength. It is not like being in any goods industry."

But she is certainly a pioneer who has broken new ground when it comes to dealing with the art scene. An art dealer in the business of buying and selling works of art like paintings and sculptures, Ms. Geetha Mehra did begin conventionally when she set up the Sakshi Art Gallery in Chennai in 1984.

But within a few years she discovered that Chennai was just not the place for art. "Chennai being a small town for the business of art, I felt I had done it all. Each city has its own characteristics and dynamics which you can't fight... or don't need to fight. I felt I could not make a viable business from contemporary art here."

She had to decide to either shut down Sakshi in Chennai or move on to other places and expand her horizons to make a success of her dream.

To go corporate, she required a financially sound partner. "I did not want to involve the family because I felt I could have too much of interference and imposition of their views. So I felt the best thing was to put together a group of interested people on my own."

For a background she had a degree in Fine Arts from the **Stella Maris College** in Chennai. "It was a very conscious decision to go in for Fine Arts because I wanted to have a gallery. It wasn't as though I had inherited something."

But till the moment she could give shape to her dream of starting an art gallery in Chennai, she acquired some office experience through a three-year stint at the Oberoi reservation office in Chennai from 1976-78.

In 1989, Sakshi went Corporate with Mr. Sanjay Kumar, Managing Director of Synergy Credit, becoming a partner. "I had always enjoyed working in a team because this helps you rise above your personal limitations and you get the benefit of inputs from people who are interested and who have the core business interest at heart."

Thus the Synergy Art Foundation was born. A closely-held public company with an initial capital of Rs. 35 lakhs, last year, its annual turnover was an impressive Rs. 1.3 crores, reflecting a growth of 20% over the previous year's performance.

Right from the word 'go', the enthusiasm this corporate venture generated was so great that "we had to keep people back or we might fail to retain the major holding in the venture".

The next logical thing was to move out of Chennai. She chose Bangalore, where she had organised exhibitions and where the patronage to art was "adequate". Mumbai naturally came next and was the place to dig her heels into because "it is THE interesting place for contemporary art as it all happens here. Artists from all over the country come to sell art at Mumbai. There has always been this intrinsic relationship between the media, the artists and the buyers which makes it a very exciting place for an art dealer. And this is also the place where there is ample patronage for art."

The place where Sakshi Gallery is located in Mumbai is unbelievable. The exquisitely beautiful 100-year-old building with its imposing wooden staircase has as exotic a name as 'Raj Mahal' and is supposed to have belonged to a Nawab once upon a time. And in true Nawabi tradition "it is supposed to have housed each of his begums on different floors," she says with a grin.

A bad beginning

She can laugh now. But the days when she did shift to Mumbai were grim, and the timing of September 1992 could not have been worse. Little could she have known about the madness which was to engulf India's commercial capital in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

"In December came the riots and we thought we would not be able to survive. Public sentiment was down... after all, art is the ultimate luxury and it is the last to pick up and the first to be hit."

But the riots were not all that the art foundation faced. The Latur earthquake "for which Mumbai was the main support centre hit the city badly in terms of public sentiment. And we also had the bomb blasts. We were neither a small venture like a paan ki dukan or a bread shop where you don't have the overheads; nor a business where you inherit a property or an old tenancy thing. We had to not only work hard but also pay absolute market rents. But we somehow survived those gloomy days", she says with relief.

The finances of the company were initially managed by borrowing between the group companies, but for its expansion it went to the ICICI, which financed an innovative venture of the Foundation. This was renting out art to corporate houses. "We keep a stock of sculptures, paintings etc. and rent it out to corporate offices, usually on a three-year contract".

This became a boom for those corporate offices which really don't have the budget to buy. They could rent out paintings or sculptures at a fourth of the cost. While the bigger companies rent out 15 to 20 pieces at a time, the smaller might take just two.

