

# eShe

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— the female gaze —

## *D Roopa Moudgil*

The outspoken  
IPS officer on  
nailing corruption  
and navigating  
systemic  
gender bias



### **WOMEN IN POWER**

Three bureaucrats who  
are creating value  
beyond the call of duty

### **COVID WARRIORS**

Pilots on Air India's  
evacuation mission  
for Indians abroad

### **HER OWN TUNE**

Singer Ananya Birla  
on talent, privilege  
and social enterprise



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MAKEUP: Sakshi Gupta  
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# WOMEN IN POWER

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**O**f the 2848 candidates who cracked the UPSC exams to make it to the hallowed ranks of the Indian bureaucracy in the past three years, only 675 were women. As these candidates will move up the hierarchy to senior posts, the ratio of women to men gets even lower. For example, of the 88 secretary-rank officers in the central government at present, only 11 are women.

The Indian civil services have largely been a man's world. The first woman IFS officer, CB Muthamma, who topped the 1949 list, and the first woman IAS officer, Anna Rajam Malhotra (née George) who was selected in 1951, were both made to sign undertakings that they would leave the services if they ever married. No such undertakings for men, of course.

Now, even though rules are the same for both sexes, the playing field is still ridden with potholes. Cover personality D Roopa Moudgil, the IPS officer who shot into the limelight after her 2017 Bengaluru jail exposé, shares some of the challenges she has faced and the courage it takes (p.20).

But these women officers are more than their public roles. We spoke to three bureaucrats who have created value in society through their own initiative even beyond the call of duty (p.10). As always, we have plenty of ideas and inspiration that await you in this issue. Have a powerful June! ■



**Aekta Kapoor**  
Editor and Publisher  
[aekta@coralcontent.com](mailto:aekta@coralcontent.com)

**Editor and Publisher:** Aekta Kapoor  
**Business Director:** Kaveri Jain  
**Sales Partner:** Karishma Makhija  
**Contributors:** Hem Borker, Kadambari Rana, Kay Newton, Manvi Pant, Maya Lalchandani, Neha Kirpal, Samrata Salwan Diwan, Shweta Bhandral

**Mentor:** Kul Bhushan

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Published by Aekta Kapoor from Coral Content,  
C3/1 GF, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi 110057, India.  
Phone: +91 9818166621. For queries, write to  
[mail@coralcontent.com](mailto:mail@coralcontent.com), or visit [eShe.in](http://eShe.in)



*Have you checked out our new Facebook group Shine Your Light™ where you can inspire others and be inspired? Here is a sneak peek*

# SHINE YOUR LIGHT™



**WE ASKED: WHAT IS THE ONE JOB YOU WOULD DO  
HAPPILY EVEN IF YOU WERE NOT PAID FOR IT?**

**“Volunteer to  
help people  
with COVID-19,  
and support  
healthcare staff”**

Ruchika Dube

**“Volunteer to promote  
organ donation”**

Mamta Agarwal

**“I am where I need  
to be, doing exactly  
what I love and  
was meant to do:  
working for people  
though my films,  
and as a public  
health professional”**

Nyamat Bindra



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# SINGING HER OWN TUNE

*Ananya Birla was born with a silver spoon but she is on a mission to chart her own path and fulfil her potential as singer and entrepreneur*

**By Neha Kirpal**

**S**inger, songwriter, entrepreneur and mental-health advocate, Ananya Birla is all that rolled into one. The 25-year-old daughter of industrialist Kumar Mangalam Birla talks to us about her music, her company that provides micro-finance to rural Indian women, her handicraft e-commerce platform, and the dynamics of carving out an independent career when one hails from a privileged background.

*Tell us about your latest track with multi-platinum Jamaican-American hitmaker Sean Kingston. What is the inspiration behind it?*

Sean and I had a shared vision for the track *Day Goes By* from the get-go. It's about the intoxicating early stages of falling in love and the obsession and attraction that comes with it. Sean is from Jamaica, so we're both from places where dance is a big deal, and this is 100 per cent a song you can move to. We had so much fun making it and you can really feel that in the sound.

We met when I opened for his show in India, and knew we wanted to do something together. He's not just great to work with, he's become a really special friend as well. He's one of the funniest and kindest people I know.

*Tell us more about your various enterprises and social initiatives. How do you juggle so many roles?*

Every morning, I wake up and feel like I can conquer the day because I



Ananya Birla at a performance in Chennai

am following my passions, working with people that I love and hopefully making a positive difference. I really enjoy the diversity of my days and there is a symbiotic relationship





L-R: Matt Shelton and Greg Thompson of music management giant Maverick with Ananya Birla

between all of my projects that drives me. Creativity and business need to go together to make the most of your efforts.

The vision for Svatantra Micro-fin has always been a platform that sustainably empowers women to fulfill their potential and achieve independence. Our clients live tough lives but the passion and determination I see in them is truly inspirational.

Ikai Isai is a platform for artisans around the globe to sell their products and keep their craft alive, making beautiful handmade objects available to many more people. At a time when everything is machine-made, I wanted to

honour slow craft and the ancient traditions of making handicrafts.

Mpower is especially close to my heart. Mental health still has an awful stigma and as a result, depression and suicide rates in India among young people are some of the highest in the world. I've had my own struggles, and I really want people to know there is no shame in having a mental illness, that it is okay to not be okay sometimes,

and that there is someone there for them when they need it.

Coronavirus has not just threatened the physical health of millions but also wreaked havoc on the emotional and mental wellbeing

**"THIS IS AN  
INCREDIBLY  
DIFFICULT TIME..  
IT IS CRUCIAL THAT  
WE ALL COME  
TOGETHER"**

of so many around the world. As people face an uncertain future, they are feeling anxious and helpless. Many have also been touched by loss and grief. We recently set up a helpline for people who need support during this difficult time



and to try to ensure that people don't feel alone. It will connect callers from Maharashtra directly with a mental-health expert. We couldn't have done it without great support from the government.

*Any resolutions for the year ahead?*

I am lucky that I have been able to put together a studio here at home, so I can work in the day. I am working on a lot of new music but this is an incredibly difficult time for so many people, and it is crucial that we all come together, look out for each other from a distance, and try to find ways that we can support our communities. I am in awe of our healthcare workers, who are risking their lives to save others. I guess my resolution is to keep on doing what I love, and hopefully make people smile at the same time.

*As someone from a privileged background, how hard or easy is it to chart your own path?*

My family is incredibly supportive of me, but my music and business career are all my own. It was important for me, for as long as I can remember, to carve my own path. It took years of struggle to get where I am. I had to prove myself twice as hard. There are always going to be people who jump to conclusions because of my surname, and that's okay. Criticism comes with the territory. But it is balanced out with the love from my fans, and that is what drives me. Everyone has their own journeys and hardships.

I was lucky enough to realise early on that life is too short not to follow the things that make you feel alive. I have never been happier, and it means so much to me that people are enjoying what I am doing. ■



# POWER AND PASSION

*These three bureaucrats are women with a mission, not just in their public roles but in their personal lives as well*

*By Shweta Bhandral and Manvi Pant*



## DR MEGHA BHARGAVA

*Deputy Commissioner, Income Tax, Mumbai*

**T**he 35-year-old Deputy Commissioner of Income Tax, Mumbai, Megha Bhargava radiates enthusiasm and energy. Having cleared her first civil service exam while working as a doctor, she got post-

ed in Nainital cantonment under the Indian Defence Services. “My belief and commitment towards selfless service to the nation come from working with the armed forces,” she says. In her second attempt at the civil services exam, she got the Indian Revenue Service (IRS), and after training in Nagpur, she has been posted in Mumbai since 2015.

Despite her career success, something was missing. “There was a lot of satisfaction in terms of how we at IRS are contributing to the national exchequer for building the nation but what we can’t see is the direct impact of it. This is the missing link,” says Megha, noting that 41 percent of her city-folk live in slums. “I began to think that there was more to my life than looking into balance sheets of corporate houses. I believe that my story should resonate with the person I believe I am and my place in society.”

