

# eShe

June 2018  
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— the female gaze —

## *Zenia Tata*

The innovation  
hotshot is  
empowering  
entrepreneurs  
to solve  
humanity's  
grandest  
challenges



### **FIGHTING SPIRIT**

World champion  
Nikhat Zareen on  
punching like a girl

### **CINEMA AT HEART**

Cardiologist-actor Niharica  
Kumari Raizada plays a  
double role in real life!

### **REBEL, UNVEILED**

An Iranian girl takes  
her hijab off for  
#WhiteWednesdays

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# YOU SAID IT

*eShe* catches your interest from the cover itself and all the articles are interesting and thought-provoking. Showcasing women who have achieved something out of the ordinary is wonderful.

Mala Bindra, Delhi

I am very happy to see how *eShe* magazine helps highlight the work and achievements of women from all over the world. I am so humbled that *eShe's* May issue featured my story and the work I do with disadvantaged children at Toto Afrika. The article boosted Toto Afrika's

presence online, and is also helping us raise funds for the

children. Thank you!

Christine Akello Otieno, Mombasa

*eShe* empowers not only women but men too who read it. I was very inspired by the story of Beeya Vohra. I'd never heard of an Indian woman running her own riding school, a woman devoted to horses and teaching horse-riding. The article revealed how she had turned her passion and love for horses and children into her profession. Good job!

Puja Mathur, Delhi

The feature on 'Why Men Rape' in the May issue brings up a very valid point: we need to start putting the spotlight on the perpetrators, and stop preaching to the victims.

Rohini Grewal, Mumbai



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# A MOTHER'S STORY

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**T**his month, both my children – now adults – will travel to other countries as student volunteers. After coming back, my firstborn will again leave for her Master's this fall. So I'm headed for an empty nest pretty soon.

On one hand, this is the moment all mothers wait for – “The child is independent! I have my life back! Now I can do the things I always wanted to do!” On the other hand, the process of parenting itself changes you, so that the child *becomes* your life, and the child is *part* of the things you want to do. The child cuts its umbilical cord and flies the coop, but the mother is forever changed.

The most revelatory part of mothering someone is the value you develop for your own mother, and, if you're lucky, mother-in-law. It is not to be confused with the all-encompassing awe and sense of security that little children get from mommy. It is rather more visceral, more intimate and, yes, even deeply shameful, as you recall the times you took her for granted. Her pain now becomes your pain. Her compulsions and sorrows (for every mother has them) are now visible to you, stark and raw. You *see* her.

In this issue, three mothers from UK and India share how motherhood changed their careers and lives (p.31, 64, 66), and three daughters share their mothers' stories (p.42). We can never repay our mothers for their love, and indeed, mothers ask for nothing. All we can do is bear witness – to their limitless strength, their unending devotion to us.

The best we can do for our mothers is *see* them.



**Aekta Kapoor**  
Founder Editor, eShe





# NIHARICA'S DOUBLE ROLE

*When she isn't playing the role of a Bollywood film star, Niharica Kumari Raizada is the head of department of a heart institute in a major Mumbai hospital*

It gets somewhat awkward for Niharica Kumari Raizada when she is recognized at the hospital where she works. "Sometimes, people ask me for autographs or selfies in front of senior surgeons, and it's really embarrassing," says Niharica, who – despite her glamorous social-media image and film roles – is rather approachable and friendly. She's also highly intelligent – but naturally – and a conversation with her can go from the difficulties that single women face in a city, to problematic marketing strategies of modern-day commercial films, to the need for more female voices in the media.

In fact, it appears that the toughest role that Niharica has had to play in life is being herself – in all her multi-talented, high IQ, super-performer avatars.

Brought up in Luxembourg where her dad worked in the European Commission, Niharica was a precocious child. Studying in a school full of Europeans sparked a craving for India within her. She

followed up her MBBS from London's Imperial College with a Master's in translational medicine with a thesis on cardiology.

A Fulbright scholarship took her to Johns Hopkins University in USA, where she researched stem cells before flying to Mumbai on the sly (her parents wouldn't have

**"PEOPLE ASK ME FOR  
AUTOGRAPHS OR  
SELFIES IN FRONT OF  
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REALLY EMBARRASSING"**

allowed if they'd known). Even as a qualified doctor, she found it hard to rent a place as a single woman, and finally had to call her parents over to help. They were understandably upset – she'd thrown up a huge earning potential abroad – but they gave in after a while.

A Bollywood nut and a diploma holder in dance, Niharica had been



brought up on Meena Kumari and Sadhana music videos, besides songs by her granduncle OP Nayyar. After brief stints as assistant director for filmmakers Shekhar Kapur, Vipul Shah and Jug Mundhra while they were on shoots in London, she had a burning desire to join the film industry. After participating in a couple of beauty pageants, she was selected to model in a fashion show that toured all over India, and introduced her to the fashion fraternity.

She then landed a few roles in Bengali, Gujarati and Hindi films including the critically acclaimed *Masaan*. At the same time, she joined BKC hospital in Mumbai where she works as head of department

of the heart institute, and currently leads a team of researchers studying 400 heart patients. “I love my job,” she says, adding that, with her background experience in surgery, physiotherapy and radiology, she is able to cater her research to these fields in a practical way.

Time and again she comes back to acting. Her next film, an all-out commercial comedy *Total Dhamaal* starring several veterans including Anil Kapoor and Madhuri Dixit, will be out this December. “I’d love to be a top-rated actress like Meryl Streep or Shabana Azmi,” she says ambitiously. In either case, whether she studies them or wins them, Niharica sure rules hearts. ■



# BROWN GIRL IN THE RING



*Global boxing  
champion Nikhat  
Zareen's small-town  
roots fire her world-  
conquering ambitions*

**N**ikhat Zareen had been out of form for a year due to shoulder injury and surgery, so not many people had expectations of any big win when she represented India in the 51 kg boxing category at the Belgrade International Tournament in April this year. But Nikhat was determined to prove them wrong.

So she went ahead and won gold.

There was always something different about Nikhat. Even while she was a young girl in the small town of Nizamabad in Telangana, she was a bit of a tomboy, comfortable in the company of her male peers, wearing boys' clothes and keeping her hair short. Curious and fearless, she wanted to explore the world.

Nikhat's father, an avid sports-person himself, had never encouraged his four daughters to take up sports. He himself had had to give up his passion in order to raise a family and he felt it was not a viable career. But when Nikhat was 11, she participated in her school's sports day and managed to beat much older

her male peers. "I lost my first game and came home with a black eye and a bleeding nose," the 21-year-old laughs in retrospect. "I didn't cry. In fact, I was furious." Upon seeing her daughter's face, Nikhat's mother cried: "We didn't let you go boxing so that you spoil your face! Who will marry you?" The teen-



L-R: Nikhat shows off a coffee-table book featuring her; with professional American boxer Tyriesha Douglas

girls. It was her first taste of sporting victory. There were more to come.

She got involved in school athletics, and her father couldn't help feeling proud when she won laurels. Then, at 13, she noticed that the district's boxing centre had no girls. "I found it odd," recalls Nikhat. The adolescent took it up as a challenge, and began training.

Finally, it was time to spar with

ager stuck her chin out, defiantly: "Once I am a success, there will be a line of grooms waiting for me."

Nikhat's first big win happened in 2010 at the sub-junior national championships. "I prepared a lot. Those were long days. I had school, plus training, plus homework. My body was always tired," she recalls.

Despite facing a more experienced player in the finals, Nikhat

struck gold. The tournament spurred her international dreams. In 2011, she travelled to Turkey to participate in the Junior World Championships. In her first round, she defeated her Russian opponent with a knockout. Then she won the semi-finals against Ukraine, and then the finals against the home

win matches everywhere she went – from Assam to Bulgaria and Serbia. She was one of three boxers picked for JSW's Sports Excellence Program, and – when she dislocated her shoulder in 2017 – the company got her the best treatment, physiotherapy and even brought down global players to train with her and



L-R: Nikhat in the gym; after the World Championships this year, she's got her eyes on the 2020 Olympics

country Turkey. "It was such a proud moment for me when the referee raised my hand and our national anthem played. I wanted to cry," she recalls. She was 15 years old.

Nikhat was a national celebrity after her return, and her photos frequently appeared in newspapers. She completed her Bachelor's in public administration, political science and psychology, while continuing to

keep up her fighting skills. But even so, many months after her surgery and recuperation, there were many in the field who doubted if Nikhat would ever get her mojo back.

