Creating Emerging Markets – Oral History Collection

Ritu Kumar, founder, Ritika Private Limited
Interviewed by Henry McGee, Senior Lecturer, Harvard Business School
January 14, 2015 in New Delhi, India
Video interview conducted in English

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Preferred Citation: Interview with Ritu Kumar, interviewed by Henry McGee, New Delhi, India, January 14, 2015, Creating Emerging Markets Oral History Collection, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

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HM: My name is Henry McGee from Harvard Business School and we are very fortunate today to have Ritu Kumar, who singlehandedly has really developed one of the important businesses in India, the Indian fashion business. She is going to talk with us today about how she grew the business. So thank you for welcoming us to your home. Ms. Kumar, when I think about your business and your life, you have really lived through the whole of Indian history since independence [1947]. You started off your business as a small handicraft-, arts-based business, and I think now, four decades later, you have just got a $17 million investment to take the business internationally. Was that your vision when you started off in your work? Did you always know that you wanted to build it into this multimillion-dollar enterprise?

RK: No, as a matter of fact, I think this was by accident, not by design. The last thing I had in my mind in the early '60s when I started my work was
anything remotely close to where [my business has] gone today. We must understand that India at that point of time did not have a retail infrastructure at all—zero. There were no shops. One really cannot quite perceive when you see India today what it was like at that time. [That was] postcolonial times; India just got its independence through the first generation that grew up at that point of time. There was almost a freeze for 150 years, I would say, on all crafts including the textile crafts in India because most of the designs by that time were taken to Lancashire [UK], reproduced there, and brought back to the Indian subcontinent to sell to India. So whatever was left of the crafts—which were considerable, there is a craft of textiles in every village in this country—was almost gone with no sustenance, of course, no patronage, as well as no reference to what the ancestors used to produce at one time because it was literally a two-generation gap. So when I came in, I was an art history student and I got into this by sheer wanting to know what the crafts of India were like rather than going in for any kind of business enterprise.

HM: Here you were a young woman, recently [a] university graduate; what were your influences? What made you think you could do this?

RK: I did an art history course in America. I went to Briarcliffe [College] in Westchester County, New York, and I was sent as this exchange student from my college Lady Irwin [College] in New Delhi and I started learning the
history of western arts there and it was abysmal. Here, I was learning a great deal about European art, but knew nothing about Indian art because nobody had exposed us to any such subject at that time and I came back very, very keen to learn more about my own history. So I joined a museology course in Calcutta, where I had got married, and that museology course took [me] out into the districts into archeological spaces, like the old archaeological site of Chandraketugarh [an archaeological site situated northeast of the city of Calcutta]. I also discovered other riverside settlements. One important [archaeological site] for my future work was on the banks of the Ganges, a few hours from Calcutta. After crossing a bridge [there was] a small but important commercial settlement [where] there was a Dutch colony, in a village called Serampore. And that Dutch colony was actually installed there to ship textiles out to the Netherlands; and that is where I discovered a lot of hand-block printers who were, of course, out of work, and I was an art history student and I was conversant with some of the arts. So, after some research on traditional textiles, I started this small enterprise of giving them some designs of what I realized they used to have, and they started reprinting them on those little block tables and started doing saris. They produced some very beautiful saris but I didn’t know what to do with them. I didn’t know where to sell them.

**HM:** Did you have any business training?
RK: No. I went with them [the saris] to a lot of places but there was no infrastructure of retail at all. So I took a little place in a grocery store, part of a grocery store.

HM: Where was this store?

RK: Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road in Calcutta, and [it was] another one soon, a tiny little one near a railway crossing in Delhi. I had some friends who said they’d run it and we just kept sending the stuff that they [the Serampore hand-block printers] were printing to the stores. Initially, it was not at all successful because India at that time was very used to wearing roses printed on chiffons from Paris. So suddenly, there came these very ethnic designs, which basically most of the society ladies related to—[which weren’t] things that they thought looked like their grandmother’s bedcovers. But in a bit, it [caught] on because we have a hugely rich textile tradition and I was sourcing from that textile tradition. So they were reproducing something that India hadn’t seen for a long time and that became very, very successful. Everybody wanted more. Then we got copied by everyone across the country who had a memory of the printing and the skills of many hand-block printers, so one story led to another. They carried on producing more and more and I needed to open more stores. So it was a complete accident.
**HM:** I think about the challenges—again, because a lot of entrepreneurs are going to be viewing this interview and thinking, “How can I do this?” I assume you didn’t have a lot of money. How did you pay for the designs? You had to collect money from the customers. Were there cash flow problems? How did you handle all of that?