And so, supported by her sister, a health professional, and her mother,

a retired school principal, Megha got out of her comfort zone to work at the grassroot level for health and education. She launched her NGO, Samarpan, in 2016, which now has several doctors and civil servants on board. It provides essential health services in the interiors of Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. They conduct diagnostic and treatment camps in

with biodegradable sanitary pads. They also provide 'Adhyan Kits' to encourage children to go to school, including shoes, bags and stationery.

With COVID striking the nation, the Samarpan team tied up with government bodies, companies and citizen groups to serve home-cooked meals to daily-wagers, migrant labourers, tribals, old-age homes and orphanages across four



Megha's NGO organises meals, stationery, bags, shoes and biodegradable sanitary napkins for schoolkids

villages, mainly treating nutritional deficiency, skin disorders, eye problems and conducting awareness sessions on hygiene and nutrition.

Megha adds, "Topics of menstrual health are still taboo, and girls miss school or drop out after attaining puberty." To counter this, Samarpan conducts regular sessions for adolescent girls and provides them

with biodegradable sanitary pads. In all, they have served 5 lakh cooked meals, distributed 25,000 milk packets and dry rations for a month to 25,000 families.

Megha believes that people have to be brave enough to care: "Significance in life doesn't come from status or any position of power. It comes from serving. It is in giving to others that we find meaning."



## RUBY AHLUWALIA

*Principal Financial Advisor and Chief Accounts Officer, Central Railways*

**E**verything had been going well for Ruby Ahluwalia. The daughter of a police officer brought up in the hills of Uttarakhand, she had joined the civil services in 1986, travelled extensively, and raised a family.

Then, in 2009, she was diagnosed with stage-three cancer.

While undergoing treatment at Tata Cancer Hospital, Mumbai, what struck her most was the plight of fellow cancer patients who did not have the resources she did. “I saw people sitting on the floor of the hospital with no hope in their eyes... Those eyes would haunt me.”

It took Ruby three years to

beat cancer. As soon as she was on her feet, she launched her NGO, Sanjeevani Life Beyond Cancer, in collaboration with Tata Cancer Hospital, to work with underprivileged cancer patients.

“The first project we launched was ‘Can Sahayogi’. Doctors spend just a few minutes with patients, so I decided that I would be there for patients as soon as they came out of the OPD,” the 57-year-old narrates.

Sanjeevani navigates patients through the hospital process, emotionally supports them and helps them with their stay in the city. “If there is a shortage of funds, which is normally the case, Sanjeevani assists them in the paperwork to avail the funds made available by the government or various trusts



L-R: Ruby at her book launch; receiving the Grant Thornton SABERA Award from Union minister Nitin Gadkari

for cancer patients,” says Ruby. The Can Sahayogi project now runs in 14 cities of 10 states, hand-holding 2.2 lakh cancer patients.

Soon, Ruby realised that with her job responsibilities as the Principal Financial Advisor of Central Railways, she could not be available all the time for Sanjeevani. There was a need to hire trained cancer caregivers, but there was no programme to prepare people for a niche role such as this. Hence, she wrote her own curriculum for a four-month course called ‘Can Saarthi’. Sanjeevani has trained six batches so far.

Next, she launched the ‘Satori’ awareness programme to educate cancer patients on how to raise their immunity levels. Then came

‘Can Chetna’ and ‘Can Varta’ to inspire patients to build their lives and health once again. With COVID spreading like wildfire in Mumbai, things have become worse for cancer patients. Treatment plans have altered or come to a halt; many are not able to reach their hospitals for check-ups. To address their anxiety, Sanjeevani handles over 700 calls a day, besides daily online sessions for over 200 persons at a time.

“We compromise our immunity by suppressing emotions, desires, anger and anxiety. This builds toxicity and is a conducive environment for lifestyle diseases from hypertension to cancer,” says Ruby, whose book on the subject, *Fragrance of a Wild Soul*, launched in March.





## SANGEETA GUPTA

*Former Chief Commissioner of Income Tax*

**K**nown for her refusal to fit into labels, Sangeeta Gupta, who this year retired as Chief Commissioner of Income Tax, has had an exceptional life outside of her public role. She is an acclaimed artist, poet, documentary filmmaker, and founder of the Prithvi Fine Arts and Cultural Centre in Delhi.

Born in Gorakhpur, UP, Sangeeta studied in a convent boarding school from a young age. Fiercely determined yet introverted by nature, she fell in love with art and literature in her youth. “I started reading the classics quite early. My love for literature, especially poetry, began there” recalls Sangeeta.

She studied political science in college, and joined the civil services soon after, quickly earning a name as an outstanding performer and earning a gold medal for Best Probationer in 1986. Alongside, her world of poetry and art bloomed. Her first book was published in 1988, and her first solo exhibition got a grand opening in Kolkata in 1995. To date, she has 20 books, which have been translated into several languages, and 35 solo exhibitions under her name.

The 62-year-old’s latest art work, based on the theme of Lord Shiva and inspired by *Maha Mrityunjaya Mantra* and *Nirvana Shatkum*, is considered the longest in the world. Painted on hand-spun *khaddar*, Sangeeta used the *dabu*, a tool





traditionally used by block painters of Rajasthan, along with a muddy paste with brush. Later, sawdust was applied, after which the painting was sun-dried, soaked in indigo dye, and then washed and dried again.

Documentary filmmaking happened unexpectedly to Sangeeta. “I wanted to produce a film on my mentor Keshav Malik, the poet and art critic,” she narrates. “Unfortunately, the director didn’t spare any time, and I ended up shooting the entire film. In that process, I also learnt filmmaking,” she beams. Sangeeta has so far shot, scripted and directed seven films, six of which are with the US Library of Congress, and have been screened in many other parts of the world.

In 2011, Sangeeta founded the

Prithvi Centre to promote India’s art, literature and music. It helps young artists pursue their education in fine arts, and has produced several documentary films and books.

But accomplishments don’t shield us from adversity. In March 2019, Sangeeta met with an accident that smashed her wrist. It led to an implant, over 150 physiotherapy sessions and nagging pain, but she didn’t put a brake on her art project. “Doing a 100-metre painting was my ultimate test. I kept challenging my physical and mental faculties. Eventually, the universe conspired, and my faith in Shiva helped me heal,” she says. “If you are connected with the universe, everything spreads out before you, even your strength and resilience.” ■



# UNEXPECTED TWISTS AND DEFIANT TURNS



*Actor-entrepreneur Bhagyashree's life and career choices reflect her headstrong determination to live her truth, regardless of challenges*

**By Maya Lalchandani**

**W**e are sometimes defined by that one major milestone in our lives. For Bhagyashree, it was her unforgettable debut role in the Bollywood blockbuster *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989). Though she went on to star in 20 more films after that, launched her own media company and even had a government campaign for underprivileged girls named after her, her award-winning role as Suman opposite superstar Salman Khan continues to be etched on most Indian hearts.

In fact, the 51-year-old actor is still very much in the saddle and at work with the big guns, this time with *Bahubali* star Prabhas in an untitled film she signed on just before the COVID-19 lockdown. The difference is that she's not the only one in her family to be in showbiz; last year, her son Abhimanyu Dasani won a Filmfare award for his debut film, just as his mother had done 30 years earlier for hers.

Bhagyashree's life has been woven on a rich tapestry. Daughter of Vijay Singh Rao Patwardhan, the titular Maharaja of Sangli, Maharashtra, she was born and raised in Mumbai. It was during her schooling at the famed Jamnabai Narsee School that she met Himalay, the love of her life.

In 1984, actor-director Amol

Palekar, a family friend of the Patwardhans, cast Bhagyashree and her sister in his television serial *Kachchi Dhoop*. Thus, the seeds of acting were sown. The next few years were turbulent and heady, as



Bhagyashree with her husband Himalay

education, career, love and marriage came together and clashed, leading to many fireworks in her life.

The Patwardhans were not in favour of her relationship with Himalay, because they felt she was too young, their backgrounds were not the same and the families were



Bhagyashree with her children Avantika and Abhimanyu, who won a Filmfare award for his debut film role

culturally poles apart. Despite this, their love affair continued through their college years, though she did break up with him for a while to appease her parents.

