

eShe

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— the female gaze —



Saloni Chopra

The feisty actor is using social media to ignite debate on sexuality and gender violence

THE WOMAN INSIDE

Maahi's sex change had an unexpected outcome in her work and life

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Shahla Ettefagh, Sigma Ankrava, Christine Akello Otieno, Madhavi Kuckreja

FUNNY SIDE UP

Standup comic Neeti Palta gives us a peek into her life & home

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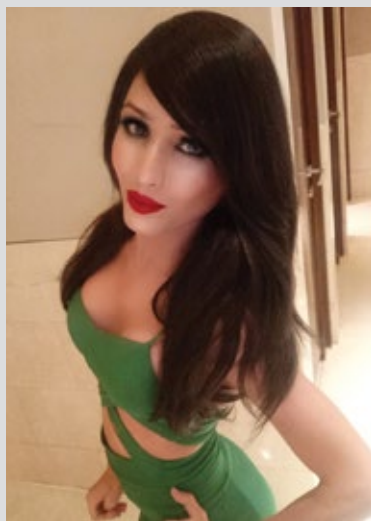
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WOMEN WHO DO



Aekta Kapoor
Founder Editor, eShe

Two days ago, I went out for a meeting and came back home to find a kitchen in disarray. My family – technically all adults but mentally all babies, including my husband – had got into some sort of Mahabharata. Dishes had shattered, a bowl of rice had been splattered, and there was a furious silence in all quarters.

“What happened?” I hollered. Everyone blamed everyone else, no one came forward to clean up.

After a few minutes of flailing my arms about in disbelief and shouting at everyone for their bad behaviour and – especially – for their cold refusal in picking up the pieces, I got to work to do it myself before the dogs stepped on the glass shards.

Raging internally for all the injustices in the world, and for being forced into certain roles because of my gender, I allowed the rhythm of dish-washing and floor-cleaning to calm me into a state of active meditation (it’s a thing, try it).

My mind drifted. I thought about my history – my grandparents on both sides had migrated to the new India from Lahore, carrying with them nothing but hearts full of fear and hope, armed with just courage. I thought about the women in my family – grandmothers and aunts who were married as teenagers, who mothered many children, lost a few,

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and bore the weight of the world on their hips.

I thought about their daily sacrifices in raising families and running households. I thought about their missed opportunities, backbreaking work, uncomplaining resilience.

The women in my family were systematically denied equal rights and freedom – to education, to their bodies, to their personal choices, to their dreams. By the time my turn came, our mothers had pushed for a few more freedoms for us, but many others still eluded my generation – such as sending a daughter away for higher studies (“What if she lost her virginity? No, no, let’s marry her off instead.”).

And yet, the women in my family all lived to ripe old ages, most outliving their men, and died peacefully at home, surrounded by the people they loved.

How did they do it? How did they wake up, day after day, and do their gender-based roles, and suffer their gender-based inequality, without bitterness?

Because they just did. They woke up, day after day, dusted off the inequality, and got to work.

The world is full of injustice – discrimination is remarkably democratic across gender, caste, class, race, nationalities. But why I idolize my grandmothers and mothers is because – despite hardship – they just got on with it, and did their bit for their daughters.

Women today have it better because other women before us pushed boundaries bit by bit, and today, we can push more. This issue of *eShe* is about agents of change – women who are changing the world, one person, one mindset, one city, one country at a time. These are #WomenWhoDo.



My paternal grandmother Krishna was born in Lahore, moved to Delhi during Partition, had five children and 13 grandchildren, and died at 75

FUNNY SIDE UP



Standup comic Neeti Palta takes a break from making Indians laugh and gives us a peek into her home, life, history – and refrigerator

If you're lucky, Neeti Palta's rambunctious French bulldog, named Punchline, will insist on climbing up your body to lick your face and lips. "She likes you," says Neeti, who finds it difficult to resist the tiny tornado's advances herself, cuddling her while she jumps up and down animatedly. Neeti's other dog, a beagle named Socks, appears calm in comparison. "There are my kids," Neeti introduces them before sitting down in her airy Delhi apartment where she lives with her husband and father-in-law, a retired Army officer.

Neeti is a magnet unto herself, her answers laced with wisecracks and her straight-backed *fauji* up-bringing drawing your attention. The standup comedian has, over the past seven years, mastered the art of reducing people to hysterical laughter armed with just a mic, all over India and Australia, and is now hailed as one of India's top comedy acts. The 39-year-old's jokes are dipped in her experiences as a woman, as an Indian, and as a tom-boy. And they all begin in her life as an Army officer's daughter.

Neeti was born in Agra ("My family jokes that the largest *pagal-khana* [mental health hospital] was in Agra then, so it was befitting my birth") and brought up all over India. "I

had a painfully older brother," she says. "He was just three years older but he was very painful." Her father inculcated in her the love for books and reading ("PG Wodehouse was the *best*") and her sporty, energetic mother endowed Neeti with a love for short hair, youthful looks and the inability to sit still.

After completing her graduation in English literature from Delhi University, Neeti went on to do

**"I WORK OUT SO THAT
I CAN EAT OUT AND
DRINK. MY COOK MAKES
TINDA-GOBI EVERY DAY. IT
MAKES ME SUICIDAL"**

her Master's in mass communication and journalism from Symbiosis in Pune. Neeti's mom had a huge influence in pushing her towards a career in advertising ("What kind of mother does that?") and for the next 12 odd years, Neeti worked as a copywriter, spending most of that time in the corridors of advertising major J Walter Thompson India.

One of her seniors, Anuja Chauhan, who is now a bestselling author, referred Neeti to the team of the international TV show *Sesame Street*. "I fell in love in just two



Neeti's acts are peppered with real-life stories, India ("I bleed the *tiranga*"), Indian men, and self-mockery

days," says Neeti of how she became the screenwriter for the children's show *Galli Galli Sim Sim*, which premiered on Indian televisions in 2006. After almost five fulfilling years there, she attended a comedy show featuring Brad Sherwood and Colin Mochrie of *Whose Line is it Anyway?* fame. She volunteered to do sound effects in an interactive scene, and caught the attention of Raghav Mandava, founder of stand-up comedy club, Cheese Monkey Mafia. He invited her to do a five-minute act the next weekend. And the rest is history.

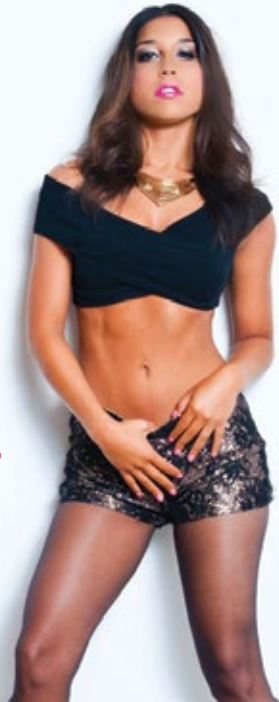
On stage, Neeti portrays a modern Indian woman who is confident

about her non-conformism, even if she is often the recipient of vitriolic comments by trolls online.

Considering her gym routine and six-pack abs ("My trainer says, model *banna hai kya?*"), Neeti spends a disproportionate amount of time thinking about food. "I work out so that I can eat and drink. My cook deliberately makes *tinda-gobi* (bland vegetables) every day. It makes me suicidal. So I have to eat out. And my refrigerator holds more beer than milk."

Punchline waits impatiently for Neeti to finish talking before pouncing on her again. There's never a dull moment in the Palta house. ■

DANCE LIKE NO ONE'S WATCHING



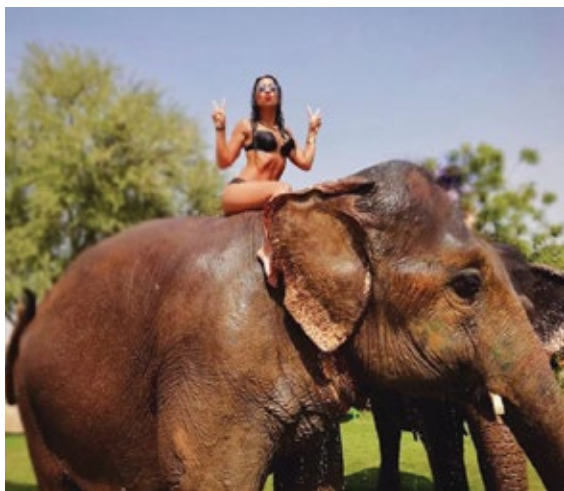
American dancer, choreographer and model Dana Alexa has moved to India to judge a reality dance show, and can't get enough of the country

New York-born Dana Alexa started dancing when she was just two years old, and was a professional dancer by 21, having trained with the best instructors in the world in hip hop, jazz, street jazz, tap and ballet. A well-recognized face on American TV after she choreographed and performed on *Watch What Happens Live* and *The Real Housewives of NJ*, Dana also participated on the Emmy Award-winning reality competition show *The Amazing Race*.

The only child of a Wall Street

broker father and an art-loving mother, always loved to read and would walk to school as a young child with a book firmly in hand. Dana has choreographed numerous viral YouTube videos and has a huge social-media fan base. She now travels the world teaching master classes and has briefly moved to Mumbai where she judges the reality dance show *High Fever: Dance Ka Naya Tevar*. The 28-year-old is eager to explore India further.

A student of behavioral science and English, Alexa says her dream



L-R: Dana getting mehendi done on her hands during her India visit; striking a pose atop an elephant

mission is to entertain, to be happy and to spread happiness.

We have some questions for her.

How has it been so far being a judge on High Fever?

I am the international judge on *High Fever*. I have so loved sitting on the panel mostly because of the contestants. They are so incredibly talented and so resilient! A lot of them have overcome great obstacles to be standing on the stage. You can catch us every Saturday and Sunday at 9:30 pm on &TV.

How has your Indian experience been?

Amazing. I have loved getting to know the people and the culture. I have been welcomed so warmly and have made friends here who will always be close to my heart. I've gotten to travel a bit to Jaipur and Goa and am planning a trip to the Golden Temple in May. I am having a blast exploring.

How do you motivate yourself before a performance?

Before a performance I can feel the nerves and butterflies in my stomach, just like anyone else. However, I truly live to perform and entertain. I love to be able to make people happy through dance. So, I shake off the nerves and just go out there and have a good time.

Who or what inspires you?

My parents inspire me the most. My mom has beaten cancer twice already and my dad had a kidney transplant that saved his life about seven years ago. They have been through so much but they always get through things with such bravery and strength. We didn't have a ton of money but we had such great memories.

How many hours a day do you practise?

When I am in Los Angeles my days are jam-packed. I dance eight



L-R: Dana Alexa (centre) with her crew; she is currently a judge on Indian reality dance show *High Fever*

to 10 hours per day, sometimes more. I wake up early and get into a workout. I hike, do Pilates, light weight training and I have even begun doing some Krav Maga-style workouts with an awesome trainer.

