**Questions:**

1. **Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Our readers would love to “get to know you” better. Can you share your company story with us?**

**Naytra Couture's Wearable Folk Art: Empowering women artisans, protecting the environment, and restoring eyesight**.

Thank you very much for having me, and it's my pleasure to be with you today.

Naytra Couture is a brand that creates a unique experience that combines art and fashion to bring an exclusive collection of one-of-a-kind wearable art with 100% pure mulberry silk tunics, tops, and scarves. The starting point for our exclusive collection begins with the artwork created by folk artisans dedicated to keeping the ancient folk art of Madhubani (meaning a "forest of honey") alive.

**Naytra Couture is also Luxury with Vision: Curing Blindness, Empowering Women Artists, Saving Mother Earth!**

Naytra is a female-founded, female-run business that supports female artisans while creating keepsake pieces that will stay in your closet for generations.

I want to share a little bit about my back story with you. I grew up in a family of four in India -- it was me, my mom, my dad, and my younger sister. We were a very close-knit family, but I always had an incredibly close relationship with my dad. He greatly influenced me, and I know that I am where I am today only because of him.

For instance, I always thought I would pursue something technical after college, as I had studied math during my undergrad and thought the next logical step was getting an MBA. My dad, however, never believed in being limited to one path. When he visited the National Institute of Technology (NIFT) in Delhi, he knew I would fall in love before I had even seen it myself - math degree or not. And he was right.

Then life happened. I met my husband Sanjeev, we got married, and our daughter Diva was born. We moved to Canada in 2001, and our son Neil was born in 2002. It was then that I got my MBA Degree in Toronto like I always thought I would, focusing on marketing and business strategy. From there, I went on to work for companies like Hallmark, and Walmart Canada, eventually moving to TJX Companies outside of Boston. I quit my job in 2015 to spend time with my kids before they left home. In 2019 when my son Neil was a high school junior, my husband Sanjeev encouraged me to follow my dream. Hence the birth of Naytra.

1. **When and how did it all begin?**

Naytra is my dream coming to life!

Naytra means "eyes" in both Hindi and Sanskrit. My fascination with eyes began when I was at NIFT. I was introduced to Madhubani paintings while taking "The Influence of Ancient Indian Art on culture, textiles, apparel, and fashion" course. Madhubani is a folk art practiced by women in rural villages of India's Mithila and Madhubani regions. This practice goes back centuries -- 2,500 years to be precise. In those days, the women in these villages would paint the homes and buildings in town during festivals and special occasions. They would create these breathtaking masterpieces using dyes from plants and vegetables in their gardens, and suddenly these tiny villages would come alive.

Aside from intricate designs and vivid colors, all the animal life has big, bold, striking eyes, and I have been so fascinated by these eyes. These eyes always resonated with me as I believed then, as I still do now, in Shakespeare's words, that one's "eyes are the windows to the soul." Our eyes are a window to our inner world —our feelings, thoughts, and how we view the universe.

All along with the ebbs and flows of life, Naytra was always living in my head. I knew that I would share these beautiful paintings with the world by bringing them to life one day.

1. **What sparked your interest in fashion?**

As I mentioned, I did not ever think that I would have a career in the fashion apparel industry. I remember my mom not being too thrilled when I took the detour into this direction rather than pursuing a technical career. My introduction to the fashion industry was on my dad's encouragement when I joined NIFT, New Delhi.

I started my career as Assistant Manager in a manufacturing facility, and I had a fantastic experience and met so many interesting people. Being in apparel manufacturing taught so many life lessons that I am so thankful for, as these learnings have helped me all along the way.

For instance, I was a newly minted Assistant Production Manager at the start of my career, and my manager was an old and highly experienced gentleman. He taught me invaluable lessons that I will never forget. One of these lessons was never accepting "no" as an answer. I learned that it is elementary for people to say no when asking them to do something as it means that they have to do nothing. My manager taught me to challenge that "no" — to work, fight, and grind until I got what I wanted. It's always an unnerving process, but it is the best advice I have ever gotten – never to accept "no" as an answer.

I started my career in the fashion industry right after design school. I went to fashion school and have stayed in the industry since then. Over the years, I have been associated with fashion apparel and retail and have enjoyed every moment.

1. **What challenges did you face at the start of your business?**

Gosh! I have faced many challenges! At every juncture, at every corner. And I am still facing them. Finding the right partners for manufacturers, supply chain partners, and people who share your passion for work is one of the most challenging things I have faced.