Soon, she landed her debut role in director Sooraj Bharjatya's *Maine Pyar Kiya*. Even during the making of the film, Bhagyashree requested her parents to allow her to marry Himalay, but once again, they refused. Finally, one year after the stupendous success of the film and a Filmfare award to show for it, Bhagyashree married Himalay in a small temple wedding attended only by her parents-in-law, her film director Sooraj and co-star Salman, besides a few friends.

The birth of Abhimanyu created

peace between both families and changed her life. What more could a 20-year-old ask for? Bhagyashree devoted herself to her family. In fact, she resented fame, because she would get mobbed if she even went out to shop for her baby. Five years later, her daughter Avantika was born, by which time Bhagyashree had made forays into television serials and south Indian films. Huge box-office hits with Kannada cinema superstar Shiva Rajkumar and Telugu film icon Rajasekhar followed. "The films suited me as they were powerful roles of strong women," she says, looking back.

She went on to act in various languages after that – from Kannada to Marathi, Telugu to even Bhojpuri

— drawn by memorable roles.

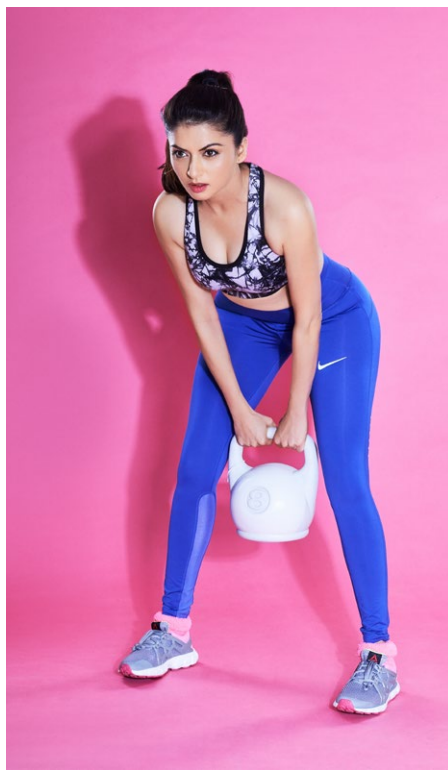
As the kids grew, Bhagyashree started feeling restless again. “I felt that I was always playing these roles of the dutiful daughter, mother, wife and daughter-in-law. Though I did it all to perfection, I started to feel the need of *me* and what I really wanted at that stage.” Around that time, her in-laws met with a near-fatal accident, and Bhagyashree nursed them back to health. After turning 40, she decided to venture onto a fresh new journey and went into film production with Himalay.

Soon it was time to confront the empty-nest syndrome as the children left home. “I actually went into depression for six months,” she shares. Not one to mope around, Bhagyashree accepted a role in the Star Plus serial *Laut Aao Trisha* (2014). “I think I was the first choice whenever any channel launched their first serial,” she laughs, adding, “I didn’t really think choosing the medium was the endgame, also I didn’t want to do regressive roles. I only wanted to do strong, substantial roles that would excite me, whether in film or television.”

As luck would have it, she soon had to deal with a health issue, with a misalignment in her arm. It was not a serious condition but it was a wakeup call for Bhagyashree. “I have always preferred to do everything myself, whether it was my film career, my cooking or my kids. I think

I spread myself too thin,” she muses, realising that she’d let her physical and emotional stresses escalate.

When doctors couldn’t help, she educated herself, learning nutrition from sources like Stanford, Univer-



sity of Pennsylvania and the American Fitness Professional Association. Convinced about holistic nutrition, she launched Back2Basics, her venture that helps people with similar ailments, customising their food plans and suggesting lifestyle changes. No doubt, they could not have asked for a better role model. ■



# A FEARLESS STEP FORWARD

*Having stood up to corrupt politicians and conniving businessmen over 20 years, courage is now second nature to IPS officer D Roopa Moudgil*

**Text by Aekta Kapoor. Photography by Syed Zubair**

**R**oopa Divakar Moudgil has been transferred several times in the course of her career in the Indian Police Services (IPS). It comes with the territory, especially if you are a bureaucrat with a penchant for arresting prominent politicians, pointing out irregularities in the system, or exposing government-business nexuses. “But I don’t consider transfer as punishment,” dismisses Roopa, who is at present Inspector General of Police – Railways, posted in Bengaluru.

For instance, in July 2017, Roopa was transferred just one month after taking over as Deputy Inspector General – Prisons in Karnataka. No doubt, the fact that she had exposed the preferential treatment given to influential politician VK Sasikala in Bengaluru’s central prison, where she was serving time for money laundering, had

something to do with it. Roopa’s report alleged that Sasikala, long-time aide of the late Tamil Nadu chief minister J Jayalalithaa, had been provided various privileges in exchange for a bribe of ₹2 crore to jail officials. The report not only put an end to Sasikala’s political career as AIADMK general secretary, it further enhanced Roopa’s reputation as a no-nonsense IPS officer.

“I did similar things earlier too, but they never came under the media glare because my postings were all in nondescript locations then,” she smiles, maintaining that the wrong-doer’s profile has no bearing on her decision to act. “I am a public servant and I draw my salary from the public exchequer. Our work has to have public accountability and transparency,” says Roopa, who was awarded the President’s Police Medal. “I had no fear of the consequences



Makeup: Sakshi Gupta  
Assistant photographer: Gavin



D Roopa Moudgil (second from left) was among 50 speakers at Harvard India Conference in Boston this February

because I was doing the right thing as per law. I have acted in public interest. How can they punish me for that?" she asks.

Instead, she was transferred for the 41st time in 17 years, and had a ₹20 crore defamation case slapped on her by her senior officer whom she had accused of connivance.

What perplexes Roopa is the "pin-drop silence" she encountered within the system after the jail exposé. The only support and applause she got was from the general public, she says. "Acting as per laws and taking strict action when there is violation, the way I did, should be the norm. I don't understand why my colleagues – especially those who have nothing to hide – don't

do it more often. By keeping silent, we have created an environment where politicians think they can get anything and everything done by civil servants. And when people like me stand up against the system, it becomes a problem. The system tries to discredit the whistleblower in order to maintain the status quo," avers the TEDx speaker.

Born in Davanagere, Karnataka, to parents who were both government employees, Roopa had an intellectually stimulated childhood. When she was in class three, her teacher asked students what they wanted to be when they grew up. Little Roopa came home and consulted her parents. While her mother suggested 'doctor' – which didn't





Roopa (far right) at work at Chikkabanavara railway station, Bengaluru, this May to enforce the COVID lockdown

appeal much – her father told her about the civil services. This sounded noble, so the next day Roopa announced to her teacher that she wanted to be an IAS or IPS officer. Impressed with the eight-year-old's patriotism and clarity, the teacher asked other students to applaud Roopa. The incident stoked the flame of her ambition further.

Earning a Master's in psychology from Bangalore University, Roopa – who is well-versed with Hindustani classical music and is a trained Bharatnatyam dancer – enrolled in the National Cadet Corps for five years.

“That's where the ‘khaki attachment’ came from,” she smiles.

She cleared her UPSC exam in 2000 with an all-India rank of 43, and was ranked fifth in her batch at the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy in Hyderabad. Not having faced any sort of discrimination at home as a child, the first time she got an inkling of gender bias in the system was when a male

## **“TAKING ACTION WHEN THERE IS VIOLATION, THE WAY I DID, SHOULD BE THE NORM”**

IPS colleague in the Karnataka cadre casually asked, “Why have you women chosen IPS – what do you think you can achieve here?” The question left her bristling.