**"IN ENTERTAINMENT, YOU
HEAR A LOT OF 'NO'S'
AND A LOT OF CRITICISM.
IT IS IMPORTANT TO
KNOW YOUR WORTH"**

Then I head to the studio where I choreograph dance routines, teach private lessons, teach open classes at Millennium Dance Complex, shoot and edit tutorials. I also film lots of dance videos; you can see them on Instagram @danaalexa_ and on youtube.com/DanaAlexaDance.

Is there any particular diet you follow?

I follow a mostly pescatarian diet. I try to avoid dairy as much as possible (which can be tough because I love pizza and especially cheese.)

How do you handle difficult career choices?

One of the hardest was the decision to leave New York and move to LA. I knew no one in LA so it was scary but it's the best thing I ever did and it has been very rewarding pursuing my career on the West Coast.

What have you learnt from the entertainment industry, and what would you like to share with our readers?

In entertainment, you hear a lot of 'no's' and a lot of criticism. It is important to be strong, know your worth and take it with a grain of salt. It's also important to be happy, be kind and stay focused on your goals. You can truly create anything you set your mind to. ■



INDIA'S DIWALI AMBASSADOR

With the colours of rangoli and the glow of diyas, Manisha Mundhra Beriwalla is trying to make a difference in the American corporate calendar

When Manisha Mundhra was a young girl in Kolkata, her Marwari parents would insist on taking her to Rajasthan every summer. “The heat was crazy,” the 38-year-old remembers, “but spending time with large extended families in those old *havelis* of Bikaner really shaped me.” Many years later, Manisha would try to recreate those festive moments for the bigwigs of corporate America in her own unique way – by be-

coming a “Diwali specialist”.

As a young girl, while Manisha struggled with academics, she met Rishi Beriwalla who was quite the opposite: “He grew up to become a brilliant college topper, an IIFT silver medallist, an MBA in finance and a CA rank holder,” she laughs.

After their wedding, the couple moved to the US. “There was so much freedom, but also so much loneliness,” Manisha recalls. She missed the Indian culture, its boisterous festivities. Her first Diwali

PHOTO CREDIT: RAJ SARMA PHOTOGRAPHY (RAJSARMA.COM).
VENUE CREDIT: KATE SPADE NEW YORK

came and went, bland and forgettable. By the time her first child Ivanka was born, Manisha began organizing Diwali events for Indian-Americans in New York. But something inside her still felt hollow – a sense of unfulfilled purpose and untapped drive.

Seeking answers, she came across Vipassana. “Those 10 days of silence and solitude were overwhelming. At the end, I felt like I’d walked through fire. It felt like my life’s biggest achievement.” Vipassana left Manisha more patient and “shock-

ry hotels, taking care of everything from the Indian cuisine to the entertainment, décor and “ethnic” props. She formalized her company MMB Events last year, and hired a team of over a dozen people. One day, she was invited by Google to host a party for 2,000 employees. And it got bigger: in her very first year of operations, she organized 13 Diwali events over two months.

A natural networker who is inspired by the idea of “women supporting women”, Manisha introduced the Diwali Devi Diva women



L-R: With her team at MMB Events; with her husband Rishi, and daughters Ivanka, 11, and Alyona, 2

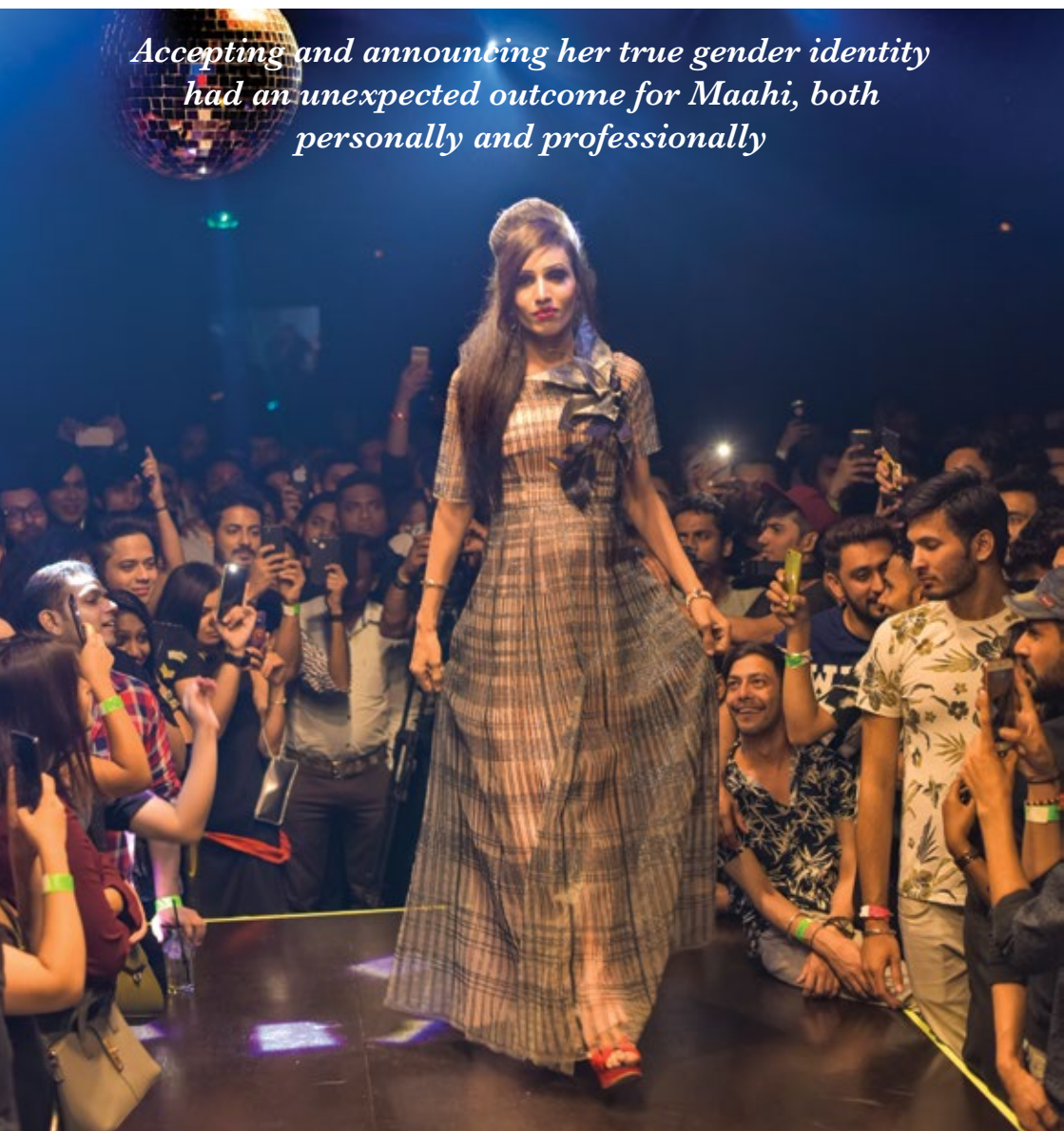
proof”. She also learnt she was pregnant again. Alyona – her “therapy child” – was born on Diwali eve two years ago.

Manisha’s Diwali connection grew even stronger over the next year. She began hosting and organizing mega events for corporate houses, schools, hospitals and luxu-

empowerment awards supported by the Mayor’s office in Jersey city while raising funds for an NGO in India via Diwali giving. She’s now gearing up for Diwali 2018 with over 600 clients on her sales list. “This is my passion,” she says, all set to light up the corporate calendar in the US. ■

WALK ON THROUGH TO THE OTHER SIDE

*Accepting and announcing her true gender identity
had an unexpected outcome for Maahi, both
personally and professionally*



In class eight, I realised I was not a boy. I started wearing my mother's saris," recalls Maahi, who was born Hamza in Delhi to a property dealer father and a homemaker mother. The youngest sibling with two older brothers and two sisters in a traditional Muslim family, the little Hamza's antics in dressing up as a girl were initially laughed at and labeled "cute". "But later these

a lot of time with the who's who of Delhi society. Her colleagues of four years, who knew her first as Hamza, often have to correct themselves and refer to her with her new name, Maahi (without a surname), which she began using for work about a year ago after starting hormone therapy and then her sex-change operation in September 2017. "I was a bit of a hunk even as a boy," she says, smiling coyly. As a



L-R: Maahi as Hamza ("I was quite a hunk even as a boy," she says): in her new avatar as a woman

things made my family very angry," the 23-year-old Maahi admits, seated in the coffee shop of the Lalit hotel in Delhi, where she works as a PR executive for the hotel's popular nightclub Kitty Su.

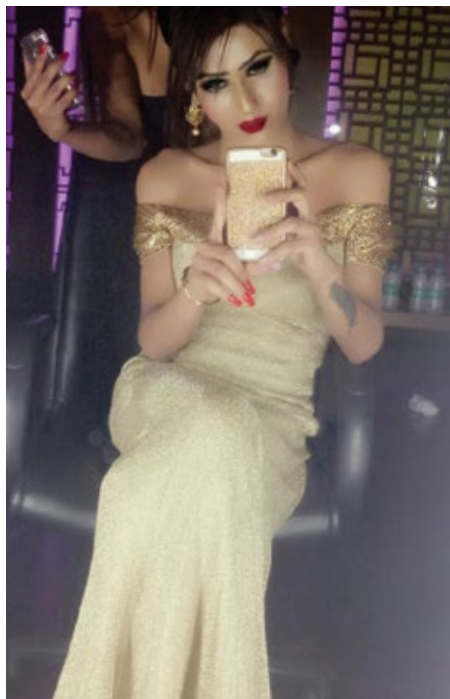
She has lined her eyes with kohl, giving them a stylish cat-eye effect, and wears carefully applied bright red lipstick. Her clothing has the nonchalant trendiness of someone who devours Instagram and spends

girl, of course, she is gorgeous.

Maahi's adolescence was traumatic, especially after her father died when she was just 10 years old. "I missed him a lot. My family used to lock me up at home when they found out that I was wearing girls' clothes secretly," she says. She studied in a government school close to home. "Maahi was actually my pet name in class 10," she shares, "given to me by my boyfriend." Her rela-

tionship lasted eight long years, all through the time that Maahi did her graduation through correspondence while working in event management. In 2014, she applied for a job at the Lalit hotel in Delhi.

After two years of battling her



inner demons and family conflict, Maahi went into depression and decided to quit her job. When she went to speak to the hotel owner, Keshav Suri, however, he convinced her to stay on. “He offered me complete mental, emotional and financial support,” says Maahi. “He said, ‘Wear girls’ clothes to work if you want.’ He even paid for me to move

out of my house and into my own apartment, which saved my sanity.”

Maahi consulted a doctor who suggested she start hormone therapy. Her family watched, horrified, as she grew breasts and let her hair grow longer. “They were worried I’d get into sex work. But with the constant support of my mentor and boss, they gradually realised this is who I am and there is nothing wrong with it. My mother has accepted it, and my sisters meet me now and then,” she says. She is now applying for an MBA degree.