**RK:** I am not quite sure how this happened, but I got an investment of 5,000 rupees from a gentleman whose card I was marking. [At the Tollygunge Club Golf Course in Calcutta, I had to walk with the golfer whose card I was marking the score on.] The gentleman was an industrialist and was playing golf. During the three hours that it took to walk with him, he wanted to know what I did for a living. I told him this long story and he said, “Why don’t you start an enterprise? I will give you a loan.” I never needed anything more because that just generated itself again and again.

I bought my first good strong silk yardage in bulk at a great price with that money and I sent that fabric to the villages and they printed it and then [that first investment] just regenerated itself. We really didn’t need that much more because it was a very slow process. It wasn’t like you had a product and you wanted to open ten stores. That’s not the way it went. India was still very conservative. It didn’t have an infrastructure, as I told you. My husband joined me in my business. So thereafter, the actual business part was taken care of by him and then the banks gave us loans against shipments. Then we had a
situation where an NGO came to the little store I had. [The representative] said, “I need a thousand scarves made out of this,” and I said, “That will take three years,” or something. “This is not going to happen that easily.” Well, my husband was a businessman, so he got involved, and we did ship those scarves.

**HM:** You did?

**RK:** Yes, we shipped those scarves and my husband, whose family was in the motor car business, set up a small hand-block printing unit which supplied silk scarves, and before we knew it, we were in the scarves business, which put us in touch with Paris, with New York.

**HM:** So which is the NGO that had that big order? If you think about the turning point in your business, was [it] that NGO order?

**RK:** That was the NGO [an Australian-based organization called Trade Action] order but also then we took our first stall in Paris at the Prêt-à-Porter. This was in the early ’70s, [when it was] unheard of for India to take a set of scarves and just go and display them in Paris, which was a mecca of fashion. And then the people from Monsoon came, people from Roshafi, people from Seventh Avenue in New York arrived, and [one buyer] gave us an order for one hundred dresses. I didn’t know how to make a dress. I didn’t know what it
was and so we shipped what we considered was a dress. It fit nobody but it made it to the windows of Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue. It almost was sold as a kaftan because it fit nobody but it was a beautiful piece of textile and from there started a story. We just couldn’t get them [Serampore printers] to print enough. The hand-block printing area started getting a lot of work. We started a small cottage industry with the designs I was doing and then it just took its own momentum.

HM: Let’s talk about challenges, because as you said, it was a craft that had been lost. You had to almost reintroduce the craft. You [were] suddenly getting orders for literally thousands of pieces, which were going all around the world. Were there challenges—you’ve got an education issue you’ve had to wrestle with? How did you get the crafts restarted here?

RK: What we all tend to not give enough credibility to is the craft: the skill and the knowledge is there and it’s been there for thousands of years. The silk that I was printing, for instance, is something that is called Ahimsa silk, a nonviolence silk, where the cocoons are actually gathered from the Terai regions at the foothills of the Himalayas. The silk is brought to Calcutta. The silk is called Ahimsa because there is no violence when the yarn is drawn from the insect. Unlike China, where the cocoons on the mulberry leaves are boiled and killed, here they are not boiled and the moth is not killed. So this silk has
been in existence forever. It does have a high degree of technology, the way you harvest the silk cocoons, you spin that yarn, which is done by the women in the villages. And it’s a kind of organizational[ly] interrelated industry from the people who actually pick the cocoons, the people who spin the yarn, the handloom weavers who weave the fabric, and . . . printing for the last process. That process needs a lot of degumming [removing the sericin, or silk gum, from silk, which improves the sheen, color, and texture of the silk] on the banks of the river. It’s a hugely organic process and the history is actually inculcated in the people who print [the textile]. I didn’t have to do anything more than produce an art work for a block and then a blockmaker carved it. So I was really a catalyst. Initially, I felt quite redundant once the whole thing [business] started. But later, [I] realized the need for constant design intervention in the world of fashion which we became [a] part of.