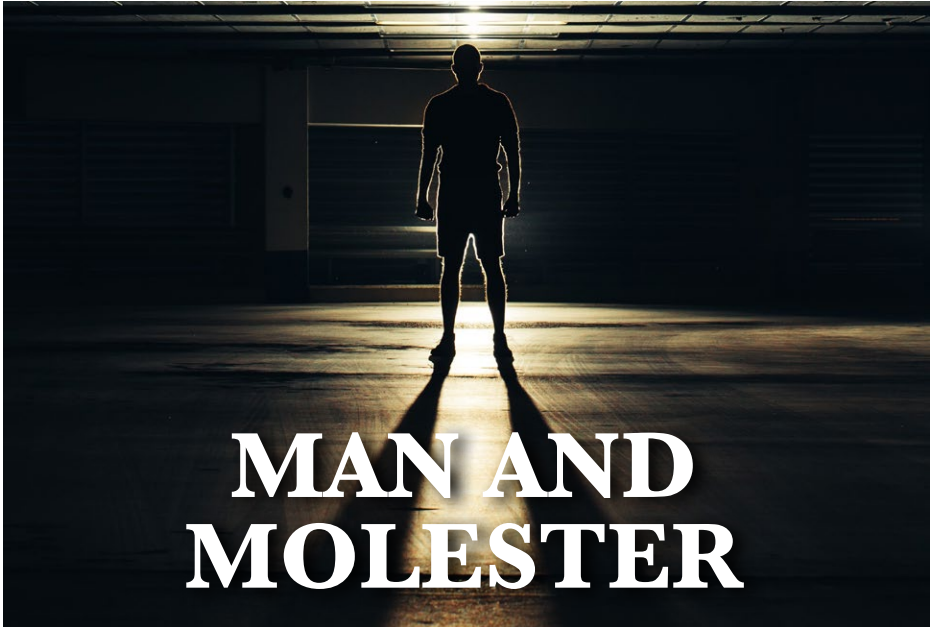
Roopa at home in Bengaluru; besides being an IPS officer, she sings playback songs in Kannada cinema

“In our training academy, we are told that we are officers first and then women,” she says. “But when you enter the field, you are reminded time and again that you are a woman. Your postings are decided based on gender.” Though she is happy that things have changed with the entry of more women, she believes there are vested interests at work when it comes to prime postings. “Businesspersons and politicians have many things to get ‘done’ from the person sitting in that chair. Obviously, this work must be bordering illegality else they would not need to approach the officer at all. So, they want a person who can comply with their desires and demands. And women officers are not

suitable for this purpose; you can’t tell a woman to bend as much as a man. That’s why women fail to get prime postings,” asserts Roopa, who is married to IAS officer Mounish Moudgil and has two children.

After a career of 20 years in the civil services, she believes courage is both a personality trait and a virtue one develops over time. “If you act courageously in one testing situation, you will be courageous the next time as well,” she says. “When you have done nothing wrong, why fear? My duty is to the common man who faces the ills of bad governance. The common man has supported me,” she adds. “That is my faith in India, the public of India, and the Constitution of India.” ■





# MAN AND MOLESTER

*Author Tara Kaushal talks about gender violence, conflicted men-women relations, and her explosive new book, Why Men Rape*

*By Neha Kirpal*

**T**ara Kaushal's first book, *Why Men Rape: An Indian Undercover Investigation* (HarperCollins, ₹399), is being called "the most awaited book of 2020". The Mumbai-based writer and media consultant with a passion for social justice has written on gender, sexuality, equal rights and socio-cultural issues for publications across the world. She was awarded the Laadli Media Award for gender-sensitive writing in 2013-14. In 2018, she was also awarded a Femina Women Super Achiever Award.

We talk to her about her expe-

rience interviewing nine rapists for her book, and what she learnt during the course of her research.

*What inspired you to write this book and how did the project take shape?*

The idea for this book came to me in 2013. For me, getting molested daily on the DTC buses that took me from Noida to college in Chanakyapuri severely impacted my attendance – though I loved my course and topped throughout, and though I carried a knife. And this is why I was deeply shaken in the aftermath of the Delhi 2012 gang-rape. Jyoti Singh Pandey could have

been me from 10 years before. And so the idea for this project appeared in 2013, though I began working on it full-time four years later.

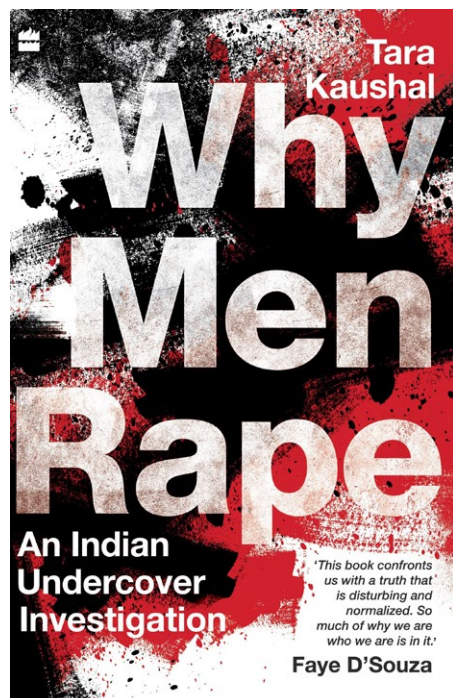
But I think it was much before that. My family moved from naval colonies across the country to civilian housing in Noida when I was 12. I was stalked, molested, flashed at and propositioned fairly regularly on my way to school. Once, walking my dog early one evening, I narrowly avoided being abducted by a gang of men in a Maruti van. Suddenly, my well-intentioned parents curtailed my access to the outdoors, policed my clothing and hemlines, and imposed curfews. I was miserable. And maybe, the questions I had started asking as a 12-year-old baby feminist newly in Noida – why should the actions of men impact my life, the lives of women; why do they do it; why can't they stop – sowed the seed for this book I wrote later.

*You interviewed several rapists for this book. Please share your experience of meeting these men. What struck you about your conversations with them?*

I met nine men who have raped, across classes – there was a doctor, a journalist, a political henchman and a farmer. What struck me was that most of these men, when you meet them, seem so 'normal'.

I agree with the feminist philosopher Kate Manne when she writes that calling men who

rape 'monsters' has damaging results. "Monsters are unintelligible, uncanny, and they are outwardly frightening. What is frightening about rapists is partly the lack of identifying marks and features, beyond the fact that they are by far



most likely to be men. Rapists are human, all too human, and they are very much among us. The idea of rapists as monsters exonerates by caricature."

When we call these men 'evil', 'crazy' and 'mad', we situate them as abnormal and irredeemable. This absolves society of any responsibility for their creation, thus allowing us

to remain blinkered to the need for social introspection and systemic change. “[I]t leads one to view sexual violence as a special type of crime in which the motivations are subconscious and uncontrollable rather than overt and deliberate as

of as different and certainly not equal to boys – from birth to food to education to marriage to leisure and death. And there is serious sex segregation, so boys grow up with no healthy associations with girls other than in their families, and vice versa. All this has got to change.

*Are things getting better or worse in this matter with the younger generations?*

Whether talking about the gender dynamic in general or gender violence in particular, things are going to get worse before they get better.

“Violence is indicative of conflict in society – complete peace can be indicative of a highly oppressive status quo. The power differential isn’t static today because women aren’t accepting their realities anymore, and few men are willing to make peace with this fact,” says the famous criminologist Dr Vijay Raghavan of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. “The truth is women are much more powerful than us. So, these rules are just to subdue them,” is something I heard from jail. It follows that women not colouring inside the lines, not following the rules, must be overpowered and punished. Violence is a symptom of the transition to an egalitarian society and, Dr Raghavan believes, the backlash will continue until “a new equilibrium is finally achieved.”

I believe this dawn will come. ■  
*Read the complete interview on eShe.in*



Tara Kaushal

with other criminal behaviour,” write eminent sociologists Diana Scully and Joseph Marolla in their study of convicted rapists.

*How do you feel parents should bring up their boys and girls so that the rape culture in India changes in future?*

The bottom line is that boys and girls should not be brought up differently. Currently, girls are thought



# UNEARTHING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

**What do you do when an unexpected pandemic and lockdown shutter your business? You adapt, evolve and, sometimes, have a stroke of good fortune**



**SHIVANI AGARWAL**

*The founder of Scraft Products added new products to her portfolio*

**E**verything had been going great for Delhi-based businesswoman Shivani Agarwal. Her factory in Sonipat, Haryana, was operating to full capacity making tissue papers, toilet and kitchen rolls, and aluminum foil for food packaging. Expecting her first child this year, the

35-year-old was in expansion mode both personally and professionally.