Maahi still wants a more feminine pitch to her voice, but, after her sex-change operation, she is very happy with her new body. “I wear business suits and saris to work, and short dresses for parties. Oh, I take a long time to get ready for parties,” she blushes, her smile suggesting that dressing up as a woman is one of life’s greatest pleasures for her.

But while she found resolution for her gender identity, her relationship was destined for doom. A couple of years ago, her boyfriend had to break up with her – “His family married him to someone else,” Maahi says, flatly.

It is part of a transgender person’s life that she appears to have accepted stoically. “People from my community call me *kinnar*, but here, at work, I am just as accepted as everyone. I don’t think I’d ever get this kind of job anywhere else.”

“This is our fight – to change social mindset,” says Keshav Suri, executive director of the Lalit Suri Hospitality group, who has been an outlier in the Indian hospitality sector and follows UN guidelines when it comes to employment of LGBTQ persons and those with disabilities. Launching Kitty Su – an openly gay nightclub with events such as drag nights – in a place like India 10 years ago was a risk, he ad-

acid-attack victims, and all levels of management have a balanced male-female staff ratio. Kitty Su also hosts fashion shows featuring those from the transgender community.

One such show, featuring garments by top fashion designer Sab-yasachi Mukherjee, was held last month. Maahi, with her tall lanky proportions and model-like gait, walked the ramp as well.

Dressed in a floor-length gown,



L-R: Maahi with senior employees at The Lalit New Delhi; Keshav Suri, executive director, Lalit Suri group



mits – which paid off. “Change in the country comes from its entrepreneurs,” says the striking 33-year-old, who has earned several tourism awards for his brand for being disabled-friendly, and takes his role as a spokesperson for the marginalized very seriously.

All employees at his 14 hotels go through sensitization programmes on dealing with LGBTQ and disabled colleagues, including

with a confident small smile on her face, she looked every bit of Maya Angelou’s ‘phenomenal woman’ as she sashayed down the runway:

*It's the fire in my eyes
And the flash of my teeth
The swing in my waist
And the joy in my feet.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman
That's me. ■*



Stephanie's new work depicts rural Indian women squatting comfortably in wait

COLOURS OF INDIA

French artist Stephanie Arpels is inspired by the colours of India and the energy and femininity of Indian women

Ever since Stephanie Le Beller Arpels arrived in India three years ago, she has been seeing things in a new light. “My eyes always fall on the colours,” says the French painter who was awarded the UN International Women’s Day Award 2018 for excellence in the field of art this March at an event supported by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. “I didn’t realise India could change me

like this,” she says, smiling warmly.

Born in the town of Arras in the north of France, Stephanie had a “complicated” childhood. “I felt misunderstood,” she recalls, seated in her sprawling house in Delhi. “I grew up a rebel. I wanted to get out of there.” Stephanie’s teen angst finds its way to paintings that were predominantly black, a trait that continued as she attended college studying German and dietetics.

When she was 22, Stephanie developed a lifelong health condition and had a near-death experience. “It left me intensely spiritual. I realised I had the power to create my own life,” says the self-taught artist. She headed to Paris, took a loan and set up three centres of a holistic wellbeing chain within two years. “I wanted to help women find confidence,” she explains. By the age of 26, she’d started her own company.

And then she met François Arpels. The Paris-based businessman proposed to her within 10 days of their meeting, and they were married in three months. “We just knew,” Stephanie says, simply.

She sold her business and, in

2012, they had a son. Encouraged by François, Stephanie moved on from her Pierre Soulages-type black canvases and began to paint abstract nudes – the female form structured in geometrical shapes and blocks of colour. A few years later, the family relocated to Delhi.

“India significantly influenced my art. The energy of Indian women leaves me awestruck. They look so beautiful and feminine, smiling even in the direst conditions,” says Stephanie. Gold paint and bright collages dominate her new work, in addition to the black of her youth. “Everyone faces some complication in their lives. I have been lucky,” Stephanie ends on a sincere note. ■



From top left: Stephanie's latest painting; with husband François and son Andrea; at the Women's Day Awards

BAD FEMINIST

Actor Saloni Chopra's provocative social-media posts and videos are her way of igniting debate on gender violence, stereotypes and sexuality

By Aekta Kapoor

In August 2016, Saloni Chopra posted a series of photos on Instagram. They depicted the actor holding cigarettes and placards that read, “I’m a virgin,” “I’m an introvert,” or “I want to explore my sexuality,” with captions that explained why a woman should feel comfortable in her body, and why no one had the right to judge her for it. In other posts, “I’m a rape victim,” and “I didn’t deserve it,” she recounted the experience of survivors of sexual assault.

Her series went viral. Not only because of her provocative photos but because her campaign came soon after she had declared her support for the global hashtag: #FreeTheNipple. In July, Saloni had posted a picture holding up

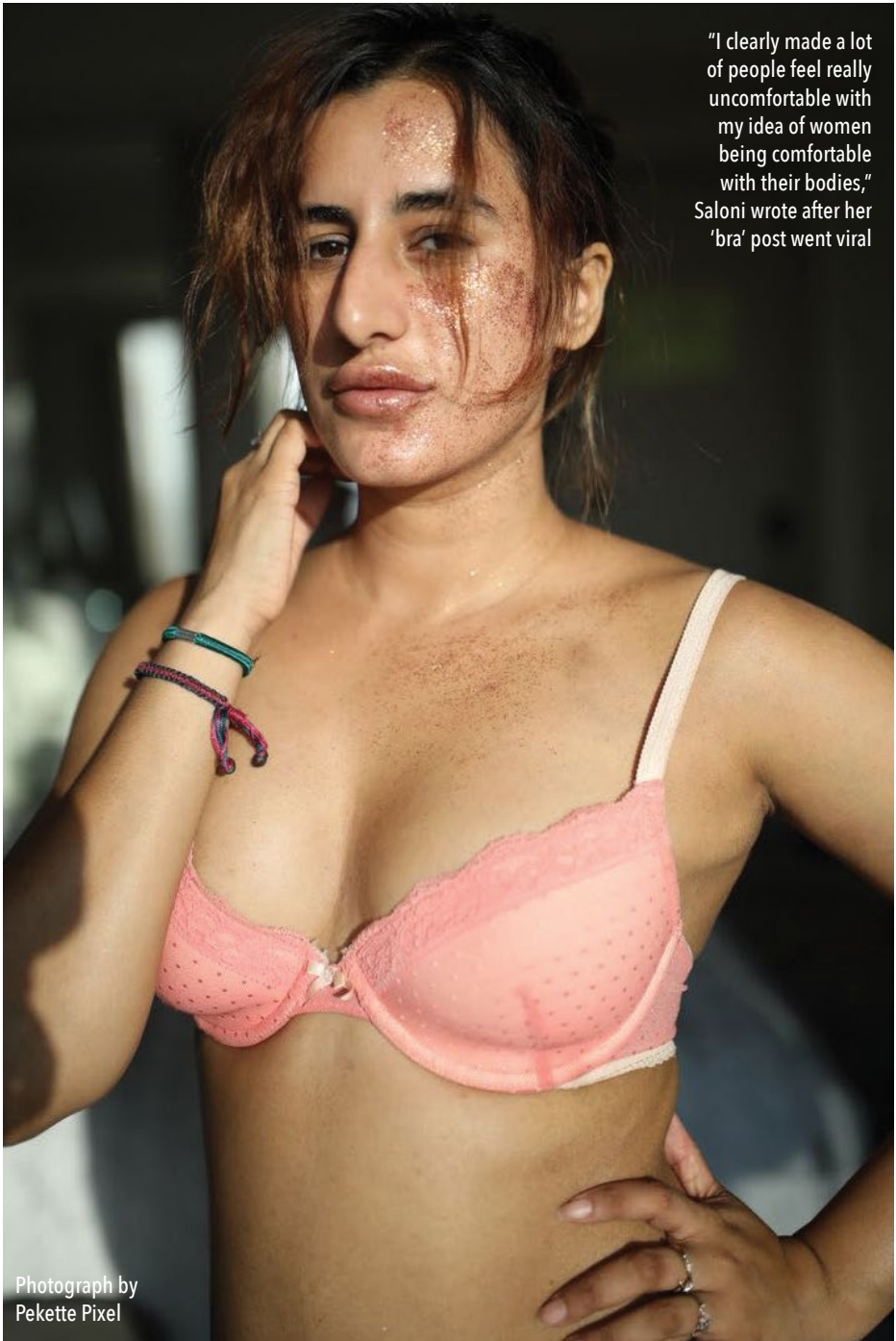
a bra, criticizing social hypocrisy about exposed bra straps. “#Free-TheNipple argues that men and women should be granted the same freedoms, and protection, under the law. The campaign is asking for gender equality and opposing sexual objectification,” she explained later in a video.

Instead, the MTV *Girls on Top* actor and social-media icon was attacked for being a “pseudo feminist”, “a publicity whore”, and for diverting attention from “real women’s issues”. Her critics used her posts to slut-shame her, ironically proving her point: misogyny is ingrained in social mores, and internalized by women themselves.

But the controversy also earned her an army of new supporters,

**“I’M AN ACTOR; IT’S NOT
MY JOB TO LOOK PRETTY.
MY JOB IS TO PERFORM
AND LOOK THE PART”**

"I clearly made a lot of people feel really uncomfortable with my idea of women being comfortable with their bodies," Saloni wrote after her 'bra' post went viral



Photograph by
Pekette Pixel

and the follower count on her Instagram handle @redheadwayfarer swelled. The outspoken Saloni lost no opportunity to trigger discussion on rape and domestic violence; using current events to make statements; releasing videos to inspire discussions on sex and female pleasure; and her own body as a kind of performance art to hold up a mirror to viewers.

Do my exposed breasts or thighs make you uncomfortable? her pictures seem to ask. *Does the sight of my menstrual blood leave you disgusted?* her eyes question, defiantly.

It's a huge career risk for an aspiring actor in India's still-patriarchal entertainment industry to be this blunt, this honest, this woke, this firecracker vocal. But for Saloni, it is who she is. Take it or leave it.

Born in India, Saloni was brought

up by her maternal grandparents in Adelaide, Australia. A quiet child, she preferred writing to speaking as she grew up. "It was a peaceful place but I wanted to get out of there," she recalls. "The chaos of Mumbai attracted me."

Though her mother – who was a stylist in Bollywood – had wanted Saloni to take up acting as a child, Saloni signed up to study fashion at NIFT Mumbai. Soon, however, the big screen beckoned, and she ended up as assistant director in films such as Hrithik Roshan-starrer *Krrish 3* (2013) and *Kick* (2014), starring Salman Khan. Around the same time, she got together with a friend to make and produce *Maya*, a short film about post-rape trauma that won several awards and was even screened at Cannes.

