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in May 4 Special Section.

Fiercely Local News

Wednesday, March 29, 2006

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Classifieds: [Real Estate](#) | [Home Services](#) | [Employment](#) | [Vacation & Travel](#) | [Professional Services](#) | [General Notices](#) | [Classes & Instruction](#) [Computer Market](#) | [Automotive](#) | [Family Services](#) | [For Sale](#) | [Music](#) | [Mind, Body & Spirit](#)

SPECIAL SECTIONS

Image

Steppin' Out
CUISINE

The Sunnyvale Sun

ADVERTISING

Place an Ad

Online Form

Contacts & Deadlines

Religious Directory

GETTING COVERAGE

Local News

Schools

Sports

Post an Announcement

ABOUT US

Contact Information

Circulation

Philosophy

History

Executive Staff

Employment

ARCHIVES

Browse Past Issues

[Home](#) > [The Sunnyvale Sun Home](#) > [Business](#)

0614 | Wednesday, March 29, 2006

BUSINESS



Photograph courtesy of Monalisa Bora

Monalisa Bora imports woven home décor products sewn by the women in a village in India.

Internet goods come from her home in the Himalayas

By ANNE WARD ERNST

Monalisa Bora traded technology for textiles when she left her Silicon Valley job to run an Internet retail business from her Sunnyvale home.

Last fall Bora launched Dreams on Looms, an online store that sells woven home décor products, such as pillows, place mats and napkins, sewn by women in a village in India. Her business brings wages to a group of women in her homeland.

"The tribe that I work with is the Bodo tribe of Assam, a state in northeast India in the foothills of the eastern Himalayas. I am a native of Assam and lived there until I finished high school," Bora says.

Assam is largely agricultural, known mostly for its tea production. Often families rely on the sale of vegetables to supplement their income. But, she says, almost every home in Assam has a loom. Weaving is a regional tradition there and part of the lifestyle.

Girls learn to weave at young ages, and then as women they weave rugs and clothing for themselves and their families, not for business or production. Bora aims to find a world market for these women and their craft while growing a fair trade business that provides them living wages.

She believes marketing and selling the products made by these women in their spare time will create a sustainable economy and help preserve

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S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			1	2	3	
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26	27	28	29	30	31	

Event title:

Event type:

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City:

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weaving traditions.

Bora works with a production designer and a textile designer who live in the villages. Together they blend traditional motifs with contemporary styles to create products marketable in the United States.

"The weaving takes place four hours from the city of Guwahati, where I grew up," Bora says. "This year, I have started engaging with the Karbee and Dimasa tribes as well." Bora says each tribe has its unique style of weaving and traditional motifs, all inspired by nature.

Designs found at Dreams on Looms will not be found in stores such as Pier 1 or Cost Plus, Bora says, because of the uniqueness of each region's styles. Woven Indian products sold in those stores likely come from other states in India where men dominate the weaving profession, she says.

The Bodo tribe uses 100 percent cotton and all-natural dyes to create its vibrant, colorful designs.

"All our products are dyed in environmentally safe ways. We want to make it as natural as possible. The dyes don't hurt the ground water in the villages," she says. "[Being environmentally conscious] is a strong pillar of our business."

In addition to the Internet store, she has sold the products, which include desktop items such as photo frames and journals, at art fairs and festivals. Bora's goal is to get the products into existing stores where consumers can touch and feel the quality of the high-density weaving.

Though Indian herself, her target market is not the Indian community.

She believes Indians are accustomed to paying low prices for the products from their homeland and would balk at Dreams on Looms' prices, which she says are reasonable for the high-quality workmanship.

"On a relative scale our products are considered expensive for Indian products," Bora says, "but I don't think paying \$10 for a hand-woven place mat is expensive at all."

The products are not mass-produced, such as what would be found at Target or Wal-Mart, she says. Also factored into Dreams on Looms' prices are the costs to bring the product to this country.

Plus, she says, the weavers are receiving living wages for their work, and that's what it's all about.

For more information, visit www.dreamsonlooms.com.

Community Newspaper Survey Results

99% of all residents reported receiving the Community Newspaper

81.4% read the Community Newspaper

81.4% frequently purchase products and services advertised in the Community Newspaper

* CVC Audit, January