Then coronavirus began to make news headlines with increasing frequency and Shivani knew she'd have to do something about it before it was too late. Remarkably, she managed to change direction, continue production, and save her employees jobs even as the lockdown ravaged the rest of the Indian economy.

The founder of Scraft Products had set up her factory in 2009 after completing her MBA from Mumbai. Things had never been easy for her despite her businessman father's support: "As a young woman, I was never taken seriously by others at home or even in the business; they'd ask to speak to someone 'senior' before striking a deal," she narrates.

Yet she managed to build up her business, expanding her product range, and touched ₹50 crore turnover last year. Then COVID hit. "Everything was in shams," she recalls, of how orders for her usual range fell to record lows in March,



and she considered shutting down until the end of the lockdown.

But something triggered Shivani to give it one more shot. A wholesale supplier to Walmart, Shivani had enrolled herself in their Vridhhi programme launched late last year to prepare small businesses and MS-MEs to participate in the domestic and global supply chains. With their mentorship, she quickly developed hand sanitisers and disinfectant wipes as per COVID product specifications, and luckily had her samples ready just one day before the nationwide lockdown was announced by Prime Minister Modi.

“I was already communicating with people via video conferencing due to pregnancy, so the sales and management process continued the same way post-lockdown,” says Shivani with some relief. With tissue paper, hand sanitisers and disinfectant wipes all classified as essential goods by the government, her factory did not have to shut for even a day, and none of her 150 employees lost their jobs. They were simply trained and moved to new departments. Scraft offers products in six basic categories, priced from ₹15 to ₹500 per item.

“Supply-chain disruptions and procurement of raw materials and work passes were some of the initial hurdles and they continue to exist. However, the thought that I am able to support in the supply of

essentials during a crisis and provide livelihoods to my workers didn’t let me give up,” she says.

Corporate and retail orders began to flow in as India geared up to face the pandemic. Most state governments have made hand sanitisers compulsory in offices, banks, and other workplaces, and so these items have been flying off shelves. Among the first to match



A factory worker in Scraft's hand sanitisers division

global specifications, Shivani is now looking at supplying worldwide.

“COVID is here for the long-run and this is the new way of life,” she says of the need for hand sanitisers and disinfectants. “We’ll continue doing these products now, in addition to our existing portfolio. If things go steady, we will be able to maintain our per-month revenue despite the lockdown and its challenges,” she smiles.



## BABITA GUPTA

*The textile manufacturer began producing face masks in wholesale*

**B**ursting with optimism and spirit, Babita Gupta has the ability to see the silver lining in any situation, even a pandemic. “Crises give us opportunities for evolution and growth. Earlier, we were all on auto-pilot. Now we are in the driver’s seat,” says the 46-year-old founder textile manufacturer and mother of two.

Her 13-year-old company Sarangi Creations, based in Sonipat, had been supplying home furnishings, fabric and textiles to domestic and international markets until the COVID crisis hit. Looking for ways to keep the business running, and noticing the growing demand for face masks, she resumed operations at her factory, except this time, they began making cotton face masks instead of their usual ware. She secured her first wholesale order of 80,000 masks recently.

Born into a traditional Baniya family in Delhi, Babita, who is a graduate from Hindu College in Delhi University, was a homemaker for the first few years after marriage. In an effort to help her domestic helper who faced violence at home, she asked her businessman husband Narender – who was partner in his family’s textile business – to give



the girl some odd jobs that could be done at home. “From one to 20, I soon had all these domestic helpers sitting in my balcony cutting threads from finished cushion covers and pouches,” she says with her characteristic effervescence. That’s when Babita decided to do more, and joined a Walmart programme for women entrepreneurs in 2015-16. It gave her the idea and confidence to run her own venture.

But her family was not as supportive. So Babita took matters in her own hands, sold off her jewellery, took a loan with her home as collateral, and set up a factory. Fortunately for her, Narender left his family business too, and joined her in her venture. Hiring between



30 to 60 people depending on the order size, she innovated, got her cotton fabric tested and certified according to global requirements, and began exporting.

When the pandemic hit, buyers called to cancel orders, and Babita found herself in a soup. “But if everything is being destroyed, it means a new building will come up. There is an opportunity here too,”

bedsheets and washable PPEs for hospitals and workplaces. Her new range of medical gowns and coveralls are awaiting approval from Defence Research and Development Organisation. There are also plans to export coordinated printed cotton masks to markets like Italy and the UK, where these are very popular. “Once people get bored of plain masks, they will want something



L-R: Factory workers in Babita's factory in Sonipat; she is now developing a range of fashionable masks

she philosophised. Since she already had reams of tested cotton in stock, she decided to make masks instead of her usual products. Reaching out to Walmart's group of 150-200 MS-MEs in the Sonipat-Panipat area, she managed to quickly source a large supply of elastic bands at short notice despite the lockdown. And the factory was in production again.

Her reusable cotton masks were quickly lapped up, and she also began getting inquiries for disposable

more fashionable,” she predicts.

Having received very valuable support from Walmart during this period, Babita became one of the mentors of their Vridhhi programme, and guides others like herself on business operations. She is a powerhouse of inspiration: “I get excited when I face obstacles, I welcome challenges,” she says with her unrelenting enthusiasm. “I am determined to make this a win-win situation.” ■





# UPSIDE DOWN LOCKDOWN

*Three friends and mothers of young children share how they've spent the past few months of lockdown balancing work and parenting at home*

**By Hem Borker, Kadambari Rana and Samrata Salwan Diwan**

**T**he three of us became close friends while studying at St Stephens College, Delhi. Never had we imagined spending a large part of our 30s discussing the joys and sorrows of raising kids. Now, with the COVID-19 lockdown, staying sane and safe has been the single most challenging job for all

of us. We have donned big smiles from dawn to dusk, when all we wanted to do was shout our lungs out instead! So, what do you do when play areas, parks and schools are shut down, but the 'powerhouse' inside of a growing child isn't? You transform into overactive, insatiable little monkeys yourselves!





### SAMRATA SALWAN DIWAN

**A**fter completing my Master's in international relations from SOAS, University of London, I set up Family Fables Co, a bespoke publishing company documenting family and institutional histories. More importantly, I am mother of Gayatri, who is four and a half years old, and Viraj who has just turned one. I divide my time between Delhi and Shivpuri in Madhya Pradesh and hustle between mama duties.

Home-schooling kids during the lockdown and adapting to the new online format of school is new for both children and parents. In the pre-lockdown era, I had begun to get a small 'work window' while my daughter was at school, which now

no longer exists. Sheryl Sandberg rightly put it, "The coronavirus pandemic has created a 'double double shift' for women." Working women were already doing a 'double shift', pursuing their careers and then returning home to take over childcare and housework. But the lockdown has created a 'double double shift' type problem for them.

I have survived so far by sticking to a routine, especially sleep and meal times. I also get kids to help in household chores. For exercise, we dance or do a combination of storytelling and yoga. Gardening is another hands-on and creative activity. We also play board games. The kids miss meeting their friends, so we help them socialise via video calls.



## HEM BORKER

I did my doctorate in education from Oxford. But once I became a mother, I realised it was nothing like doing a Ph.D, irrespective of the analogies seniors and professors gave. I currently teach gender, education and social exclusion at Jamia Millia Islamia. Owing to the lockdown, I have to race against time to complete my online class schedules as well as offline schedules with my three-year-old daughter Avya and 18-month son Adyapat.

Being a work-from-home mother is a new challenge. How do I explain to my children that “mom is (physically) there, but she is really not available”? I had to make tough choices to do justice to my role as

a mom while also pursuing an independent career. Over time, my daughter has understood that mom has ‘online’ office just like she has ‘online’ school.

I’ve learnt to make everyday moments ‘together time’ with the children – from dressing up in the morning, to reading stories and doing craft-work related to it at night. We play musical chairs, dance-and-freeze, I-Spy and obstacle races with hoopla rings. We have also created a slide and sandpit in our garden.