I am very comfortable with my area of expertise, such as my product, managing the supply chain, and product development, to name a few. However, getting the website developed, up and running, and optimizations are areas that I had to learn and get better at understanding. I also had to teach myself how to use the photoshop application to bring my designs to life as I could not work with experts and get the job done. It was my idea, my thought that I had to bring to life. I am still learning, and I am sure I use the application inefficiently, but I get the job done. All this presented a big challenge for me.

Another big challenge has been figuring out how to fund the business and keep it alive. Banks do not support small new businesses, and I have realized that marketing is a giant bottomless pit. I have only as many resources since bootstrapping this costly venture.

Then to top it all off, focusing on sustainability presents a big challenge. Please allow me to explain how. Sustainable and ethical fashion is a relatively new approach, and the most significant challenge is changing the mindset and shifting the frame of reference in the fashion industry. If we want to be sustainable, we must create clothing differently, from the beginning to the end - from sourcing to manufacturing to delivering to the customers.

A creator focused on sustainable and ethical fashion should aim not only to create benefits for the brand but also, to minimize its harmful impact on our mother earth. This action, however, results in increasing the costs of the product. These cost increases present another major challenge that impacts sustainability. Working in a sustainable and environmentally friendly manner adds to the expenses throughout the supply chain, and these higher costs get passed on to the customers. However, as more consumers become aware of the harmful environmental impact of the fashion industry and more brands realize the imminent need to produce sustainable clothing, I am confident that the paradigm shift in the minds of consumers will occur sooner than later. There is always an easy way of doing things, and then there is a right way. We must choose the right way.

I have overcome some of the challenges and still dealing with some now. It has helped me stay focused and persistent, keep at it, and be patient. The challenges make my journey more fun and interesting; when you hit a setback, it temporarily brings you down, and you pick yourself up and move on.

1. **Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting?**

Well, so many mistakes, but it's all in the learning process. I had no idea if I should start the website process first or product sampling. The funniest thing that happened, which was not so funny at that time – was the concept of art in clothing. Now, as this art involves many details, it's intricate and vibrant – it has too many colors! I worked with a manufacturing facility for almost a year, even though Covid. They were doing samples for me; however, when it came to making the size sets, making the sizes in Small, Medium, Large, and Extra Large, they found adhering to the guideline that I had defined for printing impossible to work with. They told me that because of the strict quality standards, none of their employees wanted to work on my project! They would rather quit their job! This information came to me as a big blow as I had developed this vendor for almost a year. They almost painted me as a “very difficult to work with” client. I had never seen myself in that light, and I was heartbroken and felt the earth shift beneath me. So much hard work and all for nothing – or so it felt. I picked myself up in the next couple of days, dusted, and moved on to finding the next vendor. By this time, I had learned to navigate the process very well and moved on to finding new vendors. After this first shock, I developed multiple vendors. Most of them could not work with my guideline and quality standards, but I knew by now how to weed them out.

I look back at this whole experience and think about the “monster” that I might have appeared to them and laugh about it now, even though this incident almost derailed me at that time.

1. **Is it tough for a woman to survive in this industry? How did you overcome those panic attacks?**

I have not faced any challenges being a woman in the fashion industry, and I have had panic attacks; however, they are not related to my being a woman. If anything, my being a woman has helped me understand this industry better, and I know how to handle things and survive.

I have had panic attacks – most recently in March of 2020 when Covid hit, and we were all on a lockdown. I was in panic mode as I planned to launch Naytra in May / June of 2020. The whole world came to a grinding halt, and I thought all the love, passion, hard work, and effort that I had poured into Naytra Couture was lost. This situation had nothing to do with my being a woman, but it had everything to do with being an entrepreneur. I hope this makes sense.

1. **Has the pandemic affected your business, and what have you learned?**

As I just mentioned, the pandemic did have an impact on Naytra Couture's launch date. However, I have learned a lot from this impact. The fashion apparel industry is a recession-resistant industry, and this sector offers some of the basic to most luxurious clothing to its consumers. There is not a single human being who is untouched by this industry. The industry saw challenging times during COVID, but I am confident that the consumers are waiting and raring to return to their everyday lives, further boosting the overall apparel business.

Innovation is the bedrock of this industry, and I believe that we have an exciting and thrilling future ahead of us in this industry.

I launched Naytra Couture in January 2021. Since we are a startup, we have been dealing with our own set of challenges trying to hit the ground running. Honestly, I am not sure if it's the startup issues I have been dealing with or Covid issues. However, I strongly feel that these challenges and problems have worked as opportunities as they have given us breathing space to take our time, get stronger, and set to go. I feel that I have learned, and I am learning and will continue to learn so many different things during this journey.

1. **If you were not in fashion, what would you want to be?**

I have never thought of this before! Maybe I would have loved to be a healthcare provider, a nurse, and help the community heal.