Her Belgrade win this year shut all her critics up, of course.

She's also won over naysayers at home. Now, when Nikhat comes in with a black eye, her mom says, nonchalantly, "Put some ice." ■

# GLASS CONSCIOUS





*Glass designer and founder of art studio Glass Sutra, Reshmi Dey wants everyone to learn and be inspired by the possibilities in glass*

**T**he fire element – this is the term that comes to mind when Reshmi Dey begins to speak. Dressed in yellow when *eShe* meets her on a hot, sunny summer day, handling the bright yellow-orange flame in her pioneering glass-art studio, Glass Sutra, animatedly shaking her head of curls or railing at the delivery man who is several hours late and will set her entire workday behind schedule, Reshmi's feisty personality looms larger than life.

It is apparent that the designer and entrepreneur has channeled all her feminine energy and passion into creating a business concept that celebrates creativity. Born to Bengali parents in Assam, Reshmi was always a rebel. She never combed her hair, fought bullies back, and was defiant in the face of authority. Her teachers and relatives lost no opportunity to taunt her parents about Reshmi not “acting like a girl”. But her mother told Reshmi, “As long as you are good in studies, I can face the complaints.” Determined to do her parents proud, Reshmi scored well in academics.

After her Bachelor's from Cotton College, Guwahati – concerned that her father, a railway officer, would push her to become a professor –

Reshmi practically ran away to Delhi and took up a job in a travel agency to support herself while she prepared for MBA. She got admission in two private colleges but the fee was prohibitive. Not wanting to be a financial burden on her parents, Reshmi tearfully gave it up. “I decided that there was something



else waiting for me, something creative,” she says.

Having come across beautiful glass products in luxury stores in Delhi, Reshmi's interest in glassware was piqued. She took a train to Firozabad, Uttar Pradesh, in 1999 (“I had to stand four and a half hours in the unreserved category; there was no reserved com-





Reshme Dey teaching workshop participants how to make glass using different techniques

partment”), India’s epicenter for glass and glass products. The idea was to learn more about glassmaking, while also producing her own glassware for retail from the luxury chain of stores, Good Earth.

But, after spending several hard months in Firozabad learning to brave the 55°C furnace heat, blending into the community, winning the trust and respect of male workers who had never had a woman in their midst, she came to an dismay-ing realization.

“Most of the glass was being exported or being used for architectural purposes. The craftsmen were either lacking in aesthetic sense or did not understand the reason for certain steps in the production process,” she says, explaining why she decided to go abroad to study the nuances of glass art.

As if the universe was manifesting her desires, over the next few years, she got several opportunities to study from the top centres for Europe’s glass industry (“I am destiny’s child,” she says with a bright smile), from the International Glass Centre in Dudley, UK, to Murano in Italy, Austria, Germany, Sweden and the Czech Republic. She ventured into both glassware retail and installation art, with her work representing India at prestigious museums around the world including New York. The International Labour Organisation also consulted her for their skill development programme.

In 2015, driven by a bug to take India’s glass industry from function to design to art, she began procuring state-of-the-art equipment and set up a large studio in Delhi’s Chhattarpur. In 2017, her vision-



L-R: Older children also host birthday parties at Glass Sutra; an item made by one of her many artisans

ary Glass Sutra was launched. The only centre of its kind in India, it is open to the public to learn, explore and study glassmaking and glass art. Workshops are held and artists are

## **"I DREAM OF MAKING AN EDUCATED COMMUNITY OF INDIAN GLASSMAKERS WHO CAN TAKE THIS PASSION FORWARD GLOBALLY"**

invited from abroad. Classes of up to 10 people at a time can study five to six types of glassmaking – from kiln-formed glass to flame-work – and she often hosts events for 70 to 100 people at a time.

She has also developed a mobile studio that can go to various col-

leges and schools across India. One of her most popular offerings is the corporate 'team building' workshop, and she has held 'Glassperience' events for teams from Ikea, Google, Grey Goose and LG, among several others. With prices ranging from ₹2,000 to 3,500 per head, Glass Sutra is also quickly emerging as an appealing alternative to birthday parties and pub-hopping sessions, where young people can develop cognitive skills while enjoying themselves, and taking back self-made souvenirs.

"I dream of making an educated community of Indian glassmakers who can take this passion forward globally," says the go-getter Reshmi. For someone who has shattered numerous stereotypes and charted her own path, there is no such thing as a glass ceiling. ■

# UNVEILED



*Melika, the Iranian girl in this viral picture, shares why she stopped by the side of the road in Tehran one evening and took off her veil*

One chilly evening in February, I was walking down the street in Tehran with my sister when I suddenly realised it was Wednesday. I was wearing a hijab – the compulsory dress code imposed by Ayatollah Khomeini on Iranian women. It happened to be white. Impulsively, I took it off and stood there while

my sister took a picture. I was careful to keep my face turned away – for I can be arrested if I am identified. Passers-by mostly ignored me but many smiled, and some said, “Bravo,” quietly.

#WhiteWednesdays is a cultural girl code that was launched last year by my icon, the feminist journalist Masih Alinejad, who founded

the online movement ‘My Stealthy Freedom’ to protest the mandatory dress code for women in Iran. I sent Masih my photo and she posted it on her Instagram page with her watermark (*facing page*), where I am proud to see it among several other such photos of rebellion against the government’s sexist policies.

Iran was once one of the most progressive societies in the world renowned for its intellectual and cultural prowess. The Persian civilization is one of the oldest in the world, and has contributed immensely to human knowledge in science and arts.

Our mothers were brought up in a time when women had equal personal freedoms: they could wear anything they wanted, marry whoever they wanted, and live the life of their own choice.

But, since 1979, the Islamic government has stripped us of our freedoms and made us prisoners of its own agenda. Women have to keep themselves covered head to toe, and wear a hijab and coat at all times in public. We aren’t allowed into football stadiums, or to ride motorcycles. Though women contribute as much to the system as men – my mother is a professor, I am a hospitality professional and my sisters

are equally qualified – we are considered second-class citizens of our own country.

Our men support us – they are also aggrieved to see their friends, mothers and sisters struggling with insane rules every day. We resent the Islamic dress code. We resent that we’re forced to learn Arabic just because it is the language of the Quran. We resent Arabs for their influence in our lives and the way the conflicts in Palestine and Syria drain Iran’s resources.

We resent Islam itself – we are Muslim by force, not by choice.

## **“WE RESENT THE ISLAMIC DRESS CODE... WE RESENT ISLAM ITSELF - WE ARE MUSLIM BY FORCE, NOT BY CHOICE”**

I believe religion is the biggest problem for women, and I refuse to pray. Iranians are an inherently kind, intelligent and self-aware people – but anything that is forced on us only

makes us hate it. Just like the hijab.

Until I was 17, I dressed up like a boy and kept my hair short to avoid wearing the hijab. Now, at 24, I am forced to. But I take it off when I travel abroad. I have been to Turkey, Azerbaijan and India, and I dress up in the most modern clothes there, my hijab tucked in my bag.

But the resistance has begun. Another Iranian revolution is taking place. “They buried us, but they didn’t know that we were seeds.” ■







# DRIVING INNOVATION

*With her work at XPRIZE Foundation, Zenia Tata is enabling and accelerating new technologies to solve humanity's grandest challenges*

*Text by Aekta Kapoor. Photograph by Seema Taneja*

**T**he past few months have been busy for Zenia Tata. The chief impact officer at XPRIZE Foundation has been testing the prototypes of the finalists in the race for the Women's Safety XPRIZE, the winner for which will be announced this month. "We're talking about a whole new cadre of devices," says the US-based Zenia with characteristic enthusiasm.

Launched two years ago, the innovation award carries prize money of US\$ 1 million sponsored by entrepreneurs Anu and Naveen Jain. It requires competing teams to develop a GPS-monitored device under US\$ 40 that a person can wear on their body and trigger without using hands in case of a personal emergency. It should transmit information to community responders, and also alert the victim that help is on the way, all within 90 seconds.

"Even in the US, the average

time taken for emergency services to respond is nine to 18 minutes. Besides, three billion people in the world do not have access to an emergency number at all," says Zenia, who looked for a community-based helpline system before launching the project, and tied up with the maker of the free app, Guardian Circle, which enables neighbours and friends to protect one another.