I am the eternal planner and none of my plans ever worked out. I’m grateful to the kids for the gift of patience and for realising that I have a lot to be thankful for because we spent today safe, healthy, together.



### KADAMBARI RANA

**A**fter my M.Sc from Cardiff University, UK, I went on to research 'integral education' at Sri Aurobindo Society, Pondicherry. Next, I taught economics at The Shri Ram School, Delhi. At 35, in my current role as mother to my two-year-old daughter Sanghamitra, I spend most of my time providing the necessary support structure for her growth. As women, we become more inclined towards ensuring the well-being of others in the family, which slows us down in our own professional lives. However, it is important to not lose sight of our innermost aspirations.

I trust myself to be able to use limited resources to generate enjoyable learning time. But I admit I

experienced my fair share of anxiety when the lockdown began. The first thing I learnt was to let go of some of my own rules and regulations. The world is upside down and we need to adapt. Give them a wall to scribble on, let them make water puddles on the glossy floors, let them stick stickers on toilet seats, make character masks and do drama, let them roll in mud, and just let them jump around the house.

This is also a good time to inculcate dignity of labour and hone life skills. Sanghamitra assists us in laundry, cleaning and gardening. Other family members also take over learning or activity time with her, so that she can develop a bond with each of them. ■



# A SPECIAL KIND OF MOTHER



*Two mothers of children with special needs share their day-to-day challenges, joys, heartaches and the lessons that life has gifted them*

## FERDOUSI BEGUM, DHAKA

**M**y husband Hossain and I are both doctors, so when our daughter Nuriya was born 17 years ago, we both knew something was wrong. She had a reddish lesion over her eyelid and nose, and concerned that it could be cancerous, we got her CT scan done.

It turned out be hemangioma (an abnormal buildup of blood vessels), and we hoped that it would subside.

Over the next one year, however, I suspected Nuriya had autism, as she didn't make eye contact and kept repeating words. But Hossain refused to accept it; he became sorrowful and it was left to me to stay strong and self-motivated.



I had always been a positive-spirited, fun-loving girl all through my school years in UAE and then through medical college in Czech Republic. Having moved to Dhaka to marry and raise a family, I was excited and confident about having my first child. But then, life threw this unexpected curve-ball at me.

At two, Nuriya was diagnosed with autism. Then began our new journey. It was very difficult to get her to tie her hair or wear certain kinds of clothes. Even potty-training took a long time. I never kept any helper because I couldn't trust anyone to that extent – Nuriya is slightly verbal but she is incapable of alerting me to anyone's 'bad touch'. Till today I feed her myself.

As she reached puberty, her needs grew; I feel like I have two sets of periods every month – mine and hers! She is ignorant about menstrual blood and will even try to taste it if I am not watchful. Getting her hair cut is another challenge. She prefers her dad to me in such situations, so I request ladies' salons to allow my husband inside with her if there is no other customer around.

She has also become unexpectedly strong in her teens, and is violent when agitated. Sometimes, she throws a fit in public and people think I'm kidnapping her. She also senses other people's animosity or negative feelings, and it agitates her further. For this reason, we

restrict outings to places where she only comes in contact with loving, understanding people, such as our own family and close friends.

We have enrolled her in the best school in Bangladesh for children



with special needs. Over the years, we got into a routine: the three of us would leave home together in the morning, dropping Nuriya off at her school, and then going to our workplaces. But the COVID-19 lockdown has been a trying time.

It is important for me to take care of my own health and remain strong enough to take care of her. I stay cheerful and encourage my patients to be optimistic. But social judgement is relentless: even my *jioe*



L-R: Nuriya celebrated her 17th birthday during the lockdown; Nuriya, Ferdousi and Hossain in Dhaka

*de vivre* bothers some folks – they believe that a mother of an autistic child has no right to be happy! But I have stopped bothering about what people think – I dress up, I dress Nuriya up, I shop to indulge myself, and I ignore the expressions on people's faces when Nuriya has a fit in public. I am no longer ashamed.

I feel that a woman can do more than a man. But when a family has a special child, all her motivation goes down. I am blessed to have a husband like Hossain, but I have seen fellow mothers suffer terrible hardship. In many cases, the husband deserts the woman, leaving her to raise the child herself. We chose not to have a second child, but mothers with two

or more children are in precarious positions. Many take medication to keep depression at bay.

Life is definitely a struggle with an autistic child. We cannot sleep regular hours or at a long stretch, as Nuriya wants us to be awake if she is. She spends her time playing music but needs to be watched 24/7. This takes a toll. I may put on a smiling face when I meet my patients at work but inside I am wretchedly tired all the time. I am hypertensive and I don't know how far I can pull like this.

Even then, I feel it is my duty to motivate my fellow parents, to be a role model. And there is only one way to give them hope of happiness – by being happy myself. ■

**"I IGNORE THE  
EXPRESSIONS  
ON PEOPLE'S  
FACES... I AM  
NO LONGER  
ASHAMED"**

## PRIYANKA GUPTA, BENGALURU

**M**y daughter Tarinni Gupta, whom we call Taru, was born in 2002, when there was less awareness and acceptance of disability. I was 24 years old at the time, and she was my first baby. Born 26 weeks premature with severe complications and low chances of survival, she began showing signs of disability early on in her life. She has hydrocephalus, cerebral palsy, seizure disorder and acute scoliosis, which means her spine is bent to one side.

After her birth, I had to undergo multiple surgeries myself, and life unfolded with new challenges every day. Not being able to get my firstborn home, and instead spending months in hospital hallways, was something I had never imagined. Pain and denial overwhelmed me and I just didn't know what to do. Finally, after a long wait, we got her home and then began another battle, something I was totally unprepared for. Regular therapies, medication, countless doctor visits, all took a toll on me physically and spiritually. But I did not give up. I had hope that she would get better.

Slowly, this life became the 'new normal' for me, and I was able to come to terms with her disability. Taru cannot use any part of her body. She remains confined to the bed and needs diapers. She needs



to be assisted and taken care of throughout the day – starting with brushing her, feeding her milk, carrying her to the bathroom, giving her a bath and then medication and food. There is a lot of changing of diapers and someone needs to sleep with her as well. I employed a full-time helper for her 11 years ago and trained her in caretaking, but I have to constantly watch and assist. We take Taru downstairs for a while on a wheelchair for an hour or so every day.

It was my own decision to go



ahead and have a second child. It wasn't an easy decision as I had to go through in-vitro fertilisation this time around. No one supported my choice, because they feared the outcome, but I was hopeful and confident. My second child Prisha was born 10 years ago and is completely normal. I soon realised that bringing her up was a completely different process. Taru cannot articulate her thoughts; she is happy and satisfied in her routine and has no additional desires besides her daily needs. In contrast, Prisha is extremely vocal and demanding. But I feel lucky to have two girls, and the younger one is definitely sensitive to the older one's needs.

My husband Vikram is a businessman and I have mostly been a homemaker due to Taru's needs, though I try my hand at part-time jobs now and then. Taru's condition does take an immense toll on my relationships, especially with my in-laws and my husband. It is a human tendency to expect the same kind of involvement and effort from everyone around towards my daughter, but of course everyone has different ways of showing their care and concern.

Though my husband loves Taru dearly, the amount of support he

provides on a daily basis is minimal. It is easier for him to keep himself buried in his work, maybe because it's too tough for him to accept the reality. But even though there are differences in relationships, everyone puts them aside when it



comes to Taru. She is honestly the one binding force between my husband and me.

She also has a special relationship with her paternal grandma, and talks to her on the phone every day after breakfast. It's a ritual and her own language of love. On Diwali, her Daadi comes to stay with her. Taru is as important as any other child to

us, in fact, even more important, and I never compromise on her lifestyle. She wears the prettiest clothes, and we get a hairstylist to come and cut her hair every month.

Motherhood has been a challenging journey. I try to take each

Along with this, my mom and my friends have been my integral support system. A strong support structure is vital for my own sanity.

This July, Taru will turn 18. On her birthday we all get together as a family and she loves it. She is a lovely child, always full of joy, with only love for the people around her and that keeps me satisfied as well. It helps me break barriers and talk about her freely with others. I am happy that society is changing and that people are more aware and understanding about people with disabilities.