1. **Share your best five tips that you give to every fashion brand and why?**
2. **Believe in yourself –** To be a successful entrepreneur, you have to have passion and believe in yourself and your product. This passion and belief are fundamental to your success at every level. For instance, I got challenged by many on my product and its uniqueness, and all I had to do was patiently listen and hear them and then tell my story. Either convince or get convinced is my philosophy. This philosophy has been my mantra always. Never give up; believe in yourself. It's hard to do this and have many disappointments, but you must pick yourself up again and get going. You can't let the blows decide your fate and future.
3. **A unique product that will stand you apart –**in today’s over-saturated market, it is tough for any product to make an impact. So as a creator, you have to think of what makes that product different and the point of differentiation that sets your product apart. Is this point of differentiation enough, and does it set your product apart? Is this a fundamental question you should ask yourself? Naytra's one-of-a-kind wearable art concept sets the product apart. Naytra Couture's uniqueness comes from the transformation of a 2D painting to a 3D wearable garment that is vibrant and promotes slow and conscious fashion, as we like to call it, Luxury with Vision.
4. **The right target audience** is critical in establishing your brand and its success. Your product can be the best in the market, but if the audience is incorrect, your product will not sell.

For instance, I participated in a live-streaming event in October 2021. The analytics showed that we had one of the highest audiences attending at a given point; however, we did not make even a single sale as the audience was not the right audience that I was trying to target.

Later on, in November 2021, I went to another event and sold the maximum number of pieces that I had ever sold amongst all other vendors as the target audience was the right one.

1. **Brand Positioning –** How are you planning to position your brand; does it go with the brand story? Do you have the proper pricing to go with your brand's positioning? These are the fundamental questions you have to ask before establishing your brand; for instance, I am trying to develop Naytra Couture as a luxury brand with a vision; Clothing with a cause. Our customers are not only getting a stunning statement piece of art, but they are helping us support female artisans, helping Mother Earth, donating eyesight for every unit sold, and making the world a more seeable place!
2. **Suitable partners to work with–** this is fundamental to the success of any venture to find the right people who share your passion, vision, and mission. Are these partners aligned with your vision is a fundamental question. I have had quite a few misadventures before getting to the right people, and life is a blessing when you are with the right people, and it's a pain otherwise. For example, my manufacturing partner is a dedicated person who sticks to his words. If he tells me, don't worry, and you will get the sample by this date. The sample comes to me by that date. I have complete faith in him. It is essential to your success to have the right partners to succeed.
3. **What makes you different from other Fashion Companies?**

The concept of wearable art makes Naytra Couture unique. Along with this unique concept, the three fundamental principles that are the driving forces behind Naytra Couture make us stand out. Please let me explain how and what I mean by this.

We create 100% pure mulberry silk tunics, tops, blouses, dresses, men's shirts, and scarves based on the folk art of Madhubani (meaning "a forest of honey"). Madhubani painting is where we start at Naytra.

I must share an exciting story with you - I participated in a holiday market last November. It was my first time; I had never done anything like this before, and I did not expect to sell anything during the event. When the event opened, to my utter surprise, I was the first and the most expensive vendor who sold the first piece in the first 10 minutes. I know that sentence has a lot of "firsts," I was thrilled and quite surprised and panicked at that order.

I had brought the paintings with me, and I had the mannequin with the tunic. When I would explain the painting to wearable art as a concept, people would just nod their heads; however, when I showed them the painting in my hand and asked them to look at the mannequin, I could see their jaws drop, and they would be mesmerized and say "ahhh! Now we get it!". It was interesting to see the penny drop moment on people's faces. They would stand and stare at the tunics and scarfs as if this was the moment of proper understanding. What a fantastic experience! We sold the most pieces during the day.

I was overjoyed by people's reactions and responses to our product more than the sales. They all wanted to listen to our story, they asked me if they could hug me, and their response to the pieces made me so happy and proud. Even when someone was not buying from us, they wanted to listen to the story! It was a fantastic feeling! I did not get the time even to take a sip of water as so many people wanted to know more about Naytra and Naytra's mission. I will never forget that day for the rest of my life.

1. **What are the “myths” that you would like to dispel about being a founder? Can you explain what you mean?**

I am not sure what "myths" or qualities an entrepreneur/ founder should have; I can tell you what has helped me and is still helping me as we speak throughout my journey. I would love to share some of these characters with you.

