

## **Interview Transcript**

Key:

**S:** Shikha Rungta, Interviewee, Immigrant, and Business Owner

**K:** Katherine Fallon-Reusch, Interviewer

### **PART ONE:**

**K:** Hello! Can you tell me your name and a bit about yourself?

**S:** Hi, I'm Shikha, Shikha Rungta, and um, I have been living here in the U.S., in uh, Edison, New Jersey for almost 9 years now, but I grew up in India, and um, I did my masters in finance, and I do have some corporate experience, for about 8-9 years, and now I have my own business in textiles.

**K:** That's amazing– why did you decide to leave India in the first place?

**S:** Uh, well, if it was for me, I would have probably been there [India], but it was my husband's work that made us travel, he's an I.T. consultant, so his work would take him to places, and that's how we decided to move out of India.

**K:** So you said you moved into Edison, which is in Middlesex county, 9 years ago, so when did you – was that the first place you came in the United States, or did you arrive somewhere else when you first came?

**S:** No, the first place that we – we lived in was Phoenix, Arizona, and I am glad to have moved out because, um, obviously, New Jersey gives you a lot more in terms of seasons and everything, so I...

**K:** Uh, yes...

**S:** ...I really love it here. [laughs]

**K:** ... [laughs] It's really hot in Phoenix, I can't even imagine. Um, so your business, the Atticco, sells handcrafted textiles and jewelry from India – How was the transition to becoming a business woman, what were, and are, the challenges that you face?

**S:** Um, well, it was very exciting when I really thought that this could be a choice, and I got around, um – the first biggest question was, “okay, what is it that I am going to start with?” but I wanted to, the – the idea in my head was to do something with textiles and fabrics – so because I love Indian fabric, and whenever I would go back home, everybody would be like “could you get

us some?” or these were the gifts that I would carry back for everybody, and that’s how the idea got into my mind, and the biggest challenge was what do you– what you really sell, and where you start, where do you start from ...

**K:** um-hm [agreeing with statement]

**S:** ...Because this is a new country for me, everything– there was no, no guidelines, so I had to like literally figure things out for myself.

**K:** That’s amazing– um, What is the role of your textiles and art in – in cultural education? As in, how do you think the products that you produce and sell teach people about the culture and artisanship of India?

**S:** Ok, so, if you’ve got the chance, or if anybody here has gone through my website, you’d see that, um, it actually is a burst of color, so um, I-I feel my textiles really, those textiles, they are from India, and they do represent India, in every form, in terms of the color, in terms of the quality, in terms of the warmth of the people there, so definitely I feel it’s – it’s a true representation of the place.

**K:** I would agree– they’re [the textiles/products] always so gorgeous. So, when I was looking at your website, which is theatticco.com (that’s t-h-e-a-t-t-i-c-c-o.com), I noticed that you mentioned that textiles were the primary business of your family in India. What is the role that your family background had on you that influenced you to take this path of becoming a business owner in America?

**S:** Um, well yes, I grew up in a business family, so everybody around me did their own business, and they had their own handlooms, so I have at a very young age seen how handlooms work, or how good fabric is, or what is the difference in quality, and yes, it’s – it’s a vast field, I do not know everything, but I’m learning, but yeah definitely being in the field helped because if you know once – you do understand A from B, so it had helped me. In that way.

**K:** I would think so, you grow up with it. Um, I also saw on your website, when I was reading the ‘about you’ page, that you said that you like to empower local artisans in India, can you like elaborate on that? Like, I would love to know more.

**S:** Um, sure. So I work with different, um, set of artisans, like the Shibori range that I do, uh works totally with, uh, with the women’s co-op back, uh, in Rajasthan, India, where, you know, those are the people we train them, we help them earn their livelihoods, so it – it actually is very, very fulfilling. So basically any that you really buy from us, is, it goes back to the artisans, part of it goes back to the artisans, so that’s a great way to, you know, empower the community.

**K:** That is amazing. Um, so how do you decide which textiles to produce – like how do you choose what types of fabric to use; what designs to make; what colors; like the type of item, like I know you do scarves and pouches, I know.. um do you like create it on customer demand, or do you choose the designs that speak to you that you love? Like, I'm just so curious.

**S:** Oh, you're very kind. So, uh yes, I started with what I liked, so, it's very funny, but um, so the first, the first pop-up I did was everything that I curated and everything that I got, you know, it was a lot of blue because I love blue, so it was very skewed, and it slowly and gradually, as you meet people, and I did a whole lot of events to basically understand what would really sell, so and that's how I – I add products based on, what you know, what people ask me for. So, I just started off with scarves and now I have like a whole gamut of, um, products, you know. And that's like “hey, do you think you want to do, can you do something like hair scrunchies?” or “Can you get, like, bags and things?” and so that's how it goes.

**K:** And, of course, I would love to know, of all the products that you do sell, which one is your favorite? Is it the scarves 'cause that's what you started with, or do you have like a new favorite that you've discovered as you have, beco– like run your business?

**S:** Um, yeah, I love selling scarves, I just think it's, um... the reason I did scarves was I thought this was like the easiest, easiest gift that you could give, and I think it's– it's a great thing to even pass on, like this is a gift that you could pass on from generation to generation because it's all ancient art...

**K:** Yeah.

**S:** ...So yes, I do love, um, selling scarves. I have added a whole lot of products now, but, yeah, it stays on the top of my list.

**K:** Yeah, I mean, it's like wearable art, which I think is amazing, that it's not just something you could look at, which is wonderful too, when you have something on the wall, but something you can wear out, and it's just... lovely. Like, I've seen so many beautiful colors in the things that you produce, I just love it. Um, thank you so much...

