

# eShe

March 2018  
Vol 2 Issue 3  
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— the female gaze —

## ***Shaana Levy-Bahl***

On feminist  
theatre,  
finding love,  
and her new  
documentary  
*Ladies First*



### **PRIYAMVADA'S PLAN**

She left showbiz to live  
in an old village fort  
for a curious reason

### **PHOTOGRAPHY PLUS**

Not just lenswomen:  
Shreya Sen, Naina Redhu  
Tejal Pandey, Punya Arora

### **INTERSEX BABIES**

How to diagnose  
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## SIGNS OF HOPE

**L**ast month, my friend's mother-in-law Mina Bedi – who has read every issue of *eShe* – bought a bunch of copies to distribute to her friends after a tea party. “You *must* read this magazine,” she told them, pressing a copy in each hand. To me, it was a sign that I am on the right path, that angels are looking out for me on my maiden media venture.

Cover girl Shaana Levy-Bahl (p.26) got signs too – that she'd have to change direction to fulfill her mission, she'd have to give up her Hollywood dream to take up a greater cause. Architect Pratima Joshi (p.23), who has mastered the art, science and politics of constructing toilets in urban slums, is already tuned in to the universe's vibe: she's been meditating daily for the past 33 years. And filmmaker-poet Laxmana Dalmia (p.44), one of RK Dalmia's 18 children, had mystical signs knock her off her feet more than once in her lifetime.

Then there are rebels who didn't wait for signs to do their own thing: celebrity stylist Aesha Merchant (p.06), India's 'Padwoman', Tanvi Johri (p.36), beauty entrepreneur Krishna Tamalia Vora (p.38).

Sometimes, the signs lead us to our purpose. Sometimes, following our purpose invites the signs.

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An animal lover, Aesha opts for eco-friendly and cruelty-free garments, fabrics and beauty products for all her styling assignments and for her vintage clothing label Red Empress

# DEFYING STEREOTYPE

*Celebrity stylist and entrepreneur Aesha Merchant has rebelled against social expectations of 'good girls' and won over detractors by being herself*

*Photography by Delton Dsouza*

**A**esha Merchant's grandmother was her first fashion icon: "She would always turn out impeccably dressed, with coordinated jewellery and lipstick in place even on the day she passed away." Aesha's mom was equally fascinated by bags and shoes. And so, as a young girl in New Zealand, Aesha was sure she wanted to get into fashion when she grew up. But back then, no one really knew where fashion could take you.

In fact, it took Aesha back to her birthplace, Mumbai, where she now styles Bollywood celebrities, works with India's biggest production companies, runs her own vintage clothing brand, and defies social stereotypes simply by being herself.

Aesha's family moved to New Zealand when she was a teenager. After completing her education, she worked for a short while as a visual merchandiser before moving to Mumbai "for a year" which turned into 10. She took up residence at

her late grandmother's flat – unprepared for the community pressure to conform that would assail her as a single girl living alone.

Her career took off well enough. She worked at a designer store before joining MTV, where she was on her toes for nearly two years

**"MY MTV EXPERIENCE  
WAS THE BUILDING  
BLOCK OF MY CAREER;  
IT TAUGHT ME HOW  
THINGS WORK IN INDIA"**

styling well-known VJs, from Cyrus Sahukar, Nikhil Chinappa and Purab Kohli to Anushka Dandekar. "It was like a circus! The experience was the building block of my career; it taught me so much of how things work in India," says Aesha. Soon, she got a lucky break in styling commercials. She went on to work with



brands like Lakme, Dove, Olay and Garnier, and Bollywood celebrities including Alia Bhatt, Nargis Fakhri and Vir Das. Her first movie styling project, *Kaalakaandi* starring Saif Ali Khan, released earlier this year.

But while her work was creative and productive, life in India wasn't as easy. Neighbours complained about her pets – an animal lover, Aesha rescued dogs and fed strays. Some asked why she came home late at night; "I work in show-business," she'd reply, taken aback.

"Initially, I'd get scared or lose my cool," the 33-year-old recalls, "but then my dad advised me to win over people nicely." So she changed tack and met her neighbours, developing personal relationships. Soon,

the petite young girl proved herself to be strong and level-headed, and won herself several supporters.

Two years ago, she and her videographer boyfriend Delton Dsouza moved in together. This time, there were no complaints. It helped that her parents often visit and are supportive of her choices. "I even take my boyfriend along to older people in the building when there is a situation they need help with," says Aesha, who enjoys books on history and philosophy, and fashion documentaries on Netflix.

"Society is changing, and people are sweet once you let them know who you are. I made the effort to go meet them," says the fashionista. "It makes all the difference." ■



## PILATES PERFECT

*Namrata Purohit was a prodigy in the world of Pilates, and now, with the launch of her eighth workout studio, she is out to make Indians fit*

She was the world's youngest trained Stott Pilates instructor when she was just 16 years old, and had authored a book – *The Lazy Girls Guide to Being Fit* – by the age of 21. Namrata Purohit started gathering her fitness credentials quite young, and now,

at just 24, has already co-founded eight Pilates studios across India. Along with her father, Samir Purohit, she has also been official fitness expert to the Femina Miss India International Pageants from 2011 onwards. And there seems to be no stopping her.



Bought up in Mumbai, Namrata did her Master's in economics before setting out to UK to study sports management, along with attending fitness workshops in London and Canada. She completed all Stott Pilates courses by 19, making her one of the few instructors in India to do so. She then returned to India to join her parents in running their chain of Pilates and Altitude Training studios. With three in

traveller, and loves water sports such as surfing and scuba-diving.

Her businessman father noticed his only child's passion for Pilates and decided to "do something together" to encourage her. Today, the father-daughter duo train people from all backgrounds, from industrialists, Bollywood celebrities, and sport personalities to models and fitness enthusiasts. "The best part about Pilates is that it is easy on



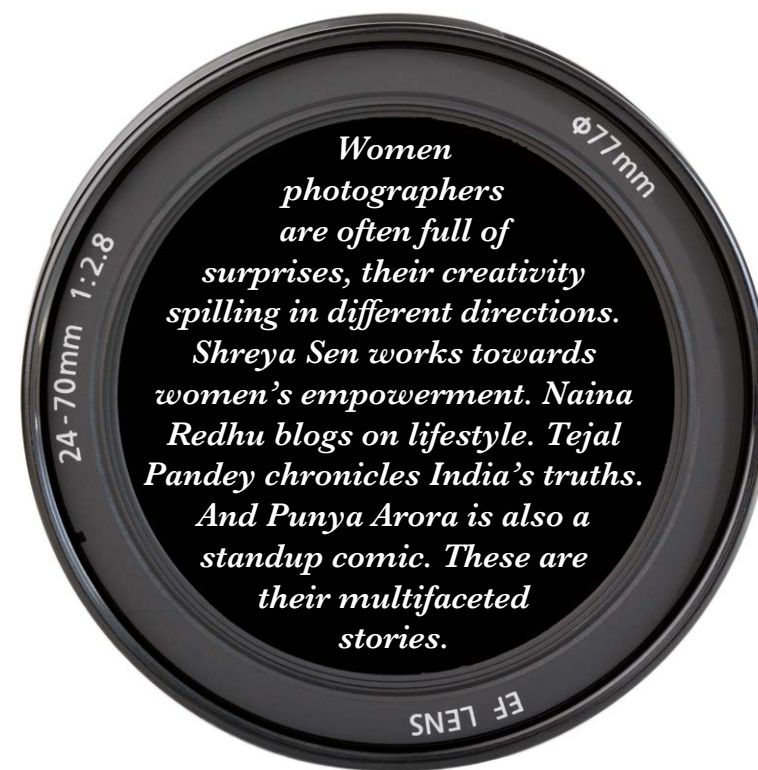
Mumbai, and one each in Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Chennai and Bengaluru, they added Delhi to the list last month.

"In the Western world, one can focus purely on fitness as a career, but in India, one needs to have a job or profession along with an interest in sport," opines the young expert, who also played squash at the national level, besides being trained in equestrian sports, football, handball and gymnastics. She is also a frequent

joints, while being tough on muscles. It's how a workout should be. There's also a lot of focus on breathing, so it's like active meditation in a way," says Namrata.

She believes most people today take up fitness for the love of it, and not just to lose weight. "Indians are now aware about the benefits of fitness: it's not just about looking good but also being happier, lighter and having more energy." Here's to India's fitter future. ■

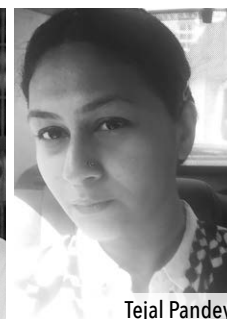
# THROUGH HER LENS



Shreya Sen



Naina Redhu



Tejal Pandey



Punya Arora



## THE LOVE BYTE

*Shreya Sen, Mumbai*

**T**he female experience has been a sacred space in Shreya Sen's photography. Inspired by valiant women role models in her hometown Mumbai and boarding school in Bengaluru, she eventually made it the filter through which she focused her lens. Specializing in maternity and wedding photography, capturing emotions – notably love and vulnerability – has been the cornerstone of her oeuvre.

Shreya initially explored the academics of psychology through her graduation from York University, Canada, and the beginning of her Master's from John Hopkins University, US. But the desire to immerse herself in the practical workings of the subject led her to quit college and take up photography.