**HM:** *As I think about you growing your business, in terms of finding enough artisans, that’s not been your problem?*

**RK:** In India, that has never been a problem. As a matter of fact, the problem started when there were too many wanting to do the same work and [as a result] I had to open stores because I didn’t know where to put the produce that was coming out of that, because you know, these are also areas [that] had a huge amount of unemployment. These artisans were not employable in
factories or in offices. They are a rural economy. Most of the work that I do is still in the rural areas and India still has 16 million practicing textile craftspeople. That’s a huge number. So almost it was a deluge. I didn’t know what to do with so many people who wanted to print. I didn’t have enough fabric. Mostly, I didn’t have the marketing [background to know] where to put this [production]. So one thing led to the other.

**HM:** What about on the retail end? Had there been challenges in getting people who can run the stores [the way] you want to see them run, to find marketers who know how to market in an international market? Have you had any human resources challenges?

**RK:** The retail, as you mentioned, perhaps was always the biggest challenge. [First]—because of the very high cost of retail space in India. Secondly, you know today you see malls, you see retail spaces; there were none and just to get somebody to come and run that store who was doing it as a hobby along with being a housewife . . . It was that level of work that was going on. Of course, today when the whole thing is professionalized, we are also seeing a whole lot of professional people in the retail space. We are having a lot of people who want to come to India to work who have experience in retailing, and in the last ten years, there have been High Street stores which have come to India. Along with them, a lot of professionals have also arrived.
Professionals who do the marketing, the fashion shows, the ramps, the models, photography—all of it is an infrastructure that has been built in India [at] maximum twenty years back. So it really was a hugely nascent industry but what it actually did was—now that I think back on it—it set down a core for the indigenous fashion of India, which doesn’t happen very often. I couldn’t see it in perspective as I am seeing it today because if you look at Bangkok or even if you look at China or you look at any other developing and developed markets, what has happened is that most of them have a Eurocentric handwriting because the most professional fashion that ever happened was in Paris or New York. And they actually were funded by large multinationals and with these deep pockets, and [with] that strength of being able to market, procure, they actually dictate the whole world’s fashion today. What you are wearing today or what has been worn in Bangkok or in Morocco or in South America is not very different. They will all be coming from the same base, which is Paris related or New York fashion show related. What we did create in India was a very strong indigenous handwriting and the base of that actually came from the handicrafts sector. That to my mind has been the miracle, not so much that you had goods and then you could open forty stores and market them. The fact is that the product itself is very unusual in the world of fashion today.
**HM:** Either there is something about the Indian consumer that allowed them to focus [on] and support this industry in a way that you point out has not happened in other countries, or is it something about the size of the Indian market [which] is just so big. Why do you think India was so different from other markets?

**RK:** I have thought about this a lot because there was a time I thought, twenty years back, that it’s over. We all will be wearing little black dresses because this is what the future is going to hold. I think a couple of things happened. When I started work, the Indian government had put down a ban on imports of anything. I couldn’t import a zipper or a button. It was impossible. We had to get local fastenings. We had to actually go back to a very indigenous route to figure out how the old coats were fastened because you couldn’t import a button and we didn’t manufacture a button. You were in a situation where you had to actually innovate constantly from within the country to find solutions for readymade garments and that was one. Secondly, I think we saw in the ’70s a huge wave of what I would say [was] our first generation postindependence of revival in this country. Most of my contemporaries who were in the textile business, we were all out in the field, we were in the villages. We were reviving old textile crafts, the weaving, the printing, the embroideries—considering this is the richest country of textiles in the world, or has been. People came to India for spices and textiles. So they found other
things along the way but this was the basic strength of the country. So there was a fifteen-year period where the government funded a lot of revival programs and there were some very energetic, broad-thinking women out there—Ms. Pupul Jayakar, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who actually started this organic India wave, a very strong wave. There were Vishwakarma exhibitions all over the country; there were festivals of India that took Indian textiles to the world. I was part of this movement. I went into embroideries in a very deep way and through this movement India got introduced to its own textiles. If that had not happened, we would have had a blank and we would also have gone the same way as . . .

