

# eShe

— the female gaze —



*Sapna  
Bhavnani*

Hairstylist, actor,  
activist, filmmaker,  
feminist, designer,  
rebel

## GUNDI CODE

Natasha Sumant's fashion label is all about desi feminism

## BABY AND BUSINESS

What's it like to give birth and launch a startup at the same time? 3 entrepreneurs tell us!

## THE INVISIBLE

2 women use age and invisibility to start new careers



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PHOTOGRAPHY: Gourab Ganguli



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# THE REBEL ISSUE

**J**Krishnamurti had said, “It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society.” I’ve always respected rebels – the nonconformists who chart their own paths, the ones who say yes when others say no, the daredevils, the mavericks and outliers.

It’s these folks who challenge conventional thinking and herd-like behaviour, who take risks and innovate in society, community, politics, sport and business. It takes courage, but each time a woman rides a motorcycle, tattoos her body or speaks up about being gang-raped (p.22), or each time a man dresses up as a drag queen (p.06), or a bunch of women declare they are happily single (p.30), or a fashion label calls itself ‘Gundi’, female thug, and celebrates female rebellion (p.42), it creates a ripple effect of courage, faith and solidarity.

Oddly, the rebellion today becomes the rulebook for herds tomorrow, so the original revolutionaries – Krishna, Siddhartha, Jesus – end up spawning religions that imprison future generations in discriminatory rules, superstitions and bigotry, instead of the love and inclusivity they had stood up for.

Let’s all rebel against religious dogmas and social codes that cloud our innate intelligence, judgement and compassion. Let’s be discerning in thought and love in action. The world needs more of us. ■



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Model: Sushant Divgikr

Photography: Monisha Ajgaonkar

Makeup: Ankit Anil Trivedi

Stylist: Mayuri Nivekar

Assisted by: Noyonika Nalavade

Outfit: Swapnil Shinde

Production: Akash Shah, Aryan

Gupta, Netram Shah

# MAKING THE TRANSITION

*A photo series by LGBTQ activist and photographer Monisha Ajgaonkar and her muse, drag queen Sushant Divgikr, challenges notions of gender and social conformity in India*

Inspired to highlight the cause of the transgender community, LGBTQ activist and photographer Monisha Ajgaonkar partnered with Sushant Divgikr, artist and well-known drag queen in Mumbai, to shoot a special photo series called 'Blossom' this summer. The series shows Sushant transitioning from a young boy – who is afraid to 'come out' due to societal pressure – into the diva he truly is. And through the shoot, Monisha manages to make a statement to all men and women: "Be the queen you are."

Born and raised in Mumbai, 29-year-old Sushant holds a Master's degree in industrial psychology from University of Mumbai. He was Mr Gay World India 2014, and continues to be on their board of directors. He is also a singer, performer, TV host, actor, columnist and motivational speaker.

He started performance drag in September 2017 as RANI KO-HE-Nur, though he had performed

in drag earlier as well, such as in Vickram Kapadia's rendition of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

"Drag is not just about 'dressing up,'" explains Sushant. "It's a performance art that deals intricately with the entire performance value, the alter ego, its name and personality, along with of course the hair, the makeup and the elaborate costumes. If you're just 'dressing up' then you're a cross-dresser. One must distinguish the two."

Founder of photography firm The Photo Diary, Monisha was keen to execute an *avant garde* shoot, one that shows a man uncovering his truth and identity. "Transgenders are mistreated worldwide. I wanted to raise a voice for them and show support. With this photo series, I want to portray that people can be themselves and be comfortable in their own skin," she says.

She hasn't faced any challenges in shooting LGBTQ people yet. "Difficulties are subjective and for me, there is none," she says.



It wasn't always easy for Monisha. In the early days of her career, a lot of clients backed out when they found out about her alternative sexuality. "They were not comfortable with that," she narrates. Now, however, many clients and their families are very supportive. "Most of them give me so much love. They want to know about my life and my story. I'm grateful to have such love from my clients," says Monisha.

She chose Sushant as her muse as, she says, he is one of the best drag queens in India and an influential personality in the community. Sushant too found that her concept struck a chord with him. "When I started off in the entertainment industry 13 years ago as a 16-year-old, I was very scared and worried

about what people would think of me and how they would react to me. But a lot has changed for me since then. Now, people's opinions don't matter! I am who I am and I am not hiding from anything or anyone," he affirms. "It's pointless to let other people's opinion affect you. They aren't paying your bills!"

Monisha herself is of the view that Indian society is changing, and people are beginning to accept the LGBTQ community as normal humans. "We've come a long way since the amendment of Section 377. People understand and appreciate this form of art. I love the fact that my work of art has been accepted by people and that I have been able to help my community through it," she says.



Besides the artistic element and its social message, this shoot was significant for Sushant in another way: it was his first nude shoot. "Many internationally renowned photographers have asked me

to pose nude for them and I have declined all these years but with Monisha, I felt very comfortable. This shoot taught me to shed my inhibitions and be more comfortable in my skin," he says.

"Whenever I am on stage, I have to give it my all," says Sushant. "I think you automatically do better when you respect your work and your audience. I

love my audience and my supporters. I am not ashamed to say that I perform for applause. Any live-gig performer who says they don't do it for applause is lying."



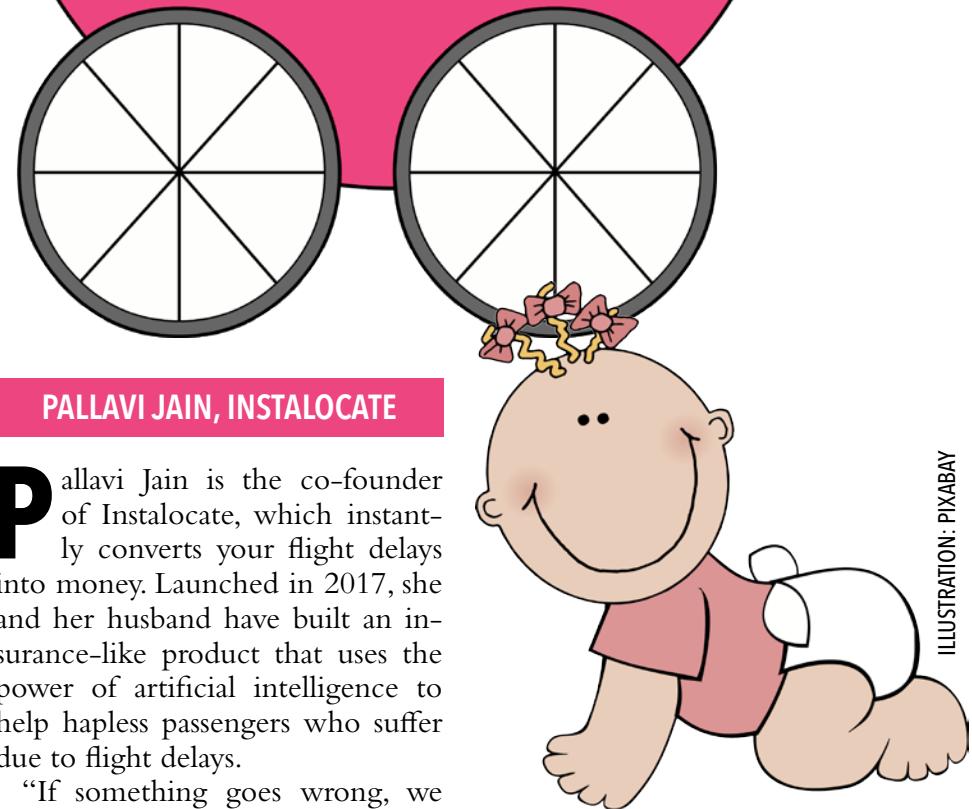


Monisha believes more photographers and artists have been taking up subjects related to alternative sexuality after Section 377 was abolished. "I still feel that there is scope for many more

artists to highlight this aspect of the community. Alternative sexuality is still looked upon as a taboo. There needs to be more representation of transgenders in art and photography," she says. ■

# BABY BABY

*These three entrepreneurs gave birth and launched ambitious startups at the same time. How did it go for them? We find out!*



## PALLAVI JAIN, INSTALOCATE

**P**allavi Jain is the co-founder of Instalocate, which instantly converts your flight delays into money. Launched in 2017, she and her husband have built an insurance-like product that uses the power of artificial intelligence to help hapless passengers who suffer due to flight delays.

“If something goes wrong, we

ILLUSTRATION: PIXABAY

will give you instant money without having to go through the complex process of claiming,” she says, adding that they recently helped team members of Dream11 get compensation of ₹11 lakh from Lufthansa.

The entrepreneurial bug caught Pallavi early on in life. She launched her first business – a phone recharge service – while studying engineering at NIT Kurukshetra. After graduation, she joined her family business in cryogenic gases. She then worked with former President of India Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam on a concept science school.

In 2016, Pallavi took a course at Stanford University specialising in entrepreneurship. “Both my husband and I have been avid international travellers. And anything that can possibly go wrong with our travel has gone wrong – delayed flights, missed connections, lost baggage. Our own traumatic travel experiences led to the genesis of Instalocate,” she says.

The couple were still in the early stages of their company when Pallavi became pregnant with their daughter Amelia. “It was the most challenging phase of my life both mentally and physically. I was put on nine months of bed rest and was given a high dosage of progesterone to sustain the pregnancy. With all the complications related to the pregnancy and Instalocate still in its early stages, it was like a roller coast-

er ride,” she recalls.

They managed only with the help of a good support system. “We invested in technology and a good team from the beginning; that’s why I could handle both my babies at the same time,” smiles Pallavi.

She believes motherhood and running a startup both require lots of passion and patience. “It teaches



Pallavi with her baby Amelia

you the value of time management. Being a mother has changed me as a person – it has made me more patient, tolerant and more organised. All this also helped me become a better leader at work. Running a startup, on the other hand, also helped me be a better mother!”

## MOUSHUMI SHARMA, MAXCORP

**M**oushumi Sharma launched MaxCorp in 2013 as a market research consultancy offering data collection, analysis and content services across various industries worldwide. She launched a second office in Toronto in 2018 to expand their research base.

Between those two launches, Moushumi also had a baby, in 2014.

Born and raised in various small towns in Assam, Moushumi had completed her Bachelor's in computer applications from North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, and then moved to Delhi, where she did her Master's. A management professional with several years of experience working with clients in

international markets, she decided to start her own venture when the company she was working with shut its operations in India, and clients began sending her small projects and assignments instead.

