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# E-tail buds bloom in bullet-ridden KASHMIR



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**Kashmir! The land described as 'Paradise on Earth' by Amir Khusrau is a brand unto itself. People all over the world associate the region with something exotic - be it the breathtakingly beautiful landscape, pure saffron, Kashmiri 'kehwa' or Pashmina. Our correspondent shares the entrepreneurial journeys of young men and women from the region who are today marketing unique foods and products to connoisseurs of taste across the globe through their bustling e-commerce platforms**

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**MAHAJAN**

Pashmina shawls and stoles, hand-embroidered suits, kaftans, saris and bedcovers, papier mache craft



and other promotions to learn what the people understand about organic products from the north. To our surprise most of them did not even know what a saffron bud or a walnut fruit looked like," explains Sahil, who always had to carry unadulterated products to show them to his audience. Almost two years later, they have orders pouring in from all corners of the country and even beyond. They have now delivered products to 3,000 pin codes across the country - from Kanyakumari to Nagaland and Andaman to Kolkata. Besides, they have also executed more than 2,000 orders from Canada, UK, and Dubai, all of which have a sizeable Indian population. With more business pouring in, PureMart is now a five member team.

Sahil shares, "We got our first order the day we launched our site. That was from one of my ex-colleagues based in Mumbai but we have come a long way since. I have personally visited many customers in Mumbai to understand their behaviour and to get feedback from them." When asked to explain the challenges faced so far, Sahil takes a minute to reflect on the journey. "Delivery is the biggest challenge in e-commerce today. There are two important arms of any e-commerce business - payment and delivery channels. We have been using leading payment partners and delivery partners since inception. But we realised that having one's own delivery arm helps remove lot many hindrances while also helping build trust among customers. With that in mind, we have already started our own delivery model in Bangalore where we are now doing single day delivery without any extra charges. We are thinking of getting started in other cities too," he elaborates.

PureMart is now looking forward

to expand its reach through multi-channel marketplaces and organic fairs. It is also looking for like-minded partners from metro cities to join hands, hoping that would streamline the delivery channel. Also, scaling up the presence by employing social media is on cards. Asked about future plans, Sahil says, "We plan to come up with a handicrafts and apparels category soon too. We are sure this will help create employment opportunities for artisans across the state." None of the two co-founders would deny that the road so far has been pockmarked with hurdles and challenges. In spite of that, they are upbeat and raring to go ahead.

### KashmirOneStop



Meenakshi Bhat

Kashmir OneStop was co-founded by Meenakshi Bhat and her brother-in-law Rohit Bhat. Rohit Bhat is a Kashmiri pundit who was forced to move out of the valley in 1990 at the age of seven. Though away from the native land, he grew up listening to nostalgic tales about the place from his parents, relatives and

friends who had spent a greater part of their lives there. His memories about the place were not too vivid but the desire to reconnect to his roots was strong enough for the operations and logistics expert to set up a theatre group called 'Vomedh' in 2009. Meaning 'hope' in Kashmiri, Vomedh was meant to highlight the plight of Kashmiri pundits outside the land they still fondly refer to as 'apna watan'.

The other co-founder, Meenakshi, has a Masters degree in Public Administration and Education, and has worked as a college lecturer earlier. Kashmir OneStop, recalls Meenakshi, was conceived over a casual banter when the whole family was sitting and chatting together. They wanted to set up a platform which enabled all KPs displaced from their homeland the chance to get spices, food items and other things unique to the valley. "So distinct is the aroma and flavour associated with some of these food items sourced from the valley that lovers of Kashmiri food will know the difference between the ingredients immediately. Even if you procure your supplies from the best of sources outside Kashmir, a passionate cook might in fact refuse to cook you a 'waazwan' (a Kashmiri feast) unless given authentic spices from Kashmir," she says.

"We realised that we, being based in Jammu, somehow manage to source our supplies from Kashmir but there are others who are located farther than us and crave for authentic Kashmiri stuff. Though the idea was conceptualized a long time back, we took the final plunge only after the recent e-commerce boom. When we saw the not too tech-savvy customers taking to buying online, we knew it was the right time to hit the market," Meenakshi elaborates. That was in September 2014. The





Rohit Bhat

Bhats took 4-5 months doing some market research. Familiar with the taste that tickles the Kashmiri's taste buds, they knew which sources to tap. "We know the places where best quality is available. We source spices like Kashmiri 'mirchi' and 'saunf' powder from factories in Jammu. We source high-quality dry fruits and vegetables from reputed wholesalers of Kashmir," she informs.

Not wanting to be labelled mere 'resellers' of established brands, the Kashmir OneStop team not only sources the items but takes care of packaging and labelling them on their own again. "We aspire to create our own brand. It is going to be a long haul, but we are working in that direction," says Rohit. The website KashmirOneStop went live early this year. The team took to e-mail marketing extensively while also exploring Facebook ads to reach out to the largest number of people from this community as well as others with a strong liking for Kashmiri food to sell their products. They also used WhatsApp groups to spread the word about them.

"The response has been very great. We are getting lot of e-mails and calls from Kashmiris everywhere in the world. They congratulate us while also thanking us for bringing

them closer to Kashmir, no matter where they are located. The older generation in particular has been very encouraging. They have been suggesting us grow to ensure people from Kashmir have access to everything they would need to cook traditional food and celebrate festivals as they have been doing all these years," tells Rohit. At present, the team is delivering the food items only within the country, afraid they might have to complete some legal documentation for shipping such items beyond Indian shores. Non-food items, however, have been a huge hit everywhere, irrespective of geographic barriers.

Shares Meenakshi: "There was someone in Australia who wanted a Kashmiri calendar before Shivratri. We were not doing international shipping then but we took his order as a special case and delivered it through speed courier, all the while ensuring it reached him before the auspicious day. He was, needless to add, ecstatic when he got that." Another unique order was from a Bengaluru-based couple who wanted Kolhrabi pickle, a KP delicacy. "We did not even have it on our site but we went ahead and delivered it to them. They were very happy and called us personally to thank us after getting the parcel."

Building an online presence and traffic however is not easy and the team, which has been into business for only a few months yet, realises that fully. "The journey of entrepreneurship is always ridden with challenges. The first and foremost challenge was funding. Rohit had already exhausted his savings on Vomedh which is a passion with him. Somehow, he and I together managed to set aside Rs 5 lakh as the initial investment," tells Meenakshi. "Right now, there's a lot of clutter out there. To get people to buy from us, we need to build up credibility and respect. That, we understand, is a challenging task. We believe our credibility will increase by word of mouth," says Rohit. "Apart from this, stabilising the supply chain and finding quicker ways to manage logistics from Jammu are the other hurdles."

The team hopes to start with other products unique to the valley soon. They want to urge more and more people in J&K to take to entrepreneurship. That, they are convinced, is the only way to change the fate of this trouble-torn state. "We need not go out of the state looking for jobs. We need to create them here!" is how Rohit puts it.

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