The rents depend on the popularity of the artist and the Foundation keeps pieces costing from Rs. 7,000 to a couple of lakh rupees. Geetha says the concept of renting, rather than buying art, for corporate offices has caught on. "In fact, I try to keep it down because we do not have full-time staff handling only this aspect of the business." Apart from corporate clients in Mumbai and Bangalore, she is able to service clients in Chennai too from the Bangalore gallery.

Great city for single women

On whether she felt any pangs for leaving Chennai, the city where she had put down roots, Geetha says with a warm smile, "If one weren't to crib about the usual things like a housing problem, Mumbai, I think is a great city for a single woman. People leave you alone... they have their own lives and I have no problems at all. Even walking down the street in a city like Chennai wearing what the hell you want can become a problem. There is not a day which goes by without some sort of a pass being made at you. That kind of thing is totally non-existent here."

"If you are a single woman in a city like Chennai, people are suspicious of renting out an apartment to you. Here they are just not concerned as long they get the rent. Obviously they size you up... nobody wants to give out their place to just anybody. But there is no moral judgment going on. There is no suspicion or even harassment. I am at liberty to drive by myself at 2 a.m. in the morning. There is no lurking fear ... should I take this alley or this bylane late at night. I have no apprehension about what would happen if I were to get stranded."

Her reply to whether she had faced any discrimination in her business on gender grounds is in the negative. "Even in business, you don't suffer because you are a woman as long as you deliver the goods. You are not in a privileged position... but certainly you don't face any antagonism. They treat you as equal... on par."

Has the cash crunch and the dismal state of the money market affected her business as an art dealer? "Not really. If you look at it in terms of turnover, it is the same. But if you look at the kind of clientele, it has narrowed down to corporate buyers. During the stock market boom, there were more people who were able to buy works of art. Professionals and others in their 30s had that little bit of surplus cash. The customer profile has changed but not the overall business."

Then of course, there are the die hard art collectors like Jehangir Nicholson. "He is in his 80s and always on the prowl to add to his collection. He is now thinking of converting his collection, which goes back by about 30 to 40 years, into a museum."

She explains the term 'art dealer' thus: "Just like the dealers in other goods we too buy and sell art, but unlike other businesses, the inputs in buying or selling art are more complex. The dealing also involves exposing or promoting younger artists." "What makes expansion a little more difficult in her business is that it thrives on the personal touch. With her physical presence on the scene imperative, expansion to newer horizons becomes difficult."

"Yes, we would like to go to Delhi. But in this kind of business, you develop an almost incestuous artist-dealer-buyer relationship. So if I'm not here, somebody might just come in and not want to buy. This is a kind of business when sometimes people want to just come and talk..."

when was this painted, what went into it and things like that. Someone might have had a hard day at the office and might want to come here and talk for about half an hour. Its a passion when you are collecting and you need to talk about that passion to somebody."

The subjective element has driven Geetha throughout her career. "I just cannot handle workmen or artists I don't seem to get along with. I would say it is not worth the effort because there has to be that bonding. These are not deals that are just struck across the table... they have to be built up."

On the growing commercialisation of art, Geetha has very definite views. "I don't know why we should grudge it if after a struggle for decades, an artist is able to enjoy the lifestyle of an industrialist. I have tremendous respect for those who have the grit... after all so many people fall by the wayside and take on other jobs. Going through the lives of senior artists you have to admire them for sticking on despite great odds."

"And then of course the entire focus is on the patron. He has to be discriminating. Take for example a bad product... if you keep on buying it, the manufacturer will keep on supplying it to you. It is also a matter of choice. You will have to decide whether you want a plastic bucket costing five rupees for your child from the pavement or a toy which is 10 times that cost."

Geetha's dream for the immediate future is setting up an art museum. "I hope I'll be able to do it this year. It has taken me five years to consolidate my position."

But a deep sigh follows this statement. "Of course real estate prices in Mumbai are ridiculous."

A pause. And she is back to her optimist best with a naughty twinkle in her eye. "Who knows.. the Shiv Sena might decide to extend its patronage to this branch of art..."

Ms. Gita Mehra

Paul Noronha.

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