Soon, she learnt she was pregnant. "My company was a year old, and doctors had advised me bed rest, meaning I could not run around as planned. For the next eight months, I mostly operated out of my bed or bedroom, taking the minimum assignments possible. Once the baby arrived, it got more complicated and I kept working out of my home for another six months," narrates the 38-year-old, who now shuttles between Toronto and Delhi.

When Lakshraaj was five months old, Moushumi tried getting out of



Moushumi with her husband Amit and son Lakshraaj

the house for a few hours a day to work. "I did this for a couple of days to attend meetings, but after seeing my little one's sad face when I left and picked him from the babysitter just broke my heart and I gave up!"

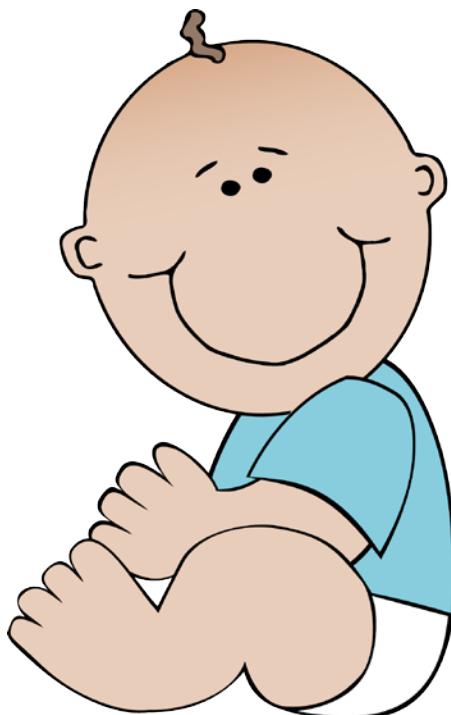
Instead, she continued working from home and went for meetings only when her husband Amit Makhija was available at home.

"I hired a few employees in 2015 and set up an office space, but I still worked from home and only visited office now and then for few hours," she explains. "Those initial years were quite hectic. We were working for the Indian market as well as UK and North American market – which meant I had to work round-the-clock as the teams were aligned for all these time zones. My phones and laptops were on 24/7 – all this along with managing the baby."

Even so, she thinks it would have all been harder if she had a fixed nine-to-five day job: "Here, even though I was on call 24 hours a day, I could arrange my work timings to match the baby's and at the same time be close to the little one almost all the time."

Gradually, she started going to office for about four hours a day, four evenings a week after her husband was back from work. "There were times when I would be on a client call and the baby would suddenly wake up and start wailing at the top of his voice," she laughs.

Last year, she took her three-year-old along to Toronto to register her company there. "My baby and



I braved the snow and ice, a new country, culture and climate, relying on public transport to explore ways of setting up a new branch. The quest is still on," says Moushumi.

She adds: "There will always be adversities in life; we just have to make the best use of available resources and figure out a way. Motherhood is not easy nor is starting your own venture. Both are your babies, and need a lot of attention and selfless contribution."

Vidushi with  
Apoor and their  
baby Meir



## VIDUSHI MALHOTRA, INGENIOUS FACES

**V**idushi Malhotra's Ingenious Faces works with leading universities across the world to enable industry-based learning and global growth for students and entrepreneurs. With its headquarters in South Africa, her startup works in India, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, Finland, Israel, Rwanda, Singapore and UAE.

A development professional and entrepreneur, Vidushi has worked all over the globe in the development sector, impacting learners and marginalised communities. Born in Delhi and raised in Bangalore, Vidushi pursued development studies at the University of South Africa.

Later, while doing her thesis for her Master's in social development from University of Cape Town, and just one month after she and her husband launched Ingenious Faces, she found out she was pregnant. "In fact, I graduated this year when Meir was four months old. I had my degree in one hand and baby in another," she smiles.

They clearly remember the day they found out about the pregnancy. "We were in Amsterdam, running a programme for early-stage startups from Africa and Bangladesh. On the second day of the programme, I took a test at the hotel and discovered we were pregnant. Funnily

enough, the night earlier, we'd had dinner with friends at a nice, quaint restaurant and discussed the possibility of moving to the Netherlands for good. Of course, we dropped the idea the next day after finding out we were going to have a baby," says the Delhi-based entrepreneur.

The couple's nature of work requires them to plan their travel months in advance. Though Vidushi

seem like a burden except late in my second trimester when I would tire out way sooner and hated walking long distances."

During pregnancy, the 30-year-old travelled to Europe, South Africa, Singapore, UAE and also did local trips to Bangalore and Jaipur. "Sometimes the staff at the security checks would ask me why I was travelling and when I said it was for work, they would give me this odd stare or even tell me to go home and take it easy," she recalls. "But, except for a couple of days in a month, I never felt the urge to just rest or chill. Work was my baby too and everything had started to pick pace. Every cell in my body kept pushing me to do more despite the physical inconveniences."

The last flight Vidushi took during pregnancy was on the last day of her seventh month (the day after which one is legally not allowed to fly).

She feels as if she's had two babies instead of one. "Luckily, my husband Apoorv and I are equal partners in parenting both babies. Our love for travelling and working in different parts of the world has taught us to be innately more resilient and hands-on," she says. Eight-month-old Meir has already travelled with his parents to six countries for work! "We have a new office in Delhi, and Meir also comes to office sometimes with us." ■

ILLUSTRATION: PIXABAY  
was pregnant, they still had to travel to Belgium, Denmark and Finland for work. "The best part was that as the weeks progressed and my pregnancy started to show, people all around at airports, washrooms, flights, restaurants, meetings and so on were very accommodating and helpful. In fact, travel didn't really

# INVISIBLE WOMAN



*Society invisibilises older women, but these divas have turned age and invisibility into a career opportunity, turning life's lemons into lemonade*

**By Kay Newton**

In the Western world, it is common to hear women over the age of 50 express feelings of invisibility, unseen by the rest of society. It can be for many reasons, for example, an empty nest, divorce, retirement or the lack of meaningful connections. Yet, ageing does have advantages as does invisibility. Here are two women who have used age and invisibility to great aplomb.

### **JACQUELINE (JACK) PEREZ**

Jack Perez has lived a brightly coloured life, including running a successful business in the dot com era, backpacking around the world for a year (without any modern technology), dealing with her biggest life challenge 'motherhood', training in the martial art of Taekwondo achieving a 3rd Dan, and even going back to the stage to sing and dance at age 50. Then something profound happened.

Says the founder of US-based Kuel Life, "At 52 or 53 years old, I became invisible. Period. I was just not there anymore. Also, my body began betraying me. I suffered from arthritis. Back fat appeared from nowhere. I started to look for information on the internet. The message seemed to be the

same: use Botox and look 25 or 35 again! I could not believe it. I am not against looking good; it was just that I was 52 and not planning on dying anytime soon. I began to ask myself, 'What was the second half of my life going to look like? Would I not completely matter?'"



Jack Perez

As Jack did more research, she realised that women over 50 are the largest cohort of people on the planet. They are also the healthiest and wealthiest in history.

She says, "We are not our mothers or our grandmothers. As well as not slowing down, we make 90 per cent of the big-ticket purchase decisions of the Western household: cars, vacations and buying homes. Yet, nobody wanted to talk to me anymore."



Based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Jack started a website as a pet project locally. She would research midlife topics, find experts and populate the site with content.

“All of a sudden I was getting emails from other women who write about their midlife expertise. At this stage in life, we have so much wisdom and talents to share. It is fabulous that we now have a place to do this. Everyone is welcome, the table is always big enough for another sister,” she says.

Many women are re-inventing themselves in their Second Act, she goes on. “Women entrepreneurs are the bravest women I know. I’ve built a Kuel Shop on the Kuel Life platform that allows visitors to

‘purchase with a purpose’ – to support other women in midlife.”

Jack has a second mission forming; she is thinking of dusting down her backpack in order to meet in person all of the wonderful women who are part of the platform. She may just knock on your door sooner than you know.

*Visit: [kuellife.com](http://kuellife.com)*

## ROWENA DANIELS

Based in Trinidad, Rowena Daniels is a travel planner and concierge who customises vacations to individual requirements and lifestyle, while she herself stays invisible and out of the way. She says, “Everyone needs a vacation. It makes sense to relax and rejuvenate from your ev-

everyday life. It turns you into a great storyteller, gives you a memory for a lifetime. But finding the perfect holiday is an investment. Using an expert who knows the ins and outs can create a hassle-free experience. Another advantage of hiring a travel planner is that if any problems



Rowena Daniels

arise whilst you are on holiday, I will sort them out for you. All you have to do is pick up the phone.”

Rowena likens herself to the swan, calm and serene on top of the water, while paddling away below the surface to make sure all is great for her clients whether rich,

famous or otherwise. “My goal is always to create an experience that will never be forgotten. In order to do that, I first spend time getting to know you, your needs, wants, likes, desires for your perfect vacation. I then take some time to do all the research and find your dream holiday. I plan everything and send you a list of choices.”

The list is detailed and includes all other important information, such as the documents, vaccinations and insurances you need. Rowena continues: “A client recently had a two-week business/pleasure multi-trip holiday. To start, she needed a hotel near the conference where she was speaking, and she loved the one I chose for her. I also sorted the rental car for the second stage of the trip even when the flight was delayed and the rental company was closed. I was able to sort out the problem for her without causing too much stress or interruption in her work. That is my goal, to invisibly make everything as smooth as possible.”

Recently, Rowena lost her younger brother unexpectedly. She says, “Tomorrow is not guaranteed; one day you are here, the next not. I challenge anyone to mark off holiday dates in your calendar now.”

Rowena’s recommendation for your next getaway is Germany for the Oktoberfest. ■

Visit: [inspirationaltravelplus.com](http://inspirationaltravelplus.com)

# DARE ME



*Hairstylist, actor, activist, filmmaker, feminist, fashion designer, icon – Sapna Moti Bhavnani is a rebel of many hues*

*By Maya Lalchandani*

**S**apna Moti Bhavnani had always been daddy's little girl, with the same deep-set eyes and furrowed forehead, from the time she played havoc as a teenager, chloroforming him so that she could sneak out with the boys in ninth grade, to the time she rode a motorcycle to school, living life her way, following her father's footsteps, both rebels without a cause.

Sapna's father passed away way too early. But the 48-year-old celebrity hairstylist, actor, designer and filmmaker is still as rebellious as ever. Now with a cause.