**HM:** People would have worn black dresses, too?

**RK:** Maybe not, because we had a fairly huge market, a very different climate, but having said that, so does Bangkok, so [does] Mexico, and they can’t really wear Lycra. But in our country, definitely we also have a very big market for bridal, for occasion wear, and most of our festivals are celebrated with fabrics. And that doesn’t really work very well with what is coming into India from an international place. Also, the women in India have a very particular sensitivity to textiles. This is something I’ve discovered because I think it comes from inherent ways. So a mixture of that and today’s explosion
of the Indian market—there are alternatives that the Indian fashion industry is offering which not many countries have been able to do.

**HM:**  I think about the arc of your business—which now incorporates three separate and distinct product offerings we will talk about in a minute—and I am going to use this term “retail empire”—You were doing scarves for Bergdorf’s and now you’ve got three product lines. So could you take me through the history of your thinking and how you got through three of them? How did you start? The first line is your very high-end line, Ri. Tell me, how did Ri come about?

**RK:**  I think that [Ri bridal line] also came through a revival story. A lot of these things seem to be planned but they weren’t. . . . I would not have been able to plan a bridal line unless there was an infrastructure behind it where there were people who did embroideries, because we don’t do bridal which are white lace dresses. All our bridals are mainly very heavily worked [by] hand because that is one garment or outfit that you are going to carry with you, perhaps give it to your daughter, etc. It’s a generational thing and it’s a very old traditional thing, whether it’s a sari or whether it’s an ensemble, families have worked on it for a bride for generations. It’s a history that has come down. Those basically [have] always been very craft-worked. So I started
doing research on another area outside Calcutta where [there are] hundreds and hundreds of miles of craftspeople who specialize in hand embroideries.

**HM:** Where is that?

**RK:** Outside Calcutta also. [On the way from Calcutta to Mumbai is a village called Ranihati. There are several families involved in some fine hand embroideries.] Calcutta was a huge resource. There was one area, which did handloom weaving, one area where I said I found the printers, and a completely different area, which had embroiderers, and these are guilds. They must at one time have been very, very large guilds but it has no structure. They are in little huts; people are both agrarian [and] work in their huts on embroideries, very multidexterous. All the craftspeople in India work on two or three crafts at the same time plus sow and till their land. So it’s a style of life more than anything else and I discovered this area and again the same thing had happened. They had no work for a very long time. They used to use pure gold to do the embroidery of these outfits and that had been replaced by some plastic thread. So they did not have a market, nobody wanted them, and it just needed some sort of intervention and, again, a catalytic kind of [effort] from our design studio to get back an old aesthetic of the technique and the embroideries. And that has really exploded. I don’t think there is an embroidery worker in India who is sitting idle because the bridal market was . .
. a void, [and now] they are looking for these embroideries and those have become one of our largest exports as well because there are no embroideries in the world left. There is only India that still embroiders. So the Ri line, I mean the bridal line, again came through [my asking] what [should] I do, they know how to embroider these things beautifully. Now where do I put them? So we had to open a bridal section. That is how [Ri] happened.

**HM:** I can see that you are very good at identifying the market need. You are very good obviously at sourcing the work. But I think you are underplaying your ability to look at risk. . . . I think it’s a long way from saying, “Well, I know that there are these craftspeople with these different crafts, I know that there is a market in Mumbai for gowns that will sell at 15,000 rupees and more.” There is a lot of work between doing that and a lot of things could go wrong. Did you ever get nervous and did anything go wrong?

**RK:** You have to be very convinced about the quality of what you are trying to achieve and also the source from which it’s come. My whole conviction always has been in the strength of the Indian textiles and I think if I go to an area where they know how to deal with it . . . It is a logistical nightmare, yes, and it is a big risk in terms of time, energy, and with the people being able to respond to it. I had to do this: put pivotal areas in these villages whereby we
could send fabric, it could be stored there, and then there would be a
distribution center.