Zenia's concept of the women's safety prize benefits men, children and the elderly as well. "When women are safe, societies thrive. The real-estate value of those neighbourhoods is higher, they are more desirable to live in, and businesses are open till late – it works for everyone," she says, adding that if an equal number of women as men joined the workforce, they could potentially add US\$ 19 trillion to the world economy by 2020.

Having spent over two decades

working for non-profit organizations across 20 countries, Zenia is well-versed in diverse issues from water and food scarcity, to land rights, healthcare, education and child welfare. Her clients include MIT's D-Lab and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. With her commanding presence and amiable personality, she is also frequently invited as a speaker on various fo-

**"WHEN WOMEN ARE SAFE,  
SOCIETIES THRIVE. THE REAL  
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rum, and to give lectures on social entrepreneurship at institutions like Harvard Business School and Stanford, among others.

The Mumbai-born Zenia has also been uniquely positioned on the cusp of social entrepreneurship and technology. During her work as executive director of International Development Enterprises (iDE), she helped pioneer market-based approaches to double the income for over 22 million impoverished farmers in Asia and Africa.

Which is why, five years ago, the donor-funded XPRIZE Foundation approached her to take forward their global strategy. One of the



Zenia Tata with industrialist Ratan Tata

many prizes that the foundation is famous for – besides challenges like space exploration, creating water from air, and turning carbon emissions to valuable products – the women's safety prize took Zenia back home to her birthplace, India.

The only child of a "brilliant mother" and a "serial entrepreneur" engineer father, Zenia did her graduation from Mumbai's St Xavier's College, and then headed to the US to attend flight school. But she faced an immediate setback as an acquaintance took a loan in her name and absconded with the money. She had to work two or three jobs at a time to fund her stay.

But the experience opened up something inside her. She picked up several languages – including French, German and Italian – and became a follower of Paramhansa Yogananda, devoting herself to kriya yoga. “I became more attracted to Eastern spirituality after leaving India. When you’re out there, all alone, and have to make harsh choices, seeds of old values planted inside you in childhood ei-

took her to India, besides other countries in the developing world.

After her wedding, she moved to Crested Butte, Colorado, with her American husband, a financial advisor, former pilot and “armchair astronomer”, and the two live a “cerebral and adventurous life” after work hours, reading science fiction or going hiking, biking, horse riding, and scuba diving.

Meanwhile her work at XPRIZE



L-R: Zenia attends XPRIZE Visioneering 2014; she is frequently invited to speak on social entrepreneurship

ther blossom or submerge,” she explains, adding that she feels blessed to be born to a family with strict codes of conduct – “You can’t use or abuse a name like Tata.”

If her dream of flying couldn’t work out, Zenia decided to follow in her grandmother’s footsteps and become a social activist. She worked across the US – including in Alaska, where she met her life partner – before her work at iDE

continues. Industrialist Ratan Tata, her cousin a few times removed, was keen for her to bring it to India to solve some of India’s biggest challenges including women’s safety, and lent his name to it.

As always, Zenia is excited about the possibilities: “We’re trying to capture the world’s imagination in order to accelerate the rate of positive change. It’s all about innovative thinking.” ■

# Flight of Faith

*German flight attendant Mariam Jouini was teary-eyed the first time she flew to India – and now she can't get enough of the country and its gods*



**E**ver since I was a little girl, I always wanted to become a flight attendant. Born in Düsseldorf, Germany, to parents of Tunisian descent, I was a dreamer, a rebel and had a deep desire to travel the world and meet people from different backgrounds.

After completing my education and working for a year in the hotel industry, I applied to be a flight attendant with a German airline and made it. I've been flying 19 years

now and I love my job. I love to see the world. I love travelling to beach destinations – my favourite is Koh Samui in Thailand – and of course, my home country, Tunisia. It is in my blood, after all.

But deepest of all is my love for India. I can't describe it. I understand that there is much injustice in Indian society towards women and lower castes – and I wish I could help – but I still love India in inexplicable ways. The food is the best



in the world, and, oh, the way people smile! So raw, so true, so deep, and so full of hope. It just makes my heart and soul glow.

Airline crew have a saying: “You either love India or you hate it. There is nothing in between.” Many years ago, my first two long-distance flights happened at the same time: the first to New York and the other to Kolkata.

I got my schedule and danced like crazy at home: “I am flying to India!” My dad looked at me like I was nuts. He said, “You’re flying to New York.” I said, “Yes, but I am also flying to Indiaaaaaa!” Nobody understood me.

New York was nice – it was my first time in America, and it was cool, but there was no big excitement. There ends the story. But on my second flight to India – oh my god! I never met so many Indian people together. All the passengers wanted something – water, hot water – and everything had to be served “Quick, quick!” But I didn’t mind. I was so excited.

As the flight approached Kolkata, my body felt changed. I got goosebumps. My heart began beating like

crazy. I couldn’t understand myself. But I felt so damn happy, I had tears in my eyes. And then we landed, and I couldn’t stop crying – even the pilot asked me if I was okay. I just couldn’t describe the emotion. “Oh god, I am in India,” I kept repeating. My whole body was lit up.

I stayed in Kolkata for two days, and it opened my eyes. It was the best layout, ever! After that I visited Hyderabad, Chennai and Delhi.

My job is a superficial one, but if you open your heart, it can also teach you to respect cultures all over the world. I can feel people. I walk through the plane and catch the vibes and feelings, the sadness, the love. We all carry a lot of grief, and we

should be good to one another.

India has never left me. Till today, my protector is Hanumanji! Of course, I love Ganesh too, and adore goddess Lakshmi. All are fantastic. I listen to Vedic mantras very often (and Bollywood music too). But Hanumanji is my favourite. He makes me feel full of life! I smile when I hear his mantras. I love his story. He is young at heart, and full of hope. He seeks truth.

And like me, he flies. ■







## BACK FROM THE BRINK

*A near-fatal accident and the loss of her closest confidantes only reinforced Anuradha Jhunjunwala's fighting spirit and zest for life*

**By Rabia Sooch Khandelwal**

**O**ne sultry day in June 2015, while returning to Kolkata from a weekend getaway in Puducherry, Anuradha 'Anu' Jhunjunwala and her friends stopped their car on the way to the airport to have a coffee break. Anu, who had been sitting at the rear left window, exchanged seats with her

best buddy, and as the journey recommenced, both dozed off. Moments later, the car crashed into the rear of the truck ahead of them.

Two days later, when Anu woke up in a local government hospital, she guessed that something had gone wrong but her immediate concern was the flight they were

going to miss. It was one of her friends' parents who told her what had happened. The girl in the front passenger seat died in the accident. Anu's best friend – whom she had exchanged seats with – had slipped into a coma. Two others, besides Anu herself, had extensive injuries.

What makes a woman a superwoman? Her 'never say die' spirit. Even in the face of insurmountable

get up to go to the washroom – it was when she failed repeatedly that the extent of her injuries truly sunk in. She had a dislocated hip, fractured spine in the neck, a broken nose and lots of wounds and bruises. Whether she would walk again was a big question mark. And yet, she did not for even a moment doubt her ability to recover 100 percent. Against medical advice, she



L-R: Before the accident; her buddies who were in the car with her (one is still in coma); after the car crash

odds, she never gives up and instead challenges the universe. Unknown of what lay ahead, the young Kolkata girl turned superwoman almost overnight.

Anuradha was moved to a private hospital in Bengaluru. All the while, she was sure that she would soon be patched up, and all the nonsense that doctors were telling her about not moving and using a bed pan was hype. Stubbornly, she tried to

flew back to Kolkata in two weeks. From there on, she fought every prognosis the doctors gave.

It was a lifelong habit for Anu. Born 20 years after her parents' wedding, she had had to face all kinds of challenges right from childhood, with health being the greatest. Diagnosed with bone tuberculosis at two, childhood thyroid disorder at five, and PCOD at puberty, life could not have been easy

for a young girl, but Anu learned to live with discomfort as companion.

Despite her parents being a generation older than the parents of her peers, she grew up in a liberal and modern environment to be an ever optimistic and confident girl. Always amongst the toppers, she passed out of La Martiniere Girls, Kolkata, graduated from Delhi's Shri Ram College of Commerce, cleared her chartered accountan-

his face, like he did all his life. He always said, live life like it's your last day and I make sure I make the most of every moment," she says. The loss set her back in her career path and thwarted her plans to launch her own startup. And then, just when she was getting back on track in her career, the car accident derailed her once again.