Her life reads like a series of make-believe events. As a teen, Sapna was shipped off to the US by her young desperate widow mother, who hoped that spending time with her aunt there would change Sapna's attitude. She enrolled in Barat College near Chicago to study marketing.

"But an artist does not need to go to school, a writer cannot be taught how to write nor an actor to perform," the feisty Sapna opines. "One goes to school just to hone

the craft that you are already born with." In fact, she believes formal education usually kills the rawness of the craft, making one too precise for true art.

After bartending and waitressing, Sapna found her niche in the Los Angeles film industry, making music videos, designing plaques to commemorate gold and platinum record sales, and living it up with a house

in the hills, a Cadillac and an Elvis-lookalike boyfriend. "At 30, I moved back to India (in 2002) after 14 years of life in the US, and gave up my Green Card," Sapna narrates. "From making \$8,000 a month I

settled for making ₹5,000 a month."

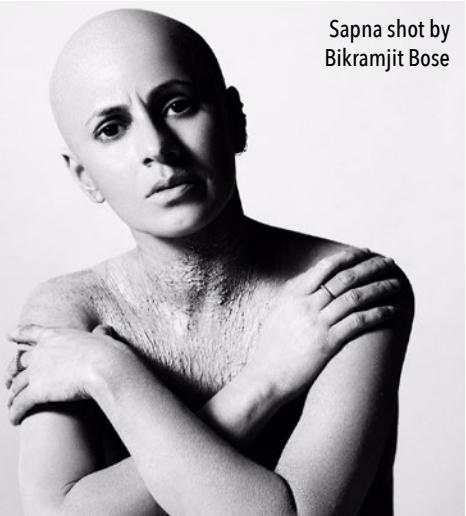
Sapna began working at a popular hair salon in Mumbai, and even became a Bollywood stylist. Within two years, she started her own salon, Mad-O-Wot, and married an old flame. But when the marriage became violent, she left. More marriages ensued, as did diversification and glory in her career.

Sapna began working with celebrity clients in fields ranging from

**"IT'S OKAY TO BE  
42 AND NOT WEAR  
A SARI, NOT BE  
MARRIED, AND NOT  
HAVE CHILDREN"**

Bollywood to sport and business. She launched a production company to promote creative talent, make music videos, commercials and short films. She even designed a collection in collaboration with fashion designer Sukriti Grover called 'So Fake' and presented it at Lakme Fashion Week.

Then the Delhi gang-rape sparked



Sapna shot by  
Bikramjit Bose

off a fire in her that wouldn't die.

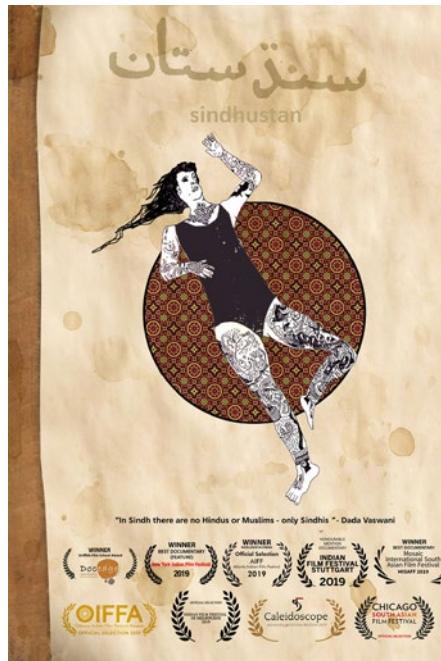
In 2013, Sapna acted in *Nirbhaya*, a play in which she spoke up about a deep, dark secret she had held inside her for nearly two decades: that she had been gang-raped in America as a 24-year-old while returning from a party late at night. "I hadn't acknowledged it even to myself so it was never a part of my sharing even in my relationships. For me it just didn't exist. The human mind is

very powerful and the incident was locked in my Pandora's box for 20 years," says Sapna.

Raw and painful, the play premiered in the largest Arts festival in the world and won the Edinburgh Fringe Award. Sapna kept up the outspokenness, and posed nude for a PETA ad that proclaimed, "Ink not mink – be comfortable in your own skin and let them keep theirs." She also participated in the Indian reality TV show *Bigg Boss Season 6*, where she had a fallout with the celebrity host, Salman Khan.

"Salman is not God, and neither am I," she quips, adding that she was glad to be there for over 13 weeks and to be able to send out an empowerment message out to Indian women: "It's okay to be 42 years old and not wear a sari, not be married, not have traditional long hair, and not have children. You can be whoever you want to be."

Sapna isn't one to follow stereotypes, and she believes women hold themselves back far too much. "I bet you think from the way I look – tattooed body, coloured hair, motorcycle boots – that I would never get married. But I did and I've been married three times. Yes, I went through domestic abuse in one but I chose to leave immediately. Fearlessness is inbuilt. But it also exists from one's childhood. Parents have to be very careful from birth to age five when they create fear in



L-R: Sapna's tattoos trace Sindhi migration; the poster of *Sindhustan* designed by Kabir Singh Chowdhry

a child's mind, because later one is tainted by everybody else's opinion of how one should be," she says.

Today, Sapna's hairstyling studio and production house are successful on their own feet – though she still personally styles the hair of Indian cricketing icon MS Dhoni and Bollywood actor John Abraham. She also devotes herself to other passions, such as her PurrOm Healing Centre where nature, cats and puppies are the real healers, and her adopted village Palegaon in Maharashtra, which she supports through crowd-funding on Facebook.

More importantly, she has recently released *Sindhustan*, a documen-

tary that traces her Sindhi roots. It premiered at New York Indian Film Festival where it won Best Documentary Feature. It was also awarded at prestigious film festivals such as AIFF, IFF Stuttgart and MISAFF this year. "I had been researching the pain that my ancestors must have felt leaving their land. That's when I came upon the idea of making this documentary," she explains.

"It took me two years to decide how to tell the story and how I wanted to project it. Being a visual person, I decided make the documentary finally with the story of the largest migration of a culture in history by inking it on my legs.



L-R: Sapna in Toronto, Canada, shot by her partner Kabir; on the field with her famous client, MS Dhoni

Interviews followed; most of the people in my film are in their 90s and so, it is very important that this story be told.”

While her legs gradually covered up in tattoos representing the land and migration of the Sindhis, Sapna shot interviews of people in Mumbai and Pune, visited the Wagah border, and travelled to Nepal. “All I am thinking about these days is how I am going to get to Pakistan to complete the documentary of my journey; only then the story will be complete,” she says, cheered on by the Twitter hashtag #GrantVisatoSapna2VisitSindh that has been trending in Pakistan to get her to the other side of the border.

Bold and spirited, Sapna refuses to

be melancholic about the wounds of her past, and doesn’t bother with a conceptual perception of happiness. “I don’t even know what healing means. My yoga teacher Siddharth Bangera says being healthy does not mean absence of disease, but instead living with it successfully. Healing does not mean I’m not hurting. These words are just Instagram hashtags, they have no real meaning,” she dismisses.

Instead, she takes to Instagram to post brilliantly directed promo videos of Mad-O-Wot or pictures with her current partner, ethnographer Kabir Singh Chowdhry, celebrating their one year of togetherness. “*La vie en rose*,” says the caption. The rebel follows her own rules. ■

# The Enigma Endures

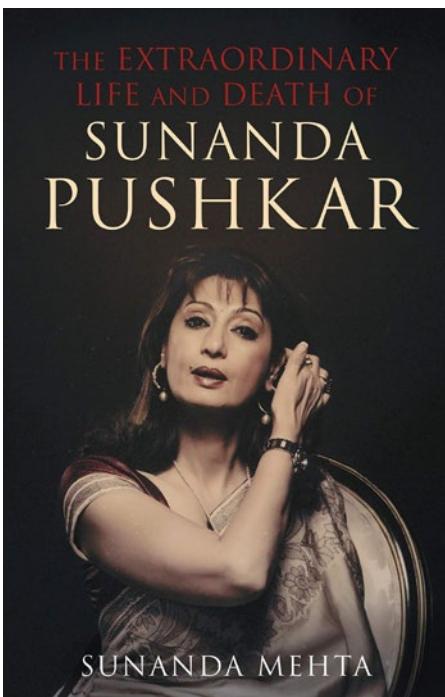
*The gripping biography of the ill-fated Sunanda Pushkar brings to life her eventful story and remarkable journey*

*By Aekta Kapoor*

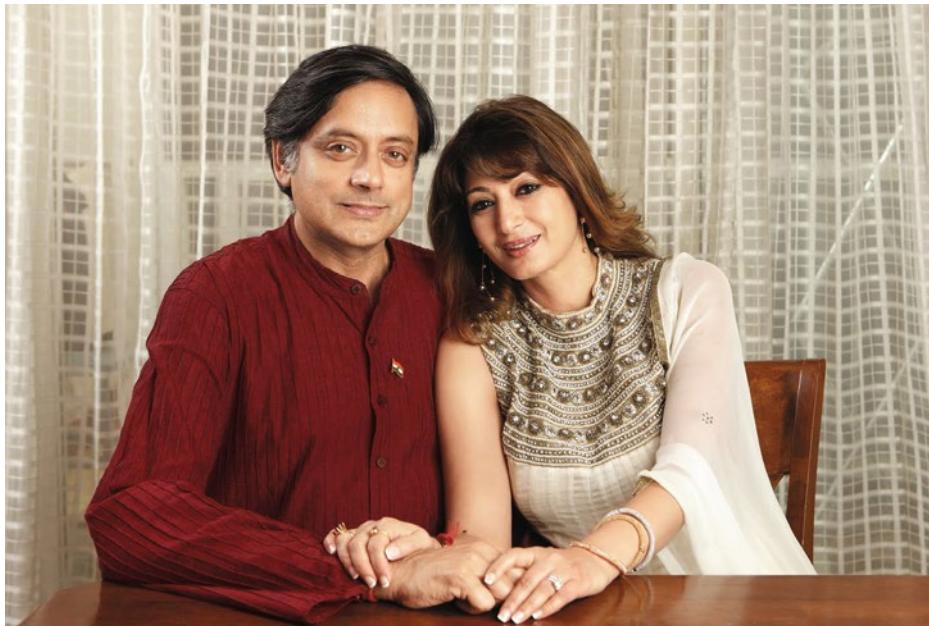
It was a pleasant morning in November 2012 when I met Sunanda Tharoor. The winter chill had not yet set in, and my colleagues and I were at her sprawling Lutyen's Delhi bungalow where she lived with her husband Shashi Tharoor, then Minister of State for Human Resource Development. We were there to interview her for our women's magazine, and to do a shoot that involved three changes of clothes.