**HM:** You had to invest in the infrastructure?

**RK:** Infrastructure as well as people. I used to have these little boys who
understood embroideries who would become managers and they had a lantern
and they had no electricity and they had a bicycle and they would go from hut
to hut distributing the fabric and hut to hut picking it up, bringing it back.
There were some wild stories of somebody getting married and the hut being
washed out and the fabric not being found . . . They were wonderful stories
because you could see what was happening. It was just [an] amazing
resurgence and revival and it put some sort of backbone into the Indian fashion
industry.

**HM:** So now we are in 2015. Talk about that supply chain now. Are people
still running around with lanterns?

**RK:** No, the area has got electricity. There are no lanterns. As a matter of
fact, the people I started working with first used to arrive sitting on top of a
bus, on the roof, because they couldn’t afford the money for the ticket. Then
they started arriving on little motorbikes, and now they have cars. I am most
impressed and they are sending their children to English medium schools, which are considered very prestigious. There has been a huge evolution.

**HM:** So there is an example of the Ri [line] going upmarket, if you will, and what that’s done to your supply chain and people’s lives. You’ve also more recently launched the LABEL line. How did that come about? That’s very different, by the way, [from] people doing hand stitching in the villages of Calcutta. What year was that, roughly, [the launch of] LABEL?

**RK:** Roughly, in the 1970s, we started taking part in the fairs in Paris with whatever we were producing. That put a huge amount of professionalism into the product line because I was doing a handicraft but I really didn’t know how to make it into garments. We had a sari-wearing culture and the craftspeople knew how to make saris but how to make a garment was a big, big challenge. That was one of the biggest challenges. So we used to show in Paris, we started getting designers in who could teach us how to make patterns, how to cut [and] to stitch.

**HM:** Were these French people?

**RK:** Yes, French.
**HM:** Did they come here [to India] or did you go there?

**RK:** They came here. They had to go to Calcutta. We had to work and people from that chain called Monsoon from England would come here. Peter Simon would send his people because they were importing from us and they wanted their things to fit. So they were in Calcutta. The collaboration was very good and then we got to understand quality. We got to understand what it took to make an international-level garment or fashion, for instance, and that collaboration has been there since then, since 1970, without which you would be wearing blinkers and working [only] in India. That has helped tremendously. [My] children were always with me. I used to take them, they used to do their homework in the villages because I had to go out and they would take their notebooks and they all understood and they were aware of the crafts that they were seeing around them. The elder one became a filmmaker and the younger one, after he did his MBA, joined the business for a while. He came to see and he started this concept of the LABEL line because I think, [in] his mind, all these women wearing saris were [from] a date that had passed. He wanted to move into something that his girlfriend was wearing, but at the same time, the touch and feel of the fabrics, the crafts, the textile richness, we wanted to retain in a younger collection. So he came up with the idea and that was the first time anything was really put to work with some method. There will be X number of stores selling it. That professionalism was brought in with
the next generation and now LABEL [is] ten years old. It actually marries a contemporary need for the younger Indian generation to have clothing that is fashion, yet at the same time not totally divorced from India, either. So this is a tightrope that we are walking [on] all the time with this particular collection, but somehow it has found a niche of its own and it’s not only selling well in India but also doing very well in Paris. It comes in with an Indian handwriting, but it is what it is. I think that is the growth path I see far more for our company as the demographics in India grow and younger and younger people are there. In my generation, people used to wear saris and sit at home. In the next generation all the women are working if they can find a good opportunity and then they have different needs. But at the same time, I think the sensibility is something that we would like to take forward in the product life of the older aesthetic.

**HM:** You’ve talked about [how] postindependence there was this deep interest in going back to the original Indian culture supporting Indian crafts and reclaiming the Indian cultural identity in this postcolonial world. Yet when I think about the world that the young Ritu Kumar is growing up in today, she turns on Indian television. She sees Indian rappers. They are exposed to Western fashion. Where is it headed twenty years from now? Where do you see the Indian fashion business and the East-West mix—where is this headed?
RK: I don’t think that there is going to be one answer to this. It is evolving. The only thing I do find is that the Indian women have a far more varied wardrobe than you would find anywhere else in the world because there is not only the need to wear clothing in which you can move a lot and go to office, etc. But there always is a parallel need to wear occasion wear as well as a bridal market plus even the everyday clothing in India can come with a lot more character, which we feel comes with the line we do for LABEL. I think it will carry on blending, but the fact is that you at least set a handwriting, and there is evolution from there. It’s not totally devoid from a cultural route that there was in Indian textiles. So I think it will evolve. It will evolve but it will maybe take a little more from the West. In some areas, maybe a little less from the West, but I think definitely there is going to be Indian fashion handwriting in the world of tomorrow.