"Every doctor strongly recommended getting a hip replacement



L-R: Anuradha and her brother with their father; she was on bed rest for 10 months after her accident

cy exams, and has been working in top advisories in the country for the past decade. Her work has taken her around the world and also brought along with it challenges of constantly maintaining her health.

When Anu was 28, her father passed away. She was heartbroken for she was daddy's little girl. "I remember my dad's face after he passed away. He still had a smile on

so that I could walk with a limp, if at all. But I knew, once I went under the knife, I was done for," she narrates. One doctor was willing to give her body a fair chance to heal on its own provided she did not move even an inch for six months. "I agreed, but I had one condition: I wanted bathroom privileges. The bed pan was not for me," says Anu with a brave smile.



Anuradha with her mother Sushila, whom she considers her greatest source of inspiration and support

And so, allowed to go to the bathroom twice a day, Anuradha lay absolutely still in braces for the next three months. As her body healed, she was allowed to go to the hospital in a wheelchair in the car once a month. “I always planned some short outing with friends after these visits. We’d go to a pub or restaurant. I needed to feel alive again. That one day of the month kept me going,” she recalls.

Ten months later, Anu was able to walk again. But the long convalescence took a toll on her fitness. “Nothing lasts forever. Good times or bad, they all come and go. And you only get better at life with each phase,” she philosophises. Through her tough times, she was support-

ed wholeheartedly by her mother – who had fought adversities all her life and, at the age of 68, had started her own business. “My mother inspires me every day with her fighting spirit,” says Anu.

Today, at 33, Anuradha actively works out and is back to her fitness levels before the accident. She has moved to Delhi for a high-profile job with an MNC. She misses her best friend who till date is in coma and prays for his suffering to end. There are activities she will never be able to do again, but that does not stop her from exploring life further. She is ever optimistic: “No one is going to come and fix your life. It is up to you to be happy, so keep your spirits up.” ■



# READY, SET, GROW

*A chance encounter led investment consultant Namrata Durgan to a new direction in her career: to help Indian women find financial freedom*

**N**amrata Durgan was at a dinner party when the hostess introduced her as an investment consultant to other guests. One woman commented airily, “Oh, I’ll invest once I have money.” Namrata stared at the woman, somewhat stunned.

“How much did your Louis Vuitton bag cost?” she asked the woman. “About eighty thousand,” the woman replied.

“And what about your lipstick? How much did that cost?”

“Twelve hundred,” the guest said.

“Well, then,” said Namrata, “you



can definitely start investing. You only need five hundred to begin a systematic investment plan (SIP)."

The woman thought Namrata was joking but after a few minutes of hearing Namrata out, the woman said, "You've opened my eyes."

"Likewise," said Namrata, wondering. Taken aback at the lack of information even among educated upper-class women about finance

ing women. She started working on her female employees and domestic help, cajoling them to invest their money in mutual funds instead of tucking it inside mattresses. A few months later, she was invited to give a talk at India International Centre to an audience full of women entrepreneurs, many of whom had never considered investing their own money themselves.



L-R: Namrata (in red) giving a talk to Avani employees in Pithoragarh; at India International Centre, Delhi

and investments, Namrata went home and looked at the client list at her husband's firm Abundanze, where she heads administration. It had 80 to 90 percent male names. "What are the women doing with their savings?" she wondered. The same night she told her husband: "I know what I have to do."

And so, her firm MIRR was born. The 46-year-old gave the professional exam to be an independent financial advisor, and began educat-

"Why hand over your money to husbands or dads? Take full responsibility for your money. Let your money earn for you," she said, "Indulgence is freedom. Take the step from financial independence to financial freedom." Within months, scores of women started coming up to Namrata to advise them on where to invest. And then they came back with success stories – and a newfound sense of power.

"When you leave the earth, leave

it more beautiful than before.” Namrata came across this Osho quote early in her life and took it to heart. The youngest of four siblings, she was raised in Nairobi and later moved to Delhi. Her journalist father and homemaker mother had joined Osho’s spiritual movement in the early 1970s, and Namrata was brought up with large doses of the international guru’s philosophy.

She practises it even today; last

vestment],” she narrates. She used examples the villagers could relate to: “The money you earn is a seed. Keep it idle, and it serves no purpose. But plant it in the ground, and it will become a tree and give shade to your whole family.”

Not only the women but their men too started investing in small SIPs based on Namrata’s advice. Today she consults almost 100 people from all walks of life – from



L-R: Namrata in her Greater Kailash II office in Delhi; with her husband Sanjay at a conference in Jaipur

year she went for a 21-day retreat at Osho’s meditation centre. “Now, my work is my meditation,” she says, her eyes twinkling softly. “I want to be a medium, the catalyst for change in these women’s lives.”

A few months after launching MIRR, Namrata was invited by the founder of Avani – a women-led craft collective in Uttarakhand – to give its employees in Pithoragarh a talk on money matters. “I first had to explain *nivesh kya hai* [what is in-

her 32-year-old housemaid to an 82-year-old housewife. “What you do is amazing,” they tell her. “We have an extra source of income, and our husbands are proud of us.”

Spreading the message is now Namrata’s mission. While in Pithoragarh, a craftswoman asked her: “You came all the way from Delhi to talk about making our money grow? What for?”

With her warm smile, Namrata shrugged and replied, “For you.” ■

# WHERE THE HEART IS



*UK-based American writer and columnist Christie Drozdowski uses her personal experiences as a woman and mother to inspire her work*

**A**s a child growing up in a tiny, rural town in the American state of North Carolina, Christie Drozdowski sensed that she would be an adventurer, that she would do things no one else in her family would have. “I remember a specific moment when I said ‘yes’ to wherever life would take me. I literally knew in my heart that I would

follow that yes anywhere in the world,” she says.

Eventually, she did.

In Christie’s early years, her father was an overnight truck driver, so he would be gone for days at a time and her stay-at-home mom raised the two children singlehandedly. Later in life, after both her parents furthered their education, her dad became a Christian minister and



her mom a teacher's assistant.

Religion and spirituality were part of Christie's growing years. "But I made the choice for myself when I was 15 to truly know God for myself and not for my family," she explains. In University, she took up religious studies at first, but then switched to writing and mass communications. "And I was hooked," she says, on finding her true path. She now has a personal connection with God that is unlike the one that her family told her about.

Christie later married an Englishman, and after a few years living together in the US and having a baby together, they decided to move

to the UK last year. "I suppose it's all about following that 'yes' I had promised myself," she says.

The young family's decision was treated with apprehension, but Christie learnt to trust her instincts. "In the process of coming to the UK, we lived in Germany for six months first," she shares. "My husband speaks German, but I do not, so it was daunting and sometimes overwhelming. However, we met some amazing people there, and my heart was able to understand even more clearly that people around the world all feel the same things."

Eventually they settled in England, and – with a baby girl keep-





ing her days full – Christie’s writing turned towards motherhood and the experience of being a woman. “I especially love interviewing people to communicate truths about parenting,” she says, referencing a recent piece on maternal mental health, specifically about postpartum rage, and the insight she gained from interviewing a therapist and a psychiatrist. “I was able to find validation in my own feelings of anger in the beginning of my motherhood journey through writing this piece, and it was life-changing.” Christie and her husband are expecting their second child this autumn.

Christie writes often about why

21st century feminism should be wary of isolating stay-at-home mothers, and instead seek a way to value and honour both women and men without diminishing one or the other. She is also passionate about being a part of a generation and a tribe of women who support one another.

“There is so much healing and freedom and power when women come together,” she says. “We have so many walls that build up around our hearts, but tearing them down and continuing to let people in will give our lives so much more meaning. Life is truly about loving other people and being loved.” ■



# KEEP WALKING

*Her first day of college turned out to be the turning point for teenager Medha Saha — she lost a leg but earned the heart of a hero*

**E**ven after the bus wheel had gone over Medha Saha's leg and left it crushed and bleeding, she remembers being wide alert, taking out her phone, unlocking it and dialing her mother. It was 9.30 am on 21 August,

2017 — the first day of engineering college for 18-year-old Medha, who had left home excitedly that morning to start a new phase of her life. But fate took her in an entirely different direction.

Her blue leggings in tatters, her

blood splattered everywhere, and her left foot limp leaving her unable to move, Medha recalls in crystal clarity the ensuing pandemonium as people shouted in horror around her. “I was very strong. I didn’t cry. I was completely aware of everything going on,” says the brave student. She was shortly moved to a hospital by the traffic police, and admitted to the emergency ward.

