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CASE STUDY 2: SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND RETAIL BUSINESS

Big group, but from a Kolkata-based enterprising woman - Aparna Banerjee. An Alumni of the retail chains like Reliance Fresh, Spencer's and Big Bazaar have competition. Not from a rival business prestigious Xavier Labour Relations Institute (XLRI) in Jamshedpur, Bihar. Banerjee, 36, retails her goods under the name of Project Sukanya. Interestingly, the goods are not sold from huge showrooms, but from 54 roadside mobile kiosks, manned by 141 women who work in shifts. Another 3,500 women directly benefit from this project by making products such as handicraft items, edibles like 'papad' (wafer thin potato/rice paste snacks), pickles and jams. Packaged spices and ready-to-eat lunches are also sold. And in the coming six months another 500 'bou carts' (women carts) would be deployed across 18 districts, again manned by women. "When I got the idea for these mobile kiosks, my first step was to finalise the design and patent it under the Intellectual Property Rights Act. The Project Sukanya retail chain is also patented," says Banerjee.

The project was the result of extensive research based on material gathered from 62 villages across India during her studies on Anthropology at Calcutta University. "I did my MBA in Logistics and Supply Chain Management from XLRI and realised during that time that I wanted to become a social entrepreneur. I then did a course in Anthropology to get a grip on human rights. I realised that women need financial independence to get freedom from restrictions, abuse and social taboos," says Banerjee, who struggled to complete her studies under great financial constraints. Banerjee realised that marketing was the bottleneck of all small-scale enterprise and blocking cash within a supply chain was not advisable. "I found that retail was the only option. But setting up huge retail space was beyond my

capabilities. I hit upon the mobile kiosk idea and worked on it for two years, getting all required permissions and licences to place them on the roads. No loophole was left open. The carts are manufactured at our own unit," she adds. When Banerjee sent her pilot Project Sukanya to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in 2005, the PM encouraged her to go ahead, assuring assistance in case of hurdles. The then Chief Minister of West Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, also instructed his secretariat to offer support. The attractively designed sleek kiosks, which are placed at most major crossings in the city, easily catch the eye.

The apron-clad women manning them are polite and knowledgeable about the products. Kakoli Das, 24, is one of the smiling faces at the Rashbehari kiosk. "We don't have any problems with the police regarding parking of our kiosk. Our paperwork is watertight. The customers, too, are friendly. We get repeat clients on a regular basis now." The turnover for the Project, which started rolling in early 2007, has already reached Rs 10.5 million (US\$1=Rs 39.9). The target was set for the year 2009 is Rs 500 million. Project Sukanya has a 20,000 sq. ft. common facility centre at Topsia.

The rural, women who supply the products, come to here with their samples. The products are graded into three categories. Under A category, the product is immediately bought with a 10 per cent advance. For the B category products, Sukanya gives support for better packaging and then it is bought. Falling under the C category are products that have market saturation. Sukanya trains these women to shift focus to products that would have more market demand. The edible products are tested and certified by the central government's National Test House.

The success of the venture is obvious from the fact that several big retail chains have started making offers to buy out Project Sukanya as well as the patent for the mobile kiosks. "But I am committed towards my social responsibility. Rather than entrepreneurship, it is the emancipation of women that is my primary concern. My venture helps several needy women take home a well-earned salary," says Banerjee. All women within the project are, as Banerjee puts it "those in need of a livelihood". Jayanti Chatterjee, 49, from Baharu village in South 24 Parganas district, responded to one of the first advertisements placed by Sukanya in a newspaper and approached Banerjee for a job. A school dropout, Chatterjee had done menial jobs for over three decades and yet had managed to send her six

siblings to school. However, they all went their ways once they were well settled, leaving her to cope with an ailing mother.

Chatterjee, who is in charge of the Sukanya Tollygunge kiosk, today earns a regular Rs 3,000. She and her mother now reside in a rented one-room unit in Kolkata. Swapna Dutta, 50, an urban poor, was dumped by her husband during the initial years of their marriage. She managed to educate her son up to higher secondary by doing odd jobs. However, when he secured admission to an engineering college, Dutta found herself helpless. The Sukanya project came to her rescue and she pays the tuition fee from regular monthly salary of Rs 2,800. On the anvil for Banerjee is a rural initiative. Project Sukanya is set to adopt a village, offering alternative livelihood development. "There are many villages which have poor irrigation or flooding problems that restrict agriculture activity. I have approached the government for adopting one such village to set up the Sukanya Village Common Facility Centre," says Banerjee who adds, "It's a Chinese model for promotion of alternative employment. We would provide the infrastructure and training required for setting up the centre." Sukanya is also set to spread its wings beyond West Bengal with 30 new outlets. Groups of needy women have already been identified in states such as Kashmir from where consignments of saffron and apples have already arrived to be sold from the mobile kiosks. Here too, it is women who are at the back and front ends of operations.

Reference : <http://smeworld.org/story/focus/msme-ministry-government-schemes-womenentrepreneurs-india.php>. Accessed on 31st may, 2014