HM: One of the challenges that you’ve talked about early on was dealing with government regulation and the fact that you couldn’t import. I think there has been a change in Indian government regulations over time in terms of foreign direct investment. When I think about the retail landscape in Mumbai, for example, if you go to the area that used to actually be the textile mills, there is your beautiful store and it’s a five-minute walk away from Zara, from Burberry. How has the arrival of these big international brands in the Indian market affected your business?
RK: I always am surprised that we are still there because when they did come in ten years back, it was very hard to compete with something with that kind of infrastructure, history, behind them, and what they bring to the table by way of expertise, etc. But I think there is a niche—not a niche, there is a space for the Indian designer today which still surprises me. I still feel it’s a miracle that there is a space in an international world for what is happening in India as far as Indian fashion is concerned. Not only are we surviving, but I think we are doing very well compared to High Street brands, and that this may be something particularly true of India and its resilience in terms of not getting totally brainwashed with a cultural input; I would say, in terms of fashion, that has happened to a lot more countries. China, for instance: I just don’t see anything Chinese there any longer. It’s really exactly what has been prescribed to them to wear and I think the Indian consumer would still like that choice.

HM: Tell me about the young women consumer in India, and is your collection directed towards her or towards an international market?

RK: You know, I am beginning to find there is very little difference between the two and this is what being an international country is all about. I think the young woman today who is working is equally exposed, pretty well educated, and able to handle a lot of other challenges that anybody else living in any
other country would be doing. So it’s not directed at any one person. If she finds it aesthetically right, it fits right, it looks good, and she is feeling trendy and good in it—a woman who is in Paris would feel similar. I don’t think we should differentiate—particularly in the LABEL line—between whether it’s Indian or French or American. Where it does make a difference is where the cultural inference is coming [in], which is the bridal ranges or ranges where people go for religious ceremonies or even to go out in the evening. There the choices [include] the odd sari which is styled a little more modern, and so on and so forth. That area perhaps cannot address a European—probably you don’t have the places to go to wear those clothes. You don’t have the climate. There is a huge color palette we deal with that doesn’t travel well but works very well in India. So, it’s a very complex space but it’s there.

**HM:** You have worked all of your life; you faced a number of challenges. You talked, for example, about taking your sons to the workplace with you. When you talk with young Indian women today, how are they dealing with that? They have multiple roles, they’ve got to be an executive, they have got to be a mother, they have got to be a wife. When they come to you and say, “Ritu, you have it all. You’ve raised these brilliant [sons]. You’ve got a business that’s got millions of people who are coming in and they are [investing] millions of dollars of money in you. . . . You live in a beautiful house. How do I become Ritu?” What do you tell them?
RK: I think you are asking whether it’s an easy thing to be a career woman and have a home and children. It’s not. And I don’t think it is any different in any part of the world. It’s a balancing act and it’s a tough one. Perhaps it was easier in India because you do have help and I had a very supportive family who would pitch in, look after the children when I was traveling to Paris. There were times when [the] kids had fever. [I] didn’t want to go. There is no way that [I] could not have gone. [It’s the] same challenges I think all over the world when women start working and also want to have a family. As I said, I was really blessed because the craft areas I worked with were not formal. So you could have flexible timings, you could do things at your own pace, and they were very easy places to take children to. I have never really had a problem working in the villages with a lot of men. That has never been an issue but yes, managing time is always an issue.

