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Secret Garden

By Rohan Tharyan

Set amidst the bustling city of Chennai is Mrs. Kiran Rao's creation: Amethyst. Most *easily* described as a boutique and coffee house, it is most *accurately* described as an 'experience'. In a world where climate-controlled buildings spawn merchandizing chains which tailor reality into marketable chunks, Kiran Rao pays homage to Mother Nature, landscaping Amethyst within a garden, under an open sky.

Having lived in England and Munich, Mrs. Rao infuses an adolescent urban Indian sensibility with a timelessness that a more experienced Europe has learnt to nurture. She holds on to our cultural heritage in the process and gives us a sort of *post-luxury*. Here, a sense of history and a desire to live in harmony with one's natural surroundings merge, to provide an indefinable sense of quality, far beyond the more obvious markers of luxury.

To buck a trend with as much gusto as Amethyst has, hints at a variety of influences this Mrs. Rao certainly has had. Coming from a business family and having worked in galleries in the UK, her entrepreneurial skills have been well honed. Her academic background is in Social Anthropology and History. She also has

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had experience in embroidery, gained while working in an NGO with afghan refugees; and added to this list is a one-year diploma in Pattern Cutting from London.

Integral to her business achievements is an ongoing dialogue that Mrs. Rao maintains, questioning developments for what they represent to us and our future, as well as continuously assessing what it means to be an Indian.

Frappé chatted with Mrs. Kiran Rao to find out more about her story.

Frappé: Where did the idea for a place like Amethyst come from?

Kiran Rao: Well, from all these sort of eateries which look inviting and interesting. I remember going to Pondicherry, and you see these little café houses with little wooden chairs, and I kind of liked that atmosphere. I think Leopold's in Bombay still retains a lot of that charm. So that kicked my interest in having a café to support the store. Being much of a café hound myself, in Munich when I lived there . . . it's all about that. That central European, continental culture is all about drinking tea and coffee and sitting in nice places and shopping. Going out for a little short bite or coffee is not such a grand event as making a decision to go out for a meal in a big way. It's a small but special event in the

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day, you know? As is shopping in a sense; I really do think retail is fun; shopping is fun; we all like doing it. The coffee shop, the bazaar; this idea of being in a happy bustling environment is really the story behind Amethyst. It's what I've tried to create. A sort of a happy bustling environment, with beautiful things to pick up; fun things; nice things to eat and drink; lovely flowers . . .

Frappé: The building is a palace right? I'm told it was a retreat for the princes of Jeypore. Did that grand past have a role in guiding the evolution of your boutique?

Kiran Rao: Oh, that's all incidental. I started out selling fun silver and costume jewellery (laughs). It didn't start off with this place at all. It started with an idea of a business. I was looking for a place and leased this one. I've always wanted to have these ingredients and put them together. But I didn't think long or hard about anything. I first started from my dining table at home, and people seemed to have sufficient interest and I said, "Oh my God, they're actually trooping into my house to look at the few things on my dining room table, and the few things on my rack (laughs)! Maybe I should look for something more public."

This house was sort of lying disused and being used as a garage, so then I thought of doing it up . . . it just looked fun. I leased it and it was a big challenge. It was an absolute shell; an awkward space; no air conditioning; auto parts in the main hall. It was a

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complete mess. So I slowly set about restoring bits and pieces; not really knowing where I was going, but I just did it on my own, with my heart in my mouth. I just took the advice of a few experienced people in the line and made a go of it (laughs)!

Frappé: It would seem that Chennai as a city is heading in the opposite direction to the kind of experience you are trying to provide. What's your take on this?

Kiran Rao: Well, one side of the change we see in Chennai is that we're losing our heritage day by day. All the lovely art-deco houses are just disappearing. I think that the real estate boom is fabulous for all those who want real estate and can make money out of it; but we're losing our true state of luxury. It's happening in cities like New York and London as well, where real estate has been galloping beyond tolerable levels. Where's your sense of luxury if you have to drive out to a mall? You're forced to have this compartmentalized life.

Whereas in the great metropolises of the world, it's wonderful if you can wander out in the streets; and you can go to a café, go to your florist, go to a pet shop, or a book shop. And for people to be able to run these small businesses and do well, you can't have exorbitant real estate prices. I think that's something we unfortunately have lost, and we will regret it one day but; *c'est la vie . . .* that's how it is.

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Frappé: O.K., so a simple question. What's your favourite item on the menu?

Kiran Rao: (Laughing) I'm happy just to eat stir-fry chicken, broccoli and beans. That's my main lunch. Then I love these fabulous *sharbaths* we've just introduced which are absolutely delicious.

Frappé: Of all the things available at Amethyst, what are you most proud of?

Kiran Rao: Well, I've worked very hard on the flowers. I think they are very very special. The problem is that with our climate, flowers that last two weeks in the UK will last only one day in Madras. But then they are priced accordingly (laughs). I think that's a great undiscovered luxury. We do fabulous flowers. The coffee is unique. Its Indian coffee and we brew it the Italian way! I think it's a marvellous fusion of East and West.

In terms of my products, almost everything I have is sourced from somewhere in India. So it really it's a shop for the global traveller. It represents some of the best things in India.