She worked under top fashion



photographer R Burman in 2010, and then started out on her own. "I've watched strong women juggle various roles in their personal lives as well as work, and still find a balance with grace and strength. Yet they are often not recognised as world leaders or given accolades for what they do, even though I see them as the ones taking care of the world," she says of her decision to shoot real women, not celebrities.

She pioneered maternity photography in India in 2012 when the concept was unheard of, "but it was the beginning of my journey to

celebrate the strength of women."

Shreya met her husband through an online matrimonial site – a concept she did not believe in! When her dad put up her profile online two years ago, she'd "screamed and yelled" that she wasn't meant for "the arranged marriage setup". "But I guess you never know what might pour in when you open up doors," she shrugs, adding that her husband is a consultant in the corporate field.

The 33-year-old has just completed a film for an NGO working towards girls' health in public schools, and is creating presentations for women's organisations. One of them is on the importance of vulnerability in creativity. "In the age of social media and in my industry, there is an obsession with 'perfectionism', which can often be crippling and make us feel like failures," she says, explaining how opening up about her personal experiences has added an element of empathy to her photography.

Shreya cherishes the fact that she gets to be part of memories that people treasure for life: "I get to make women feel beautiful. I get to capture love that is unconditional and not scripted. Moments that are fleeting, warm, real, innocent. Coming from a broken home, I also get to fill a hole in my life of losing family, and giving it back to people with my photography. That's all that matters in this lifetime: our family and the laughter and love we share with them." ■





## THE INFLUENCER

*Naina Redhu, Gurugram*



**A**s a teenager, Naina Redhu was intrigued by her father's analog Fuji film camera that he would take on deployments as part of his job in the Indian Army. When it was available to her, she'd take pictures of plants or animals. Her hobby continued all through her schooling from an Army school in Delhi, and followed her to Pune where she did her BCom and MBA. At the same time, she was one of India's first few bloggers, using the online forum to publish the latest case studies in design and innovation.

She also began putting up her amateur photos.

In 2006, when a friend set up a new website and needed an image bank, he called her. "His budget was low, but I decided to give it a shot," she narrates. "When I reached the client's loca-

tion, they asked, 'Where's the team?' I told them, 'At this price, what do you expect?'" The young girl convinced them to look at her work, and pay her only if they were satisfied.

"They loved it, but I barely covered costs," she recalls of her initiation into professional photography. She shot a friend's wedding, and then commercials, chronicling her work on her blog along the way, growing in online influence and followers. Even today, in its new avatar, her blog *Naina.co* is one of the most respected luxury lifestyle blogs in the country.

Born in a military hospital in Mhow, Madhya Pradesh, and raised all over India, Naina was hardwired for versatility and resourcefulness from a young age. Describing herself as an 'experience collector', she covers a broad range of subjects from lifestyle and fashion to personal travel experiences, and is highly prolific: she published more than 1,000 posts in 2017 alone. "I prefer projects that result in a photo story," she says. With over five lakh followers across social media, she has partnered with brands like Emirates, Google, Swarovski, Dior, Burberry and Hermes among many others.

Naina married her childhood friend about eight years ago, and now lives in Gurugram. "It's important to have fun along the way, and to ensure that the quality of your work is good," says the 37-year-old of her success mantra. "And be open to learning – you never know who you'll meet." ■





## THE OBSERVER

Tejal Pandey, Mumbai



Photography taught Tejal Pandey to observe more, to listen, and to blend into her environment, “I lose my self-consciousness before stepping out into the street; I forget that I have this huge instrument in my hands. I have learnt to become invisible,” says the award-winning photojournalist and independent photographer based in Mumbai.

A student of English literature from St Xavier's College, she studied social communications media at Sophia Polytechnic, where she won her first accolades in the art form. A nine-year stint working across genres at *Times of India*, *Time Out Mumbai* and *Verve* magazine gave her a wide berth to experiment, understand the dynamics of light and frame, and explore her own reactions to situations.

In 2009, she received two Press Club of Mumbai awards for her images shot in the aftermath of the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai. “It was staggering to see what a tragedy of this scale leaves in its wake. And yet it was reassuring to see that life does go on, things do get back to routine sooner or later,” she says.

Tejal also won the Time Out International Award for her photo essay *Bathed in Blue*. Taking a sabbatical between jobs, she studied art history, black and white film pho-

tography, and digital darkroom at the Aegean Center for the Fine Arts in Pistoia, Italy, and Paros, Greece.

A daydreamer by nature, Tejal is drawn to “ideas and concepts that might be universal in nature but are often rooted in specific socio-economic contexts and worlds of their own”. Her work puts her in contact with people from varied fields, and she spends a lot of time understanding their background and personalities so that she can incorporate it in the language of her shots.

“Women’s stories are often the most layered of them all,” she observes. Having spent a lot of time with women from underprivileged sections of society covering news stories, she finds that men in their lives are largely superfluous, except for adding one more mouth to feed. “How strong these women are! But they don’t realise it,” says Tejal.

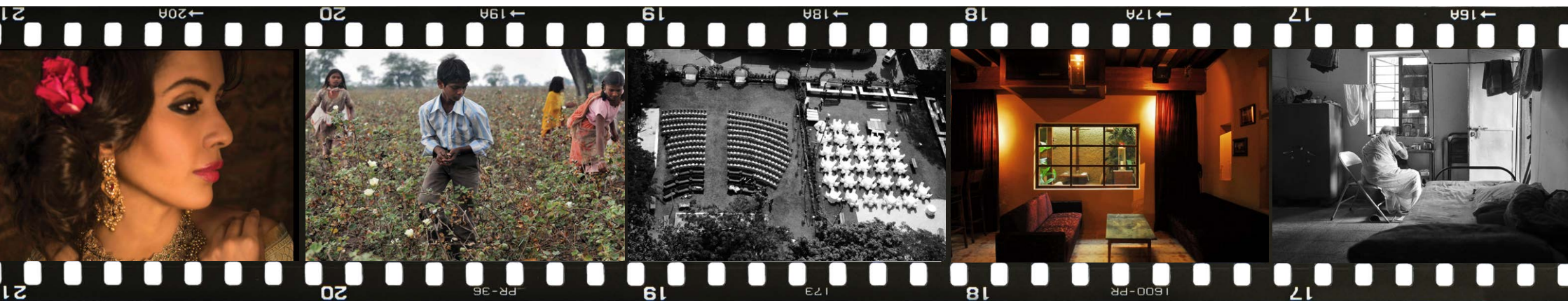
The challenge in modern photography, she says, is that it is driven

by social media – or “outward appreciation” – for the sake of more ‘likes’ and views. Tejal, who turns 34 this month, is rather more attracted to the quieter ones: “The ones that get the least likes are most often my favourites.”

While photography has become more accessible than ever, Tejal is

**“YOU REALLY NEED TO ASK YOURSELF A LOT OF QUESTIONS: WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS? SLOW DOWN YOUR PACE”**

interested not so much in the method but in the meaning. “It’s easy to shoot. But you really need to ask yourself a lot of questions: why are you doing this? Slow down your pace, really look at the subject.” The answer may surprise you. ■





## THE CLASS ACT

*Punya Arora, Bengaluru*

**A**t the time of Punya Arora's birth in Bengaluru, her young mother had been going through a rough time in her marriage. When the husband expressed his displeasure at the birth of a girl, the brave young Punjabi wife decided to nip the marriage in the bud. And so Punya was brought up by a single parent, and never knew the other.

When Punya was in her early teens, her mother's gift shop faced closure with the advent of e-commerce. Dogged by financial loss, the family of two had to tighten their belts to eke out a living — Punya made chocolates for sale, her mother became a property consultant.

"Despite the hardship, my mother was always happy with whatever we had," recalls the photographer and standup comedienne. "To see her



deal with life's problems so lightly left a deep impact on me as a child."

After completing schooling and graduation in business management from her hometown, she signed up for a course in professional photography from Ooty. She enjoyed the process so much, she decided to intern with a fashion photographer in Mumbai for a year. But as things turned out, her photography stint went on for eight years — she specialized in portraits and underwater photography (for which she did a



certified diver course).

And then, two years ago, comedy found her. Open mics were in their nascent stage in Bengaluru, and Punya decided to give it a shot. "It's my Punjabi nature to keep talking," she jokes. One thing led to another, and soon she was doing ticketed shows at larger venues across India.

In both professions, Punya has seen perceptions change as women enter male-dominated arenas: "Earlier, people didn't expect a woman photographer to turn up with heavy equipment. Now they don't bat an eyelid." Standup comedy still has some way to go in terms of gender equality but Punya is hopeful things will change as more women step up to the mic.

Comedy for her is as much about confronting her own truths as the audience. "There are many layers to my work. My comedy is all coming from a deeper place inside me, I've seen so much at a young age. I have to remind myself of how far I've come: I'm sleeping on a bed and not on the floor," she says somberly.

In the award-winning *Horse Walks into a Bar* by David Grossman, a book that Punya is reading these days, the Israeli protagonist pleads his friend to come to his standup show, "I want you to see me... That thing, that comes out of a person without his control? That thing that maybe only this one person in the world has?" Through her lens and the mic, Punya is doing both: seeing and being seen. ■




 A full-page photograph of Meera Gandhi, a woman with long brown hair, wearing a strapless white gown with a large ruffled skirt. She is sitting on a red-carpeted staircase with a white balustrade, holding a small gold clutch bag. The background features a wall with vertical red and gold stripes.
 