Her uncle was the first to arrive and, seeing him, Medha sighed in relief that she was no longer alone. Soon her friends arrived, and then her mother and aunt. “Seeing my mom, all my strength just left me,” she says. Her brave face crumpling, she broke down in tears, wailing like a child in her mother’s arms.

The doctors asked her family to move her to another hospital as she required a complicated surgery. On the way, in the ambulance, Medha remembers screaming as her pain intensified. By 7.30 in the evening, she had had X-rays and was rolled in for surgery. Mercifully, the doctors gave her an injection to make her unconscious, so that she had a brief respite from her pain.

When she woke, it was to a devastating new reality. Her left leg had been amputated below the knee.

Medha adjusted bravely to the hospital routine, and by the time she was taken home a week later, she had reluctantly accepted her destiny. Doctors had advised her

bed rest for at least four months, but Medha had been a jolly, gregarious, extroverted child all her life, and hated sitting in bed all day.

So, two weeks after her accident, she got up and went to college.

The college provided her with a wheelchair, which she used to get around while she made new friends. “Everyone in the engineering col-



Medha at the Kolkata Marathon in December 2017

lege appeared so intelligent to me! I met people from different parts of the country, who were all very supportive and helped me get around,” she recalls. Her cousin would pick her up in a car after college, and she learnt to walk with a walker and crutches when at home, building her upper-body strength.





Medha continues to pose for Instagram photos, her smile intact. Top right: With her parents and brother

Exactly four months after her accident, Medha got fitted with an Ottobock prosthetic leg. It was expensive but her businessman father and homemaker mother were determined to give her anything she needed to walk unaided. “I started using it 18 hours a day, and adapted to it very quickly,” says Medha. The trainers from Ottobock – who taught her how to use it – also encouraged her to participate in the upcoming Kolkata marathon. “Twenty days after I got my new leg, I participated in the marathon. I didn’t have much practice but I just ran the best I could,” Medha smiles describing the day. She completed the two-kilometre distance marked out for the disabled.

It’s a word she still hasn’t come to terms with, though. “I react very badly when someone calls me disabled. My parents and friends never say it,” she says vehemently. But the very next moment, she softens: “At least I’m still alive. And I can still walk and look normal – no one can tell I have a prosthetic leg.”

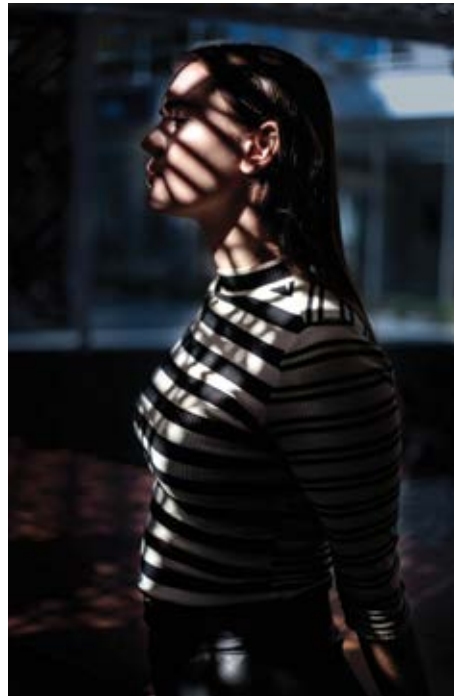
These days, she is busy with her first-year examinations. In her spare time, she reads up about her new icons, Paul Martin, an American amputee athlete, Paralympian, speaker, and author; and Arunima Sinha, the world’s first female amputee to climb Mount Everest. She is also active on Instagram, like any other girl her age. Her heroic journey has just begun. ■



# AND STILL I RISE...

*In Supernormal, her groundbreaking new study of trauma and survival, Meg Jay tells the stories of people who overcome trauma in their childhoods to go on and live successful lives as adults*

**W**hen Mara was a newborn, her mother had an urge to throw her against the wall. She rocked her in a nursing chair each day and night, and all the while she stared at a spot across the room, a target where she imagined hurling her baby girl. One evening when she thought she could resist no more, she turned out the lights so she would not see the spot and wedged herself tightly in a corner, knees to her chest, squeezing Mara hard. This is how Mara's father found them, both wailing. Don't turn on the light, Mara's mother said, confessing everything between terrified sobs. Mara's father crouched in frozen fear as mother and baby screamed together and, before he could act, his wife's shrieks reached a piercing crescendo and the baby fell silent. Both parents thought Mara had died when in fact, she had fallen fast asleep. As if a switch inside her had



simply turned off, she went from being a squirmy, squealing baby to a limp and quiet, eight-pound source of warmth. That night, Mara's mother was hospitalized with what

the doctors at first thought might be postpartum depression – except that after she came home and Mara went from being a baby to a toddler, it only got worse.

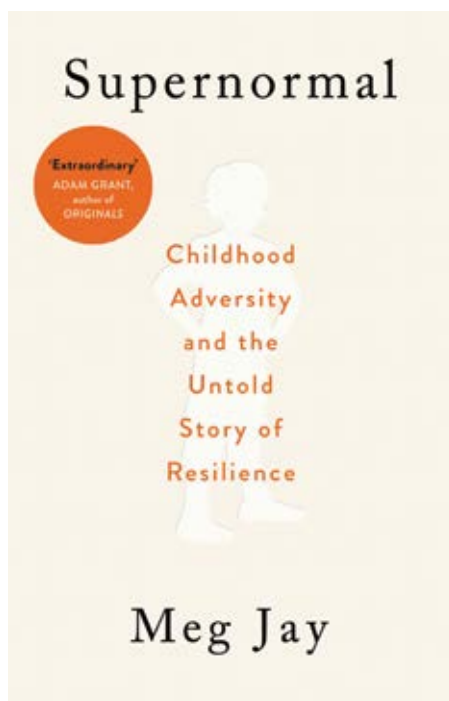
Once a busy caterer who loved to try out new dishes on her family and friends, Mara's mother became more irritable and unpredictable with each passing year, and Mara and her father never knew if dinner would be on the table or on the ceiling. More than once, Mara packed her child-size suitcase to run away, but because she was not allowed to leave the yard, she sat in the farthest corner of their large wooded lot and stared at the sky. It seemed so empty, it was like looking at nothing, except for the birds and the planes that flew whichever way they wanted. Watching them, Mara could sit out there for hours.

**I**n response to fear, our brains are hardwired for fight or flight.

Yet when fighting back is not an option and neither is physical flight, many supernormal children stick around and comply with what the situation demands while, on the inside, they find ways to escape. Maybe they fall asleep when they become overwhelmed, or they flee without leaving the yard. Even when their bodies must stay put, they take their minds somewhere else. This is one of the key survival strategies of many resilient children: One way or another, they get away.

They resist being defined or engulfed by whatever ails those near to them.

According to psychologists Susan Folkman and Richard Lazarus, there are two ways of coping with stress: problem-focused coping in which the individual works to fix



the problem, and emotion-focused coping in which the individual manages his emotional response. Problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping are somewhat akin to modern forms of fight or flight, and neither approach is inherently better than the other. Rather, much like the Serenity

Prayer taught in Alcoholics Anonymous – *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference* – the art of adaptation is choosing the right way to cope at the right time.

Many resilient children find ways



Meg Jay

to minimize the impact of their difficult surroundings, often first by trying to fight back, to change things somehow and improve their lot. If that does not work, they do not necessarily accept their situation but they accept that, at least in the moment, they cannot change it, and they distance themselves from

the chaos around. Distancing is a form of emotion-focused coping, one based on the recognition that while we may not be able to change the bad things that happen to us, we can change how much we pay attention to those bad things and how much we let them affect us.