Her famous husband appeared both amazed and amused as he stood in the doorway, watching us flit about his wife: I was steering the interview while the makeup artist went about her assignment, and the fashion stylist fussed over her ensemble, holding up an alternative on a hanger. Shashi smiled with a bit of awe and wandered away.

It was an easy assignment for us all – Sunanda was gregarious and generous with details about herself (her favourite holiday destination was Italy, her most precious gift was



a poem Shashi had written for her). She had smooth, glowing skin and a beautiful face, making the makeup artist's job a breeze, and a figure that added glamour to any outfit she wore – a full bust, slender waist and sex appeal oozing from every pore.



Shashi Tharoor and Sunanda Pushkar after their wedding in 2010

“You’re damn right I’m a self-made woman,” she told me when I explained the ethos of our magazine and the kind of women we profiled. Later, she led me to the bedroom she shared with Shashi, strewn with books and photo frames, and opened up her wardrobe wide to allow me to choose a sari for one of the shoot looks. I remember feeling touched at her innocent trust in a complete stranger.

Much of these impressions came back as I read her biography, *The Extraordinary Life and Death of Sunanda Pushkar*, by her schoolmate Sunanda Mehta (Pan Macmillan India, ₹599). The author took over two years to trace her namesake’s

life, and etches a very compelling picture of her childhood in Jammu & Kashmir, her relationships and marriages, and her role as a single mother to a traumatised little boy.

**“YOU’RE DAMN RIGHT I’M  
A SELF-MADE WOMAN,”  
SUNANDA TOLD ME**

It’s a riveting book not only because the protagonist’s life was so eventful but also because of the candour with which her story has been written. This is certainly no hagiography. The author deserves praise for portraying a realistic

picture of the late Sunanda Puskhar, neither glorifying her nor serving up the complicated details of her life as salacious gossip.

Indeed, there are many complicated details, especially from Sunanda's years in Dubai. It must have taken rigorous research to dig out details of how she met her second husband, and how she dealt with his death, including moving to Canada to start anew with her son.

The book also takes an objective look at Sunanda's son Shiv's life, his feelings, his frank disapproval of his mother's marriage to Shashi and his sense of loss at her mysterious death. It does not sugar-coat Sunanda's difficult relationship with Shashi's intellectual family, nor her suspicious and somewhat crazed behaviour when she suspected him of having an affair with Lahore-based journalist Mehr Tarar.

It is at such moments in the book when Sunanda's story really comes to life, and one can see her for all that she was – a mother doing the best she could for her son and herself, a woman who loved too easily, a wife who was feisty and outspoken yet vulnerable and insecure.

I'm reminded of a quote she'd shared with me that day, 14 months before she died: "If your presence can't add value to my life, your absence will make no difference." No doubt, Sunanda's presence and absence were both deeply felt. ■

## YOUNG LOVE

These new novels will satiate your cravings for millennial romances!



### THE RIGHT SWIPE

Alisha Rai's novel speaks to the left-and-right-swiping generation who have career ambitions of global proportions. Loosely based on the corporate battles of the founders of Tinder and Bumble, the plot goes in an interesting direction when the protagonist finds that a man she dated, and who ghosted her, is now on the competitor's side.

Little Brown UK, ₹399

### I HAVE THEORY ABOUT THAT

Two BFFs and roommates – who had once dated the same guy – place a bet on who will find love first before they turn 30. Set in Chennai with international nicknames, Judy Balan's novel is a fast-paced read for romance addicts.

Hachette India, ₹399

# HAPPILY SINGLE

*Why can't Indians accept that women can be happy even when single?*

*The 12 women in Kalpana Sharma's new anthology are proof*

*By Neha Kirpal*



Kalpana Sharma

**M**umbaibased independent journalist and author Kalpana Sharma has compiled and edited the recently released anthology *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women!* (Women Unlimited, ₹275). The 12 contributors to the book – writers, journalists, a lawyer, a sociologist, a scientist, an editor and a pioneer

in promoting Indian handwoven textiles and handicrafts – are all single women between the ages of 26 and 72, and feminists in their own right.

We spoke to Kalpana, who has been writing on gender in mainstream media for over three decades, about the book and the conversation she hopes to start with it.

*As a 72-year-old single woman in India, do you feel the taboo of staying unmarried has changed over the years for women?*

Over my lifetime, it has begun to change, but not fast enough. Getting married is still the norm, and for women to either delay marriage, or choose to remain single is the exception. In India, a woman's status is still linked to marriage, who she marries, whether she has produced a male child, and whether she is an obedient and dutiful wife and daughter-in-law. That women are human beings, like men – with desires, ambitions, dreams and rights

— is still not accepted.

*How did you choose the writers for this book?*

We asked the women we knew who were single, as in never married, and who could write. That itself narrowed the field as there were women who could have been interviewed, but then that would have been a different book. We also wanted to have women from different age groups. We tried to get women from different parts of the country. Of the two dozen or so that we approached, ultimately 12 sent in their essays. I might add, that writing about this subject is not easy. It is extremely personal, and not everyone is ready to tell their own story.

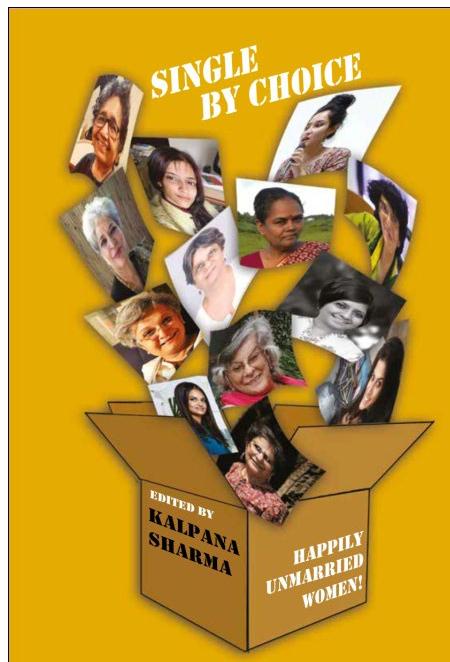
*What is the common thread among all the stories?*

What comes across is that all these women want a society where women are respected for what they are. The institution of marriage in India, irrespective of caste or community, still does not provide women that space, or that respect. Secondly, economic independence has played a major role in these women deciding to remain single. Thirdly, they had supportive parents, who believed that their daughters could make their own choices and decisions on the question of marriage. And finally, many speak of the importance of support from friends and colleagues, an alternative

family if you will, that has helped strengthen their resolve to not get married for the sake of it.

*What can Indian women readers learn from the book?*

My hope is that this book will begin a conversation on marriage, on our society, on the rights of women and their fundamental right to make



a choice. I hope it will also send out a message to the many women thinking about their future that they are not alone!

*What are you working on next?*

I have a book coming out in November called *The Silence and The Storm: Narratives of Violence against Women in India* (Aleph). ■

CONTEST  
ALERT!

# FLASH FICTION WRITING CONTEST

*The female gaze is powerful. Express it.*

eShe is pleased to announce its first Flash Fiction Contest for women writers.

Send us your 100-word stories on women in workplaces (in every manner of speaking), stories that are complete vignettes and sparkle with pizzazz.

## ELIGIBILITY AND SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

**Theme:** Women and Work

**Language:** English

**Word count:** 100 (not one word more). Your title and byline are not part of the word count!

**Author eligibility:** Women writers of all ages who are residents of India

Original and unpublished work only

Only one submission allowed per writer (and do not send us pieces you have submitted elsewhere)

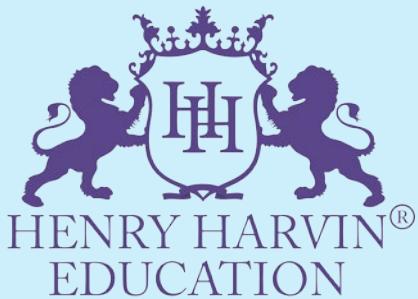
**Story format:** Attach your story as a Word document (none other will be accepted). The file must contain the title of the piece and the name of the author. The document must be edited and be free of errors.

**Subject line:** The email title should be in this format: "Story name - Author's name"

**Submit your story to:** [mail@coralcontent.com](mailto:mail@coralcontent.com)

**Submission deadline:** 11.59 pm, September 30, 2019

## THE PRIZES



Winners will be announced on October 10, 2019.

The best entry gets courses worth Rs 15000 from Henry Harvin Education, a book collection of four Hachette Essentials, an annual subscription to eShe's print edition, a handy eShe notebook and an award certificate.

10 more winners will receive eShe notebooks and merit certificates.

All winning entries will be published by eShe.

## THE JURY



**KOTA NEELIMA**  
Author and artist



**CHITRA GOPALAKRISHNAN**  
Award-winning flash-fiction writer



**AEKTA KAPOOR**  
Editor, eShe



# TERRACE OF TREASURES

*How a Delhi woman converted her townhouse rooftop into a bountiful garden where vegetables grow, and where birds and bees drop in*

It's hard to believe Manu Goel and her family moved into their present four-storey house in Delhi's Chittaranjan Park – known for its predominantly Bengali culture and rosogollas – just a year ago. Today, her terrace garden – which she began growing as soon as she moved in – supplies all the vegetables the family could ever use in their own kitchen, plus more

to make pickles and distribute to friends and family.

Co-founder of Novarch Architects, a firm that specialises in industrial architecture which she runs with her husband Nishant Goel, Manu's love for nature goes back to her childhood in Bareilly where she was born, and Dehradun where she lived with her uncle's family while completing middle school.

“They had expansive litchi farms and a dairy, and grew vegetables. I remember playing in those farm-lands with my cousins. The air was unpolluted, the food was fresh and clean. It was a healthy, unspoilt upbringing,” recalls the 41-year-old architect and mother of two.

After competing her Bachelor's and Master's in environmental planning from the prestigious CEPT University Ahmedabad, Manu worked the development sector before she won the Chevening Schol-

arship to study urban environment in the UK. After her wedding, the Goels set up their home and business in Delhi. Naturally, Manu's own propensity towards spaces that promote sustainability and well-being had a hand to play in the way she designed her own home.

The rooftop garden has taken some time and planning, but the benefits have greatly outweighed the efforts. “Delhi's summer heat can be overbearing for flat-owners who live on the top floor of a



Clockwise from top left: Spearmint; compost pots; flowers attract bees; drip-watering system bought online



building. But in our case, the apartment is always cool due to the earth insulation,” says Manu. Secondly, the garden has created an ecosystem with its own micro-climate that attracts birds, butterflies, bees, snails, grasshoppers and so on, who have a symbiotic relationship with the garden, helping it grow effortlessly.