Three years ago, she was offered



L-R: With brother Sahil and mom Bindu; with her grandma who has her own online fan club, 'Nani Chopra'

Saloni's Instagram
account handle
@redheadwayfarer
is a nod to her
auburn tresses and
her love for travel

Location credit: The
Sun Siam Iru Fushi,
Maldives; Sun Aqua
Vilu Reef, Maldives



"Of course I am insecure about my body at times, we all have good days and bad days," says Saloni, "but the trick is to tell yourself you're pretty more often than you tell yourself you're not."



the role of Isha Jaising in MTV's *Girls on Top*, and she identified with it completely. "TV has awful hours," she recalls jokingly of her year shooting a full season of the show. "It doesn't matter if you have fever or a broken leg, the show must go on. The experience changed me," she affirms.

What set Saloni apart in those years was how she refused to conform to social standards when it came to her body and looks. "Women role models are stereotyped into looking 'pretty and perfect'," she rues. "I'm an actor; it's not my job to look pretty. My job is to perform and look the part."

Her MTV season had another personal significance for Saloni: she had taken on her mother's last name Chopra in her screen credits in deference to her brave single parent. Her decision to speak up for women's rights was also born from having been through toxic relationships herself. "I dated some really horrible men who were controlling and sexist," she recounts. The experiences had sapped her of her confidence and self-love. "If this could happen to a girl raised in Australia, imagine how girls raised in India must feel, having been brought up with everyday sexism," she says, adding, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Now I don't take shit from anyone."

Her observations about Indian

men found their way to her web series *Waking Up With Maggie* in which she plays a girl who wakes up from one-night stands and confronts a strange new character in her bed each time. Her new web-series *Screwed Up* by filmmaker Harry Nath will be out this year.

The 27-year-old has taken her turbulent past in her stride and credits her challenges for shaping



Saloni with her partner Rahul Bhattacharya, her "best friend and favourite human being"

her. Her partner Rahul Bhattacharya, a Melbourne-based lawyer and her childhood friend, travels frequently to spend time with her, and Saloni is unabashed about posting their romantic pictures online: "The more you put yourself with all your truth out there, the more people relate to you." Looking back at her trajectory, she says, "I wouldn't change a thing." ■

THE POWER OF ONE



There are women out there who are driven by a cause greater than themselves. Women who are moving mountains, saving childhoods, bridging nations, and being the change they wish to see. We celebrate these agents of change: educationist Shahla Ettefagh, academic Sigma Ankrava, feminist-activist Madhavi Kuckreja and social worker Christine Akello Otieno. It takes just one determined spirit to transform a community – and the world.



Shahla Ettefagh at her home in Rishikesh, which overlooks the River Ganga

Moving Mountains

Iranian-American educationist Shahla Ettefagh moved from California to Rishikesh to set up a pioneering school for the hill town's poorest children

Dressed in all-white – from her *dupatta* to shoes – Shahla Ettefagh stands out amongst the sea of colour at her school, Mother Miracle, where students have been given uniforms in four different colours to indicate their houses. The petite woman

is a powerhouse of energy as she takes you on a tour of her Rishikesh school, which took 10 years to reach its current form. In all this time, with her American work ethic, never-say-die conviction and tough love, she has not only transformed the most underprivileged children

from Rishikesh's shanty areas into academic toppers and sports champions, she has also affected a remarkable change in the social and economic fabric of this impoverished neighbourhood, where caste differences once eroded human rights and development.

Born in Iran in the 1950s to a wealthy family, Shahla has lived an eventful life. A qualified architect, her first marriage ended just as the 1979 Iran Revolution took place, and she migrated with her son and family to America. There, her family once again reached the pinnacle of wealth. Shahla lived in a three-storey home in San Francisco, partied frequently, and travelled the globe.

But her soul was not at peace.

A trip to India in the winter of 1995 changed everything. Traveling via road from Varanasi to Bihar, she was initially disgusted by the flies and smells from heaps of rotting garbage on the way, and complained constantly. The group stopped for tea at a roadside restaurant. Suddenly, a skinny three-year-old girl entered, her dress in tatters, her feet bare. She came up to Shahla and pointed at her tea. Shahla handed it over, and the child just held it in her palms for warmth. Then she sat on the floor and snuggled up to Shahla's legs to share her body heat.

"My motherly instinct kicked in, and I hugged her tiny naked body in my arms," Shahla narrates. "That was it. With my eyes closed and my



Shahla (in white, back row) with Mala Rajya Laxmi Shah, Maharani of Tehri Garhwal and Member of Parliament, (in yellow) with students and staff at Mother Miracle School's annual day in April this year



L-R: Students display a 'township' made from a donated bag of Lego; Shahla with Uma Shankar and team

arms around the girl, scenes from my life flashed all around me. What was I doing with all my privileges?"

For the rest of the trip, not one complaint escaped Shahla's lips. Back in USA, she became a changed woman. She stopped drinking alcohol, turned vegetarian, began doing yoga and meditation, and adopted a simple lifestyle. She attended spiritual lectures and seminars almost every second day. She also sold her home and her interior art business.

In 2002, she moved permanently to Rishikesh, and tried to set up a school for the poor. But she kept facing roadblocks – from fussy government officials, from cheats who ran away with her money, and from nature, as the school she built would get flooded during the rains.

Yet, Shahla steeled herself and pushed on.

She gave free books, food and uniforms using her own funds. She

taught English, computers and art. Students joined her year after year, regardless of her logistical problems. In 2016, the former architect constructed a flood-free school across over 25,000 sq ft in Shisham Jhari, one of the most impoverished localities in Rishikesh. She opened her doors to the poorest of the poor. Soon, due to a space crunch, she could choose only the brightest children from the thousands who lined up every year for admission.

Realising she could not build a sustainable model of education from personal funds alone, Shahla returned to the US seeking donations from friends. Today, the English-medium school has about 430 students from kindergarten to class 10 (they are adding classes 11 and 12 next year). Most students have individual sponsors who will fund their education till they complete college (\$480 per year per child). Besides

free uniforms and books, the school offers a volleyball-cum-badminton court, basketball loop, hockey field, table tennis, art classes, computers, dance classes, science labs, clinic, a large canteen where kids can eat all they want (“It’s often the only food they get all day”), WiFi, and modern, sparkling toilets that would put most government schools to shame. Corporal punishment is banned. Kids are taught to meditate and

dren, especially girls, do housework after school or hitting them. “The parents are mostly illiterate daily wagers. They know this school is the only chance their children will ever get to break out of poverty,” Shahla says bluntly. “They’ll do anything to keep them here.”

The kids who make it to class 12 are the best of the best. “There are only three ways for you to rise above caste discrimination,” Shahla



L-R: Computer teacher Prateek Rastogi; Shahla with Kusum, her former student and now personal assistant

send “healing energy to the sick”.

Discipline is uncompromising: shoes must be lined up neatly outside the canteen during lunch time, toys must be put back on shelves after playing, mats must be rolled away, and lab equipment cleared. The cook and kitchen staff must be thanked with a bow after meals. Bullies are expelled. Parents are warned against making the chil-

tutors them: “Computers, computers, computers.” The school owns 48 desktops; 50 more are on the way. Children start learning coding from class 6; by class 12, they can design and run a complete website.

The school’s annual day is a mega event which hosts over 1,500 visitors. Bollywood choreographer Uma Shankar is flown in with his troupe to teach children elaborate

dance performances. The Mahara-ja and Maharani of Tehri Garhwal come in as chief guests. The symbolism is stunning: here are revered members of upper-caste Hindu society, in a holy Hindu town, stepping into a former slum colony where only the backward castes live, to support a school run by a Buddhist Iranian-American.

It takes a fireball of love like Shahla to achieve that.

Older students vow to sponsor the next generation. Vikrant Sharma, for instance, who is now studying to be a neurosurgeon from Drake University thanks to his American sponsors, will support the school as soon as he lands a job. Kusum Bijalwan, who completed her MSc in Zoology, now works with Shahla as her personal assistant. Many other students return – one works as the accountant – and an alumni asso-



L-R: Children getting their act together for their annual day; the volleyball court in the heart of the school

From day one, she put an end to all caste snobbery among the school's 42 staffers: when she heard the cooks pooh-poohing about having to eat at the same table as the toilet cleaners, Shahla and her (Brahmin) manager went and sat at the table along with them. "If you have a problem dining with your colleagues, you can leave," she said sternly. That put an end to *that*.

ciation is in the offing. "I used to be worried about who will run the school after I am gone," says Shahla. "But now I can die in peace."

The school chant says as much about Shahla as the future of these students: "Who's the best? I am! Who's the smartest? I am! Who's a genius? I am! Who's the cutest? I am! Who's a champion? I AM!" ■

To contribute, visit MotherMiracle.com



Bridging Nations

The India-loving Latvian Dr Sigma Ankrava has contributed in a major way in bringing together both countries, academically and culturally

Professor Dr Sigma Ankrava sees a lot of similarities in the history of her native Latvia and her favourite home away from home, India. “Both countries developed their ideas of national consciousness around the same time, and began their fight for independence in the same century – India from the British, and Lat-

via from Russia,” says the professor emeritus of the University of Latvia.

But Sigma’s love for India goes deeper than a shared sense of history. Not only has she written a book on India’s feminist icon, Sarojini Naidu, she has also helped bridge the two countries. Her ‘academic diplomacy’ partly led to Latvia setting up an embassy in India in 2014.

Born in the early 1950s in Riga, Sigma was the eldest of three sisters; their father was a construction engineer and mother an accountant. Sigma had a happy childhood in the suburbs of the capital, going skiing in summer and skating in winter.

She did her graduation in English literature from the University of Latvia, and, after her Master's, was offered the opportunity to study at the Russian Academy of Sciences

the University of Madras by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations. It was an exciting time for her – her team organized an international expedition along the ‘amber way’, an ancient route that linked Latvia and India in amber trade. Sigma organized PhD scholars from 10 Latvian colleges and a TV crew, who flew to India and made four films here.

As a result of all this activity, the University of Latvia decided to



L-R: Sigma at the opening of the Centre of Indian Studies and Culture at University of Latvia; she was instrumental in organising the first International Yoga Day celebrations in Riga in 2015



in Moscow. There, at the Institute of Oriental Studies, she did her PhD on the Indian poetess Sarojini Naidu, and published it as a book when she was 27.

She began teaching at her alma mater, her fascination with Oriental studies still very much alive. In the meantime, she also got married and had two daughters. In 2012, Sigma was given a two-year scholarship to

open a Centre of Indian Studies and Culture, headed by Sigma, offering courses in Hindi and yoga.

But Sigma wasn't quite done. On a visit to Haridwar in northern India, she happened to come across “a beautiful gate”. It was the Dev Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya University. Sigma went in and presented herself to the administration office. “Oh, we know where Latvia is,”

she was told. “Many Latvians come here to study yoga.” The visit led to discussions, and eventually, the acting vice-chancellor of the university signed an MOU with the University of Latvia to set up a Centre for Baltic Studies in Haridwar.