In psychology, the oldest and broadest term for such distancing is dissociation, a word that refers to a wide variety of strategies that allow us to disengage from our surroundings. The most extreme forms of dissociation are associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, and tend to be sensationalized and pathologized in books and movies. Maybe this was why, as an adult, Mara wondered what her lifelong tendency toward dissociation meant about her mental health. The most common forms of dissociation, however, are not necessarily sensational or problematic but are typically used as creative and temporary forms of coping. Knowing how and when to separate ourselves from our surroundings may sound sophisticated, but psychologist Harry Stack Sullivan argued that such distancing is “the most basic capacity of the human mind to protect its own stability,” and its use can be seen even in very young infants. ■

*Excerpted from Supernormal: Childhood Adversities and the Untold Stories of Resilience with permission from Penguin Random House*



## WOMAN OF HER WORD

*“Our traumatic experience shape us the most,” says novelist Shuchi Singh Kalra. She shares her views on gender bias and social taboos*

**A**uthor of the very popular novels *I’m Big. So What!?* and *Done With Men*, Shuchi Singh Kalra’s views on social injustices and body image find their way to her columns and books. Born in Lucknow, Shu-

chi spent most of her childhood in Libya. Later, she studied optometry followed by a Master’s in English literature from India.

“Both my parents are doctors,” says Shuchi, who tried writing her first book – a work of science fic-



tion – at the age of 10. “There is no ‘literary gene’ in the family, so to speak. I am most likely an aberration or a genetic mutation.” Her new novel, *A Cage of Desires*, has just been released. We talk to Shuchi about life and work.

*What is a lasting memory from childhood that left a great impact on you?*

The first memory that comes to my mind upon reading this question is not a very pleasant one, but I guess it is our traumatic experiences that teach us the most, and lend depth to our understanding of the world. While there are memories I wish I could let go of, they have definitely helped my expression as a writer, and I often find myself drawing from those experiences while writing.

*How did marriage and motherhood change your writing journey?*

I started writing my first published book after my daughter was born, so marriage and motherhood have never been a hindrance. In fact, motherhood has not only been inspiring, it has also made me more focused, disciplined and driven.

*You once wrote about going through infertility treatment, and how badly women are treated if they can't have kids.*

*How can society fix this prejudice?*

Infertility is not a curse. There is no need to wrap so much trauma and taboo around it. The only way to fight this prejudice is to talk candidly about these issues and encourage other people to share their experiences till they begin to be perceived as normal. Conversations also help build support groups.

*Your columns take on gender biases in the way girls are raised. What has your experience taught you in this regard?*

We women live in the same world, but our realities are very different. I was brought up by very progressive parents who never discouraged me from voicing my opinions. Gender biases existed all around me but not in my immediate environment. It took me a while to realize that the way I was brought up was not the norm. My relationships with

men opened me up to a lot of grim realities. A large number of women in India continue to struggle with gender biases on so many fronts every day – it is insane. I want to be a voice for all these women and write about issues that affect our everyday lives. As a woman writer, I feel I owe this to my tribe. ■



With her new book, *A Cage of Desires*

# HER BLOOD IN MY VEINS

*It's only well into adulthood that we realise how important our mothers are, and how we've inherited their histories and memories. Three women trace their mother's lives, and see a mirror to their own truths*

## JASHO

*By Anita Panda*

**M**y father Dr Abanish Panda was always the celebrity in our family – the eminent paper technologist that he was. But my mother Jasho was his driving force and was the true ‘shero’ in my life.

Jasho's story is that of an ordinary, primary-school educated woman from a nondescript village, who became the ‘Rock of Gibraltar’ for her ambitious husband. It is the story of her metamorphosis from a shy, simple girl into being the driving force behind her illustrious husband's success. It is also the story of ‘The Beauty and the Nerd’, which proves that marriages can still work despite vastly mismatched educational and intellectual disparities in a couple.

Jasho hailed from a family of *zamindars* and freedom fighters in the

village of Bhurkamunda in Odisha's Jharsuguda district. She cleared fifth grade but discontinued her education. Betrothed to Abanish since childhood, she got married in the summer of 1947 at the age of 16.

They had their first son in 1955 and the second in 1957. Her husband got the opportunity to work in Finland on an international exchange fellowship and young Jasho



Jasho and Abanish, 1997

was left behind with two little sons at her maternal home. One year of her husband's stay abroad turned to seven as he decided to pursue his PhD from Germany. Jasho stoically bore all the trials by fire, pangs of separation, social ridicule and wild speculations from the villagers



Jasho and Anita, 2017

about being abandoned by her husband. But she had unflinching faith in Abanish, toiling hard to achieve his dream, the first Asian to earn a doctorate from the Darmstadt Tech University, Germany.

The couple kept their love alive by exchanging long, sentimental letters every month. When Abanish returned in 1963, his two young sons reacted to him as a stranger rather than as their father! He wanted to take his wife along for

his post-doctorate in Norway, but being heavily pregnant with their third child, Jasho couldn't go. Abanish left for Oslo soon after their third son was born in 1964.

The family relocated to Delhi in 1972, five years after my birth, and Jasho adapted quickly to the urban lifestyle, socializing with the elite at parties, attending to her home, raising kids studying in top schools. Her lack of formal education was no deterrent to her playing hostess to numerous European guests. Later, we moved to Kolkata, where she continued to be the motivating factor behind her husband's soaring career graph. Abanish took Jasho on an unforgettable European tour and – despite her inability to converse in English – she made her husband proud with her charm.

In 2005, Jasho was diagnosed with cancer; a lump in her left breast had been found to be malignant. She and her family went through hell but she bore it and survived with her trademark grace and resilience.

Earlier this year, her husband was felicitated with a 'Lifetime Achievement Award' for his exemplary, 60-plus years of contribution to the global paper technology industry. As his wife of 68 years looked on, her eyes moist behind her smile, their youngest born and only daughter looked at Jasho with pride. Here's to an exceptional woman and mother: *"Maa, tujhe salaam!"* ■



# RUPA

*By Reeti Roy*

**I**n 2008, when I was in my second year of college, my mother was diagnosed with renal carcinoma, or cancer that afflicts the kidney. I remember sitting with my brother, both of us holding each other, and sobbing, because we did not know what to do, how to react in that situation. I also remember my mother asking me to take my exams that year, no matter what.

Incidentally, for the first semester of my English literature examinations, I had topped class. But when

my mother's cancer was diagnosed, studying and getting a good grade was frankly the last thing on my mind. When I think back about it now, the entire year was a blur. I did not fail, but ended up simply scraping through the exams. It was a sureshot setback in my academics. But as far as I was concerned, I had pulled through in what was one of the hardest moments of my life.

My mom Rupa Debi is my biggest inspiration. Born and brought up in Kolkata, she studied mathematics in Presidency College, and was one of only five women in her batch. She also accomplished another rare feat: she was a CA rank



Rupa, 1986



holder and set up her own chartered accountancy firm, which has worked with several pioneering organisations since. Along with all this, she has raised five children, looked after her own parents in their old age, has a large number of friends who turn to her for love and support, and is a true moral compass for me. She introduced us to art at a very young age. She's also taught us the value of compassion, kindness and hard work. She would give us all books after our exams ended as a reward for trying hard.

She was a true feminist, and created an egalitarian environment at home that was not gender-specific: both my brother and I played with the same toys. Our mother even made fake shaving-foam beards for both of us together!

She's also had a very tangible hand in shaping my career, for it is my mum who still does all my taxes! Were it not for her, launching a startup would definitely have been super difficult for me. What most people don't realise is how difficult and isolating being an entrepreneur can be. Having a positive, strong force in your life can really shield you against the outpouring of backlash, criticism and negativity that comes your way.

I've just learnt so much from her just by observing how she conducts herself: with grace, with dignity. She's also one of the most spon-

taneous people I have ever come across in my life – with a passion for life, a love of travelling and learning new things, and striving to make the world a better place every single day.

My mother healed from cancer,



Rupa and Reeti, 2013

and is doing well. She always told me to absorb and observe and learn from each experience that came my way, good or bad.

What I've learnt from her is embracing failures and the curveballs that life throws at you with as much dignity, courage and strength as you can muster. Tell stories, and help others around you tell stories. And so I'm starting with hers. ■

# KAMLA

*By Meenakshi Alimchandani*

**W**e lived in a joint family in Delhi when I was born. My relatives brainwashed me into believing that – as the second girl child and a dark-complexioned one at that – I was unloved, unnecessary.

When my brother was born a few years later, he was lavished with attention and affection especially from our grandmother, the matriarch, and my belief in my own superfluity was cemented.

So I would cling to my mother,

my life. As if holding her hand or sari was the only thing keeping me alive. Even if others didn't care for my presence, I was somehow very sure about my mother's love for me.

It was not something she said, but it was a given.