She also composts all the garden waste, and pumps it back as manure. “Every season, we plant new crops,” she explains as she counts off a long list of vegetables: “Mint, spearmint, ba-

sil, tomato, three types of aubergine, capsicum, gourd, lemons, baby corn, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, bitter gourd, moringa, lemongrass, chives, dill, rocket leaves, curry leaves, fenugreek, spinach, beans...” She breaks off laughing. “And more.”

Manu’s children, age 10 and 13, have also had a huge lesson in life and gardening in the process. They love making little signboards for each plant, and whoop in joy each time a new plant comes to fruit. “There’s a certain window during child-

## “OUR TOP FLOOR APARTMENT IS ALWAYS COOL DUE TO EARTH INSULATION”



hood when this connect is possible; after that, kids become urbanised and disconnected from such activities,” Manu opines. The green cover also gives the family ample privacy for putting up an inflatable pool or having get-together with friends.

Their kitchen life is more exciting too, as the family has become more experimental with vegetables and proud of their homegrown produce. They also have a great place to sit and watch the sky put on its daily show at dusk and dawn. “The clouds go by, birds come and hang around, there’s always a cool breeze up here,” says Manu, spreading her arms wide open. “It’s my piece of sky.”

## TIPS FOR A TERRACE GARDEN

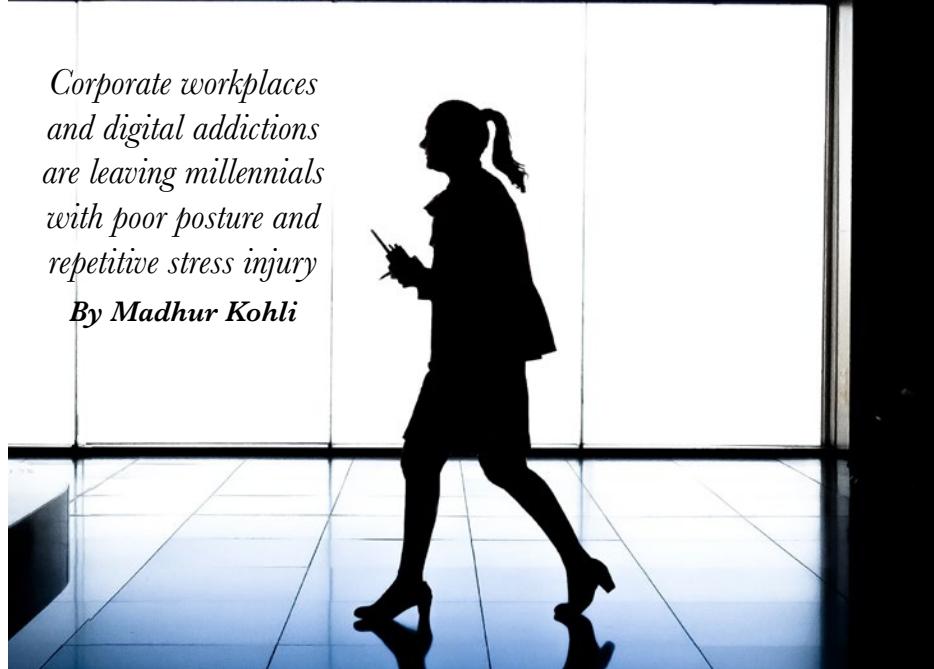
**M**anu strongly recommends you grow food plants in your terrace garden and not merely decorative greens. “This helps you create a different connect with your food, your whole approach to your cooking and nutrition changes. You value your food more, as you realise how long it took to grow and how much you had to tend to it. You are also more grateful for your blessings,” she says.

She also advises waterproofing the entire terrace before starting work on the garden. ■

# OUT OF ALIGNMENT

*Corporate workplaces and digital addictions are leaving millennials with poor posture and repetitive stress injury*

*By Madhur Kohli*



Last month, a 22-year-old girl complained to me of pain in her wrist. The first thing I asked her was, "How long do you use the computer for?" And then, "How long do you use the phone?" It turned out that out of 24 hours in a day, if she wasn't sleeping, she was either on the phone or on the laptop for most of the time.

Now, the problem she was facing was pain in her wrist, but that was not the cause of the problem. The

origin was in the shoulder blades, which were completely tight due to bad posture. It's a full kinetic chain that is connected – from wrist, elbow, shoulder blade and shoulder joint, to the middle and lower back. Over a period of time, due to misalignment in the body, the pain had reached the wrist, which was one of the weaker parts in the chain.

When I started working with her as a rehabilitation therapist, I actually didn't touch her wrist at all. I

helped her correct her posture, did therapeutic stretching for her and manually rectified the alignment in her middle back. That's how we fixed her pain.

Misalignment is a very common problem these days among all age groups. Even nursery children aren't sitting straight – everyone has their necks bent down and their shoulders hunched forward over phones or gadgets.

Millennials particularly, whether they are executives or sportspersons, are plagued with repetitive stress injuries such as tennis elbow, cervical spondylosis, carpal tunnel syndrome, frozen shoulder, sciatica, and pain between the shoulder blades.

All this can easily be fixed with awareness as it is mostly due to bad posture, incorrect alignment, and overuse. But by the time people come to me, they are in deep pain already. I correct it through therapeutic stretching, leading the joint to a better range of motion.

Once their posture is corrected, people start feeling taller, sitting straighter and breathing better as the lung capacity increases.

So what are the warning signs? Any form of stiffness in the body. If your body is stiff when you wake up in the morning – or stand up af-

ter sitting a long time – that means something is wrong. You have to work not just on the pain point but on your entire body.

You may have ergonomic chairs at your office but even when you're sitting, how often are you conscious of your posture? Whenever you are free, rotate your neck, move your arms up and down, rotate your ankles

and wrists, stretch your shoulders, and stand up while talking on the phone to get your blood circulation going. At other times, take the stairs, not the elevator, and just stand and do calf stretches.

You don't need to time out of your schedule for maintaining good body alignment; it can be done within working hours! ■



*Madhur Kohli is a certified fitness consultant, rehab trainer and functional movement specialist in Delhi. She conducts workshops in corporate houses and schools across NCR.*

# AN INTUITIVE RHYTHM



*An engineer by qualification and a belly dancer by passion and training, Anusha Hegde finds dance to be meditative and liberating*

There's a YouTube video with over 5.3 million views (at the time of writing this article) featuring a young south Indian woman with a long braid doing a fusion of belly dance with Indian classical dance. Titled 'Sublime', there is something hypnotic about the woman's movements, the grace and fluidity with which she moves her hips, and the utter creativity of the choreography. It ap-

pears as if the girl and the music are one, sensuality sublimated.

It is no wonder that Anusha Hegde is one of the masters in her field of belly dance. The head of Tarantismo Creative Dance Company along with Deepthi Shetty, the pioneers of belly dance in Bangalore and Delhi, Anusha – who is also trained in Bharatnatyam, Kathak, contemporary dance, ballet, hip-hop and a few Latin styles – has

been teaching with Tarantismo for the past 12 years, and is only just getting warmed up.

Born in Mangalore and raised in Bangalore as the only child of a businessman father and homemaker mom, Anusha always loved to do the smallest of tasks with the utmost dedication, and was fascinated by just about everything. She did her Bachelor's in computer science engineering from NMIT Bangalore and MSc in management from Manchester Business School, UK.

It was during her engineering days that she chanced upon belly dance. "Dancing is like going on a ride, where the music drives and you just go with the flow," says the 30-year-old, who idolises dancers like Martha Graham, Michael Jackson, Madhuri Dixit, Prabhu Deva, Rachel Brice, Sadie and Galen Hooks among others, "It not only improves muscle strength, body flexibility, stamina and coordination skills, it's also an absolute stress buster, which seems to be a necessity in today's world."

Passionate, meticulous and a constant learner, Anusha believes there is a spiritual quality to dance. "I dance to a piece of music only if I can connect with it within. I find dancing quite meditative. I find myself as I lose myself to dance," she says.

Having taught thousands of students in her 12-year journey with

Tarantismo, Anusha believes women can use dance to develop self-esteem and confidence too. "If one needs to enjoy dancing completely, one needs to let go of all hesitations. It does not matter if it's an empty room or an auditorium filled with thousands of people. Dance is an internal process when you use your