# All About GIVING

*New York-based global philanthropist  
Meera Gandhi on motherhood, mingling  
with world icons, and her new perfume*

MARCH 2018

**F**ormer UK prime minister Tony Blair's wife Cherie is her 'BFF' – "I am in awe of her intellect". She hangs out with the who's who of American politics and culture – Bill and Hillary Clinton, media mogul Oprah Winfrey, human rights activist Kerry Kennedy, actor-activist Whoopi Goldberg... the name-dropping could go on endlessly, really.

But what strikes you immediately about Irish-Indian-American humanitarian Meera Gandhi is her youthful exuberance and do-gooder earnestness. While recounting her life's journey, she breaks off into thoughtful tips on personal growth. It is certainly a useful quality for a global philanthropist whose special skills include networking with the high and mighty to raise funds for children in India.

Meera's story begins when her father, who was in the Indian Navy, went to Dublin to train with the UK's Royal Navy, and fell in love with an Irish woman. Born and brought up in Mumbai, Meera met and worked with Mother Teresa in her teens, an experience that left her forever changed. She graduated in economics from Delhi University, and went on to do her MBA from Boston University School

of Management, followed by an executive education program from Harvard Business School. She married one of her B-school classmates, settled in the US with him, and had three children in quick succession.

Her initiation into American high society and philanthropy began early. She volunteered at charitable events, and was on the committee that selected notable personalities for receiving the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights. "One day, I got an invitation to 10 Downing Street for cocktails and supper – there was no other detail, no 'London, UK', just those words on a red card with two horses on the side," she recounts with merriment. It was the beginning of a very 'special friendship' with the Blairs, each supporting the other's charities. "As a young person, you may wonder what your path really is, but I've learnt that one just has to take the first step. As Rumi says, when you start walking, the road appears."

In 2010, Meera founded The Giving Back Foundation, which has adopted New Delhi's St. Michael's School, and sponsors its meals and upkeep. It also identifies and sponsors entities and individuals across India, Turkey, Hong Kong, US and UK. The

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Clockwise from top left: Meera Gandhi with former US president Bill Clinton; Meera hosts a birthday party every year for Cherie Blair (far left); with Hillary Clinton; her new perfume Giving; with Oprah Winfrey

foundation often conducts workshops on de-stressing and happiness, and Meera also has her own TV show featuring interviews with inspiring personalities.

On Valentine's Day 2014, Meera had an amicable divorce, a date chosen to endow a humour element, and is on good terms with her ex while she "lives her own life". Two years ago, she launched merchandise including The Giving Back Candle, and a curated music CD. She is now out with her latest endeavour: the Giving perfume.

"I began the process 10 years ago, visiting perfume houses in south of France to develop the scent I wanted," she recalls. Made of 28 essen-

tial oils that took six years to perfect, the fragrance comes in special purple-coloured, hand-blown diamond-shaped bottles imported to the US from Normandy. Priced at \$165, with a smaller variant at \$25, it was launched in the US last July and has already won an award. It hits the Indian market this month.

"The concept behind Giving is embracing humanity, spending more time being loving and kind," she explains. "Every moment is important to me. I live in the now. I believe one should choose one's words and moments carefully. We get only one opportunity to craft our lives." Meera is most certainly making the most of hers. ■



## HYGIENE CRUSADER

*For architect Pratima Joshi, ensuring that the urban poor have proper sanitation has been both a personal and a professional mission*

Every time Pratima Joshi lands up at a new government official's door to get approvals for yet another round of toilet construction in urban slums, she is asked, "Why are you doing this? Do you want to stand for elections? Does this earn you big money? Why waste your time walking about in the sun in these filthy areas?"

She usually has no reply.

The Pune-based architect certainly has no political aspirations.

She also doesn't earn much out of the whole activity – toilets are built in partnership with residents and corporate houses who donate for the cause. And the mother of two definitely has better things to do than walk about in the narrow lanes of urban *jhuggis*, where she is greeted with the calls of, "*Sandaas-wali ayee hain* (the toilet woman is here)," said affectionately, of course.

Once in a while, Pratima explains her motives: "I do it so that girls



don't have to go out at night to relieve themselves in the dark in open areas. I do it so that families don't have to queue up every morning outside dirty community toilets, where the ratio is one toilet to a hundred people anyway. I do it so that lesser women contract uterine tract infections (UTI). I do it so that slum dwellers live with dignity and keep their homes clean."

Sometimes new bureaucrats and

she also learnt Hindustani light vocals and was often to be heard on Pune radio in her younger days. Her father, a metallurgist, had a stable business and encouraged her to go to Bartlett School of Architecture, University College of London, for her higher education. "London changed my perspective. I became very clear that I would work in the development space after returning to India," says Pratima.



Pratima's NGO works with six Maharashtra cities, constructing toilets in slums with a cost-sharing model

ministers are skeptical. But once they realise this 54-year-old benevolent looking woman means what she says – and that they will get to do the ribbon-cutting and earn the goodwill (and votes) of the slum-dwellers – they usually give in.

Born in Nagpur and brought up in Chennai, Pratima studied at the School of Architectural Planning at Anna University. Inheriting an ear for music from her singer mother,

She was 24 when she married an engineer with his own consultancy. They went on to have two children.

After studying rural and urban development from Centre for Development Studies, Pratima got together with two other architects and founded her NGO, Shelter Associates, in 1993. In these 25 years, her NGO has built over 12,000 household toilets working with six cities in Maharashtra, from Sangli to

Pune. In areas such as Pimpri, they have managed to construct household toilets for 1,700 out of 2,400 homes, reducing the load on the community toilets to one toilet per 30 persons. Their model involves collection of data using GIS software, mobilization of community, and implementing a cost-sharing model. The government is convinced to invest in sewers, drainage or septic tanks; corporate houses

bathe later. "The most heartening thing for me is to hear women tell me they now eat to their hearts' content at nighttime," says Pratima, "they are not worried any longer about going to the toilet in the dark." They can change sanitary napkins more often too.

"Slum-dwellers lead such wretched lives, with no privacy or resources," says Pratima, who exhorts women to come together and



Women benefit vastly once a toilet is installed in their tiny tenements, and UTI rates always fall drastically

are invited to invest in their social responsibility, and the slum owners select the tiles and do the construction at their own expense.

This often leads to healthy competition among them to make 'fancy' bathrooms or even upgrade the entire home. Some live in one-room tenements with barely a few feet to spare around a drain – they improvise by covering latrines with a plank of wood to stand on and

demand amenities from the government as one voice. She has a down-to-earth demeanour and a sense of peace that has been developed after over three decades of daily meditation. Winning accolades across different forums hasn't gone to her head. On the contrary, she believes there is still much more to be done. "Work with the highest intention," she says. The results will take care of themselves. ■

# STORIES WITHOUT BORDERS

*Actor-producer Shaana Levy-Bahl used her global experiences and even the hard knocks of life to chart a new language of storytelling*

*Text by Aekta Kapoor. Photography by Pernilla Danielsson*

**H**er mother is a Gujarati from Kenya; her father a Swiss-Hungarian Jew. Shaana was born in Mumbai and raised in Switzerland and London. She made annual trips to Mumbai to “stay in touch with her Indian roots”, while feeling “both local and foreigner” in all parts of the world that she lived.

This state of constant dichotomy perhaps led to her rejecting the regular ‘formula’ to get into Bollywood, and embarking on her own unique journey of producing films with a women-centric focus. And so far it’s working: *Ladies First*, her new documentary on India’s best-known woman archer Deepika Kumari, has already won international awards including at the London Independent Film Awards and Los Angeles Documentary Film Festival. It releases globally on Netflix on Women’s Day, March 8.

It was as an undergraduate student at Columbia University study-

ing theatre that Shaana got her first taste of feminism. Inspired by the city’s multi-cultural vibrancy, she took up a role in the Off-Broadway production of Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*. Around the same time, she interned with Mira Nair who was then working on the drama film, *The Namesake*. Her New York experience rekindled her childhood ambition to act.

But destiny had other plans. Shaana was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis, an auto-immune condition that mostly occurs in the developed world, when she was still in college. The diagnosis meant she had to give up her Hollywood dreams and return to London. “It forced me to be aware about nutrition. I adopted an anti-inflammatory diet and now find joy within that. I meditate and do yoga. I entertain at home to avoid eating out,” she says, adding that one can’t live life as a victim. “You have to adapt, to rise and fight another day.”

Shaana is quite the fashionista and is frequently featured in fashion magazines for her wardrobe full of international designers





While her health taught her one lesson, her first taste of Bollywood taught her another. Having auditioned for a Hindi film to be shot in London, Shaana ended up in Mumbai when one of the crew members failed to get a UK visa, and a song had to be shot in India. She then got a second lead role in another Hindi film, but most of her parts were cut out in the final edit. Ever the optimist, she took it in her stride and continued auditioning.

Soon, however, demands to act in a certain way – dumb or sexualized – left Shaana disillusioned. Unwilling to compromise on her values, she again turned to theatre, finding salvation on stage with the award-winning *Chaos Theory*.

Her true path revealed itself to Shaana in her mid-20s when her mother asked her, “Why put your destiny in others’ hands? Why not make your own film and be part of the storytelling process?” It all suddenly clicked. Shaana took on the role of executive producer of *West is West*, starring Om Puri and Linda Bassett. In the same year, she produced the hard-hitting documentary *Living in Emergency – Stories of Doctors Without Borders*. “The sense of control and power as a producer was intoxicating,” she says.