Years later, I would learn that my mother, Kamla Wadhwa, was herself a victim of her circumstances. She was not very educated and it was easy for others to boss over her. The eldest daughter-in-law in a family of 10 siblings, the eight-year delay between her wedding and first child meant that she already had to face much social pressure and ostracism. By the time I was born, our family's financial situation was precarious. My docile mother had to make do with whatever little she had, wearing hand-me-downs from her relatives, and taking permission for every little expense.

My childhood was marred with low confidence and lack of motivation. After my education, though, I had a burning desire to be a 'working woman' and delay marriage. And I found support in an unexpected source: Kamla.

My relatives chided her: "You'll let your daughter go out to work? She'll get out of hand. She'll run away with someone." But my mother had faith in me. The love in her eyes gave me the courage to set off on my career.

Over the next decade, I grew by



Ashok and Kamla, 1965



leaps and bounds in my workplace, married and had a son. Life was full and busy. In 2009, facing various workplace challenges, I began looking out for a new job. At the same time, my mother fell seriously ill. After two or three days in a nearby hospital's ICU, her condition became worse. The doctor advised us to take her to a bigger hospital. There, tests revealed her kidneys were 90 percent damaged and her lungs severely infected. She needed dialysis before they could perform surgery. On the first day of her di-

**MY RELATIVES CHIDED HER: "YOU'LL LET YOUR DAUGHTER GO OUT TO WORK? SHE'LL GET OUT OF HAND." BUT MY MOTHER HAD FAITH IN ME.**

alysis, she said to my father: "You've brought me to my death bed..." After that day, she stopped talking much. She did, however, insist on calling all her close family members to visit her – as if she wanted to bid them all goodbye. But after they left, she would lie back in silence.

One day, she asked me about my job search. I told her I was still looking. She put her hand on my head and said, "You will get something very soon." I cannot forget

the smile on her face as she said it: beatific and pain-free. I felt like I had been blessed by a divine presence then.

The doctors once again asked us to shift her to a third hospital with an in-house dialysis facility. The moment my mother entered the building, she sighed with contentment: "Now I will be fine," she told us with a weak smile. I finally went



Meenakshi, Kamla and Ashok, 2000

home, relieved.

The same afternoon, she passed away. She was just 57.

I was shattered with grief; my confidante was gone. But she had left me with a heartful of gifts: courage to face loss, resilience to bounce back after pain and suffering, and the will to keep moving forward.

I got a new job a few months later, and have grown even further in my career since then. It is a given. It is the blessing she gave me. ■



# A BITE OF GOOD HEALTH

*It took vision and reinvention for former television producer Shradha Aggarwal to launch her own startup offering healthy gourmet snacks*

**I**t was cheese that did it for Shradha Aggarwal. A blob of 30 kg of fine cheese lay in front of her, sweating and melting under the harsh studio lights. “I wish I could learn more about food so that I could treat food better,” the young TV producer thought that day in 2010. “Food should be respected.”

Two years later, the media professional launched Miss Chhotee’s,

a range of ready-to-eat, all-natural snacks that “reimagine international flavours for the urban Indian.” And the journey has been as sweet and spicy as the sauces and chips she’s famous for.

After graduating in media studies from The New School, New York, Shradha, the Delhi-born Modern School alumna moved back home, where she joined Discovery channel.



The next four years were highly educative as she learnt all about branding and gained an insight into the changing consumer mindset.

Soon after she'd watched the cheese being tortured at her Delhi workplace, Shradha was on a holiday to Goa when she came across a quaint Italian restaurant. Impulsively, she applied for an apprenticeship. "You'll leave your glamorous TV career to work in this little restaurant?" the owner asked her incredulously. But Shradha persisted, and he eventually gave in. That's how Shradha started on her food education, learning on the job.

hotee's struck her. "I'd come home tired and in no mood to cook something elaborate, yet my palate craved fresh gourmet food," she says.

The idea bore fruit in 2012, when she set up her home-business in Delhi with her family's help. She offered a variety of preservative-free, baked, vegan snacks – including peri-peri dips, pesto sauce, kale chips, and beetroot and spinach lavash – to gourmet-food stores.

The product line kept evolving and her packaging design won global awards and recognition. Ananda in the Himalayas consulted her to develop preservative-free foods, and



L-R: Miss Chhotee's range of healthy snacks; Shradha launched her label at a gourmet food festival in 2012

Over the next couple of years, she worked with the Lite Bite Foods chain of restaurants, The Table, and the Four Seasons in Mumbai, understanding kitchen politics, quality assessment and customer relations. It was while she was working in Mumbai that the idea of Miss Ch-

her startup was shortlisted for incubation by NITI Aayog.

"Being an entrepreneur is a lonely journey," admits the 32-year-old. "But it's your own vision, so you have to just motivate yourself and keep re-inventing the curve." The big game has begun. Say cheese, Shradha. ■

# HAPPY WOMEN = HAPPY STATE

*Bhutan's people smile easily. And it's no wonder — their country is considered the happiest place in the world. Perhaps one of the reasons is that women have equal rights and opportunities — in property, education, employment, and personal freedom. A frequent visitor shares snapshots*

***Text and photos by Ritu Goyal Harish***



Angay (grandma in Bhutanese) and I in her daughter's kitchen, warmed by a traditional *bukhari* (heater). She is 82, and has only one desire — to live longer.



This woman was on her way home after offering prayers at the Chime Lhakhang temple (known for its phallus symbol). I asked if her children looked after her. She beamed: “Yes. I am happy,” she said. It showed.



The elderly in Thimphu flock to the National Memorial Chorten to circumambulate the temple 108 times and offering prostrations. The administration has made it easier to prostrate by installing wooden boards.





Festivals are a big part of Bhutan's religious and spiritual fabric, and include traditional dances. These village girls in Paro smile as they get into form during practice for an upcoming spring festival.



Monks and nuns are a common sight in Bhutan's towns, shopping for essentials or visiting other monasteries – such as these nuns in Changankha Lhakhang, Thimphu. Some even renounce their vows and get back to regular life.



Every person in a Bhutanese household contributes towards its day-to-day running, even the elderly and visitors. Unperturbed by the growing urbanisation, they prefer to walk home, carrying groceries in their hands.

# SEEKER OF MEMORIES

*Artist and author Aanchal Malhotra studies the personal histories of the refugees of Partition through the belongings they carried with them*

**W**hile doing her Master's in studio art from Concordia University, Montréal, Canada, Aanchal Malhotra took a break to

during the Partition. Simply talking about those items transported their owner to a different time, recalls Aanchal, who wondered, "If one person has this reaction to the past, what about the others?"

And so began her personal exploration of memories. "I found it interesting how no one had ever studied migratory objects," says the alumna of OCAD University, Toronto. "So I decided to do my thesis on objects of the Partition."

It was a one-woman show. Aanchal did the research, photography, interviews, translating and writing all by herself. "You have to become a kind of ethnographer for something like this," says the 28-year-old. "You have to learn to deftly extract memories, which are sometimes painful. You have to learn to ask personal questions respectfully."

Aanchal's own family had crossed over to India during the Partition. And yet she admits she is one of the rare young breed who is showing an interest in this slice of history. "I



Aanchal at her studio in Montréal, Canada

return to her hometown, as she had "no idea what to do for her thesis." While in Delhi, where her family runs the 65-year-old Bahrison's chain of bookstores, she happened to come across two objects that a family had carried across the border

PHOTO CREDIT: AASHNA MALHOTRA (THIS PAGE); RAJINI MALHOTRA (FACING PAGE)



Aanchal at  
Udaipur  
City Palace



was tired of being from the generation that is slowly forgetting the past,” she says, acknowledging that the study of history has so far been dominated by older researchers.

“But this kind of work ages you beyond your years,” says the bright-eyed Aanchal, who – having travelled across India, and to Lahore and Karachi in the course of her research – feels she has seen a glimpse of the other side and come to the realization that we’re all the same. “I hope my work will be the starting point for cross-border conversations,” she says. “It may be a naïve way to look at it, but the truth is, we share a common history, and the

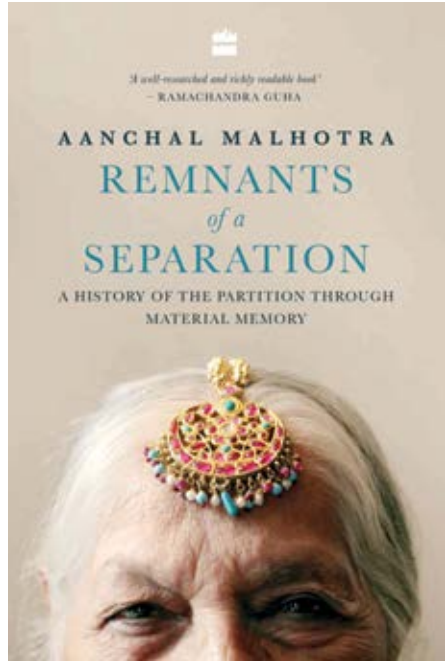
people who remember the time of undivided India are not going to be around much longer.”