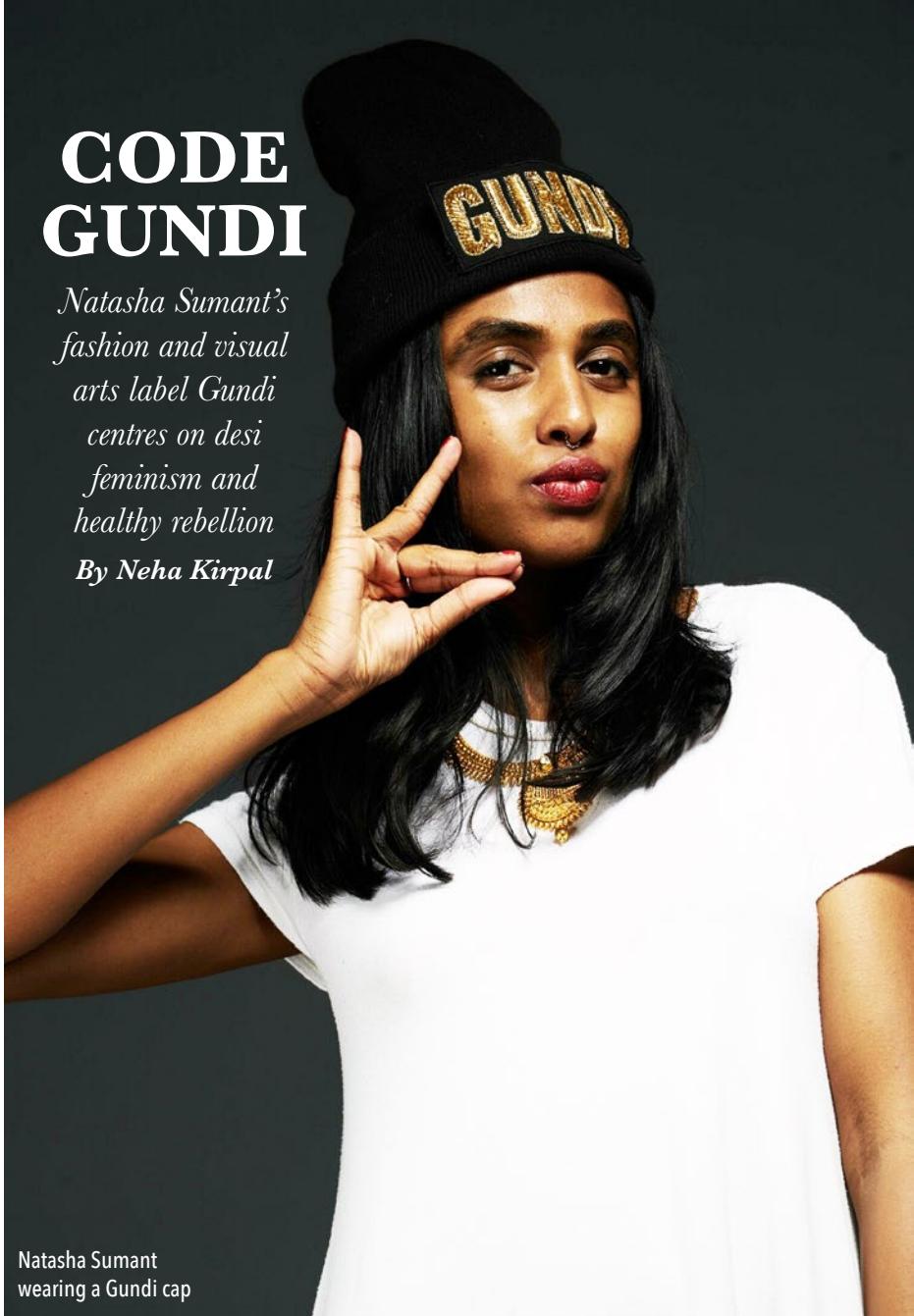


body to express yourself. The only person you should worry about judging you is you. Nothing else matters. And when you understand that, low self-esteem or confidence will be trivial issues," she says. ■

*Learn belly dancing from Anusha at eShe's Shine Your Light Bangalore on September 21 at The Lalit Ashok*

# CODE GUNDI

*Natasha Suman's fashion and visual arts label Gundi centres on desi feminism and healthy rebellion*  
*By Neha Kirpal*



Natasha Suman  
wearing a Gundi cap

**A**n artistic showcase of desi feminism 'Gundi' was recently on display at the newly opened Method art gallery in Mumbai's Kalaghoda. Founded in 2017 by Natasha Sumant, an art director and multidisciplinary designer, Gundi Studios is a slow fashion and progressive media brand that celebrates assertive and independent South-Asian women. Its streetwear is made in a female-centred supply chain, designed to honour historical resistance movements, and intended to be worn by independent women. Every piece of Gundi clothing features its signature branding embroidered using traditional

zardozi techniques and is made in partnership with suppliers who have set out to impact women's lives meaningfully.

Showcasing their work across New York, London and Mumbai, their art show included an installation called 'Ghosts of Gundis Past', frames of photo series centred around desi (south Asian) feminism, a photo series about how Gundi Studio works with women in rural India to make clothes, a video on code-switching, a video called Akeli on desi women being alone, and a rack of Gundi's clothes to buy. All products are handmade, homegrown, made of khadi, and come from all-female NGOs.



“We see Gundi as a manifestation of expression, an important contribution to the artistic fabric of a generation,” said Method’s founder Sahil Arora.

Natasha, who is based between Mumbai and Brooklyn, spoke to us in an exclusive interview:

*What was your inspiration behind setting up Gundi Studios?*

I didn’t find a brand that spoke to this demographic of unapologetic women, and celebrated that kind of character. I didn’t find anything in pop culture, especially in India and south Asia, that celebrated a woman like that. I believe that if a character exists in pop culture, it validates those character traits that exist in people.

*Tell us more about the work Gundi Studios does, its sustainable ethos, and how it is empowering desi women and battling sexism with fashion.*

We are first and foremost a clothing brand, and secondly, we make media around feminism, especially south Asian feminism. That media can range from short films about female existentialism to long-form content on our website or photoshoots questioning certain gender stereotypes. We like to speak to the female gaze as much as possible. All our clothes are made

with the intention of empowering women. That could be through the supply chain or its design.

All the products are not as sustainable as we would like them to be, but we try to follow as many sustainable practices in the production of our products as possible. Our fabric is mostly hand woven or made of natural fibres. We also have some polyblends in our materials, which we are trying to switch out of to find a more sustainable option.

*How does fashion serve the cause of feminism, and what are its strengths and limitations in that sense?*

We try to employ women on every level of our supply chain, because we believe that women, especially south Asian women, are victims of capitalism in a way. They’re really affected by the fashion industry, because they are either disenfranchised, low-wage workers, or women like me who are slightly privileged and see ads that play on insecurities to get us to buy stuff.

*The word ‘gundi’ has a rebellious ring to it. Why do we still need to ‘rebel’ to demand basic rights that are apparently guaranteed to us in free societies?*

We try to have all-women dealers and women in mid-level management. We try to get our fabrics from units



Gundi's dress is made from khadi as a homage to the Swadeshi movement of 1947 that promoted the hand-spinning and hand-weaving of cotton as a means of self-determination in India.

The cut of Gundi's pants is inspired by the salwar, trousers worn by women as part of the traditional South-Asian dress ever since they were introduced to the region by the Mughals in the 13th century.



in India where they employ women weavers. It's a hard process, but it propels the demand for basic rights that are apparently guaranteed to us. The systems that are supposed to protect us are not doing their job. So, everyone has to speak out and rebel in whichever way they can. And that's just not in India; it's the state of the world right now. Healthy rebellion is really good, especially in democratic societies.

*In Akeli, you highlight that women in the subcontinent aren't taught or encouraged to be alone.*

*Why do you think this is so?*

From my experience and especially in south Asia, women are always taught to live for others. For example, our mothers take care of the family's needs before their own. Women in general have just been taught to serve others, and we've been raised to kind of exist for others. We often get ready for someone else's gaze. Akeli highlights why we are not encouraged to be alone, or female existentialism. Once people see women doing really mundane things alone, it's just sharing our perspective. It's necessary to encourage independence.

*What frightens society so much about an independent, rebellious woman, when in fact pop culture frequently glorifies*

*independent, rebellious men?*

It affects a very longstanding power structure in humanity. We've always been second, that's why people get scared when we rebel. Pop culture often glorifies rebellious men, because they have often been able to affect really big changes in the world. People are afraid of the kind of changes a rebellious woman might bring to the table.

*Can modern-day politics help bring about social equality and ensure human rights? Are you optimistic about the current state of affairs around the world?*

I hope so. People need to just keep expressing their needs, vote and push for the kind of legislation that they want. Even though it seems bleak and the news makes

everything seem quite apocalyptic, I really believe in the younger generation, especially the one that's younger than me. They are extremely well informed, caring consumers and citizens. I really hope that they will affect change. I think that social equality has a really long way to go. I read a study somewhere that said that in 200 years, America will have achieved social equality. Social equality is also quite fluid and relative, so I hope that we can achieve it, but we also have to define what that looks like. ■

## “PEOPLE ARE AFRAID OF THE CHANGES A REBELLIOUS WOMAN MIGHT BRING TO THE TABLE”



# A SPARKLING HISTORY

*How a historical piece of jewellery from an Indian Maharaja's stunning collection became the centre-piece of a glamorous Hollywood movie*

*By Puja Shah*

**O**n the eve of the momentous Christie's auction of the Al Thani collection of jewels titled 'Maharajas and Mughal Magnificence', I made a trip to New York to catch a final glimpse of the

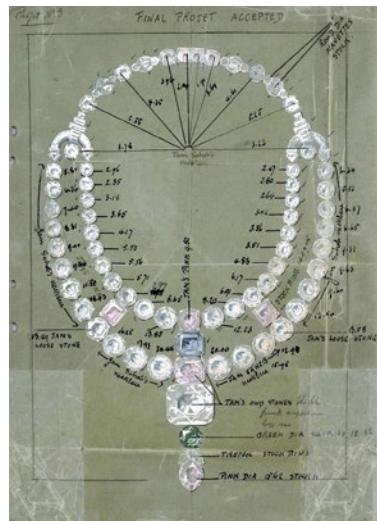
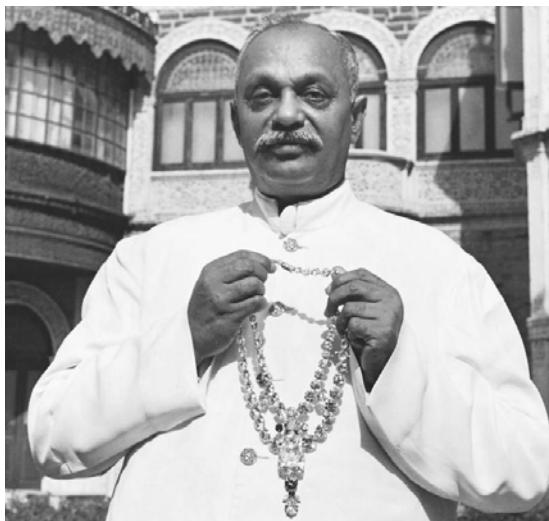
pieces before they were dispersed, each making its way to a new home in different parts of the world. An interesting observation that I made here while looking at the pieces was that though one considers jewellery

to be mostly a woman's prerogative in today's time, more than 85 per cent of the jewellery in the exhibit belonged to and was worn by men.

I was intrigued by a magnificent turban ornament whose provenance stated that it belonged to the Maharaja of Nawanagar (present day Jamnagar, Gujarat). Since I

Jadeja and Maharaja Digvijay Singh of Nawanshahr with Cartier.

And that is where I first came upon the story of the Nawanagar necklace. Commissioned in 1931, the Nawanagar necklace is one of India's most famous and finest jewels through history. So much so that it was immortalised in a Hollywood



L-R: Maharaja Digvijaysinhji Jadeja holding the Nawanaagar necklace; Cartier's sketch of the necklace

am from Gujarat myself, I delved deeper into the Nawanagar jewels to know more.

