

## Interview with Laxmi Sharma

Being illiterate and a divorcee, Laxmi Sharma faced many difficulties in her life. When the money she was earning was not enough to support her she took out a loan to buy an auto-rickshaw (a three-wheeled taxi). This proved profitable and she managed to buy more auto-rickshaws which she leased out to drivers. She then learnt to fix the mechanical and technical problems that the drivers



often complained about and then started to drive one of the auto-rickshaws herself. Years later, she was formally recognized by the government of Nepal as “The First Nepalese Woman Auto-Rickshaw Driver.” Some members of the community insulted and harassed her because she was a female driving an auto-rickshaw. Later, she devoted her skills to the handicraft sector and undertook training in India. Today she runs the Button Palace helping many disadvantaged people earn a living.

The money she was earning was not enough to support her she took out a loan bought an auto-rickshaw (a three-wheeled taxi). This worked out very well and I managed to buy more auto-rickshaws which I leased out to drivers. Then, to learn about the mechanical and technical problems that the drivers often complained about, I started driving one of the auto-rickshaws myself. Years later, I was formally recognized by the government of Nepal as “The First Nepalese Woman Auto-Rickshaw Driver.” Some members of the community insulted and harassed her because she was a lady driving an auto-rickshaw. Later, she devoted her skills to the handicraft sector and took training in India. Today she runs the Button Palace

The motto of Laxmi Wood Craft Udhyog is “Where Hope for Survival is Provided through Skill Development.” Thus, at LWCU people are trained to make hand-crafted products so that they can become skilled workers. To date, more than 4,000 people have been trained (15% of whom are physically disabled). They are provided with a nominal allowance rather than charging a fee. More than 5% of the profits are dedicated to social welfare activities. LWCU’s products are environmentally friendly. Many items are made from bone and horn of domestic animals, which are left over from the meat industry.

Recently Laxmi has opened a Handicraft Institute for Button and Craft Production. Many disadvantaged Nepali people can learn to make their livings in this sector, which still has a lot of potential for growth.

<http://buttonpalace.com/about.html>

## Can you tell us about your family background and your childhood memories?

I was born on Mansir, 3 1949 in Maharajgunj, Kathmandu, Nepal. I am the only daughter of Laxman Thapa and my mother Sukumaya Thapa. My father and mother had an inter-caste marriage and at that time Nepalese society didn't accept such inter-caste love marriages. My mother used to live in her parents' home, so I was born in my maternal home. But after some time had passed, my father's family accepted the marriage and so my mother and I started living at my father's home. I didn't feel that my parents discriminated between me and my brother. I received a lot of love and attention from my parents. I was named 'Laxmi' because I was given birth at the cattle shed. In Nepali cows are considered as "Laxmi", a goddess of wealth. It is not common to be born in your maternal home in Nepal usually you are born in your father's home. Neither of my parents were literate and they were both farmers.

As I grew up in my maternal home I didn't feel there was any discrimination between son and daughter. I didn't really experience many difficulties though I only was able to study three formal classes in Kanya School as a child. At the age of six, I joined the Royal family of Nepal as a housekeeper until I was eleven. After that I worked in the family home doing household chores like caring for the cattle. I was married at the age of thirteen and this made my life difficult. I was only sixteen when I had my first child, my daughter. My second daughter was born when I was eighteen and my third when I was twenty-one. My youngest daughter was only eighteen months old when I got divorced. Being a single mother at that time was very hard and I had to struggle in my life. As a single mother it became difficult to educate and provide other facilities to my daughters.

## What or who inspired you in your life to establish your business can you tell us about your journey?

My husband didn't care very much about me and our family, and that motivated me to do something to sustain and provide for my daughters. The situation I found myself in inspired me to work so that I could take care of my daughters, as I had sole responsibility for looking after them. I used to work hard in my duties but I don't really recall having any specific ambitions. Before I got into my current business, I was working as a housemaid for the diplomats working in Kathmandu. I was divorced and my three daughters were with me, but the money that I was earning was not sufficient to support their education. My circumstances encouraged me to take a loan and purchase

a public tempo (auto-rickshaw). This worked out very well as I managed to buy four more tempos which I used to lease out. Then I started driving one of the auto-rickshaws myself. I also learnt how to solve the mechanical and technical problems that my drivers used to frequently complain about.

In 1999, His Majesty's Government formally awarded me with a letter of appreciation, and I was given the title of 'The First Female Tempo Driver of Nepal'. I began to find myself running the tempo business. It was not easy though, as people would insult and harass me simply because I was a female auto-rickshaw driver. At this time there were no other women doing that job, you just didn't see it at all.