Aanchal began working on her thesis project, ‘Remnants of a Separation’, in 2013 under the guidance of Canadian photographer Raymonde April. She presented it in 2015 at Concordia University’s Galérie FoFA, having designed the viewing area as a 120-foot long, 10-foot wide gallery with a glass on one side to create a sense of “walking along a border and surveillance from the outside”. Visual arts theses are usually light on text, but Aanchal’s was 25 pages long. “I wanted to provide a context,” says Aanchal,



Aanchal putting the final touches on her presentation at the Galérie FoFA, Concordia University, Montréal

PHOTO CREDIT: RAJNI MALHOTRA



Clockwise from top left: Portraits of lawyer Bakshi Tek Chand and his wife taken at the home of their daughter, Sumohini Bhagat, as part of Aanchal's *The Hiatus Project*; the cover of her book *Remnants of a Separation* features a photo of her grandmother Bhag Malhotra wearing the *maang tikka* her own mother had carried with her from NWFP to Delhi in 1947; Aanchal signing copies of her book at Bahrison's

who also works as an editor in her family's literary agency, Red Ink. Her thesis was expanded on and published as a book in 2017, and has been very positively received across the subcontinent.

Having grown up surrounded by books and authors, Aanchal has the knowledge of a librarian, and – unlike her grandfather, the founder of Bahrison's, who famously never read the books he sold, but simply understood his customers very well – she is monstrously well-read. Deeply appreciative of literature such as Anuradha Roy's *Atlas*

of *Impossible Longing*, and Haruki Murakami's *1Q84*, Aanchal believes "all fiction is some sort of non-fiction". "You're creating a whole new world, putting together pieces of reality," she says.

Meanwhile, her study of the objects of Partition continues on her photoblog, 'The Hiatus Project'. "The younger generation is only informed through text books. But we have to publish these personal stories of people, which make them more humane, especially the stories collected from the other side," she says. "It's our duty." ■





# THE STATEMENT

*These five jewellery designers allow their eclectic designs to speak for them*

*By Anupam Dabral*

## EN INDE

Influenced by her global travels and India's mystique, Anupama Sukh Lalvani launched En Inde in 2004. Architectural shapes and geometry being the focal points of her creations, Anupama has taken a complete detour from traditional gold

and diamond jewellery. Modern, edgy and daring, her pieces take hints from *patwa*, an ancient technique of winding thread in tribal jewellery. Retailing out of prestigious stores in US, France, Australia and Japan, the En Inde label is proof of evolving tastes in jewellery.

**Shop at:** *Eninde.com*



## MISHO

Trained as a sculptor at Goldsmiths, University of London, and having honed her skills under architect and interior designer Ashiesh Shah, Suhani Parekh's understanding of metal, shape and the global consumer manifests in her label Misho, launched in 2016. She has already earned prestigious fashion awards, and has created pieces for the likes of Rihanna, Deepika Padukone and Sonam Kapoor. Suhani is now all set to make headway in the fine jewellery market.

**Shop at:** *Mishodesigns.com*



## KICHU



Kichu Dandiya's eponymous label finds meaning in artisanal, handcrafted pieces. After completing her Bachelor's in jewellery design from Central Saint Martins, London, Kichu returned to Jaipur to work with artisans. Her aim was not just to understand the trade but, based on the nuances of various ethnicities, create something as dynamic as today's changing society. A retro take on traditional Rajasthani anklets, eagle-inspired rings and a bison-inspired pendant are some of her signature pieces.

**Shop at:** *Kichu.co.in*

## ATELIER MON

Launched in 2012 by mother-daughter duo Monica Sharma and Meher Rohatgi, Atelier Mon encapsulates contradiction. Experimenting with unconventional Western forms while looping in Eastern references, the label retails from prestigious stores such as Harvey Nichols, Anthropologie-BHLDN, Saks, Lou and Grey, and has been embraced by the likes of Sonam Kapoor and Priyanka Chopra.

**Shop at:** *Ateliermon.com*



## LARA MORAKHIA

Lara Morakhia's contemporary take on classics sets her apart. What began as an artistic pursuit, after Lara was recommended bed rest following an injury, has now become a sought-after label. An eclectic mix of precious and semi-precious stones, precious metals, *jadtar*, *kundan*, mother-of-pearl combined with *batik* bone, leather and beads help shape up Lara's artistic jewellery pieces. Heritage structures such as Indian temples coupled with contemporary culture form a distinct narrative for Lara as a designer.

**Shop at:** *Laram.in*

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# Mindful Motherhood

*Allow your children to find their own paths – like the practice of a martial art, it may just lead you to grow yourself*

**By Kay Newton**

**I**t was the Spanish Championship finals and our youngest son was on the tatami mat, one judo throw away from losing the match. His coach shouted an instruction and something switched in his demeanour. In the next 30 seconds, the reigning champion was

on the floor. Our son had won.

When I look at my son's life, I can see defining moments when he became the man he is today. Judo was one of them. Not only did it teach him many lessons from the moment he first stood in a dojo, it taught his parents many lessons too.



PHOTO CREDIT: ARNOLD EXCONDE ON UNSPLASH



Kano Jigoro said of judo, “If there is effort, there is always accomplishment.” Our son has applied effort to all parts of his life, his studies, friends, maintaining a long-term distant relationship with his girlfriend and being a role model. Our effort as parents has been to let him go free, to fly the nest and to experience life with all its ups and downs for himself.

At times this has been hard for all parties. When things go wrong you want to step in and be the parent. And yet, holding back and letting our children sort ‘stuff’ out for themselves in their own way is the greater skill.

There is also another judo phrase that’s equally meaningful for parenting: “The less effort, the faster and more powerful you will be.” Too many parents these days are ‘helicopter’ parents (doing everything for their kids, so that they do not have the basic skill sets to live away from home such as preparing a healthy meal, balancing accounts, washing clothes or using public transport). Releasing the apron ties can be an anxious time, even if you know it is part of the natural cycle.

Making sure that your child has basic life skills can take away some of the pain when they leave. Self-sufficiency is not a skill taught in schools, it is something they need to learn from home.

Finding a mentor outside of the

family is also a must for young people. One life-defining aspect of judo for our whole family was the fact that our son had another male role model in his life apart from his father. A mentor who not only taught him judo’s discipline and focus, he also taught him judo etiquette and behaviour. Parents can find it hard to teach their own children such life skills. The rapport this surrogate father figure had with our son certainly took away many stresses of the teenage years.

Last month, our son turned 21, and, on the same day, graduated from University. Judo lessons remain permanently in all our lives. Before and after practising or engaging in a match, opponents bow to each other. Bowing is an expression of gratitude and respect. In effect, you are thanking your opponent for giving you the opportunity to improve your technique.

I bow to my son with gratitude and respect. ■



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](http://www.Kay-Newton.com)

# A Mom's Trade-off

RABIA SOOCH KHANDELWAL, 33, DELHI



I was born in Amritsar. At the age of six, I was sent to boarding school, and later moved to Chandigarh to live with family. My parents are both doctors, and my younger brother and his wife are both dentists and live in Toronto. Unlike my family, I studied B.Com from Delhi University and then went to the Warwick Business School in UK for my Master's in marketing and business strategy. My husband and I were dating then. We got married many years later. In our Indian context, marriage is a great deal of adjustment and sacrifice on the girl's part, but I believe there is light at the end of the tunnel.

I worked as a brand planner in Delhi after returning from UK. The greatest workplace challenge for a woman is to be heard. You may be talented but men don't take you seriously. After seven years, I had to quit my job to raise a family, but I plan to go back to work as soon as my kids are a little older.

Motherhood has set me behind in my career but it has also taught me empathy. It changed the way I looked at my mother-in-law, especially since I have two sons myself. It also made me a bit of a worrier: I think about my kids all the time.

I want to be remembered as a loving person; I have a lot of love to give. If only I knew how to express it best. ■



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