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Crafts That Empower

Craftizen connects rural artisans with skills and opportunities to market their products to urban Indians.

By Paromita Pain

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Mayura Balasubramanian (center) with team members at a cultural entrepreneurship meet in Bengaluru. (Photograph courtesy Mayura Balasubramanian)

[Mayura Balasubramanian](#), founder of [Craftizen Foundation](#), experienced India's rich craft and cultural heritage during her stint with a rural tourism project for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), India.

"What struck me [during that experience] was the growing gap between urban consumers, their preferences and evolving lifestyles and the products being made by rural artisans," says Mayura, an alumna of the U.S. Consulate General Chennai-funded [Women in Indian Social Entrepreneurship Network](#) (WISEN). "Craftizen was conceived to bridge this gap and to ensure the skills of our talented artisans continue to stay relevant in a rapidly changing world."

Mayura says being a part of the WISEN program in 2020 introduced her to “a tribe of fellow women entrepreneurs with whom I could share my fears and anxieties.” She says the program focused on helping them become more self-aware and mindful leaders. “This is so critical to ultimately becoming a better entrepreneur and managing the constant struggles and stress that are a part of this career path,” she adds.

Founded in 2014, the Bengaluru-based organization aims to keep crafts relevant and enable stronger collaborations between the crafts sector and the corporate sector in India through its corporate social responsibility programs. “At Craftizen, we invite people to join our tribe of craft-conscious citizens aka ‘Craftizens’,” she says.

Through its collaborations, the organization offers regular income to marginalized communities, including adults with intellectual disabilities and underprivileged women; upcycles a range of discarded material like temple flowers, paper waste and single use plastics; and repurposes traditional and contemporary craft skills to preserve and promote the crafts heritage of India.

Empowering and enabling

Craftizen trains women in a range of skills like hand embroidery, tailoring, hand-block and screen-printing, crochet and natural jewelry from Bena grass. “We form them into group enterprises at our livelihood centers, where we provide continuous support for capacity building, design development, production and marketing,” says Mayura.

Craftizen also works closely with several traditional artisan families, like those who create ecofriendly lacquer-work toys in Karnataka’s Channapatna, wooden toys in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, and paint folk art and masks in Telangana’s Cherial village. “We support the artisans with upgraded tools and infrastructure, design workshops and marketing,” explains Mayura.

For artisans, this support is crucial. Fatima had never threaded a needle before joining Craftizen. Today, she is a skilled tailor and crochet artist who coordinates large orders, oversees quality and ensures timely delivery. She is one of the main earners in her family and actively motivates other women in her community to step out of their homes and become self-empowered.



Craftizen upskills marginalized communities and works closely with traditional artisan families, like those who create lacquer-work and wooden toys, as a way of preserving India's craft heritage. (Photograph courtesy Mayura Balasubramanian)

Building networks

Craftizen has its own online store and presence on e-commerce platforms like [Zwende](#) and [Okhai](#). "Our products are also retailed at [Go Native](#) stores in Bengaluru," says Mayura. Over 3,500 people have benefited from its livelihood programs being implemented at 25 centers in six states. The enterprise has also supported 30 craft skills, developed more than 350 unique designs and recycled or upcycled 55 tons of discarded material.

As Craftizen moves toward a future of greater sustainability, it is now working to launch Kobokai, a niche brand to support the Channapatna craft cluster. "The name Kobokai translates to 'the child in you,'" says Mayura. "All products and designs here have been developed through traditional craftsmanship while inventing and innovating modern mechanisms to make a collection of handy games and puzzles that are suitable for individuals, especially working professionals looking for moments of playfulness in their day."

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