But even with all this cross-cultural exchange going on, getting visas was cumbersome. Finally, largely due to the cooperation between the Latvian and Indian universities, Latvia set up an embassy in New Delhi.

In 2014, Sigma also helped to organize the first Indo-Baltic Forum and, a year later, hosted the University of Bangalore. They organized celebrations for the first interna-

tional yoga day too. Professors from the University of Madras were also invited to give talks, and a steady stream of Indian students began lining up at Riga’s shores.

Two years ago, Sigma’s daughter was offered a job at the Latvian embassy in Delhi. Sigma was gleeful: “Won’t you need a grandma around to babysit your two little girls?” she asked her daughter, who obviously agreed! And so, Sigma took a sabbatical and headed to India again.

She is taking it easy this time. Her cheeks ruddy with the summer heat (which she doesn’t mind), she smiles happily as she heads out to pick up her granddaughters from school. ■



Clockwise from top left: The first Indo-Latvian forum in Latvia in 2015; with her husband; giving a talk at University of Madras



Social activist Madhavi Kuckreja is not only empowering underprivileged Indian women, she's also walking her talk in her personal life

Madhavi Kuckreja briefly toyed with the idea of marriage when she was in her 20s. "Then I realised it won't work for me," decided the social activist, who instead introspected on what drives people to marriage like moths to a flame. "I liked kids and the comfort of close relationships," she reasoned, but why marry just for that? So, at 32, she went ahead and had a biological baby while single – something that would have scandalized all classes of Indian society, not just the rural communities she worked with.

But Madhavi's loved ones could only sigh: "There she goes."

Born to a privileged Punjabi family, Madhavi was a natural leader, and headed her students' union in Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi, where she did her graduation. For her Master's in international relations, she headed to the famed New School for Social Research in Manhattan, and worked in New York for two years, taking a year off to travel around the world, from Turkey and Egypt to Peru, Bolivia and Brazil.

On her return to India, she decided to move to Chitrakoot in Uttar



Madhavi reading a copy of *eShe* at her parents' home in Delhi, where she organises Sanatkada exhibitions

Pradesh for a year, and volunteered to enable Dalit women with transformative skills such as understanding hand-pump mechanics.

A year turned into 14.

Shaken with the condition of women in backward areas – especially those who had been raped, abandoned by families, or were victims of domestic violence – the activist decided to stay on and set up her first NGO, Vanangana. “As long as marriage is central for women, things in India are not going to change,” says Madhavi, who began educating girls – especially battered wives in the most impoverished areas of Banda and Chitrakoot – and

training them to be financially independent. She gave workshops on self-empowerment and legal rights. “They asked me, ‘If not marriage, then what?’ I told them marriage was about bloodlines, money, inheritance – but it came with patriarchy, inherent violence and inequality.”

Soon, the young feminist realised she’d have to walk her talk: she couldn’t well preach against marriage if she gave in to social pressure from back home to get married herself. So she had a baby outside marriage. After the initial outrage, her defiant act sealed Madhavi’s position as a fearless non-conformist.

In 2004, she handed over the

reins of Vanangana to the local women, and moved to Lucknow, where she began sheltering orphans and victims of sexual abuse. Soon, her ‘family’ of foster kids grew, and today, she has 20 of them, who either live with her, squeezed into her little two-bedroom flat in Lucknow, or study in boarding school.

It wasn’t easy being a single mom, or even getting a passport for her son without a husband’s name. “If

Around 13 years ago, she set up Sanatkada to curate handicrafts from villages around India for retail at her crafts outlet in Lucknow and through exhibitions in Delhi. They also organize food festivals and publish books on the oral history of Awadh. The Sanatkada Lucknow Festival, sponsored by automobile major Mahindra, is one of the most popular events in town.

Ten years ago, Madhavi fell in love



L-R: Madhavi at an event in Sanatkada - The Crafts Shop in Lucknow; with her partner Askari Naqvi

that was happening to someone like me, imagine the lives of these single mothers in villages,” she shakes her head. “They had no crèches for kids, no support – how could they make a living? Exerting sexuality is not an option for them; society can only tolerate widows and divorcees if they are *bechaaris* (pitiable), not empowered.” The experience taught her about the inherent strength in women, and their resilience.

in her usual non-conformist way: Askari Naqvi, a performance artist, is not only Muslim but also 24 years younger than her. “There she goes again,” her loved ones sighed. The couple adopted a baby girl, now 10 months old. “I’m changing nappies again after a gap of 21 years,” Madhavi smiles, bouncing the gurgling baby on her knee. The couple is not married, of course. ■

Follow @Sanatkada on Facebook

Saving Childhoods



Christine Akello Otieno's NGO Toto Afrika uses rugby, music and education to protect vulnerable children in coastal Kenya from falling into crime and drug abuse, and to help them aspire to a brighter future

By the time Christine Akello Otieno was in high school, she had already decided she wanted to get into social work when she grew up. Having lost her father in early adolescence, she had seen her mother be a “mother to everybody” besides Akello’s six siblings, taking in homeless children and orphans or victims of traffick-

ing, while also being the sole breadwinner for the family. “My mother just couldn’t send people away,” Akello shares. “If we complained about the costs, she always said, ‘You don’t understand. God will provide.’ And somehow, we survived.”

Born in the picturesque sea town of Mombasa on the east coast of Kenya, Akello was raised in Kisumu,

an old port town best known for its Hollywood connection: it is the hometown of Oscar-winner Lupita Nyong'o, who starred in *Black Panther* and *12 Years A Slave*.

In her childhood, however, Akello was exposed to the brutal injustices of cultural vices through the girls and women her mother worked with. "The girl child is an inferior member of society – the husband

Akello travelled alone to Kampala, Uganda, to complete her A-levels. She also did her Bachelor's in social work from the prestigious Makerere University there. She could not attend her graduation ceremony, however, as her mother passed away: Akello was back in Kisumu, burying her mother the same day.

Akello then worked for a few years in the development sector,



L-R: Akello presented a paper on Feminism and Activism at the 10th Ewha Global Empowerment Program in South Korea; the children Akello works with, outside the Toto Afrika office

can even divorce his wife if she only bears him daughters. If a young girl gets pregnant in school, she is treated as 'soiled goods' and often married off as the second or third wife of an old man. My mother would take care of these girls, and advocate for them to be taken back to school. You don't stop cooking just because the cooking ladle breaks, she would tell them, advising them to be stoic and never give up," Akello says.

before returning to Kenya and settling in Mombasa. "I spent a lot of time with street kids, talking to them about their situation. When I saw what was happening with orphans, my heart broke," she recalls. She did a thesis about the situation of potential orphans – those whose parents had HIV, for instance – and worked with kids with neurological problems, and with those in juvenile prison. She counselled them,

and taught them music and games. Initially, she worked only with boys, but then realised girls had more problems. “In some villages, the poor girls wear leaves during menstruation, and when the leaves leak and soil their clothes, their male classmates laugh at them and taunt them, ‘Oh, now you will get pregnant’,” Akello says. She decided to



Akello with a part of the Toto Afrika rugby team at Mombasa Sports Club

educate young girls on menstrual hygiene and sexual reproductive health. “Some girls take pills all year round because they don’t want to menstruate as they cannot afford sanitary towels. Or some of them sleep with the shopkeeper or *bod-aboda* (motorbike) riders for a packet of sanitary towels or for food. Their bodies are abused so young,” she goes on, shaking her head sadly.

Besides educating the children, Christine also works with the com-

munity, and educates them about the hazards of marrying girls off early. Initially, she faced resistance because she is an unmarried woman herself. “They thought I’m too independent, and would be a bad influence on their submissive and respectful wives,” she says, but over time, they have come to accept Akello, and even come to her for marital counselling.

Akello registered Toto Afrika in 2012 and started operations in 2013. She now has about 70 children in the age group six to 17 who come in to study four times a week, play rugby and learn how to use the concept of rugby tackling to “tackle life”. Most children also stay till late evening to finish their homework, as their own homes don’t have electricity or lack space or the required books. Akello invites mentors from different walks of life to give motivational talks and career guidance, so that the children can have ambitions beyond being somebody’s house help or guard. Toto Afrika has a small library, and offers the children basic meals, the means for which they receive as contribution from the NGO’s board of directors.

“If society doesn’t take care of its orphans and vulnerable children, they will grow up into thugs and harm society itself. It is a collective responsibility,” Akello says. ■

To contribute or volunteer, contact Akello at tynah.otieno@totoafrika.org



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WOMAN RISING



Shazia Imam had to lose a child and a marriage before she could find herself. Today, the Indian-American is out to help women with their own transformative changes

Her name means ‘unique beautiful leader’ in Urdu and Arabic, “but I was more like a ‘confused stuck follower’ for the greater portion of my life,” says Shazia Imam in jest. And yet, today, with her confident demeanour, compassionate gaze, and courage in speaking out, she has transformed her life and personality, and lived up to her name.

Born to Indian-origin parents in Washington DC, Shazia was brought up with traditional values that she says are not only representative of Indian Muslims but also “any girl, anywhere”. “There’s all of this idea around what perfection is,” she says, admitting that she herself subscribed to it for most of her youth. As a student, she excelled in mathematics and science, finally graduating with a degree in industrial and systems engineering.

Following the trajectory of a “perfect” life, she got a job at one of the world’s largest consulting companies, and had a traditional wedding at the age of 23 with a man she met through her community. “He was Pakistani-American (so, *desi* and same culture),” she narrates.

Shazia settled into the “perfect suburban life with a perfect husband, a perfect house in a perfect

zip code”. Five years later, she got pregnant. “I had that white-picket-fence story signed, sealed and delivered... except that’s all it was, a story,” she writes on her website *TheLifeEngineer.com*.

She went into labour earlier than expected, but her son survived only a few hours. “He wasn’t meant to be with us,” she says, sadly. Losing her baby left Shazia broken in more



ways than one. Her marriage began to fall apart. “I tried to hold it all together for a while, but then, the divorce came through, and I was suddenly all alone.” It was hard enough to lose her son but it was even harder to think her husband was leaving her, admits Shazia. “There were times I felt like my life was going to end, and I even wished it would end – because who would I be without these things? Who *was* I?”

And yet, being a person with deep faith, Shazia soon understood that “whatever happens is for the best.” “Even when your heart is breaking, and you’re crying alone in your bed late at night, and no one knows what’s going on with you, God knows. And God knew what was meant for me,” she affirms.

The journey of self-discovery that began at the end of her son’s



life culminated in an unexpected rush of relief the day her husband of 10 years left their house for the final time. “I suddenly felt free to be me,” says Shazia. She made a “dreams list” and began doing things she’d never done before – taking sewing lessons, travelling alone, meeting

new people from different paths.