It was purely coincidence that I began to make handicraft items and buttons. A British Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) volunteer, Pam Hamming, was designing sweaters and she encouraged me by buying fifty of my buttons. I remember this vividly. She then provided me with more samples. It was through meeting her that I started to create new designs, and continued to make more buttons and handicrafts and research into new designs.

I was very interested in finding out more about which raw materials could be used that were more environmentally friendly. I looked at the books on handicrafts at the British Council Library and the Indian Culture Centre Library. During the course of my studies, I came across a book which mentioned the history of ancient times when artists' creations were made of ivory. This book gave me a new idea. In today's materialistic world, it was not possible to create handicrafts from ivory, so I decided to use the bones and horns of domestic buffalos. Initially, I was unsure whether my products would have a market. However, I decided to give it a try. I found that buttons and handicrafts made from bones and horns in the Western countries are highly popular. So this was how my business expanded.

My mother has always supported and helped me in each step of my life. I am able to manage my daily life and duties with her support. When I established my business, the 'Laxmi Wood Craft Industry', my mother gave eight ropanies of land to me. It was my mother who encouraged me to start this business and to leave the tempo-service industry, so you could say it was she who inspired me. I don't remember any people outside my family who have helped and supported me through my career.

Nowadays, I am the owner of the Laxmi Wood Craft Industry, and I am also the President of Birendra Universal Studio Kaliwood Pvt. Ltd. I am also associated with many organizations through my handicraft work. For example, I am an advisor to the Nepal Small and Cottage Industry Association and a member of the Nepal Handicrafts Industry Association, the Nepal

Chamber of Commerce, the Nepal German Chamber of Commerce and Industries and the European Economic, Trade, Business and Industry Association in Nepal. I am also a life-long member of the Community Service Centre in Maharajgunj, Sahayogi Haat Nepal, and a board member of the Kathmandu Animal Treatment Centre. As well as this, I act as an advisor to the Manab Kratbya Jagaran Samaj in Makawanpur.

## What do you consider to be your main achievements?

I think my main achievement is that I occupy some kind of respected position today, despite the fact that I am a divorced women living in a very traditional society. I am now getting the opportunity to serve many disadvantaged people in Nepal. I am proud to improve the skills of people. Through training programmes I have become successful in developing the skills of about four thousand people who previously had very little skills.

I am also very proud of my awards. Some that I have received include the Women Entrepreneurship and Gold Medal 1986; Best Exporter of New Products 2000; Top Exporter of Horn and Bone Crafts 1998, 1999, 2001, and 2002; Outstanding Women Entrepreneurship of Nepal 1997; The Leading Woman Entrepreneurs of the World 2000 and an award in 2000 from The Global Entrepreneur.

## What are the main challenges you have faced?

The first and most obvious challenge was to become the first woman tempo-driver of Nepal, because Nepal is a patriarchal country. During this profession I have encountered many challenges, like I had to fight with the many smugglers and pocket-pickers that were around. In Nepal due to the many revolutions and strikes we often could not work; this is a common challenge that many working Nepalis face.

It was difficult to make people aware that my products were made from animal bones and horns, because it was the first industry to use these raw materials in Nepal. My poverty was also a great challenge in the initial phases of starting a business. The inefficient government policies in my sector also made it difficult to register my business. In addition to this, the Maoist trade union in my sector also caused my business to close for about three months, which costed me lots of money.

Initially, when I established the business I had to store the bones and horns I was using to make buttons in my home but then when my father became ill I had to find a new place for my business

which was another challenge that I faced. Also, I often returned home late at night due to my workload, and this has caused my neighbours to talk and say that I have a bad character.

### What are your plans for the future?

My future plan is to work with the rhythms of time. I plan to establish a NGO, 'Laxmi Sarokar Pratisthan', to serve the disabled and handicapped people in society. As there are no training centres in our country to produce skilled labour in this field, I have taken it upon myself to train different people. This industry is in process of growing, and I plan to open up a Laxmi Button and Handicraft Institute so that many Nepalese villagers, many whom have poured into the Kathmandu Valley in search of jobs, can make their living. These people could be trained to become a craftsman or technical person as there is still a lot of scope in this sector for growth.

### Do you have any advice for women reading your story?

Time waits for no one, so we should all ensure we utilize our time well. Rural women should be encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities. Women should work hard to attain success and not just talk about it; action is needed by all women. It is important to work from the grassroots level if you want to be successful and have an impact with what you do. It is important to work for the betterment of the country and serve the neediest people in society. In this way you can achieve great things and maybe even make a name for yourself.

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