My life may be full of difficulties and sacrifices, revolving wholly around my child, but her smile eradicates all my pain and I cannot imagine it any other way. She's so special that only she understands when I am hurting, sad or unhappy. She is my only companion. And though we can't have proper conversations and only sit together in



day as it comes, and stay happy. But seeing my child suffer for so long has left me with a helpless, painful feeling. Watching her cry without being able to understand what she needs is the worst.

I have followed Nichiren Buddhism for 14 years, and that has been a pillar of strength for me. At times, I go for counselling as well.

silence, our hearts are always connected and she understands every feeling of mine.

Taru is a gift of God and has changed my life, teaching me patience, endurance, forbearance and love. It was difficult in the beginning but with time, she has become more precious than anyone else. ■

*As told to Kaveri Jain*



L-R: Captains  
Minaxi Tayal and  
Aakanksha Verma

# MISSION BHARAT

*Meet pilots Daisy Chacko and Aakanksha Verma who are part of India's unprecedented worldwide evacuation operation Vande Bharat*

*By Shweta Bhandral*

**T**he frightening possibility of contracting COVID-19 did not deter Daisy Chacko from standing up for duty. For someone who grew up with the ambition of becoming a fighter pilot but had to join national carrier Air India because the Indian Air Force had not yet opened its doors to women fighter pilots when she passed out of flying school, Daisy always loved a bit of adventure. Which was why the 36-year-old volunteered for the

Vande Bharat Mission, a massive evacuation programme to bring back Indians stranded abroad due to the pandemic-induced lockdown.

On May 20, she flew the long Mumbai-Riyadh-Kannur Vande Bharat flight as its captain, leaving her overwhelmed with the sense of solidarity that the country displayed in an unprecedented situation. "People said they were proud of us. They blessed us and were genuinely happy that a young woman flew



them back home,” avers commander Daisy who also flew the Abu Dhabi-Ahmedabad-Mumbai flight as part of the mission.

India launched the Vande Bharat Mission on May 7 to be executed in three phases by Air India. The second phase started on May 16 and will end on June 13. During this period, the country will fly back 32,000 Indians from 47 countries in over 160 flights. In phase three,

compared with 8797 male, this 13 per cent ratio is much more than the global average of 5 per cent.

Aakanksha got her student pilot licence at age 16, even before her driving licence. Her father was her inspiration for her “focused approach” towards building her career, she recalls. “Dad in uniform was captivating for me. In class 2 we had to write a paragraph on what we want to become, and I wrote ‘Main



Above: Visuals from Captain Aakanksha Verma's Vande Bharat flight to Dhaka

private airlines will be roped in.

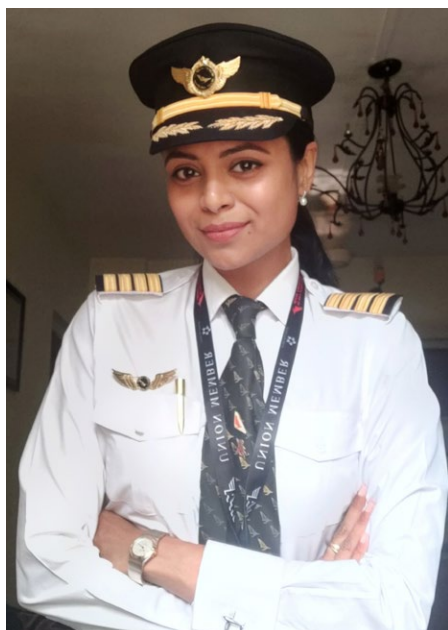
The likes of Daisy are part of this legacy. In fact, it was Air India that broke the glass ceiling way back in 1966 employing its first woman pilot. “More than five decades later when I joined, this is one profession where there is equal pay and respect for professionalism,” says senior commander Aakanksha Verma, also 36. Interestingly, though India has only 1092 licenced female pilots

*ek mahila vimaan chalika banna chahti hoon* (I want to be a woman pilot)’,” says Aakanksha. Both pilots were in home quarantine when we spoke to them, which is mandatory after Vande Bharat flights.

Mumbai-based Daisy who is married to a pilot says she did not think twice when this opportunity struck for her to volunteer for the mission. “I have no children, no old parents living with me, and because



L-R: Captain Daisy Chacko on her Vande Bharat flight



I was involved in a lot of relief work in Mumbai during these lockdown months, I had no fear,” this ‘COVID warrior’ explains.

When she decided to volunteer for this risky mission, Aakanksha’s 86-year-old grandmother – who lives with her and her family in Delhi – was worried. It was her mother who finally prevailed and encouraged her to be part of the mission. Aakanksha flew to Bangladesh and back on May 9.

Although there is often very little interaction between pilots and passengers, Aakanksha found the feedback from the ground staff in Dhaka heartening. They told her about how relieved the passengers were on seeing the national carrier

land, she says. “All their (passengers’) anxieties disappeared and they knew they were safe and finally going home. Onboard I could feel there was gratitude and a sense of relief on their faces,” she notes.

Meticulous procedures are followed on evacuation flights, and the process can be time-consuming so as to ensure safety. Both the women pilots *eShe* spoke to feel that the frequent training they are given to upgrade their skills came in handy during this mission.

Daisy is enamoured of the role that doctors and nurses play in such evacuation operations. “Hats off to health workers. It is a Herculean task to be in PPE and work for hours,” she states. Aakanksha agrees,



Captain Daisy Chacko  
(R) with her co-pilot  
Duhita Reddy

“I have a lot of gratitude for doctors and nurses who wear these suits day in and day out. It’s difficult to breathe in those suits.”

Vande Bharat Mission, once complete, would have brought back 259,001 Indians from 98 countries. Most of those who have registered to fly back are workers (28 per cent), students (25 per cent), professionals (14.5 per cent) and short-term visa holders such as tourists (7.6 per cent). Priority is given to those with compelling reasons, like job loss, medical emergency and senior citizens to fly back home.

When asked about the financial viability of the local airline business, Daisy and Aakanksha hope the industry will ride out the bad times

gradually. These pilots feel that it is time to accept the ‘new normal’ and open the skies in a phased manner. “The industry was already in a bad shape and so it is time to move forward. New rules will be set, lesser people will travel, but we have to restart,” says Daisy.

For her part, Aakanksha says, “With only one-third of the fleet back in operation, it’s also going to be a wait-and-watch situation. The government of India, along with the Ministry of Civil Aviation, has thoughtfully laid down a strict new travel protocol to help passengers and crew remain safe during this pandemic.”

She adds, “It’s never too late to get back on your feet.” ■



# School @ Home

*With online classes becoming the new normal in education around the world, parents, students and teachers weigh in about the pros and cons*

**By Shweta Bhandral**



Someone has entered the group, they are removing kids from the class, you have to come here,” Sasha, my 11-year-old, shouted for me to check what was going on in her online class before the teacher came in. The children were in panic mode, or perhaps excited, all the microphones and videos were on, and a surprisingly healthy discussion was taking place. Who could this be? Why would they be doing this? Is this cybercrime? They went on and on

with their arguments and counter-arguments until I told them to run a virus scan on all their computers and inform the class teacher.