Soon her personal life spilled into her professional. Shaana was wooed by real-estate baron Uraaz Bahl and tied the knot with him at a much-talked about wedding at



L-R: With husband Uraaz Bahl after winning the Best Short Documentary for *Ladies First* at the Los Angeles Documentary Film Festival; Shaana (far left) with Kanika Kapoor, Deepika Kumari and Uraaz



L-R: The couple with actors Frieda Pinto and Sarita Chowdhary, and filmmakers Mira Nair and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy at their first academy private screening in NYC; with archer Deepika Kumari in Jamshedpur



the Umaid Bhawan Palace in Jodhpur five years ago. “I’m a hopeless romantic,” she justifies with a laugh. “It was the biggest production of my life.” The couple took off to the US to study production at the University of Southern California’s film school. They returned to Mumbai, inspired to create films based out of India. Unwilling to go the Bollywood route, however, they decided to make films for global consumption. And so, *Ladies First*, their maiden venture with Shaana as producer and Uraaz as director, is being released globally on Netflix, not in cinemas.

“We both grew so much spending three years with Deepika Kumari – before and after the Rio Olympics. We were humbled by how strong and resilient she is,” admits Shaana. “Most Indian women don’t get the opportunity or the means to prove their talents and worth. This is the

cause I want to work towards.”

Shaana is now working on another film with a female protagonist. She continues to travel globally, especially to Spain where her parents live, walks the red carpet, is

## HER MOTHER ASKED, “WHY NOT MAKE YOUR OWN FILM AND BE PART OF THE STORYTELLING PROCESS?”

interviewed for her posh home and extensive wardrobe, and throws some of the best parties in town.

And yet, it is the message of adapting and constant pushing of boundaries that defines the 34-year-old’s life: “Growth comes out of your most difficult experiences. It’s always darkest before dawn.” ■

# SPEAKING UP FOR SPORT

*Australia-based lawyer Molina Asthana helps immigrant women build confidence and adapt to their new land through sport*

She's an advocate for everything about sport: the physical fitness it builds, the sense of community it creates, and the confidence it instills. Having had firsthand seen the change in herself through running, Australia-based lawyer Molina Asthana is now out to get other immigrant women out of their homes and into the playing fields.

Born in Delhi to a family of legal luminaries, Molina completed her BCom and then did her LLB from Delhi University. She had been working as a lawyer at the Supreme Court in Delhi when she had a "sort of an arranged marriage", and moved to Melbourne to start a new life. There, she did her Master's in commercial law, and took up a job at one of Australia's top law firms.

Facing unconscious bias and due to the lack of work-life balance, however, she decided to move to the government. She joined the Victorian Government Solicitor's Office as principal solicitor.

A couple of years after her daughter was born, Molina took up long-distance running as a form of



Molina Asthana

fitness. "We had a lunch-time running group at my workplace," she recalls. "Sport is a religion in Australia, and somehow, I got inspired to train for half-marathons." She has run eight half-marathons since.

The confidence boost she got

from running triggered her to take up sports advocacy for immigrants, post-retirement pathways and leadership skills for elite athletes, and to encourage inclusivity in sports clubs. "A lot of immigrant women suffer from isolation and depression. Joining a sports club helps in gaining confidence, finding peer support, increasing wellbeing and creating a sense of belonging in a new country," she explains, adding that there is still much awareness to be generated in this regard.

For this purpose she founded her organization, Multicultural Women in Sport. "Clubs don't have safe and inclusive spaces for women of migrant backgrounds, so I advocate for

women-only spaces and for women to be allowed to play in traditional clothing like the hijab."

The diversity proponent has received several awards for community service. She is often named in the most powerful Indians' lists, and is the first Indian-born on the board of the Law Institute of Victoria, besides on various others including Australian Rules Football and Melbourne University Graduate House. Her nine-year-old daughter Diya is already a sports buff: she's learning football, tennis, swimming, gymnastics and ballet. "If you want to integrate with the majority population of your adopted country, join a sport," Molina signs off. ■



Clockwise from top left: Molina with actor Chitrangda Singh in Melbourne; receiving Person of the Year award from former PM John Howard; receiving the Victorian Multicultural Award from the then Premier of Victoria, Denis Napthine; in her role as Commissioner of Football; with husband Ajay and daughter Diya





## MEJA'S MAKEOVER

*Priyamvada Singh left a cushy life in Mumbai to restore her family's 148-year-old fort in Rajasthan. She ended up giving the village of Meja a new look, and the rural community a new outlook*

**H**ow likely is it that a young single woman at the peak of her career in reality television – rubbing shoulders with the likes of Amitabh Bachchan on *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, and numerous celebrities on *Jhalak Dikhhla Jaa* and so on – would give it all up to move to a village set in the middle of nowhere to restore an old fort at her own cost?

But Priyamvada Singh wasn't out to set an example. She had been on a small break from work and had tak-

en an impromptu visit to her ancestral village Meja, a village of about 10,000 people 130 km from Ajmer. There, she visited the 55-room Meja Fort – her great-great-grandfather Rawat Amar Singh had started its construction in 1870 – and decided to clean the place up a bit, “restore its original glory”. But what happened next was unexpected. This is a remarkable story of an individual's spirit changing a community's outlook, of the ripples caused by a pebble in a pond, of the power of one.

Several things happened when Priyamvada announced her decision to move to Meja in 2012. First was resistance from the family: “Why would you give up your TV career just when you're doing so well?” asked her father, a retired bureaucrat based in Ajmer. “How can a single girl live alone in a village?” worried her homemaker mom. “Is she mad?” questioned the villagers.

But Priyamvada doggedly went ahead. “We had no fans initially,” the 35-year-old alumna of Mayo Girls School and Sophia College in Ajmer recalls in her grounded way. At first, she tried to hire a few men from the village to sweep the place – the rooms were full of

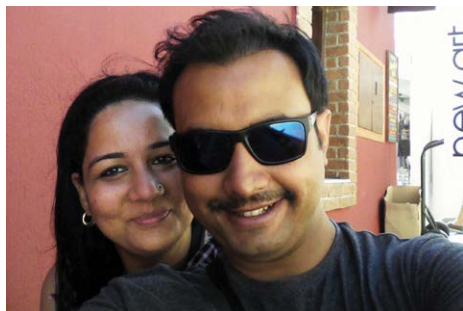
owls, bats, spiders, and other unsavoury inhabitants. Some corners of the fort were also being misused as dumping grounds by the neighbours. But the villagers didn't want to take instructions from a woman, so she told them to send their wives instead.

“Since I was a woman, their husbands didn't mind their wives working for me,” Priyamvada recounts. She hired a full-time domestic helper and a guard to live with her on the premises, and set to work. The village women worked outside their homes for the first time in their lives, earning a wage and gaining in confidence. Priyamvada also deliberately hired older, retired



L-R: Priyamvada Singh at Fort Meja; the property's entrance area before and after months-long restoration





Clockwise from top left: The inner facade of Fort Meja; the all-women team at work cleaning the property; with the team of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* during her Mumbai days; with her husband Deb

masons to work on the restoration of boundary walls and inner arches using traditional construction styles to give them a source of livelihood.

Then, Priyamvada came across a room full of old books and decided to set up a library. Her friends from Mumbai pitched in and donated more than 2,000 books. Since the area lacks public libraries, she hoped that this initiative would open new avenues for the locals.

She also began organizing activities for the benefit for the villagers such as blood-donation camps, yoga camps, and so on, and using the fort as a venue to celebrate local festivals like Gangaur and Jal-jhoolni Eka-dashi. Competitions were organised

to involve the younger generation – and she wasn't averse to using her personal 'network' to help them too. Spotting two little Meja boys' singing talent, for instance, she got them to participate on a reality TV show. One of them performed so well that a corporate house has now sponsored his stay and education in Mumbai.

In 2014, Priyamvada married Orissa-based businessman Vijayendra Chandra Deb, who was a family friend for several years and was aware of her "crazy" endeavour in Meja. He doesn't mind her obsession, and they have come up with a comfortable travel routine.

The 48,000-sq ft fort has also



Clockwise from top left: Before (left) and after (right) pictures of the boundary wall and gate being built; with actor Vidya Balan; with the cast and crew of the award-winning short film *Blouse* and the local villagers

earned its bit of fame as a movie backdrop: the short film *Blouse* was recently shot there, directed by one of Priyamvada's friends. Not only did it give the villagers a chance to act or work as local crew and earn some money, it also put them on an international platform as the film went on to win the Best Short Film at New York Indian Film Festival, got screened at other international festivals, and even saw a theatrical release at PVR Cinemas.

Self-deprecating and modest, Priyamvada's priorities have changed vastly in the past few years. Last month, she was given the 'Advantage Woman Award' by ICICI Bank for heritage preservation and so-

cial upliftment. Startlingly tall, she dwarfed actor Vidya Balan while the latter handed her the award. "When I showed the villagers the photo, they asked me 'Who is she?' That's how clueless the rural populace is about cinema or what goes on in the cities," she says with a sad smile. She hopes to turn the fort into a kind of homestay where tourists can experience the rural lifestyle and give local tourism a boost, but it's still a distant dream.

