

Tailored to her needs



A worker at Creative Handicrafts

■ D. Solani, Hill Road

WHEN one walks into a small clothes store on Hill Road, the shelves are full of high-quality, trendy outfits. Some accessories such as tablecloths, embroidered napkins, letter holders and plush bedcovers and dolls also are painstakingly created and displayed.

But, is the shop really a designer outlet, one wonders.

Every inch of "Creative Handicrafts" store is filled with handcrafted products made by underprivileged women living in the suburbs.

The name of the store is borrowed from the NGO, which was set up by Sister Isabel Martin, a Spanish missionary of the congregation, Missionaries of Jesus Christ.

Sister Martin, who is an inhabitant of the Achanak Colony in Andheri for many years, was moved by the plight of women, struggling to eke out a living. She formed the organisation in 1984.

Started to make married women economically independent, the store that is affectionately called "CH," has made a difference in

thousands of lives over the years. It also discovered latent talents in women, who belong to all age groups, religious and marital backgrounds, working under a common roof to build lasting friendships in one another.

Today, the group has grown to include eight self-help centres in the Colony, with about 200 women being taught to become self-reliant.

"These women are trained to make useful handicrafts, soft toys and beautiful garments," said Linda, who runs the store. "And, the creativity and talent you see there is unbelievable. We explore this and aid them to realise there is a whole new world out there, where they can become the bread winners."

CH has hired staff and trainers to teach the women.

However, local residents including housewives were so impressed by the NGO's efforts that students from colleges like Nirmala Niketan volunteer with the agency regularly.

"Fifty percent of the income comes from exports to fair trade organisations in Spain, France and Italy, and the rest from sales in the domestic markets, profits from shops, other charitable NGOs and philanthropic individuals," said Arul Pinto, CH's program co-ordinator.

CH also has approached the tribal areas in Goregaon where it has one production centre and a training school. They also run *balwadis*, crèches, adult education programmes and child sponsorship programmes so that they are spared from the spiral of poverty and social exclusion. Its project, "Asli foods" undertakes catering and lunch orders. Nearly 20 women supply 400 packed lunches everyday.

"Creative Handicrafts" wants to continue to diversify and empower women to live with dignity.

"Our aim is to create millions of bread winners, and not a few millionaires," said Johny Joseph, CH's director.

The CH projects all aim to establish a society based on equality and justice, especially gender equality in a country where women issues is often of little concern. Supporting CH makes shoppers feel good when its hand-made labels read: "Thank you for making our world a less unequal place!"

For more information or to become a volunteer, please call 2832-4692 or 2837-9268. The store is on Hill Road, opposite the Bandra Medical Store.