The more Shazia explored the world, the more she discovered herself. After a year of her divorce, she met a wonderful man. They married a few months later, and Shazia moved to Texas.

The process to self-realisation took a while, “and the story continues,” she says, but what helped was following her heart – and helping others. She became a life coach, and now helps other women feel worthy, see their own gifts, and live their purpose. The 38-year-old admits she does feel deep sadness at times but has learnt to see her life in perspective and to count her blessings: “I feel good about myself now; my heart feels at peace.”

Shazia also runs a blog and podcast where she interviews inspiring women from all over America. “There’s an imbalance of masculine energy in the world, and we can see how that’s playing out. We need our divine feminine energy to rise. We need women’s voices to be heard. This is what will bring the world back to balance. It’s positive for both men and women,” she avers.

The biggest lessons Shazia has learnt are in acceptance, being present in the moment, and keeping hope alive. “Your voice matters and *you* matter,” she says. “Share your light even if it’s with just one person. The collective light will illuminate the world.” ■

WHY MEN RAPE

Celebrated speaker, somatic therapist and social entrepreneur Vasu Primlani tells us what leads men to rape and what we can do about it

You may have seen Vasu Primlani's video on solutions to India's rape crisis. The five-minute clip has gone viral on WhatsApp groups and online especially after the horrific gang-rape of an eight-year-old child in Kathua, besides news from elsewhere in India of minors being raped and murdered.

A child-rape survivor herself, Vasu is one of America's most prominent social entrepreneurs. She is also a somatic therapist, actor, environmentalist, professor (at institutions such as IIT, XIMB, University of Michigan among others), besides also a triathlete and one of India's leading standup comedians. She has received over a dozen environmental and economic leadership

awards globally, including India's Nari Shakti Award 2017. Here are excerpts from our interview with her about India's 'rape epidemic'.

What are your thoughts on the Kathua and Unnao rapes? Why do men rape?

Unnao and Kathua are the shame of India. At the same time, you have

to know what causes rape to fix it. No child is born a criminal or a rapist. They are *made* into one. Men who rape have been through a great deal of physical, emotional, and/

or sexual abuse as children. They have seen how violence operates. Who creates rapists? We do, as a society. A study on developmental experiences of child sexual abusers and rapists*, which studied 269 sexual offenders, found that child sexual abusers reported more frequent



experiences of child sexual abuse (73%) and early exposure to pornography (65% before age 10). In contrast, rapists reported more frequent experiences of physical abuse (68%) and parental violence (78%). Both child sexual abusers and rapists (>93%) reported frequent exposure to violent media during their childhood. Most offenders (94%) described having insecure parental attachment bonds.

These children grow to be adults, and to lack *empathy* – because no one considered their feelings in the first place.

What about the rapes of girls from the weaker communities by those in positions of power? Doesn't a sense of entitlement drive these men?

Yes, sense of entitlement, but I know enough young rich brats to whom it does not occur to rape a woman. Wealth and upper caste have nothing to do with the absence of violence. Hitler and Charlie Chaplin both had bad childhoods. What makes one man

different from the other?

Some of India's richest children go through neglect, having been raised by maids and nurses when the parents are busy being successful. Rape is an age-old weapon of war. If you have a son or a husband, can you imagine him raping someone as a soldier? For some men it is

less possible than for others. Why?

How can we stop rape?

You don't have to talk to *victims* to stop rape. You can stop rape only by changing the *rapists*. By doing critical, immediate rehabilitation for rapists. Rapists know shame, humiliation and violence. What they do not know is what safety feels like.

Or what kind-

ness is. They have to have their humanity restored. When I did counselling for a rapist, I was told he has no feelings. They beat him and threw him out of the house, and not *one* tear from him. When I did somatic therapy for him, and caressed his forehead with kindness, he cried non-stop for three



Vasu Primlani

hours. He was raped himself as a boy (as was true of Nirbhaya's rapist as well). If we can save even one rapist's life, it's worth it.

Almost every second news item today in India is about sexual assault or gender violence. Is so much media attention helpful or is it aggravating the problem?

Exposure to violence of any kind does make an impact on the level of violence. Exposure to pornography at a young age has a similar deleterious effect, because the boys are not old enough to distinguish between what they watch, and real women. We need to talk about this stuff, yes, but without assigning blame, judgment, politi-

cizing the issue. What solutions have been talked about? And please don't insult India by recommending the removal of dark windows on buses or draping girls in coats in Indian summers as a solution to rape. When you don't know what caused it, you can't solve it.

How can the media help in promoting respect towards women?

Showing images of true respect. Showing women as strong. And by promoting programs of healing and education for boys and men. Indian men, by and large, don't know how to talk to women, relate to them,

or respect them. Bollywood is full of disrespect toward women.

How can women help to create a safer environment for themselves?

Raise your boys properly. A lot of women don't know how to say no. It took my mother years before she could stop her husband from throwing me out of the house when I was four years old, then when I was 15. A lot of mothers have to protect their children from their own husbands. If women refuse to get married when others ask

them to, refuse to have children when they are told to, and do it only when they *want* to, we would have happier mothers, and there-

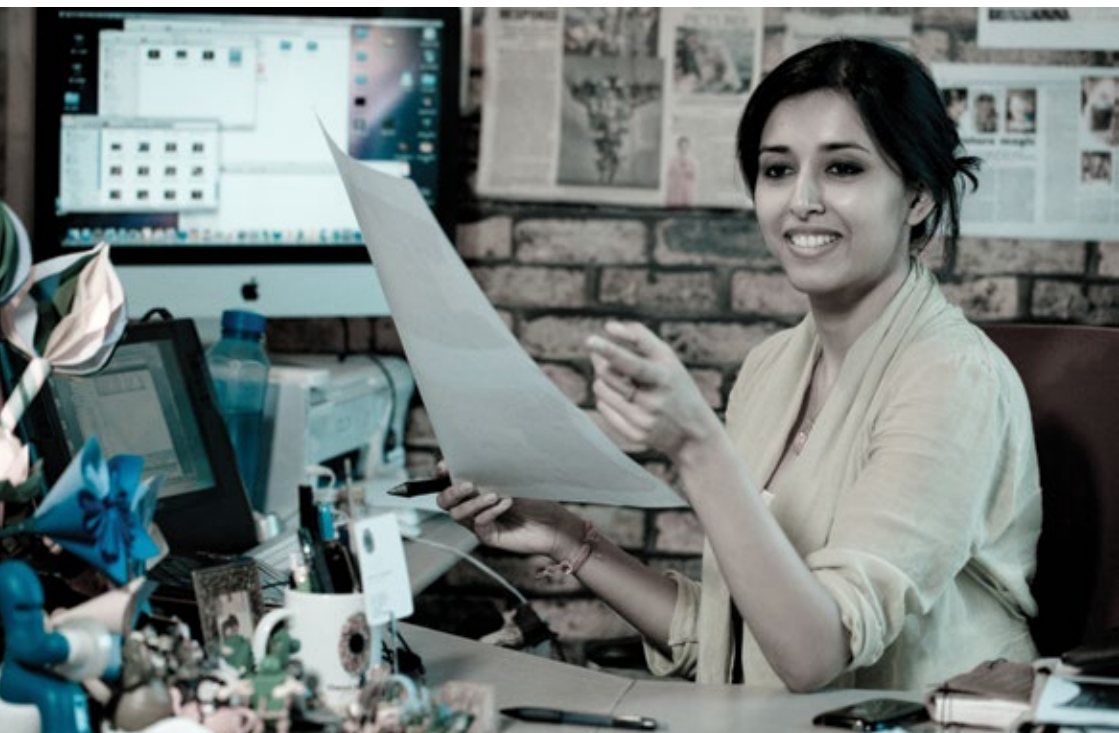
fore happier children.

Can a rapist ever be rehabilitated and learn to respect women?

For some, it's too late. They are all monster, and no man. But I conjecture that most can – through dedicated and detailed work. My experience with a rapist tells me even though they seem happy on the surface, they carry as much trauma as a gang-rape victim. I call upon all healers of society to stand by me in conducting a nationwide program for this greatest of epidemics facing India right now. ■

Read the full interview on eShe.in

**"YOU DON'T HAVE TO TALK
TO VICTIMS TO STOP RAPE.
YOU CAN STOP RAPE ONLY BY
CHANGING THE RAPISTS"**



LIFE IN 3D

Designer, filmmaker and visual artist Charuvi Agrawal was hired for an unusual project — it went on to change her life

When Charuvi Agrawal was in class six, she made a self-portrait. Her art teacher announced that it was too “mature” for her age, and told Charuvi to throw it and start again. Though the child cried initially, she later went and submitted it in an art competition. “That was my first win,” says the 34-year-old

entrepreneur, who now runs the award-winning animation studio, Charuvi Design Labs.

Winning competitions came easy to her from then on: in class seven, she made miniature statues of prominent politicians, which made it to the *Limca Book of Records*. In high school, she used art and graphics to draw her answers during tests,

and her teachers loved it. The girl was clearly meant for visual arts.

Brought up all over India as her father worked in the aviation industry, Charuvi did her graduation in painting from the Delhi College of Art, where she was a gold medalist all through. She then moved to Canada to study animation at Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning, and to work there with some of the best minds from around the world, making music videos, animations for TV shows and so on.

In the meantime, her student film *The Tenth Avatar* was travelling to film festivals around the world, and Charuvi was being invited to speak at computer graphics conferences. By the time she returned to India, her reputation preceded her. She was offered an unusual project: a 3D animation film on the life of the Hindu god, Hanuman. The money involved was substantial: “I could set up my own studio in that amount,” Charuvi thought to herself. Yet she was wary as the promoter was erratic with fulfilling his commitments.

Encouraged by her mother to take on the project anyway, Charuvi immersed herself wholeheartedly in it. She set up her own studio in Delhi and hired 30 animators. She travelled to Varanasi to understand the lore behind the *Hanuman Chalisa*, a devotional hymn dedicated to the simian god. Her film, made over

three years, was a vastly complex work of art: she and her team converted the film with 60,000 characters and 40 environments. They turned it into an application for tablets, and even a book.

As she’d feared, the promoter bailed out and she ended up co-funding the film herself. “But by



A 3D sculpture of a buff-bodied Hanuman made with 26,500 bells, measuring 25 feet in height

then, I had started believing in the deity’s virtues,” says Charuvi, who began hero-worshipping Hanuman.

Some of her relatives worried about her devotion: “Lord Hanuman was a *brahmachari* (celibate). He’s the wrong god for a single 30-year-old girl,” they opined, warning, “She’ll never get married as long as she’s



Clockwise from left: A kavadi 'cabinet of curiosity'; a zoetrope on the *Thali Bajao Andolan* during the time of JP Narayan; miniature figurines from the characters in her film *Hanuman Chalisa*

working on this project.”

But the god blessed her in more ways than one.