In the meantime, she will continue to add her unique city perspective to the village folk's lives, foster community bonding, and maybe see her beloved old fort stand tall in its former glory again. ■



# PADWOMAN

*All of 26 years old, Tanvi Johri has not just launched India's first 100% biodegradable sanitary napkin, she is also out to change social perceptions surrounding menstrual goods*

**B**y the time she was 24, Tanvi Johri had already seen the winding up of two start-ups. Armed with a degree in chemistry from Hindu College followed by an MBA, the Mathura-born girl was left jobless but with a deep understanding of how to lay a strong foundation for a startup, and the mistakes one must avoid.

Her experiences at the workplace also gave her an opportunity to interact with scores of working women, and to understand their daily lives and needs. "What struck me was the difficulty of having periods in the workplace," says the bright, bespectacled young woman, who is now 26. Firstly, women would tuck their sanitary napkins tightly in their palms or their *dupattas* while going to the washroom, and would also need to carry some paper or bag to discard used ones. Secondly, many wore the same pad all through the workday, choosing to change only once they got back home.

The long duration coupled with the pad's synthetic materials and India's humid conditions meant that a

rash or infection was always waiting to happen. And then the problem of disposal – why must we fill up



Tanvi Johri

landfills with tons of waste plastic? "I wondered why MNCs never thought about biodegradable napkins. Or softer surfaces that don't create rashes. Or pretty packaging that one doesn't have to be ashamed of carrying around," she says.

And so Tanvi decided to create



L-R: The Carmesi pad has a sealable pouch for disposal; the storage box is designed to be kept on a dresser

the ultimate sanitary napkin herself.

Along with her partner Rikshav Borah, she developed a beta range of pads that were easy on the skin. After nine months of extensive trials and feedback from over 3,000 clients, she further modified and enhanced the pad and, in November 2017, came up with Carmesi, a 100% biodegradable napkin.

The pad has many features women would rejoice about besides the fact that it doesn't harm the planet: it comes in a sealable pouch for disposing soiled napkins. It has a cottony covering that makes you feel like you aren't wearing anything. It contains no chemicals and is certified in India and abroad. You can take a subscription and have 10 pads delivered to your doorstep just before your period, so that you never need go out to buy them. You are given a pretty box that you can proudly keep on your dresser with-

out embarrassment. And it comes in two sizes – you can even specify how many of each you need per period. The only con is the price: it costs between Rs 25 to 34 per pad due to the high cost of production, packaging and home delivery.

But Tanvi – who has almost 20,000 customers – is optimistic that Carmesi would appeal to those looking for a menstrual product that matches their lifestyle, the way the upwardly mobile opt for better shoes or sunglasses. She also wants to remove the social taboo about talking of menstruation – Akshay Kumar's *Padman* could not have come at a better time for her. "Men buy our gift packs for their girlfriends or the women in their families. It makes me happy that we've made menstruation goods a 'regular thing' for these men, like shaving or brushing," she grins. Coming up soon: pantyliners! ■

# Nature's Bounty and Mother's Love

*Former lawyer Krishna Tamalia Vora launched Mom's Therapy, a herbal hair oil and skincare brand based on her mother's home remedy – and she also has a pretty interesting love story!*

**A**cquaintances always complimented Krishna Tamalia Vora for her lush hair, and she would attribute it to her mother's and grandmother's home remedy made with black sesame seeds. But as she grew older, she realised that the potent family recipe not only worked for her, but for others too. Deciding to spread the goodness far and wide, the for-

mer lawyer launched Mom's Therapy, her all-natural herbal remedies label, in 2016.

The second of four children, Krishna was born in Surendranagar, Gujarat. With a lawyer father, who still practises at Gujarat High Court, and a mother who taught Sanskrit and English, studies were an important part of her growing-up years. The little girl also often spent time at their grandparents' large farms, playing in the open fields and watching the dairy workers at work.

After completing her BA from Saurashtra University, Krishna went on to do her LLB, becoming the first lady lawyer from her father's Rabari community. She practised briefly but there were not too many cases to take up in the small town. So, in her early 20s, she took up a job as a legal advisor in a firm.

The next few years of her life were straight out of a Bollywood film: she fell in love with her boss, Rajesh Vora, who is 22 years older than her. He met with an accident, and Krishna had to manage his



Krishna Tamalia Vora with Rajesh Vora



Clockwise from top: The Mom's Therapy range; with Milind Soman at Mumbai's Pinkathon; Krishna with customers at an event at Racecourse in Mumbai



business with almost 70 employees while he was bedridden. He did get better after a couple of years, but both their families were against the match. Despite all odds, however, the couple went ahead with their relationship. Though her father didn't speak to her for months, he acquiesced eventually.

In 2009, Krishna moved to Mumbai. Unwilling to practice law, she instead started making small bottles of herbal oils using her grandmother's old recipe. She used first-cold-press black sesame oil of the highest quality and natural herbs along with floral extracts and Ayurvedic ingredients, which came from plants grown on the family farms in Gujarat, where she hired mostly women. "I only got

positive feedback from all family and friends," she recalls of her early years. She began retailing at farmers' markets in Mumbai, and customers would return every week.

Soon, she branded her products and priced them reasonably from Rs 179 to 599. She now makes a 100% herbal hair oil, body oil, coffee body scrub, handmade *sheesham* comb, hair pack and a very popular eyebrow oil. Her products retail from Nykaa and various other online stores, besides her own website [momstherapy.in](http://momstherapy.in).

Next on Krishna's agenda is a herbal makeup remover that also works as a cleanser and toner. "It gives me strength when someone makes a repeat purchase. It tells me I am on the right path," she smiles. ■



# RUNNER'S HIGH

*Deepa Rupani started training for marathons in her 30s, and rediscovered her true calling – and herself*



**T**wo years ago, Deepa Rupani was doing a practice run on the streets of Mumbai along with about 40 other runners when a car driven by a drunken man hit her and sped away. She fell unconscious while her fellow runners carried her to her hospital, and she was given emergency treatment for a gaping wound on her knee.

A week later, she ran the Mumbai half-marathon – against the advice of her doctor, and braving the displeasure of her parents who did not speak to her for three months. “I was bleeding at 18 km, but I didn’t want to stop. It was my worst timing ever,” says the 39-year-old nutritionist, who had to go off running for six months after the episode.

“But if I hadn’t finished it, I would have felt like a loser.”

Deepa belongs to a family of fitness enthusiasts: her businessman father was a yoga aficionado and her brother, like her, an avid gym-goer. She even won a fitness pageant two years in row. After doing her BCom followed by Master’s from Bombay University, she got married at 24, and had a daughter. Devoting herself to the home, she stopped caring for herself, emotionally and physically: “I was at my unfit worst.”

When her daughter was four, Deepa consulted dieticians to lose weight. “But I kept gaining it back again,” she says. So she decided to do the two-year course herself, and experimented on herself and her friends. “We all lost weight beautifully, and kept it off!” she smiles. Soon, she had a full-fledged practice running and an office of her own.

“But I still felt some space was empty inside me.”

At 36, Deepa discovered running. It began with short runs armed with good music, and then the five km ‘Pinkathon’. “Why not train professionally?” her friends encouraged her, so she joined the Be Fit Academy. Over the next three years, she ran 10 half-marathons and is now part of GETFIT, an NGO that organizes runs for a cause. “I even encourage clients to run!” she says.

For Deepa, running is as good as breathing: “I don’t drink, smoke or

eat junk food. The only high I ever get is from running.” She’s observed a huge change in herself in the recent past: “I used to crib a lot about life earlier; now nothing fazes me.”

Her family is supportive too: “If I’m in a bad mood, my husband tells me to go run! He knows I am



Top: With her husband Manish and daughter Priya. Bottom right: After a 21-km run in December 2017

always calmer later. And my daughter, who is 13, just completed her first four km run last month.”

Deepa’s next target is the full marathon: “I want to run 42 km by the time I turn 42!” She dreams of running in prestigious marathons in Delhi or Boston or New York. And after that? “The 89-km Comrades ultramarathon in South Africa!” ■



# WORDS FROM A HIGHER SOURCE

*A former doctor in the Indian Navy chances upon a new spiritual technique called 'automatic writing' and decides to give it a shot*

**By Dr Urvashi Tandon**

**O**n a pleasant winter evening in November, I told my parents I would like to be present when they celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary (theirs was a second marriage, each having lost a former spouse). There were no plans to have a party; instead, they intended to spend the day at an ashram in south India. I decided to go along. That was my first visit to any such centre of spirituality and it changed my life.

Being a medical officer in the Indian Navy sounded so very glamorous to me as a young woman. Little did I realise what was in store. I am an anaesthesiologist by profession

PHOTO CREDIT: PIXABAY

and I attended surgeries every single day. Having qualified as a doctor in 1988, 30 years of seeing sickness, pain and death on a regular basis and from close quarters made me face the reality of impermanence of situations and life in general.

After observing people reacting differently to various diseases and responding differently to similar treatments made me strongly believe in the law of karma. Faced with the knowledge of inadequate

It is said that when you really want something, the law of attraction manifests it for you. I moved cities and guess what? There was an automatic-writing workshop being held very close to where I stay now. I could not miss it.

Automatic writing is a means of channelling messages from your 'spirit guides' or higher self. We all have some psychic abilities – more commonly called intuition – developed to various degrees. Automatic



L-R: Dr Urvashi Tandon at Sri Ramana Ashram in Tiruvannamalai; with her colleagues in the Indian Navy

means to provide complete relief to terminal patients drove me to explore alternative methods of treatment, starting with energy healing.

