

Interview with Mohana Priya, Founder of Kapala Helmets

Mohana Priya loves bicycles but once she finally found the perfect vehicle, she could not lay her hands on any suitable helmets. The young entrepreneur decided to design one that would be safe, slick, and lightweight. Soon to be launched on the Indian market, Kapala Helmets are hand-made out of carbon fiber and targeted at urban commuters eager to beat the traffic. Even before she had a prototype of her helmet, Mohana filed for a design patent so her product would be protected against unlawful copying and her customers feel they have a special item.



WIPO: Can you introduce yourself, your career path?

Mohana Priya (MP): I am Mohana Priya and I am 36 years old. I was born in the South of India, a place called Coimbatore in Tamilnadu, a very enterprising city. My enterprising spirit comes from the fact that I was brought up in this city, surrounded by entrepreneurs everywhere. I studied engineering in food technology, and agriculture, followed by an MBA in oil and gas, before going to Geneva to earn an executive master's from the Graduate Institute.

I have always been entrepreneurial, since childhood and always wanted to do something different. During my studies in Geneva, alongside my studies I became a food caterer, cooking Indian food for the students, selling boxed meals, cooking for events, and members of the Indian community.

Upon coming back to India, I lead a project on sustainability for an energy company. I worked with local communities, understanding the potential effects and risks of infrastructures, considering their cultural sensitivities. When the pandemic hit, I went into existential questioning. I focused on my calling to become an entrepreneur and started Kapala Helmets in October 2020. The company was like a culmination of my life experiences. I have tried many different entrepreneurial endeavors but never on a long-term basis. I guess I was more interested in the process of creation. With Kapala Helmets I always knew that I wanted to move beyond the process of creation and see the fulfillment of the project.

WIPO: Where did you get the idea of Kapala Helmets?

MP: I have always been an admirer of bicycles, in particular vintage bicycles. I love the ingenuity of bicycles, both a simple and complex machine, relying on physics rules, only needing human power to run. I think it is the best innovation of humankind. After I managed to find and buy a customized bike, I went hunting for a bike helmet. I could not find any on the market that I found suitable. All helmets felt like having a huge plastic contraption on the head. There was no thoughtful design and that got me wondering if something slick, minimal, and safe could be designed.

I found a designer from Coimbatore. The city has a specific manufacturing ecosystem, with a support system. I decided on the name, Kapala, which in Sanskrit means skull cup, and the next thing I did was to get a design patent even before I had a prototype because the helmet can

easily be copied and replicated I hired IP lawyers who helped me understand all the steps to be taken to apply for a design patent. The patent shows that we are a very innovative company, giving a sense of provenance to customers. They are wearing a unique patented product. Also, I did not want to copy somebody else's design so we did a complete search of existing designs registered in the country, and found out nobody was doing this so it gave us the confidence to go ahead with the patent.

WIPO: What would you say is Kapala Helmets' competitive advantage?

MP: The other helmets on the market do not show design thinking. We collected a lot of input from the users, how the helmet should feel and look, its functionalities. The first major difference is in the design of our helmets, and the second is their weight. It is very light because it is made out of carbon fiber. Somebody could hop off their bike and go into a shop and they would forget they are wearing a helmet.

I wanted to find an alternative to plastic because the life cycle of plastic helmets is very short. After two to three years, helmets made out of plastic have a lot of wear and tear and have to be replaced. Carbon fiber, in comparison, has a much longer life cycle, its strength is comparable to iron but is weightless.

The fact that a helmet made out of carbon fiber can last a lifetime compared to 5 or 6 plastic helmets makes the choice of carbon fiber a much more sustainable option. We also offer to buy back the helmets when people want to change them whether the helmets are damaged, or people want to buy a new one or have no longer use for it. We are working on the possibility to recycle those helmets in-house.

WIPO: How does your product answer to the market's needs?

MP: In India, the vast majority of cyclists do not wear helmets. It is a huge issue and an opportunity. Wearing bike helmets is not part of the culture. We want to make the urban commute safer for cyclists. The bicyclists' community is also increasing in India, in particular since the beginning of the pandemic. More and more people want to bypass traffic, and there is an increased awareness in local governments about having dedicated cycling lanes. Large cities such as Bangalore are setting an example with such dedicated lanes. It is a growing phenomenon and we are part of this phenomenon.

WIPO: Where are your helmets manufactured? Which segment of the market are you targeting?

MP: The outer shell of the helmet is hand-made in Coimbatore. We have recruited experts who are familiar with fiberglass, which has the same properties as carbon fiber. A lot of people in the city who were working in fiberglass manufacturing were laid off because the use of fiberglass has become obsolete. Those people had the necessary know-how to work with carbon fiber. The whole process of making the outer shell of the helmet takes about two days. The other elements, such as the inner shell, the straps, and buckles are sourced from different international suppliers. We want to keep the outer shell of the helmet handmade because it brings both a human touch to the product and that element of provenance.

Because the helmets are hand-made, the capital investment and expenditure are very low, but carbon fiber is an expensive material and we are targeting a premium segment of urban commuters. In the future, I am looking at alternative sustainable materials, such as ocean

plastic, plastic from fishing nets to offer a more affordable version of the helmet. Also, our project is to expand to bike track racing helmets in the future.

WIPO: When are you expecting to launch the product and where will it be sold?

MP: We are missing the inner foam shell, all the rest is ready. We also need safety certification. There is currently no safety certification for bike helmets in India so I will have to send the helmet to Ireland to get it tested and obtain a CE certification. It will take another three to six months for the helmets to be commercialized. They will be sold by bicycles retailers and online.

We are planning on producing about 300 helmets per month. We want to keep the company lean and scale little by little.

WIPO: Did you have any gender challenges when starting Kapala Helmets?

MP: I did face discrimination as a woman. Manufacturing bike helmets were considered as a man's space. I faced discrimination and doubts from designers to molders, but eventually when those people saw my hard work and how dedicated I was, discrimination shattered over time. There was also the feeling that girls and women cannot learn something as technical as carbon fiber easily or quickly, and it was quite difficult for me to find people to guide me in material sciences. I was lucky to find the right people who guided me.

You need to be resilient enough to keep working on it and when men see all the efforts women deploy, they start changing, their conditioning gets challenged. You must not back down!

WIPO: What other challenges did you experience?

MP: Fortunately, Kapala Helmets do not require capital investment, but when I looked into the investment ecosystem, I realized that investment was only available for digital start-ups. There was virtually no support for manufacturing, not even mentorship support.

Another challenge is to promote a culture of safety, raise awareness on the importance of wearing a helmet for urban commuters. I have to educate my consumers.