The film went viral after its release in 2013, and went on to win numerous awards around the world. Charuvi created a large 25-foot superhero-like sculpture of Hanuman using 26,500 bells, which made it to the *Limca Book of Records* and was exhibited across India. She also made a series of *kavadis*, an ancient Chhatisgarhi form of art, somewhat like cabinets of curiosity. She was facilitated at the ‘Incredible India@60’ Festival in New York as one of “the emerging 10 who would transform the global artistic landscape”. She got several projects and was com-

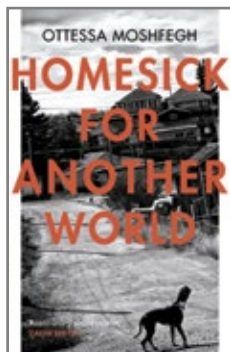
missioned many more pieces of art, including a sophisticated zoetrope on the life of JP Narayan.

She also met entrepreneur Aditya Singhal, who would go on to help in marketing the *Hanuman Chalisa* film for her. They fell in love, and married as soon as the project was complete. They now have a two-year-old son, Vikramaditya.

Charuvi is busy these days on the next art installation and is moving to a bigger, swankier office in Gurugram. Professional in her demeanour and yet humble and thoughtful in conversation, she has got the hang of running a successful business. Going by her talent and drive, it's only about to get better. ■

LIFE AND FANTASY

Here are our top three books of the month



Homesick For Another World

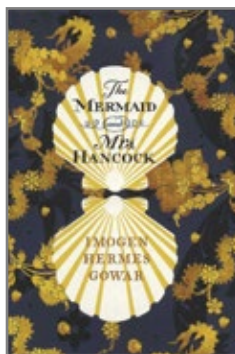
Ottessa Moshfegh (Vintage, Rs 499)

After a critically acclaimed debut novel, *Eileen* (2015), Boston-based Ottessa Moshfegh's latest collection of short stories *Homesick for Another World* was much awaited. Bizarre and breathtaking, the characters in the book will delight and disgust you with their all-too-relatable human failings and impulses. Some of the stories uplift you and others leave you wishing you could delete them from memory. But that's the one thing Moshfegh has proved she is masterful at: her stories are unforgettable.

The Legend of Virinara

(Penguin Books India, Rs 299)

A fantasy novel set in India's deep past, *The Legend of Virinara* is the story of a princess whose life takes her from the royal palace to the forests, where she falls in love with her kingdom's enemy. Usha Alexander's third novel – like her second – uses India's rich cultural history as the colourful backdrop of a woman's coming of age. Questions of love, purpose and individuality find difficult answers in morality, loyalty and family. An interesting woman herself, Alexander's new book is an engrossing page-turner.



The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock

Imogen Hermes Gowar (Harvill Secker, Rs 599)

This debut novel haunts you with its vivid imagery and gripping prose. Revolving around a melancholic widower, a talented prostitute and a dead mermaid, the fantasy novel has you hooked line and sinker. The historical details are noteworthy: 1780s' London is carefully sketched out, from carriages clattering on cobbled streets to chamber pots emptied onto passers-by! While the plot does stretch one's imagination at times, it's all par for the course when you're reading such a dreamy piece of literature.

Schoolbags & Spirituality

Sonal Sachdev Patel and Jemma Wayne-Kattan came together to write a children's book based on the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita



Sonal Sachdev Patel



Jemma Wayne-Kattan

A follower of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and a seasoned journalist who loves Eastern thought. The duo behind *Gita: The Battle of the Worlds* (Harper Collins India), Sonal Sachdev Patel and Jemma Wayne-Kattan have come up with an interesting way to teach children about spiritual concepts. Here are excerpts from an interview with them.

Why did you decide to come together to write this book?

We wanted to combine our strengths. Sonal had been looking for a way to bring the timeless messages of the Gita to children today. She had been inspired by her Guru, Paramahansa Yogananda's interpretations. Jemma has a wealth of experience in both journalism and fiction writing. Her first novel was

longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, and much of her writing touches political, religious or cultural themes. So it was a natural fit.

Which age group are you targeting?

This primary target age of this book is 9 to 11 year olds. But we hope that it is something that older children and even parents may re-read.

Your protagonist is a young boy who has recently lost his father – what was the inspiration behind this plot?

Dev is struggling to cope with grief. However, when a sprite-like being, Sanjay (who represents divine introspection) goes inside his body and confronts Dev's emotions we are able to literally weave our way and see first-hand how some of the messages from the Gita can help children like Dev better cope.

You have brought in kriya yoga, chakras, besides concepts of Gita. Why do you feel it is important for young children to understand these topics?

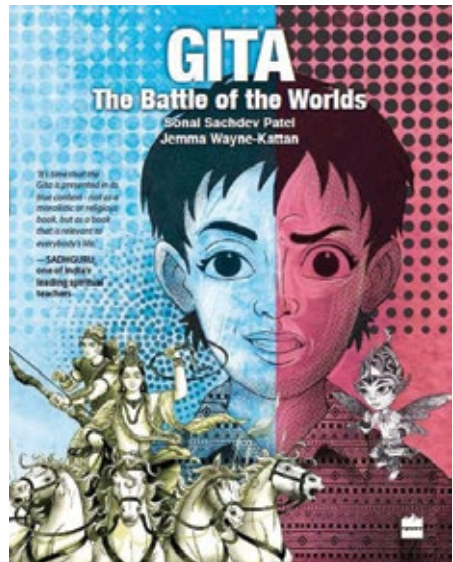
Paramahansa Yogananda showed that meditation, and specifically Kriya yoga, is a central tenet of the Gita as it is through this tool that we can access our true soul nature. If children learn and practise these concepts, then they will be able to apply them throughout their lives.

How do we instil spiritual values in our children, who are brought up surrounded by gadgets and 'virtual' relationships?

(Sonali) Children do what we do, and not what we say. The best way of instilling spiritual values into

them is living them in our everyday lives. Therefore, we recommend parents read this book. Growing together with our children is a valuable process.

(Jemma) We have seen throughout history so many ways that religion can divide, but beneath such appropriation is a spirituality that has the power to lift people.



Jemma, when did you get attracted to Eastern spirituality?

For me, the attraction was the universality of the messages in the Gita.

Sonali, religion has become a 'bad word' in today's India. How do we fix this?

I believe we can fix this by looking at the true universality behind religions and the many things that unite all people. ■

Read the full interview on eShe.in

HOW WE WENT OFF SCRIPT

A young couple give up their well-set corporate careers in the US and move to India for a reason that's a mystery even to them – at first

By Sana Hoda-Sood

Once upon a time, there lived a couple who – apart from being irregularly tall – maintained an otherwise regular life. They woke at the same time to the blare of their alarms, then commuted to work every day via the same regular route, where they participated in meetings about meetings that had previously been held, only to discuss what should be attended to at a future meeting. Emails were sent, best regards were conveyed, and the relevant attachments were often forgotten.

It wasn't all drab and droll, no, of course it wasn't. A ray of hope often shone through their ordinary days. The muted excitement of a new fancy coffee machine in the office kitchen, for one. It has pods! Flavours! We have choices! Choices! Like real-life free humans!

Free humans with coffee pods and paychecks and stability. A foreseeable financial future, and a well-rehearsed answer to where they'd be in the next five years.

But then, as the days and years

marched on, as their family grew and the hamster wheel they raced on creaked more frequently, those well-rehearsed answers began to feel like a carefully crafted sham. Till more and more, the pair couldn't remember those well-rehearsed lines anymore. And I happen to know



Sana Hoda-Sood

that for a fact since I was there – I'm half that pair, you see.

And one autumn morning of 2015, I woke up in my Washington DC home in a dull panic. Nothing dramatic, really – just a strained uneasiness, a parched throat and a solid titanium bowling ball in the pit of my belly. And no matter how much I willed my body into hauling itself into the shower and off on that regular route to my ordinary life, it just refused to budge. The rehearsal was over. It was time for a grand new opening.

And so the pair, and their little pair, forgot their lines and went completely off script.

We packed up our bags, and more bags still. We fit our lives into a 20-foot container, shred the script into tiny scraps and bid farewell to everything familiar and comfortable.

The askers were mortified – a startup in Delhi after a lifetime in the US wasn't an answer they'd willingly accept. "But!" they protested. But! But! But!

But by then, we were busy building something out of the ordinary. Our startup didn't come with a script – we were writing the lines as we went along, cobbling together words as and when we chanced upon them. Making mistakes, tak-

ing risks, and hurtling headfirst into entrepreneurship.

The air was thick with the buzz of Make in India. The powers spoke of great visions for the nation and grand schemes of success. But as we soon discovered, outside the world of the front-page news, contracts were merely suggestions, timelines were laughable at best, naps were a survival mechanism and money was a hazy, misty memory. Then, there was the college intern who warned I would fail without her insight, and the investor who'd only message me after midnight.

So, two years down, a twinge of longing for that old ordinary does creep in every so often – those pre-

dictable emails, the familiar meetings. But on most days and nights, we relish in the extraordinary. No adventure seems far-fetched. If it can be done, we try it; if it's a mistake, we don't mourn it. Even the smallest wins deserve celebrating, as they're victories we eked out of tiny scraps. There's a peculiar enjoyment in toying with that titanium bowling ball in my belly here and now, in the most bizarre way.

Entrepreneurship has spectacularly astonished us. ■

Sana Hoda-Sood is the co-founder of HappyShappy.com

THE AIR WAS THICK WITH THE BUZZ OF MAKE IN INDIA. THE POWERS SPOKE OF GREAT VISIONS FOR THE NATION



A LITTLE BIT OF THAI

Epicurean, chef and caterer Shreyaa Shah brings together good food with good health in her cuisine and workshops

For Shreyaa Shah, who travelled the world as a child and was raised between Delhi, Nepal and the picturesque district of Tehri Garhwal in Uttarakhand, food and fitness were the two greatest joys she discovered

early on. From the age of 16, she began doing aerobics (“Those were the Jane Fonda days,” she chuckles), while experimenting with health food at the same time. As fate would have it, she married into a “foodie” household, where she learnt to

ALL RECIPES AND PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY SHREYAA'S KITCHEN

cook an array of gourmet dishes.

When she was 20, Shreyaa decided to make a career as a fitness trainer. She noticed that even people who exercised to stay fit were often eating the wrong foods that would achieve the opposite of their goal. “The notion that healthy food involved two sticks each of carrot and celery with a little olive oil and sea salt drizzled on it needed to go,” she says.

So she decided to change that.

After decades of cooking and armed with a Cordon Bleu certification from Thailand, Shreyaa started her own small home catering business called Shreyaa’s Kitchen in 2011. Since then, her business has grown by word of mouth, and she caters to all kinds of events from six to 100 persons, from formal sit-down dinners to buffets. She’s known for her healthy and innovative cuisine – ranging from Asian to European, vegan to barbeque, soups to desserts – and her penchant for organically grown ingredients.