After long gruelling years of medical study, reading was a habit for me, and I gravitated towards books of a spiritual nature. I came across *Laws of the Spirit World* by Khursheed Bhavnagari. This was the first time I heard of 'automatic writing'. Needless to say, my curiosity was aroused.

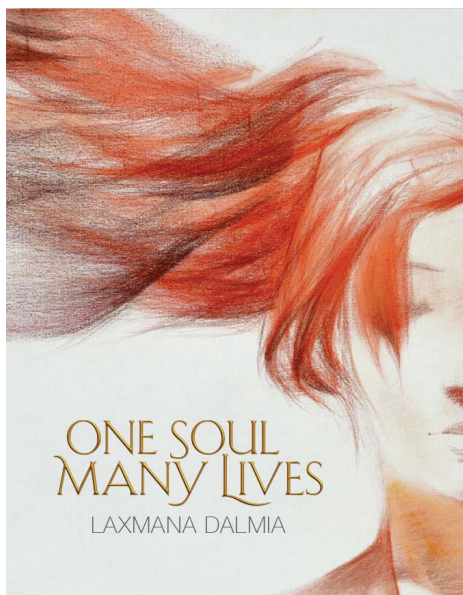
writing is about learning to tap into these faculties with proper guidance and taking your life forward.

How does it help? Well, imagine being able to seek guidance from your higher self when confronted with a dilemma in your day-to-day life. It could be a task to be done or a career move. Practice makes perfect and I am certainly very glad I went for that workshop. I seek guidance on a regular basis now, and am in a much happier space. ■



# PATH OF POETRY

*A fateful fire led Laxmana Dalmia, daughter of a poetess and India's pioneering industrialist, to switch careers and venture into spirituality*



**L**axmana Dalmia was born with a weighty legacy: her father RK Dalmia was one of corporate India's most colourful personalities. Her mother Dinesh-nandini was his youngest wife (out of six), wedded to him at 32 when he was 53. She was an outspoken feminist, award-winning poet and novelist. Laxmana was one of seven children the couple bore – and one

of 18 children her father had in all.

Her father did not allow his many wives to mingle, and they continue to live on expansive properties in Lutyens' Delhi in separate homes.

With two headstrong parents, India's newly won Independence as a backdrop, and a large dose of political, personal and business drama in their lives, Laxmana's childhood was eventful to say the least. An emo-

tional, introverted child, she began writing poetry in adolescence, having inherited the love for the written word from her firebrand mother. "My mom used to make me write out her manuscripts," recalls the 67-year-old, who attended Mater Dei School and later did her Bachelor's and Master's in philosophy from Delhi University.

The young Laxmana fell in love with Aziz Quraishi, an inter-religious match that was forbidden by her strict father. Though RK Dalmia passed away when Laxmana was 24, and her mother later cajoled her to marry Aziz, Laxmana decided marriage was unnecessary for their relationship. In any case, she already had a child to care for – she had brought up her late sister's son from the time he was a month old.

Laxmana had begun her career as a teacher at age 16 in a school for 400 children that her mother had set up on their property. By her early 30s, she was working as a college lecturer. One day, she was sitting in a café, confused about the career choices ahead of her, when a Spanish woman approached her. "You're at a crossroad," the stranger said, and proceeded to teach Laxmana about tarot. At the end of the surreal conversation, the lady handed Laxmana a set of heritage cards as a gift.

Moved, Laxmana quit her career as a teacher and went into business with Aziz. They launched a film

production company and went on to make over 500 documentaries and serials for the public sector over the next several years. But more mystical experiences were in store.

When Laxmana was 50, a freak fire burned down her entire office, destroying all their equipment, films and documentation. The only thing that survived was the set of tarot cards. "Suddenly, a voice within me guided me to take up this path," she



recounts. She studied various forms of energy healing and card-reading, and took on clients, helping them make the right choices in their lives.

Now, the former teacher, filmmaker and tarot reader is all set for her next role: that of poet. Her new book *One Soul Many Lives*, due for release next month, is a collection of poems written over the years, juxtaposed with visual art. "Your circumstances may be destined, but your choices decide your future," says the spiritual guide and poet. ■



## Love in the Time of MILLENNIALS

*The bestselling author of 10 novels about modern-day relationships, Nikita Singh answers our questions on love and marriage*

There's a very universal appeal in Nikita Singh's books when it comes to love and relationships; the couple in her latest novel *Letters to my Ex* (HarperCollins, ₹199) have Indian names but could well be anywhere in the

world. Born in Patna and raised in Indore, Nikita worked in the book-publishing industry in New Delhi before moving to New York to study creative writing. While her family lives in Ranchi, Nikita is currently in Manhattan, where she

does digital content and marketing for a solar-energy company. She has authored 10 novels and edited two collections of short stories. She shares her perspective on 21st-century romance and relationships.

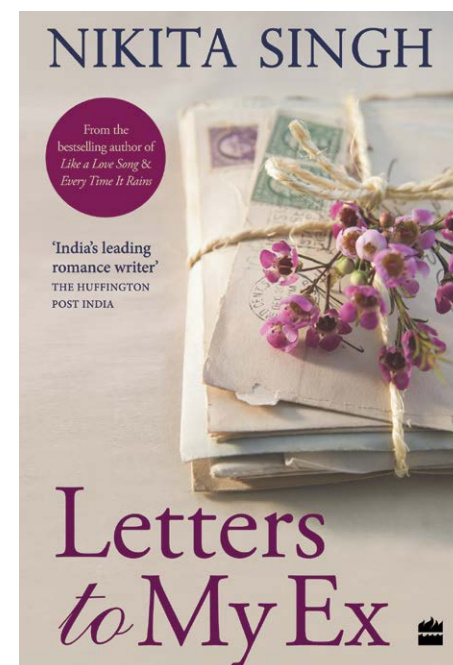
**On the shared experience of love and romance for millennials the world over:** When it comes down to it, emotions are less geography and more human. Today, when the world is so well connected, and we know everything that's happening in the other part of the world as if we're living the same reality, I do believe millennials all over the world are connected through similar experiences. Variables come into play, but there may be more similarities than dissimilarities.

**On the definition of love today:** It's divided on a personal level. Everyone sees it differently, and wants different things from it. Which is good – you're likely to be happier if you know what you want!

**On the aspirations of younger people in small towns versus cosmopolitan cities:** People in bigger cities like Delhi and NYC hustle more visibly (there's no other way; survival of the fittest) but even in smaller town, even though it's harder to dream, people who do dream, do it just like a New Yorker would. At least I did, having lived the majority of my life in small towns like Indore and Ranchi.

**On the “pressure to perform”**

**before writing every new book:** Initially, there was no pressure – I had nothing to lose. But as I started getting recognition, I began to care more about what people thought of me. Now, I've come full circle. I do everything I do for myself, and am unbothered by haters.

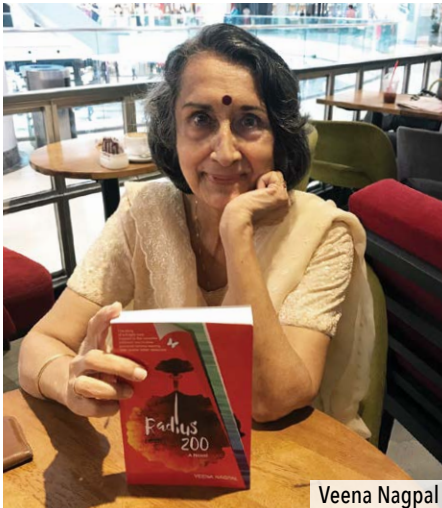


**On whether marriage is an outdated concept:** I don't think so. Most of us grow up in close-knit families, and divorce rates are low in India as opposed to the West. While I do think that millennials don't make rushed decisions when it comes to marriage, it doesn't reflect an opposition to marriage as an institution itself. ■



# Dystopian Drama

*Author Veena Nagpal chose an unexpected topic for her latest novel – nuclear destruction and a water crisis*



Veena Nagpal

**A** journalist in search of love, a geologist in search of the lost river Saraswati and an Army Officer in a coma – these are the protagonists of author Veena Nagpal's latest novel, *Radius 200*. Set in mid-21st century, the book projects a dystopian future for India as a war with China cripples its water supply and a nuclear attack leaves the land and people destroyed. The plot is a foreboding of what awaits humanity in a few

decades, a disturbing picture of our worst nightmares come true.

It's also a very unlikely story to come out from the pen of a septuagenarian Navy wife, whose previous works have included four children's books.

But there's nothing 'regular' about Veena, who admits she is 18 at heart and 35 in her mind, even if she is 75 years old in body. She prefers Kindle to regular books, is an avid photographer and artist, and thinks nothing of driving 30 kilometres all by herself to meet a journalist for an interview. At the Jaipur Literature Festival this January, where *Radius 200* was released, she hotly fielded questions from critics in her audience on how 'qualified' she was to write on nuclear weapons and radiation. "Why must women restrict themselves to 'feminine' subjects?" she asks. "We must lay claim to the androgynous space."

For almost three years, Veena researched wars, weapons and historical events before writing the novel, and had the manuscript vetted by



Clockwise from top left: Veena Nagpal's books for children; Veena at the launch of her third novel, *The Uncommon Memories of Zeenat Qureishi*; conducting a workshop for children; in her younger days



an Army general. "The water crisis has reached a critical point; India gets about 30 percent of its water from the Brahmaputra, and China is building a series of dams on it. They

**"WHY MUST WOMEN RESTRICT THEMSELVES TO 'FEMININE' SUBJECTS? WE MUST LAY CLAIM TO THE ANDROGYNOUS SPACE"**

can shut us off any time," she warns.