The beginning of the 20th century saw a great deal of interest by the Indian maharajas for all things European, particularly jewellery. It also coincided with the visit of the famed jeweller Jacques Cartier to India. I stumbled upon a range of rare jewels that were commissioned by Maharaja Sir Ranjitsinhji Vibhaji

movie (*lead photo*), worn by the lovely Anne Hathaway in *Ocean's 8!*

The princely state of Nawanagar was ruled by the Jadeja dynasty before Ranjitsinhji came to the throne in 1907. By then, he was a noted cricketer who had played for the English cricket team, Cambridge University and the county of Sussex. In fact, the Ranji Trophy, India's first-class cricket tournament that has been the breeding ground for



Turban ornament (jigha, left) made by Cartier for the Maharaja Sir Ranjitsinghji Jadeja of Nawanagar (right)

scores of international greats, was named in his honour later.

Ranjitsinhji had another great passion apart from cricket: collecting rare jewels. The 'Nawanagar Jewels' that he accumulated were described by his close friend, Jacques Cartier, as "unsurpassed in the world, not perhaps in quantity but certainly in quality." The collection is considered unique even when compared with other great jewellery collections such as those of the Hyderabad, Baroda, Indore and Kapurthala royal families. One of the reasons is that the pearl fisheries around Gujarat were known to produce natural black pearls – it is no wonder that the Nawanagar royal family had a rare necklace made of these. They

also famously had an emerald necklace owned by the Ottoman Sultans, a beautiful lemon-coloured diamond known as the 'Tiger's eye', and many other exquisite pieces.

Coloured diamonds – Ranji's favourite – were a large part of his collection, including unusual shades such as pink, blue, green and black. The book *Cartier* by Hans Nadelhoffer speaks of a red diamond and even a brown diamond bought by the Maharaja, which would no doubt command astronomical prices today.

But the most important jewel from the Nawanagar collection is the two-line Cartier diamond necklace called the Nawanagar necklace. It had two strands of

first-class white diamonds, linked on both sides by a pair of square pink diamonds. The centre pendant comprised several pink diamonds, a large 26-carat blue diamond, a 12-carat green diamond, and the famous 136-carat 'Queen of Holland' diamond, even larger than the 105-carat Kohinoor! Its total carat count was around 500 carats.

Jacques Cartier described it as "the finest cascade of coloured diamonds in the world" and "a superb realisation of a connoisseur's dream".

But the connoisseur did not live long enough to enjoy his necklace. It was his nephew and successor Sir Digvijaysinhji Jadeja (1895-1966) who actually wore the necklace several times on state occasions. He too was a lover of jewellery and further expanded the Nawanagar collection. Sadly, the necklace no longer exists except in archival photos.

But it was resurrected to celebrity status when Warner Bros collaborated with Cartier to recreate a replica as the centre-piece in *Ocean's 8*. Though the design is exactly the same, the necklace used in the movie is reduced in size by 15 to 20 percent and adjusted to Anna Hathaway's measurements as the initial dimensions were for a

man. And of course, those aren't real diamonds; zirconium oxides were used instead.

## CARTIER DESCRIBED THE NECKLACE AS "A SUPERB REALISATION OF A CONNOISSEUR'S DREAM"

pioneering woman who was fascinated by Indian jewellery and inspired by the splendour of the great Indian Maharajas.

It's only fitting that the movie version of the Nawanagar necklace was worn in a women-centric film starring some of Hollywood's greatest stars, a fun flick with high fashion and glamour! ■



*Puja Shah is the founder of Aurus Jewels ([aurusjewels.in](http://aurusjewels.in)) based in Ahmedabad. She is a jewellery designer trained at Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, and a history buff.*

Vidyasagar Setu  
Bridge (or new  
Howrah Bridge)  
across the Hooghly  
at sunset



# 48 HOURS IN CALCUTTA

*Kolkata is only gradually, languidly moving into a modern metropolis, and its old-world slowness is still its most defining feature*

*Text and photographs by Ananya Jain*



L-R: A signboard at the 'original' Nizam's Restaurant; at Jorasanko Thakurbari (Rabindranath Tagore's home)

**A**t the end of July, I took a two-day trip to “The City of Joy”, Kolkata, along with friends. As someone who is obsessively enthusiastic about history, I did know my fair share about the city, its roots and its flourishing culture that had repeatedly come up in my history lessons at school. Even so, it was my reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* that had shaped my vision and expectations. I had never even visited Calcutta before, yet the image created by one of my favourite books was dreamy, mysterious and one that I was looking forward to. I could almost imagine myself following in the footsteps of the book’s nameless

narrator, walking the streets, talking in metaphors and attempting to find hidden pieces of history.

Yet, coming from Delhi, a city with years of history and culture behind it, which has still grown into a sprawling, fast-paced, crowded metropolis, I was prepared that Calcutta may not truly be like the descriptions I had read in books. After all, the 21st century has brought about too many changes, and what was once the largest port in all of Asia would surely attract the commercialisation that globalisation brings with it. So I braced myself for an unexpected journey.

In the two days we had, my friends and I tried to cover as much



as possible in order to get a small glimpse into this glorious old city. The first afternoon was spent eating lunch in a neighbourhood called Tangra, often dubbed as the Chinatown of Calcutta, at a restaurant called Kim Ling gorging on possibly the best Sino-Indian cuisine I have eaten. Throughout the rest of the evening, we toured the WB National University of Juridical Sciences in Salt Lake City, visited an extremely charming cafe near New Market (Raj's Spanish Cafe), and spent the rest of the night walking around Park Street.

My favourite part of the day was walking through the crowded streets of New Market, each corner flanked with stalls of all sizes selling jewellery. The fact that it was after dark made it all the more enchanting, since the hundreds of sets of metal earrings could be seen dangling and shining, reflecting the bright street lights.

The next two days were spent rigorously sightseeing, and we managed to visit the Victoria Memorial, St. Paul's Cathedral, Rabindranath Tagore's home, and the Indian Museum in a span of just 24 hours. But while these obvious emblems of history, both from the British Raj as well as traditional Bengali heritage, were magnificent, it was the smaller and more traditional experiences that will always stay with me. For instance, a 45-minute boat ride on

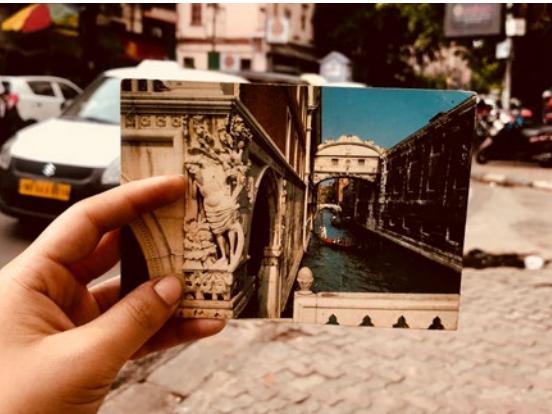


L-R: The inside of a traditional Kolkata yellow cab; buying paan from a street vendor  
Facing page: (top) A view of the city from our hotel room; (below) St. Paul's Cathedral

the Hooghly at Prinsep Ghat with the old Howrah Bridge in the distance was perhaps the most rewarding experience of the entire trip. Yes, the waters were extremely murky, yes, the humidity was a downside. But everything was overlooked that evening, as the sky turned purple and we sat in silence, watching the water ripple. There were occasional bursts of soft music from our phones, and the changing times meant that the boatman wasn't the source of song and lore anymore. But apart from that, the ride felt as timeless as a hundred years ago.

Even if your trip is short, there exists no other place like Calcutta

in the entire world. They say Mumbai never sleeps, but Calcutta never stops either. Life seems to be an intermingling of fast and slow, modern and traditional. On a street where one of the greatest symbols of imperial grandeur stands tall in the background, The Victoria Memorial, surrounded by massive and expansive green lawns, the area just outside bustles with local hawkers, truly Bengali in language and culture, with their multi-coloured stalls and carts, selling everything ranging from bhel, to puchkas, chhole kulche, shikanji, and more. This juxtaposition of the two cultures is nowhere out of



place or strange, as it represents the reality of this city, an amalgamation of Western influences, while still retaining indigenous elements. In his book, *The Epic City: The World On the Streets of Calcutta*, Kushanava Choudhury writes about this intermixing of elements in a similar way. He says that this is what makes this city unique, because it is here that these two seemingly polar opposite elements are made to complement each other perfectly.

A lot of people claim that the city is stuck in a different time. In a recent conversation, a friend categorically described it as, “Delhi, but dirtier, smaller and worse with regard to food.” Yet, my own appraisal was at the opposite end of the spectrum. I loved the little corners of Calcutta, the meandering narrow lanes, streets bustling with locals, people working out of colourful box-like structures, selling street food, fruits, vegetables and working all kinds of odd jobs,

Facing page, clockwise from top left: A postcard bought in Venice in the 1960s and sent to an address on Park Street in Calcutta; earrings at New Market; a vegetable vendor; an antique store. This page: Victoria Memorial



people across classes standing in groups, the crowd seeming never to disperse from the *addas*, the traditional roadside hubs where cultural and social revolutions were once sparked over cups of *chai*. Its close-knit *paras* (neighbourhoods) are where communities flourish together. In a world where one's neighbour is slowly becoming a stranger, these communities have retained human communication and interaction.

I don't think Calcutta is stuck anywhere. I think it rests in another time purposefully, resisting the wave of rapid commercialisation and cultural homogenisation that are washing out everything that made Indian cities unique and different. The same waves that hit Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore like tsunamis making large stretches of the cityscape non-differentiable from one another appear to have paused at Calcutta's shores. ■



# WALK OF FAITH

*An Indian woman walks the 800-km ancient pilgrimage of  
Camino de Santiago from France to Spain to find faith*

*By Smitha Murthy*

It's a walk of faith, I tell myself. I would walk 800-km from France to Spain to find faith. A walk to dispel my inner cynicism and believe in the essential

goodness of humanity. That walk is the Camino de Santiago, an ancient pilgrim trail that starts in different places in Europe, culminating in the Santiago Cathedral, where

apparently the remains of St. James, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, lie buried. To walk that distance, it should take about 31 days or so. Long enough to test the limits of your endurance and faith.

On day one, I start my walk from Saint Jean Pied de Port in France, moving through meandering villages and rolling hills to reach Roncesvalles, a small town in Spain. On day one, I stumble into a jet-lagged, dream-filled sleep at the albergue. I wake up early the next morning to a nightmare. My daypack is missing. In it is my passport and all the money I am carrying for the trip: 900 Euros in all.

For a moment, I am bewildered. This. Can't. Be. Happening. Not on the first day. Not ever.

Faith. Whither thou?

Panic sets in. No passport. No wallet. The police are civil but seem just as bewildered as I am. Friends back in India frantically ask me how they can help. The kind people at the hostel offer me tea. I am stunned. Lost.