* + 1. **Being flexible and nimble**. Having an open mind and being open to learning and steering in a different direction than planned is fundamental to many situations. This trait has helped me numerous times. I have learned that things often don't work out the way you have designed them, and you must have the flexibility to change course. The most important thing is the goal, and you may have to take a detour or two to get to it, and that's ok. For instance, when I was conceptualizing Naytra, I was unsure how this concept of wearable art would work or if it would work. I talked to my friends, and they challenged me on my product – how will I stand apart in an already saturated market? They challenged me on the styles and why would someone buy from Naytra? Was it edgy enough for the millennials and younger generations? And at every point, I took the feedback and changed my strategy – added two styles Shakti – the sleeveless top, and Maya – the off-the-shoulder top. I gained a lot by just being flexible and being open.
		2. This is a perfect segue into the second trait that has helped me: having a **positive attitude and not taking things personally**. I almost feel that this character and being flexible are interrelated. I always ask people for feedback and ask them what I could do better. I have done this at the styling level; at the time of sampling, my friends came and tried out the tunics and told me how and what they felt. About my website, I have taken feedback from so many different people regarding all things that could be done differently to generate a better ROI, are brand awareness for Naytra. Having a positive attitude helps me stay focused, move further, and is energizing. I am always looking at how things can be done and not at the obstacles. For Instance, while making the design files, I have to make sure that the authenticity of the painting is maintained. I had to work with my vendors to educate them on why the imperfections work as perfections as each piece we create at Naytra is handcrafted – it took a lot of work and a positive attitude. While discussing sustainability, I had to work with my vendors as nothing about the proposition was straightforward. However, once you educate everyone and get on the same page, things become more manageable.
		3. **Persistent** – Not giving up is the most crucial character, in my opinion. You have to keep at it no matter what. You fall, you pick yourself up dust, and move on. Being persistent is a strong character because it deals with having a strong mind and not letting your setbacks define you. I have many examples of this. I have had 20 vendors, if not more, who have said no to me while we were at an advanced production stage. This happened as I was not ready to compromise on my product quality. It was a non-negotiable point where I was concerned. However, I firmly believe that where there's a will, there's a way. You may have to try again and again, but ultimately this is what will make you go ahead with confidence. As you fall, you get up and go as now you know what not to do again. You will come upon other obstacles; however, you will learn and move on. This attitude is the grit, and this will see you through everything.

1. **What is the most significant sacrifice you've made in starting or running your business?**

The most challenging part about running your business is that the company becomes your baby -- and in this process, your other babies and your spouse at home can feel neglected. The balancing act between the two is challenging.

I miss out on the little things, like being with my family and watching TV at the end of the day, and I feel like I'm not present with them - even if I'm physically in the same room. Simple things like cooking for my family, which is therapeutic for me, have taken a back seat. But I try my best to find a balance and enjoy every little bit of time we spend together.

1. **What's one quote you live by?**

There are two things that I firmly believe in. First – “being lucky is not a coincidence – it happens when your hard work meets the opportunity”. The second most important thing is "how to get things done rather than why they can't be done."

These have been my two mantras since the conception to implementation of Naytra Couture, and these still give me the strength to keep moving on despite setbacks and challenges.

For instance, I was supposed to launch Naytra in May / June 2020. However, Covid happened and the US in March when everything shut down. My initial reaction was that I had panic attacks as I was going 100 MPH getting things together, and suddenly everything came to a grinding halt. However, when I took time off, I realized that I was thankful for the opportunity, and now I could take a breath and think about everything in a calm and more composed manner. I also got the time to consolidate and develop a strategy to launch. I had too much going all at once, and now I could break down the steps and make them bite-size and more palatable. I launched Naytra Couture in January 2021. Since we are a startup, we have been dealing with our own set of challenges trying to hit the ground running. However, I strongly feel that these challenges and problems have worked as opportunities as they have given us breathing space to take our time, get stronger, and set to go. I have learned and will continue to learn so many different things during this journey. I also know that I have always looked at how I can make things work during this time rather than not.

**"You should never take more than you give – in the circle of life."**

I must tell you a story before we move on. Every morning, I go for a walk with my Siberian Husky puppy for about an hour and a half. That's Ryder and my time – I often listen to podcasts or books or listen to music. So, about three years ago – I was listening to Circle of Life from the Lion King – I have heard that song a million times and love it! However, that day I somehow focused on the lyrics, and a beautiful line caught my attention – In the Circle of life – you can never take more than you give – in the Circle of life. This is the sentiment that is the driving force behind Naytra!

Our brand and business are based on three pillars that we are deeply passionate about - women supporting women, sustainability, and giving the gift of eyesight.

1. **Lastly, what do you think this world needs the most?**

This world needs lots of love and compassion. I believe that good-hearted, kind, and compassionate people help this world move on and make it a better place for everyone. Helping people and giving back and forward makes us better human beings and this world a better place.