Veena did her BA in literature, world history and anthropology and married soon after. With her husband away in the Navy, she be-

gan writing articles for newspapers while raising their two children. When her husband later joined the Merchant Navy, Veena travelled him to the four corners of the globe. "Must have inherited gypsy blood from somewhere," she laughs. After he retired, the couple settled in Noida, and Veena focused on writing books. This is her fourth novel.

A passionate environmentalist, she has conducted more than 500 environment workshops for school-children, and has no intention of slowing down in old age. She signs off on an optimistic note: "Whatever cards I am dealt, I would like to play them the best I can. The present moment is all that matters." ■



# WRENCHED FROM HOME

*Reena Nanda's new book From Quetta to Delhi traces the path of her family as they migrated to an uncertain future, and is as much about the pain of India's Partition as about Punjabi customs and lore that survive even today in parts of both countries*

Even in the midst of turmoil, Maanji thought only of her children, her Vahe Guru, her gold, and food. She anxiously clutched her two *potlis*: one was filled with fried partridges and quail (sprinkled with her special spices) for the journey, and the second contained her small *gutka* (condensed Guru Granth Sahib), gold ornaments, and sovereigns (quite a fortune, since her husband held the traditional distrust of banks, and would always convert his money into gold). Fighting their way through a frantic, jostling crowd, they managed to board the aeroplane mainly because of Captain Soni's army uniform. Trying to cheer the weeping women with his typical Punjabi humour, he said that he was guarding the dry cleaners' shop on Bruce Road just because it had his best English suit!

Inside the vintage Dakota, Shakunt felt cramped and confined. People were shouting and pushing to get in, impeding the removal of the steps leading to the aircraft. She could see her father at the barricade, and realized with a sudden shock that he was not coming with them. She felt a gut-wrenching pain, as though a limb had been severed from her body. She wanted to cry out and stop the plane and pull her father

on board, but she sat there silent and dry-eyed; the responsibility of her entire family was on her. As the eldest, she had been mature beyond her years since her childhood, a universal *behenji*: mothering her siblings, caring for her parents, aunts and uncles, and considerate of her servants.

Absorbed in her jumbled and chaotic thoughts, Shakunt realized with a sudden jolt that the Dakota was airborne. Quetta was receding below her. Her body shook and trembled. Would they ever return to Quetta, the city of vineries, of vine creepers clinging to walls with bunches of tempting greenish yellow grapes hanging off them, of apple blossoms and trees laden with fresh green almonds and pistachios!

No. They would never see Quetta again.

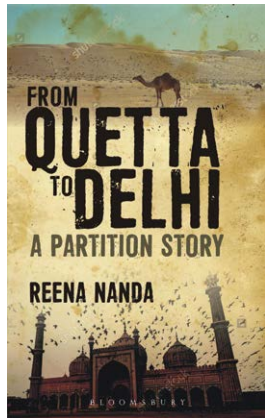
Meanwhile Maanji, having overcome her fear of the aeroplane, started to wail and moan loudly, "*Hai mera Kota, hai Kota chala gaya* (my Quetta is gone)." Embarrassed, her daughter tried to hush her, glancing apologetically at the other passengers, but no one noticed. They, too, were sunk in their own grief, shell-shocked at losing their homes. Shakunt felt their pain. Losing one's home was like reaching the end of a familiar road and stand-



ing at the edge of a cliff, staring at the abyss below. This migration was final; the way back would always be closed. But Quetta would never leave them; it was embedded in their minds and hearts.

**T**he stunned, bewildered expressions of her fellow refugees in the plane suggested that a cruel blow of fate had struck them. Partition, however, was not the work of fate, but of human beings: of an

imperial and colonial powers had carved out nations in the Middle East that had separated religious, linguistic, and ethnic communities by new, artificial and arbitrary borders, dividing them from their brothers. The British repeated the same in India. My family, and other West Punjabis, naturally considered their traumas and travails as unique. But in fact, they had joined the worldwide brotherhood of ref-



elite class of leaders born out of the freedom struggle. People had trusted Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, and other 'statesmen', but no one, not even Mahatma Gandhi, had bothered to consult the people before ruthlessly uprooting them from their native soil and flinging them into this state of limbo, homeless and penniless.

The Partition of India was one in a long succession of events since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the end of the First World War. The

ugees. And they would not be the last. Future struggles for power and conflicts would continue to ruthlessly crush the ordinary people, who were helpless before their ego-maniacal leaders. 'Refugee' would become the leitmotif not only of the twentieth century, but also of the twenty-first. In the anguished, hopeless faces of the Palestinians, Syrians, Kurds, and Yazidis, I see my grandparents and parents. ■

*Excerpted with permission from Bloomsbury*

PHOTO CREDIT (RIGHT): CHRIS VAUGHAN GRIFFITHS ON PIXABAY (PHOTO FOR REPRESENTATION PURPOSE ONLY)



# WHEN ROHINI IS ROHIT

*One in 2,000 babies is born intersex. But parents needn't despair; modern science, and an experienced professional, can offer solutions*

**By Dr Smita Koppikar**

**I**n remote Uttar Pradesh, Uma★, a sixth-time mother, was puzzled. She had just given birth to a healthy and beautiful baby. Doctors told her she had a girl, but she could feel two bulges in the baby's genital region that indicated testicles. Her heart pounded with fear, given this was not in keeping with being a 'girl'. In trying to get

someone to acknowledge her deepest fears, she went from doctor to doctor, reaching Mumbai in the process. Everywhere she looked she got the same answer: "Yes, of course, there are testes, but where is the penis? Of course, you would need to raise this child as a girl."

Based on medical advice, she named the child 'Rohini' and tried

PHOTO CREDIT: ALEX PASARELLI ON UNSPLASH

to bring 'her' up as a girl.

As the baby grew, Uma always felt that Rohini never responded to a female name, but promptly acceded when called 'Rohit'. "The mannerisms are always like those of a boy," the mother said.

Eight months later, when I first met Uma, I confirmed to her that her child was born intersex. She burst into tears. She told me later that they were tears of relief that some professional was being honest with her.

I explained that an intersex condition could have several different causes due to disruption of some internal mechanism in Rohini's body, and that we

needed to conduct some tests. In line with current patient-centered models of care, I was totally honest with her at each step. I told her we would need to readdress the gender of the child in the context of the test results, and the family's social, cultural and financial background, explaining the long-term consequences of all of these. It took a lot of gentle goading to get Uma and her husband to trust me, given their prior experience of the healthcare system thus far.

In light of all that I knew, I tended to favour bringing up the child as a boy already. Thankfully for everybody, the tests, and the mental health professional's evaluation, all came back in favour of bringing up the baby as a boy, much to Uma's relief. Uma promptly started bringing the baby up as a boy, and Rohit himself looked much happier being Rohit rather than Rohini. Uma

then was keen to normalize Rohit's external bits. I explained that it would be best to wait until he was old enough to understand and decide on his own. "We would do immediate surgery only to restore any functional aspect, like

difficulty in passing urine. But we would not recommend operating on a child to normalize the look of the genitalia," I said, being an advocate for the rights of a minor. Rohit's medical diagnosis, in fact, qualified him to receive an imported medication that caused the growth of a penis, much to the amazement of his parents.

A few months after I had first made Uma cry, I saw two big smiles and a bubbly baby enter my clinic. The couple were profoundly grate-

ful, and Rohit was getting spunkier by the minute, a sea-change from the distress he demonstrated when being brought up as Rohini.

Rohit has what is called an 'intersex condition' which affects 1 in 2,000 newborns. They are identified at birth by means of any irregular looking genitalia that need to be addressed promptly by a special-

the same gender by age 13-14 years, (b) no periods in a girl beyond the age of 16 years, or (c) a child or adolescent showing a crossing over of gender, that is, a girl beginning to develop man-like features.

These features need to be picked up and directed to an appropriately trained and sensitive professional. This will enable an open and honest dialogue with the families, ensuring confidentiality. The family should be offered treatments and explanation of the condition according to internationally accepted standards. Unfortunately, owing to the rarity of this condition, it foxes many healthcare professionals too. This is why it is important to create awareness amongst the lay public as well. If you think you have a child with DSD, this article is for you.

A very common fear that parents harbour is, "Is my child going to be a *kinnaar*?" We assure them that we work on arriving at a gender for the child based on tests and a detailed dialogue with the family. Bringing up the child as a *kinnaar* is not medically accepted currently, nor is it socially feasible in the current circumstances, considering the biases and difficulties faced by the transgender community. ■

*Dr. Smita Koppikar, MBBS, DNB (Paediatrics), MRCPCH (UK), CCT (UK) is a paediatric endocrinologist specializing in intersex disorders.*

\*Names changed



PHOTO CREDIT OPPOSITE PAGE: TAD EUSZ LAKOTA ON UNSPLASH (PHOTO FOR REPRESENTATION PURPOSE ONLY)

ist. It is very essential that an open honest and step-wise approach be taken in line with recommended international guidelines, which, to be honest, needs more awareness even amongst healthcare professionals. Intersex conditions are also called DSD (differences in sex development), and could show up in later life with other symptoms.