It's already 7 am, and I should have begun today's walk already. Other Camino walkers are slowly trickling out of the hostel. And then, a tall guy with a salt and pepper beard comes over to the reception desk. He has my daypack, having found it in the bathroom. In it is my passport, intact. My wallet with all

the cards, intact. But the 900 Euros? Missing. Gone forever.

I want to cry. I want to rave and rant. I do neither. Strangers walk up to me and ask me if I need any money. I shake my head. One woman insists and presses a 10 Euro note in my hand before leaving. Another stranger comes over to hug



Smitha Murthy

me. I blink away the tears unformed.

Is this faith? This is faith, then, is it not? There's nothing I can do but walk on.

“Where's the next ATM?” I ask the police. And just like that, I resume walking.

I walk, 25 km on some days, 30 km on other days. The Camino



I started out from St. Jean Pied de Port in France in May, intending to finish walking the 800 km in a month

passes through northern Spain. On most days, despite it being June, the weather is freezing. I walk wearing socks as gloves. I shiver in the shorts I am wearing thinking it was 'summer'. My backpack is too heavy, and my mind heavier still. I curse the uphill stretches and hate the jarring impact of the downhill stretches. I hate that I can't find vegetarian food. How many cheese sandwiches can a human being have? I glug more wine and beer than I should because it's cheaper than water. And cheap is what I seek after all the loss of that money. I complain. I feel cheated. This is not what I signed up for, Universe, I cry.

And then, I sit down on a bench

in a village, listening to the church bells ring in the evening. It's still bright out even though it's past 7 pm. I hear the distant shouts of laughter from my fellow pilgrims. But in front of me is a flock of sparrows. A biscuit is fluttering in the wind on the ground. Each of the sparrows tries to pick up the biscuit. But it's too heavy for their little frame. I watch, fascinated. This is The Battle of the Biscuit. The Game of Sparrows. But after a few pitiful attempts, all the sparrows give up. The biscuit lies alone and forlorn. Is this it? I think. But no. Another sparrow swoops in. He tries to lift the biscuit with his tiny beak. Fails. He flutters away. Comes back



The Camino pilgrimage has picked up popularity over the years. Indians, though, are few.

again. Fails. When will he give up? He doesn't. On the fifth attempt, he swoops, wavers in the air, but doesn't let go of the biscuit. Flailing in the wind, he somehow makes it to the rooftop where presumably he will enjoy his hard-won dinner. I cry then. And just like that, I know that I can't give up on life too.

I go back and take out half the things in my backpack. And almost symbolically I lighten up with that. I learn to walk lighter. I start to hear the birds. I laugh and walk along with Suzanne from the US on one day; Raphael from Brazil another day; and chuckle listening to John's British humour. I walk past crumbling churches and

majestic cathedrals. I see Jesus in a skirt. Jesus in the arms of Mary. Jesus surrounded by angels. By apostles. By fluttering wings of human faith. I walk past villages where no one seems to awake and past vineyards, dappling green in the sun and past an endless stretch of wheat and cereal. And when I finally walk into the Santiago Cathedral, I think not of my life's long journey. Not even of the last 800 km.

All I can think of is one little sparrow that didn't give up. Perhaps, that's faith. Just one sparrow. ■

*Smitha is an occasional writer and entrepreneur, and frequent wanderer. You can often find her with a book, staring out of the window.*

# THE DOLL MAKER

*A daughter recounts her mother's unusual career journey*

By Chitra Gopalakrishnan



**S**omething about my mother's handcrafted stuffed dolls held me in their thrall all through my childhood in the mid-1960s and early 1970s in Secunderabad. Girl dolls with their nut-brown skin, almond-shaped eyes and swaying plaits encouraged an inexplicable connection in me. So much so that my secrets were theirs. And as for the boy dolls who were part of the collection, they had their charm too. They did not stand at a sneering distance like the boys in my neighbourhood.

My mother Vimala Jayaram, now 88, no longer creates these wonders. Her eyesight is on the wane and the other apertures are beginning to close in. But her face beams with the memories. "Somehow, other

than you, very few children took on my dolls as playmates," she says with a chuckle. "They preferred plump dolls with blue eyes, fair skin, red lips and blonde hair even though they smelt strongly of paint and plastic."

In those years, as they are now, children were socialised to accept white-skinned dolls as the norm, she further explains. Even the golliwog, a fictional character created by Florence Kate Upton in the late 19th century that toy manufacturers in the UK and the USA exploited in the 1970s to make ragdolls, had very few takers among the young in India.

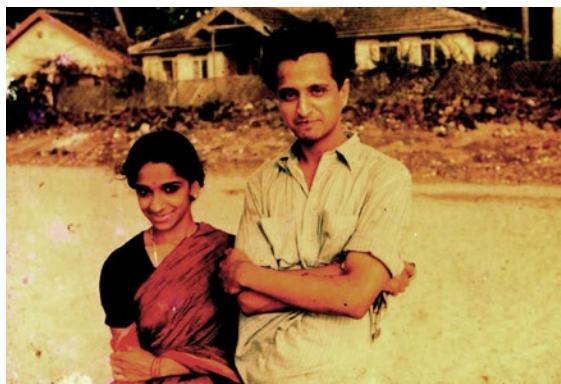
"I was conscious in my aim, with each of my handcrafted dolls, to connect with the human spirit and

build on the experience of looking and interacting with dolls as an artistic one. I saw my dolls being not just wound in wool and wire but as real girls filled with dreams and desires,” my mother tells me.

It was not an unusual pursuit. Vimala’s passion for making Indian dolls, from the 1960s till 2007, was one in a chorus of like-minded contemporaries, many of them well-educated, outspoken

that her granddaughter has used her dolls to commemorate the Indian way of life and its traditions at her wedding show. “Each of your lives contain my beliefs and that of my generation in some measure. On a larger scale, the caravan of Indian heritage moves on as our country’s innate talents, beliefs, traditions and our craftspersons’ skills continue as living traditions,” she muses.

Before she became a doll-maker,



L-R: My parents when they were younger; one of my mother Vimala’s handmade miniature dolls

professional women who wanted to root Indian culture both within the country and internationally. “We were all inspired by Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay and Rukmini Devi Arundale who nurtured in us a love for an Indian ethic and who taught us to revel in our Indian-ness,” she explains. “So we were on a collective mission.”

My mother is content with the fact that I recently wrote a book using her dolls as illustrations, and

my mother had worked in the 1950s at the Haffkine Institute, Reserve Bank of India and Burmashell in Mumbai, and for the Agricultural Statistical Department at the Pusa Institute in Delhi. “People looked upon it as disturbingly venturesome,” she chuckles. But as straddling motherhood and a career became increasingly difficult, she became a full-time doll maker and launched her own enterprise.

“I aligned my work schedule



My mother with her sisters; she stepped out to work way back in the 1950s, perplexing many in her family.

with my domestic routine. I had to source materials like wire, wool, voile cloths, gold borders (*gota*), lace, accessories for jewellery, handmade paper, glue, nails, wooden stands and cards from wholesalers and by venturing into localities that women rarely set foot in. I would travel alone from Secunderabad to Chandni Chowk in Delhi. I also had to find a set of dedicated women to help me and that was a challenge as they, like me, had to balance work with their family needs and the many illnesses that befell them,” she recalls.

My late father was her ally. “When we shifted to Delhi, he made me address the market needs and diversify. On his insistence, I switched to making miniature handcrafted dolls of wire and wool

to use on greeting cards, brooches and as hangings on walls and cars.” The Central Cottage Industries Emporium, Khadi Bhandar and the Lepakshi and Kamala Emporiums loved my mother’s dolls mounted on colourful wooden stands sourced from Channapatna, Karnataka, and my father’s unique design of a dozen dolls with varying Indian costumes on a sturdy triangular frame of thick handmade paper.

She never received accolades. “Ours were simpler times. But I remember people recounting how they collected and preserved my dolls over the years. I had an overseas visitor write me a letter of appreciation. ‘Your diminutive dolls are graceful, unique and with surprising Indian depths,’ it said.” And she’s content with that. ■



## Love in the Time of Krishna

By Aekta Kapoor  
Illustrations by Yashashri Kamble

My grandmother was born on Janmashtami and so, naturally, she was named Krishna. It's a unisex name. Much like Krishna himself – who I suspect was gender-fluid in his divine omnipotence. He goes from man to woman in my imagination, like Sushant Divgikr the drag queen, and he moves his body in sacred sensuousness, like Anusha Hegde the belly dancer. Like a man, he charms you and demands surrender. Like a woman, he lights up each cell of your body with his own love and benevolence, raising you to the skies.

I am not religious, but Krishna is a religion unto himself. When my grandma died peacefully in her sleep, he taught me that life means death. When the walls of my first marriage were falling apart, he taught me that faith means fearlessness. When I stepped out of home for the first time to earn my own living, he taught me that work means worship. When I battled social mores to be with a partner of my own choosing, he taught me that love means courage.

He called me toward him in his characteristic insidious ways. He dipped me in the fire of domestic abuse so that I would call out his name. He carried me on wings around the world so that I would see his different forms. He took me to the end of my tether on a deserted road in a frozen corner of the planet so that I could have an epiphany. He threw me into the arms of a lifetimes-old playmate so that I could experience his own life-giving ecstasy. He teased me with sorrows and joys with unpredictable regularity, so that I may learn to wait for him under any circumstance, calmly, patiently, stoically.

He changed forms – sometimes the tantrum-throwing child, sometimes the furious mother. Once he was an overbearing boss, at another time a petulant employee. He warmed me when hardships left me bare and cold; he cooled me when I got fired up fighting injustice.

But he was always there. Even if I forgot him at times, he never forgot me. Even if I was busy with my own little existence and my own little preoccupations, he was always there every time I looked up.

Every time I looked up, he was there.

Mere mortals give such limited definitions to love – tying it down in ropes of morality, fidelity, certification, declarations – but Krishna was the antithesis of all that. He was a born rebel. He loved thousands of women, all equally, and his divine consort was married to another man. The slim threads of matrimony could not contain his all-encompassing Love, the one with the capital L, the one that lit up the world and laid the path of idolatry for centuries to come.

In fact, in him, it is her who comes first. Radhe-Krishna. He is gender-fluid like that.

What is Krishna? A mythological being, a historical reality, an imaginary god? Every time I wonder, he tells me, *You are like a fish asking, what is water?* So now I don't ask, I just swim in him.

And every time I look up, he is there. ■





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