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Melting pot designer!

Meeting Poonam Bir Kasturi was like meeting several people at once, says Sumana Bharadwaj of the talented designer, psychologist, educationist, design researcher and more recently, the 'compostwali'!



A first look at Poonam Bir Kasturi, sitting at her desk in front of the PC in the basement garage of her house, walls lined with shelves of books on topics ranging from designing to human learning, memory and cognition to environment to art to culture to photography, will keep you guessing her profession.

Is she a fundamentally a designer or an educationist or an environmentalist or a psychologist? But just a few exchange-of-words later, you are taken with her extreme clarity in thoughts and expression on all of these topics!

She is not just a designer; she is everything rolled into one. An industrial designer by profession, she is an educationist when designing courses for her art institute and revolutionary one at that, when she questions the existing pedagogy in schools, an environmentalist when she is designing eco-friendly clay pots for home composting, a psychologist when she is designing illustrated children's books that encourage them to rethink and reinterpret the world around them, a researcher when she is writing papers related to design and craft. That is multidimensional Poonam Bir Kasturi for you.

Poonam, a graduate of the National Institute of Design, is a founder-member of Industree Crafts Pvt Ltd (which designs and retails craft-based products for both Indian and export markets) and founder-director of Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology. She also founded PlaynSpeak, a product design company developing new paradigm products based on the Indian context and a universal sense of fun.



Apart from these, Poonam has a number of papers on design and craft to her credit. She has designed and conducted numerous interactive workshops on issues of design, creativity and craftsmanship. Her groundbreaking paper is titled "The India Report Revisited", a fresh look at the India Report authored by Charles Eames that led to the setting up of the NID.

And her most recent project, Daily Dump, has brought her the title 'Compostwali' one which she is sure proud to hold! Daily Dump, a year old now, a brand of PlaynSpeak, makes eco-friendly terracotta pots for home composting, deploying the skills of rural artisans to provide an elegant solution for the urbanites to deal with the garbage they generate while helping the artisans retain their identity. Daily Dump, apart from pots, offers a range of products and services that facilitate home composting.

The beginning

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Two companies and an art institute later, Poonam was still 'not at peace' and felt the need to do something that can make a difference. She was dissatisfied with the way designing, "a powerful tool that can make ideas visible, understandable and finally result in action/a tangible product" was merely used to "create products that sell, only adding to problems of stress and consumerism".

And, neither the element of human fulfilment present in the design process, nor was designing used to solve real life problems like ecological degradation or improving man's quality of life proactively. So for Poonam, a firm believer in the philosophy that knowledge ultimately has to transform into useful action, the next logical step was to design a product that is creative, innovative and relevant to our society and people. Coupled with this desire to innovate was her deep commitment to the crafts sector, both its cultural heritage and its people, and the belief that good design should be accessible to artisans at the grassroots level.

Daily Dump

All these reflections finally culminated in The Daily Dump. Poonam feels that the first step you can take towards becoming a socially responsible citizen is to do your bit by managing your own waste because all it takes is logic, awareness and a sense of responsibility towards the ecosystem you are part of. What with Bangalore city producing 2,200 tonnes of garbage/day and with the government plant's capacity being only 500 tonnes, the rest 1,700 tonnes are dumped in illegal dumps.


So the least one can do to change this and make a difference is to clean up after one's own mess! Since Poonam does not believe in containing knowledge, the design of the clay pots used in composting is available for everyone to borrow and change it to suit their needs and become what Poonam calls Daily Dump clones. Unlike franchisee, Daily Dump clones pay only for the printed matter provided by the company and for the first batch of 100 pots.


Daily Dump was nominated for the international award, INDEX, one of the most prestigious international design honours, that focuses on 'design to improve quality of life' from Copenhagen making Poonam the first Indian to be nominated for the award.

Poonam is optimistic about the future and is working on prototypes of mechanised composter for homes and developing composting products for specific needs like restaurants, wedding halls and looking at the larger waste issue-- like disposal of medicines, plastic, steel-- with the intention of creating zero-waste homes in Bangalore.

And this is not all. Poonam has brought out illustrated, easy-to-read books for children on topics such as environment, globalization, current life styles, which is self published.

Her work indeed has been a life-enriching experience for herself and for all those working with her. Standing where she is now in life, Poonam says, "I am at peace, this is it for me."

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