**S:** Oh thank you ...

**K:** ... for your interview.

**S:** ... so much for, for your time.

**K:** Yes, and thank you for yours!

**PART TWO:**

**K:** Hello, and thank you, and welcome back for part two– um, I was going to ask, what advice or recommendations would you give to an immigrant woman who wants to start her own business?

**S:** Okay, thank you for having me back Katie. So, um, yeah, that’s not a very complicated question, actually. What I would say is that, um, put your thoughts together, be ready to work very, very hard because, um, it’s not easy setting up into a place where you do not – where you’re an immigrant and you are new to the place yourself, but um, it’s a beautiful community out there, and um, don’t be afraid to ask for help, and, yeah, keep going, baby steps, I guess. One step at a time.

**K:** That’s good advice – um, How do you balance being both a businesswoman and a mother? ‘Cause I know that you do have a son, so I was curious.

**S:** Well, that’s um... I’m glad you asked. So I actually started my business when my son was starting high school, so it was both, uh, an interesting and difficult time for both of us, but I feel, um, having him around really helped me be where I am today because he was pretty involved in the business, and uh, I guess when you have your child looking at you, or you know, when you know they are looking up to you, you tend to work harder, you want to, you want to show that it’s quite doable, that once you decide to do something, so, yeah, it was – it was tough at times, but not impossible.

**K:** I– I can’t even imagine it, it really is– how you juggle everything is so incredible to me. Um, so when we had first talked, you said that you felt like your textiles “represent India, in every form, in terms of the color, in terms of the quality, in terms of the warmth of the people there”-- um, could you elaborate with like one or two examples, like of how that would work?

**S:** Sure. So um, yeah, when I said, um, so if you were to visit India, any part of India, so like, India probably every two hundred miles you would find a different dialect, but – but, overall, whichever part of the country you go to, you would find a lot of colors, so I feel, that um, we represent it in its true form, so when you look around, when you look around at the textiles that I have, and um, and also, most of my textiles are inspired by the Mogul Empire, so that’s the period that ...

**K:** Uh-hm... [Sound of acknowledgement]

**S:** you see the floral motifs of...

**K:** Oh, Okay–Okay...

**S:** of the scarves. So, that's what I meant by that.

**K:** Ah, alright. Um—uh, what region of India are you from? Like, do your textiles have stuff from that area – I know that you just said the Mogul Empire, but um, uh [laughs] but like other stuff too, like is it all– all parts of India, or particularly where you're from originally?

**S:** Yeah, sure, um– I am from the north of India, Rajasthan, that's, um, that the desert area of, uh, the country, and yes, most of my textiles, in fact I would say one hundred percent of my textiles, are there. They are made in my hometown, so very well associated with where I'm from.

**K:** Right, yeah. So they're made in your hometown – [laughs]-- so the next follow-up question I was going to have was how are your textiles made? Like I know you had mentioned the process of Shibori to me a while ago, could you give an example of like how those processes work?

**S:** Sure, so we do, um, two particular, uh, technol– I would say, like the artisan techniques. So, block print is one where we use a wooden block to first carve the pattern, and then stamp the fabrics, so basically it's like what makes– if you see– so each color represents a col- you know, each color is represented by a separate block, so if you see a pattern that has four colors, it would have been stamped by like four different blocks, so that's what hand block printing is. And Shibori is where you sew the pattern onto the scarf, and then after dyeing you undo the stitches, so basically the thread acts as a resist there, so these are two different dyeing techniques primarily that we use.

**K:** Oh, okay. Umm– that's really interesting! That must be so time consuming to like take out all the stitches, I have a lot of respect for the people who make it. Um, what are the lives of the artisans like, and are most of the artisans who make these products women, and like, how do you train for that, like how do you even... get skills?

**S:** Sure, so the Shibori range that I do I work with the women's co-op back in India to make those. So that is done by primarily women, but yes, we do have men on the team too, because all the hard work, like where you have– where you need to cook the dyes, or you know, when you need a little more help. So we do have men at the team too, but it's primarily women, and the block print we do with separate groups of people. So they're known as chhipas, so chhipa in hindi means to print, like guys who print, so that's an art that goes on from generations, so it's basically, you would say, it's a family of printers who do the job.

**K:** And will those families go back, like– how many years?

**S:** Generations....

**K:** Generations, like hundreds of years even?

**S:** ...Yes! [laughs]

**K:** Ah, that's really interesting! Do you– would like a family have like certain things they're known for? Like, is there like a family – like we have like family crests, like a family design or pattern that is known to a certain family? Or...

**S:** Sure– like some dyeing techniques – Bagru is another, um, small village in Rajasthan, and that's where one particular type of dyeing that we do gets done. So, the red and black is primarily Bagru, so if you see that kind of a print anywhere, those are done with natural dyes, so those are the ones you can identify. So that is a craft that belongs to that particular – so they even have their own blocks, some of the– some of the patterns would be theirs, because they had it. So, so every printer would have their own set of blocks.

**K:** And like the – so some of them are natural dyes– like, do you use mostly natural dyes–I would think? Or do you use some more of the synthetic stuff, as like we've progressed, and learned more about the different types of dye.

**S:** Sure. So all– all our scarves are done with azo-free dyes, so that's the first important thing. But no, not all – but most of my silks are done with natural dyes.

**K:** Okay. I think– I think that was everything I wanted to ask today, thank you so much, I really appreciate it.

**S:** Thank you for having me, and thank you for asking– I could go on and on and on!