“It is important for everyone to at least know the basics of healthy cooking,” says Shreyaa. “That’s why I offer cooking classes for people to get over their fears of cooking and realise that it’s not rocket science!”

She’s also sought-after for her domestic-staff training course, through which she teaches domestic helpers how to plan menus, balance food groups, and make fresh, delicious

and hygienic well-plated meals. She also makes her own range of home-made pastes and sauces that are preservative-free and gluten-free.

“Health is not just about fitness; it’s about mental, physical and spiritual balance,” says the youthful chef, who did a course in permaculture last year, and follows sustainable



Shreyaa Shah

waste management methods. “The role of seasonal vegetables is very important to me. I want to get more involved with organic farms close by to add more of such produce to my kitchen,” she says.

In this issue of *eShe*, she shares four fantastic Thai recipes that abound in good health, and taste too.

THAI GREEN CURRY WITH VEGETABLES

Ingredients:

3 tbsp Shreyaa's Kitchen Green Curry paste
1 tbsp vegetable oil
4 cups coconut milk
Vegetables (broccoli, snow peas, peas, mushrooms cut into small pieces, blanched)
1 tsp roasted cumin powder
1 big red chilli, sliced
4 kaffir lime leaves

sliced thin
15 leaves sweet basil
½ cup coriander leaves

Seasoning:

2 tbsp fish sauce or soy sauce
1 tbsp palm sugar
Salt to taste

Instructions:

1. In a saucepan on medium heat add vegetable oil, red curry paste, cumin powder.

Stir for 2–3 minutes.

2. Add coconut milk little by little and then add eggplants. Boil for a minute.

3. Add seasoning, kaffir lime leaves, red chilli.

4. When the curry boils, add the blanched vegetables and sweet basil leaves.

5. Garnish with coconut cream, sliced red chilli and coriander leaves.



MISO SOUP WITH GREENS AND TOFU

Ingredients:

1 cup fresh vegetable stock made with carrot, onion potato, celery, garlic and ginger
50-100 gm chopped greens (bok choy, spinach or any other)
50-100 gm chopped green onions (light and dark green parts only)
50-100 gm extra firm tofu, 1" cubes

1-2 tbsp miso

Instructions:

1. Place stock in a sauce pan and boil.
2. Reduce heat, add greens and simmer for 5-7 minutes. Put in tofu.
3. Place 3 tbsp of miso into a small bowl, add a little hot water and whisk until smooth.

Add 1 tsp of miso first, taste, and if you need more miso, add it little by little.

4. Remove the pan from the heat before the miso soup boils again. And then add the bok choy back into the pan.

5. Garnish with green onions.

6. Serve hot.





PAD THAI NOODLES

Ingredients:

½ packet Pad Thai noodles
 ½ cup green onions, cut long and fine
 ¼ cup tofu, cut into small cubes pan fried
 1 cup bean sprouts
 2-3 tbsp peanuts, roasted and crushed
 Garnish with fried garlic and Togarashi powder

For the paste:

5 tbsp tamarind paste, heaped
 3 tbsp palm sugar or jaggery powder
 1 tsp salt

2 tbsp fish sauce
 3 tbsp Sriracha sauce
 2 tbsp sweet chilli sauce
 1 tbsp tomato ketchup

Instructions:

1. Make a thick paste using non-spicy, whole dried red chillies soaked in water overnight.
2. Cook all the ingredients together in a pan until the paste becomes thick and is of slightly sticky consistency (can also be stored in a bottle).
3. Take about ½ a

packet of noodles and soak them in cold water for half an hour. Add pan fried tofu, evenly browned.

4. Add the soaked, drained noodles.

5. Add the paste and mix well till all the ingredients are mixed well with the noodles. Use as much as you require to coat the noodles.

6. Sprinkle green onions, bean sprouts, peanuts and fried garlic over the noodles and serve.

KHOW SUEY

Ingredients:

3 tbsp Shreyaa's Kitchen Khow Suey paste
3 tbsp roasted gram powder, mixed well in 3 tbsp coconut milk
1 tbsp oil
4 cups coconut milk
1 tbsp roasted cumin powder
1-2 tsp salt to taste
½ cup coriander
Juice of 3 lemons

For accompaniments:

1 cup chicken, boiled, shredded
1 cup shrimp, blanched
1 cup peas, blanched

1 cup cauliflower, chopped, blanched
1 cup carrot, blanched
1 cup mushroom, sliced, blanched
3-4 onion, deep fried
15 pods sliced garlic, fried
6 tbsp ginger, finely chopped and fried
Roasted peanuts
Chopped spring onions
Boiled egg whites, grated
Red chilli powder
Green chilli (optional)
150 gm egg noodles, boiled
4 spring onions, chopped

Instructions:

1. Add the paste and sauté for 2 minutes. Add coconut milk, gram flour and boil for 20 minutes.
2. Season with salt, cumin and add grated coconut. Add the chicken and cook till tender or add blanched vegetables. Turn off the gas and add the lemon juice. Garnish with chopped coriander.
3. Boil noodles, drain.
4. Serve noodles in one dish, curry in another and accompaniments in small bowls.



MOKSHA IN THE MOUNTAINS

A hillside hermitage, a guru who uses English slang, a workshop on a spiritual tool for divination – this is quite a getaway

By Dr Urvashi Tandon



Nestled in the Himalayas, in the region of Tehri Garhwal in Uttarakhand, lives Ma Gyaan Suveera. The middle-aged but youthful guru teaches lessons in spirituality – from Vedic mantras to tantric tools – using everyday English, even slang, and urban examples to explain complex philosophical concepts. She lives on the hillside along the

Ganges in a hermitage, surrounded by the bounty of nature, and conducts workshops from time to time to help city-folk like me understand our ancient philosophies better.

I was fortunate to attend one such stimulating workshop this April and, I have to admit, I was star-struck by her zeal, energy and pizzazz.

The three-day workshop was about the Mokshapata, devised by

PHOTO CREDIT: MANISHA SHARMA

ancient seers as a divination board that can predict a soul's journey through this life and others. It can guide an individual through predictions and difficult dilemmas, as well as give guidance for day-to-day life. I was amazed to learn that this board-and-dice method of prediction was designed after an intense study of numerology, laws of karma, chakras and Vedic philosophy.

The theory of karma stares you in the face as you cruise along the board. Every good deed takes you up a ladder to a higher plane of spirituality, while every wrong step – from violence to greed – brings you down to a lower plane. It also depicts very clearly the alternating patterns or the co-existence of the “good” and the “bad” as you cruise along – ultimately, both are essential parts of human existence.

The evolution of the soul unfolds on the board telling you about the ups and downs, and offers you a chance to be aware of what lies ahead, thus enabling you to deal with a given situation better. The trick is to develop an intuitive connect with the board and put forth your queries as you go along.

With over 30 persons in the workshop organised by Healing with Feeling, it was interesting to see how the board answered various questions and personal scenarios – from searching for a life partner to helping someone make a business

or career decision. I also met some wonderful souls during this journey, and got a chance to take a dip in the holy Ganges. I gained a renewed respect for our ancient sages and seers, and I now have this intense desire to study the scriptures as I find the teachings fascinating.



From top: A view of the Ganges; Dr Urvashi (second from right) with other workshop participants

Well, apparently, the British found the game fascinating too. Having discovered it in India during the Raj, they took it back with them to England and converted it to an indoor board game called *Snakes & Ladders*. I feel so proud to belong to a land that is a storehouse of ancient wisdom. ■



A LIGHT MOVE

Making a big life change becomes easier if you ditch the emotional and physical baggage, and travel light – in body and heart

By Kay Newton

My three-year adventure in Zanzibar was about to come to an end. It was time for me to leave this paradise and begin a new chapter in my life. With two days to go, the messages from my acquaintances were clear: “I had better start packing!” Yet I knew I had no need to

rush, I had done this many times before and it wouldn’t take long to pack a 23 kg suitcase.

My friends didn’t believe me. “Surely you must have accumulated lots of possessions, bought lots of memorabilia,” they said. The short answer was NO! Living in a two-roomed house and a minimalist life-

PHOTO CREDIT: STEVEN LEWIS ON UNSPLASH

style meant that keeping that which no longer served was not high on my priority list.

Not only were my friends convinced that I would be “challenged” with packing my bags, they were adamant that I would also find the change itself a trial: “Change can never be a good thing, right?” At my age, especially, change is seen as equivalent to a midlife crisis.

When my husband and I had first told our peers we were moving to Africa, it had caused much consternation. Now that I was about to *leave* Africa, the comments were no longer based on adapting to a third-world country, and were instead all about how I would cope going back to the bustle of a modern world. I acknowledged all the “encouragement” I received from my peers and thanked them for their concerns and then decided, after a few seconds’ thought, to ignore them all!

Within the space of two hours, I had divided my “stuff” into three piles. The coming-with-me pile, the staying-in-the-house pile, and the giving-as-gifts pile. We do not need to become too attached to anything. More importantly, we do not need to become attached to the emotion that the object holds, and this is the key.

The emotions we feel about stuff are nothing more than emotions. If the object caused you painful

memories, letting go of allows for space to create new and better serving concepts. Often when we delve deeply, we realise the emotion was wrong from the start.

Another reason for ditching physical baggage was a selfish one. For me, there is nothing better than watching someone else enjoy your gifts, right now in the present, today. The local ladies’ impromptu ‘Kay Newton’ fashion parade was certainly a highlight of the whole Zanzibar journey and had me in hysterics. As well as helping them with clothing for themselves and their families and receiving thanks in return, it has created positive lasting memories for me.

Change, whatever it is, is preferable to stagnation – it means you are not dead yet! It is never the change that gets you; it is the way you go about adapting to the change that counts. It is always a choice.

PS: My bag weighed just 17 kg on the airport scales. ■



Kay Newton is a personal development coach based in UK. She's an author, confidante and Tai Chi instructor. Follow her on www.Kay-Newton.com

The Write Way

REETI ROY, 29, MUMBAI



I was interested in literature even as a child. Born in Kolkata as the fourth of five siblings, my chartered accountant parents fostered an intellectual environment at home. I followed up my Bachelor's in English literature with a degree in social anthropology from the London School of Economics.

I started my career as a research associate at Columbia University. The next few years were an incredible learning experience, as I was chosen as a LAMP fellow (a legislative assistant to a Member of Parliament) and was mentored by Dr Shashi Tharoor. I also worked with Harvard Business School's India Research Centre and Pratham Education Foundation, researching during the day and editing books for top publishing houses during the night.

In 2014, I started Aglet Ink after realizing that many professionals were unable to present themselves well on paper. We help job hunters frame their resumes and cover letters. Since then, I've worked with clients all over the world. Early on, I found myself not negotiating my pay. But now, if I don't get paid what I think I am worth, I walk away from the project.

You have to believe in yourself. There is absolutely no substitute for plain old-fashioned hard work. ■

Every woman has a
story - what's yours?

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