Broadly speaking, symptoms of DSD might show up in later life as (a) inability to grow into an adult of





## SISTER SPARKLE

*With their jewellery label Outhouse, sisters Kaabia and Sasha Grewal are carving out an unexpected niche for themselves*

**By Anupam Dabral**

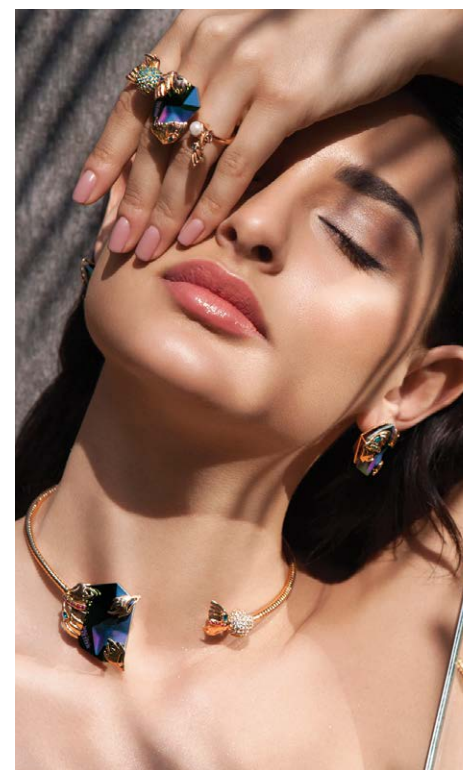
**K**aabia and Sasha Grewal developed a passion for jewels early in life. Hailing from Ludhiana and brought up in Delhi, the sisters often visited the family jewellery as children along with their homemaker mother, who bequeathed them her great taste and understanding of details. Encouraged by their hotelier father, they earned degrees in jewellery design and manufacturing from the Indian Institute of Gems and Jewellery. Sasha then went on to design for the high-street fashion brand Topshop in London. Meanwhile,

Kaabia studied at the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) in New York after which she interned with jewellery designer Eddie Borgo.

In 2012, they launched their label 'Outhouse', which saw a quick and heady rise in the world of fashion accessories, creating a whole new genre of nature-inspired jewels.

It was their own special kind of butterfly effect.

Worn by some of India's biggest fashion icons from Sonam Kapoor, Priyanka Chopra, Deepika Padukone to Kangana Ranaut, and global divas like Sienna Miller and Tyra



Banks, the label has grown organically, breaking into a business dominated by traditional sensibilities.

What made them stand tall was their flair for "unique and dynamic designs" they say. From dragonfly earrings to rings inspired by horses, these jewels are certainly not meant for the faint-hearted. "Outhouse thrives on constantly pushing the envelope of design, redefining how fashion jewellery is perceived and adorned; every piece aims to be a work of art and a conversation starter," the sisters say. Their commitment to old-school craft makes a

difference. Each piece is handcrafted with fine detailing, which is why they prefer working with an established team of skilled metal-smiths.

With over 70 employees and retailing out of reputed stores in Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru besides internationally at Bloomingdales and Harvey Nichols, the girls have witnessed the jewellery market evolve. "Women are moving away from the typical gold and diamond real jewellery and are more experimental with their choices," they opine. That's good news for the maverick label, certainly! ■





Every Outhouse piece is cast and hand-finished till it is polished to high shine, after which it is plated with two microns of 18-karat gold, followed by a two-micron lacquer that prevents it from any tarnishing or corrosion.



From semi-precious fashion jewellery earlier, the brand has now ventured into eclectic bridal jewellery, and their feather and beads-studded-into-brass pieces have already been doing the rounds at millennial bridal parties.





## SOMETIMES PRETTY, SOMETIMES BADASS

*Shubhika Davda's edgy fashion label Papa Don't Preach defines its muse as "a ribbon around a bomb" and is meant for a "perfectly flawed girl"*

*By Anupam Dabral*

**A**fter completing her fashion design studies from London College of Fashion, Shubhika Davda returned to India in 2010 to launch Papa Don't Preach (PDP) as a high-street label. It's defined by the deconstruction of traditional Indian silhouettes, use of over-the-top embellishments, and experiments with an unusual colour palette.

***What are your earliest memories of fashion or design?***

When I was about four years old, my mom bought our first electric sewing machine to stitch tiny dresses for my sister and me. She would let me practice the different stitches inbuilt in the machine on scraps of fabrics. The machine also came with this little toolbox, which to me was the cherry on the cake!

***How did your brand evolve from high-street to bridal?***

Inspired by London's high-street culture, I was clear that PDP would mature into a brand offering street-wear along with accessories such that my client could walk out of the store with a complete look. But looking at the business side of work, I quickly realized that the money was actually in Indian bridal-wear. That pushed us into designing a bridal couture and Indian-wear line in 2012. I'm glad that it did. I now come out with four distinct lines a year in the high-street, bridal couture, Western women's wear couture and accessories categories.

***Isn't that daunting?***

Creatively yes, it is mighty daunting and exhausting as I needed a team that was good at producing Indian as well as Western wear. But financially we can now rest our business on Indian-wear and be experimental in other departments.

***How has the industry changed in the past few years?***

The fashion industry is unfortunately still quite disorganized. It still requires a great deal of effort for young designers to be recognized



and you very often don't know where to begin. Luckily there are platforms that do launch young talent, and some encouraging buyers and multi-designer store owners.

But most interestingly, what has changed now is that social media can now help build brands and launch designers, and bring business in as well! That's pretty empowering even as a creative person; you know that if you put quality work out there, you will find appreciation and eventually business. ■





Papa Don't Preach combines Shubhika's three loves, music, drama and rebellion. Her muse is "pretty yet explosive, a mix of intriguing contradictions."



"You choose Papa Don't Preach because you want to stand out and not blend in, so don't break a sweat if all you have is the equivalent of a safety pin holding your dress up!" says Shubhika.





## Discovering My True Purpose

*A moving film she watched with her grandma and a humiliating moment in school led one woman to find her life's true purpose*

*By Kay Newton*

**A**s a young child, my weekends were usually the same. Dad would drive me over to grandma's house and dump me there for the weekend. We would either sit by the fire watching black-and-white movies on an old TV screen, a mug of hot cocoa in hand, or walk down to the local 'whist drive' – a group of old ladies playing cards.

On drive nights, I sat alone with a glass of warm lemonade. Sometimes the barman would chat. He was the

one who shattered my belief about Father Christmas, which led to me getting a slap around the legs from Dad for spilling the beans to my younger brother.

On one of those Saturdays, the barman asked me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The question evoked another bad memory. The weekend earlier, grandma and I had been watching a film about a young girl who went to live a pious life in a nunnery. I loved the film and told my so-called

school friends about how I dreamed of shaving off my hair and giving my life up to god. By coincidence, the very same day, the same question was asked in assembly by the school headmaster. I was pointed out by my classmates, made to stand in front of the whole school, tell them my biggest secret, and then deal with the laughter, shame and humility all alone.

Perhaps those past experiences led me to rebel against the norm, to not worry about what I would do when I grew up, what my true life's purpose would be.

**L**ife moved on. From high school, university, being bullied in the workplace, adventures on the high seas to other countries, working on private yachts in the Mediterranean, looking after second homes for the rich and famous, marrying, having kids, creating a home and sharing it with others, to where I am today: living in a two-roomed home by the beach in Zanzibar, Tanzania.

If you had given me a crystal ball when I was a 10-year-old child of working-class parents, would I have been able to foresee all my life's stories, the twists and turns? Of course not! All these experiences made me who I am today, a unique individual with a library full of memory books that only I can tap into.

When I contemplate my mind's library, I can be proud of most of the books that I find there. I have

followed my heart and intuition at every turn. When something does not feel right or isn't working, I make an effort to change it, to get curious and find new solutions. I remain true to my heart as much as I can, treat others as I wish to be treated, daily learn something new and at the same time serve others in some way.

My youngest boy is about to leave university and is finding it hard to step into the big wide world. Where does he go next? How does he choose the right career path? For me, there are no 'wrong' answers as long as you do something that includes two basic steps: evolve and help others evolve. Sometimes you just have to trust your intuition, plant one step in front of the other and leave worry for another date.

I still don't know what I want to be when 'I grow up' yet I know my true purpose in life – to learn, evolve and help others do the same. What about you? ■



Kay Newton is a personal development coach based in Zanzibar. She's an author, confidante and Tai Chi instructor. Follow her on [www.Kay-Newton.com](http://www.Kay-Newton.com)

PHOTO CREDIT: AARON BURDEN ON UNSPLASH

# Twice Stronger

RANI GAUTAM, 38, DELHI



**M**y father worked in the Air Force, and I was the oldest of four children who kept my homemaker mother very busy. Soon after school, I joined a beautician's course and began going door-to-door offering beauty services.

At 17, I fell in love with a 23-year-old boy with a good job. We married and had a son a year later. But my husband was diabetic and, within two years of marriage, he had a stroke. He was admitted to AIIMS for two months, and then he died.

My in-laws threw me out, and my stoic mother quickly married me off again. She forced me to study and work while she looked after my son. I had a daughter in 2000 and another son in 2005. The same year, I opened my own little parlour.

My second husband was good to me; he always helped with housework and childcare. But he had bitter quarrels with his mother. This led him to drink, and his liver got damaged. One day in 2016, he drank while he had jaundice, and died within days. His family did not attend his funeral. Four months ago, my mother – my only support – passed away too.

I don't pay attention to whispers about being twice widowed. All I want to do is work. My parlour and my children are all I see, feel, breathe and dream of now. Do drop in. ■

Every woman has a story – what's yours?

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