HM: The number of women who are running large multimillion-dollar businesses in India is a very small number. What do you think some of the barriers have been? We spent all afternoon talking about the number of women political leaders in the history of India, but when I try to put together a history of women business leaders, it becomes a much shorter book. Why is that?
RK: I think it has to do with how young the country is. Give another generation, I think that’s going to change hugely because I have a lot of respect for the women in this country and particularly now the younger generation has the opportunities that a lot of us did not have. In my time, it wasn’t very normal to send a girl to America to study, for instance. Colleges were limited, curriculums [were] limited, and spaces where you could work were, basically, you could be a teacher, you could be in a hospital, or some such very conservative area. Nobody was thinking of sending a girl to study to be able to head a bank. That has happened today. I think it’s just a matter of another generation and you will see much more because as a society, we are not repressive for women. I have never felt it. It would appear so when you read about events that happened on the streets, etc., but I think as a society we are pretty supportive of women today and their education. I think it’s a matter of time.

HM: One of the things government [in India] has done to support women in business recently, in moving into leadership role[s], is there is now a law mandating women's participation in corporate boards. Do you have a view on whether that’s good legislation or bad legislation?

RK: I think that the legislation is not going to be as effective as the sociological movement that is going to take place in any case. You know, this
is like making quotas for women. I think they are not going to need it. This is my particular reading of the Indian women today and in the future. The quota regime is only there if you are not competent enough to get into the place yourself. It helps, to some extent, to increase numbers but I think the talent is there. You are going to see a lot more women up there in front.

**HM:** You talked about starting the business, learning the business on your own, and again, building it into this worldwide enterprise, but I know you are also deeply interested in your business being really intertwined with giving people jobs, and so on. As you think about business and what its purpose is, talk about your view of what you think business’s role is in society—because you could just make money, you could do other things. Does business have a role in society?

**RK:** Let me just talk about the Indian context because I wouldn’t know where it fits in other areas. In India, we [still] are living in a highly impoverished country and part of the business role does definitely have to take corporate social responsibility into account. In my case, I feel that my field has given me so much enrichment as well as so many opportunities that it is part of the company’s responsibility to sustain a bit of that, definitely. So part of the role [is] need based: For businesses like us to be able to facilitate a design in areas which need design, giving employment in areas [that need it, and] more
than employment, also reviving some textiles that are being lost to the world. So I would definitely say our business is very well placed to take part of that role and we should do it.

HM: *And you’ve got a new initiative or larger initiative in that field.*

RK: Well, this is [an] initiative I want to work in for the next number of years.

HM: *Tell me about that.*

RK: We have [experienced] in India like it must have happened all over the world. Textiles were made by hand on handlooms. With the industrial revolution in Europe and America, that became [obsolete]—there are no handlooms left in the rest of the world. In India, because of its history, there was a handloom in every little village, which we used to make the sari for the potter. You know, that whole barter system was there in every village and we haven’t moved forward that fast. That is all gone. There is a very rich handloom industry in India still existent, and I don’t know what the last count was, but it has to go into lakhs of weavers who have no other livelihood, and this is really not something that you do as a philanthropist only. They have in their hands skills which can actually produce textiles which the world has
forgotten about. This so beautiful and so highly sophisticated. It again needs an interaction and the government is now really very keen; particularly, the new government is putting forward a lot of initiatives for designers to come and work in those areas, and they have set up the clusters for the handloom weavers to stop rural to urban migration, as well, and also to cultivate inherent skills. So as a designer, this is something that I am taking on very seriously. I have already started working [with] five or six areas to put up looms and redesign or design in a way the fabrics that they are making, which can go into our stores initially and then perhaps start a revival of some sort.

_HM:_ That’s going to be your focus?

_RK:_ Very much.

_HM:_ What do you think are your greatest challenges as you look at the next five years?

_RK:_ I think the great challenge is to do this—which is a revival, and a sentimental kind of thing, most people think—but make it work. That is the biggest challenge, [but] it’s possible and it’s always been a challenge whenever I worked in these areas. The second challenge is that you can’t only do this. You have to go into a semimodern industrial space as well if you want to
survive and keep growing to make this also happen. We’ve now got such a wide range of products and we have to keep doing that to make sure that all these areas we want to address can be worked with. So there is a design challenge here, there is an expansion challenge here, and there is also a challenge of getting back into the CSR [corporate social responsibility].

HM: Thank you very much. This has been a really wonderful afternoon. We have covered a lot. People will get a lot out of this interview.