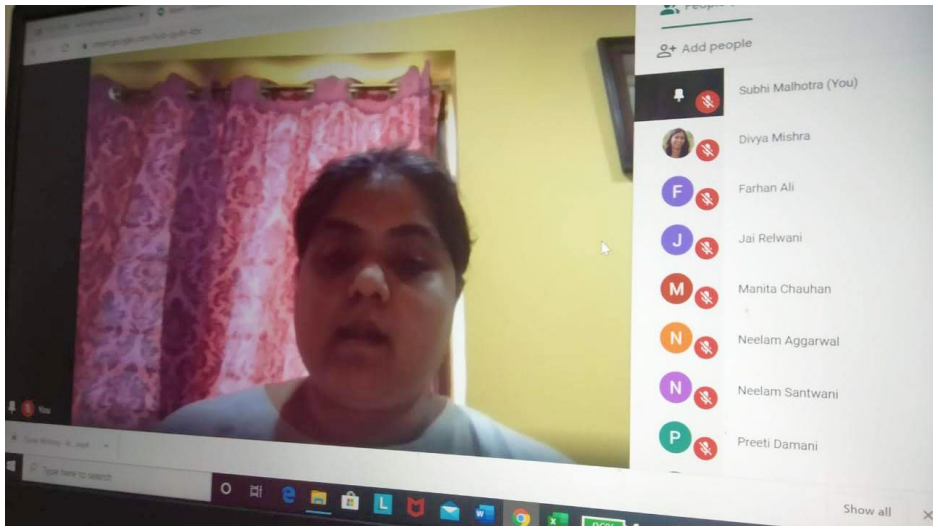
Online education is de rigueur in the days of the COVID lockdown, from small towns in India to the world’s most prestigious universities. While this appears to be the best solution in the short-term, there are various pros and cons that have already become clear in the past two months of the lockdown, especially in a developing country like India.

## THE CHALLENGES

Just a few days into lockdown, Arambh School in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, asked its teachers to explore and identify an online platform. Subhi Malhotra, 40, who teaches English from grades three to six, found that the task

teachers and students.

Connectivity and bandwidth issues have emerged as the biggest challenges in the Indian scenario. And while many kids genuinely do not have the resources required, many others happily use it as an excuse to skip class. Bandwidth



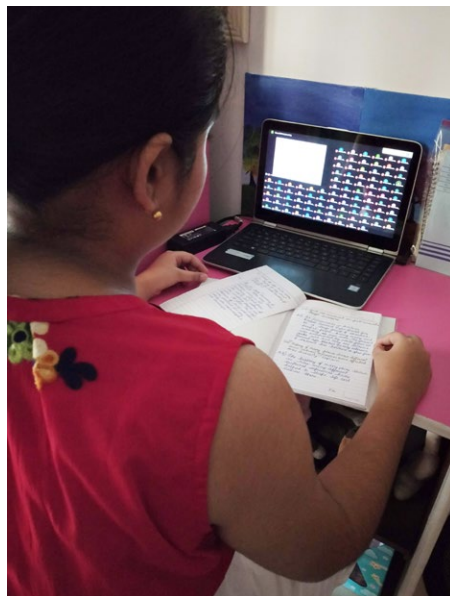
wasn't as simple as it sounds, and some teachers took up to a week to understand the process. She adds, "Not everyone can afford computers, headphones, broadband connections and the other devices one needs in this kind of setup."

Neither are all teachers tech-savvy, trained to embrace change, or understanding of the needs of introverts who sit quietly in class. In addition, lack of private spaces in Indian homes could be a major hindrance to such classes for both

issues are also forcing schools to keep the video off, which means that the teacher has no clue if the child is sitting and listening in the class or playing online or offline games, or using the internet for other purposes entirely.

At this nascent stage, training is needed to build online etiquettes – such as muting one's mic, sitting at a spot with minimum background movement, chatting in the chatbox while the class is on, and so on. The class size also needs a re-think. A

class with 40 or 90 students becomes just a monologue by the teacher. “Online learning is not going to work if it replicates the classroom – monologues are not the way forward,” says renowned education strategist Meeta Sengupta. “Online is an egalitarian medium, and teachers will need to create lessons



that are about listening more than about talking.”

Long scattered timetables have also increased the screen and sitting time of the child, which is physically harmful and mentally tiring. “Though we are getting to interact with our teachers and schoolmates and finishing our syllabus faster than normal, I don’t think it’s a good idea for our eyes and health,”

says my daughter, Sasha, whose head starts to ache after a point.

Twelve-year-old Avi agrees: “The timetable sometimes has too many continuous online classes, which makes my eyes hurt, and sometimes the timetable has too many offline classes, which become boring.”

After all, a child’s education doesn’t end with textbook syllabi but includes all the other aspects that school provides: the friendship of peers, the attention of adults and a hands-on learning experience. Ten-year-old Raipur schoolboy Arjun says, “Going to school is much more fun than sitting at home. I miss my friends.” Sitting in one’s home may also make children lazy or laid-back, or alternatively, frustrated at their lack of resources.

## THE OPPORTUNITIES

But there are multiple positives to be spotted as well. Most children have taken to these classes like a pro and even help their teachers to conduct class peacefully. They are happy to upload their assignments on the Google Classroom, and with online worksheets, teachers no longer have to spend hours and days on correcting hand-written copies.

Aditi Grover, 44, who teaches entrepreneurship and retail to high school students in a public school in Delhi-NCR, affirms that the experiment had been successful for her senior classes. “These students



are mature enough to understand the medium, its advantages and challenges. For subjects like IT, web apps and entrepreneurship, it is a blessing in disguise as the concepts can be explained better by features like screen sharing,” she opines.

Schools that were lagging in technology had no option but to pull up their socks, and even government schools have gone ahead with digital transformation.

Teachers have shed their inhibitions, adapted new technologies, and now better understand the world in which their students operate. Assignments are now given keeping in mind the availability of resources at home, which is making the teaching process more relatable and practical.

With most teachers being women, some effort is required to adapt to the new work-life imbalance, though. A senior teacher from a public school in Mumbai shares, “Teachers are working 24/7 these days, dealing with their household work, taking classes, understanding technology, making audio PPTs and assignments. Those who are good with technology are helping their peers catch up.” It’s a new normal, for sure.

Post-lockdown, Meeta suggests schools focus on best practices for health and safety first, then focus on safe spaces for genuine learning. “We have seen that the world

managed well without an intense focus on exams and results – let us bring learning to the fore and push exams back to their proportionate spaces,” she says, adding that this may just be an opportunity for course correction. “Education is about safety, care and progress, but we gave that up and ran children



Meeta Sengupta

through the same assembly line regardless of safe mental spaces to grow, or care for personal potential. Everyone cannot and must not progress into being the best photocopier of them all. This is the time to reframe, redraft and rebuild our ways of learning and teaching. Our pause gives us a chance to turn our faces towards the sun again, towards authentic learning.” ■



*A group of women from around the world get together over 'Zoom coffee' to share their lives, wishes and wisdom*

*By Kay Newton*

**O**ut of every hardship comes an element of magic. When the COVID-19 lockdown began, I wondered how to best serve my Facebook group members and realised that creating space in the form of a daily Zoom call would be the perfect solution. Our calls are refreshingly random, members turn up or not, and there are no obligations. We laugh or cry, share or stay silent, and all is good.

We are globally yet randomly tied together for 40 minutes, oblivious to 'normality'.

It is in such moments that magic occurs – a new formed friendship, a piece of advice, a light-bulb moment and, above all, space to just be human. I asked six amazing women what lessons they've learnt during the lockdown in their countries. Here are their answers, shared over smiles and cups of coffee.

PHOTO: ENGIN AKYURT / PIXABAY

## CHERYL REUM, SOUTH AFRICA

Our country entered the world movement of lockdown with extreme draconian rules and regulations. It would appear that while this curbed the potential viral impact, the financial impact has been extreme and dire. In a country where there is huge informal trading and illegal inhabitants, it is leading to starvation. Private-sector goodwill feeding programmes are blossoming yet the prognosis going forward is concerning.

Despite this, South Africa has always been a country that accommodates resilience and, eventually, nothing is insurmountable.

For me personally, these times have shone a high-density wattage on what it means to be human. To reconnect with family and folk that we had forgotten in the 'busyness' of largely meaningless pursuits. I envisage we will turn back to embrace this value even more – an awakened instinct. For example, at 3.15 am on Wednesday morning, I felt drawn to message a friend only to find he was experiencing a very dark hour.

When we stop, we can truly hear.

This has been a 'coming home' in so many ways. My healed heart is full, happy and content. I have learned to state my truth. My adult daughter and I locked down together have deepened our already excellent relationship with clarity



and sometimes brutal honesty. We have appreciated the nooks and crannies of our environment. We have cleaned, prepared, cleared clutter and my crafts and skills acquired decades ago have been revisited. In the end, nothing matters as much as the health of the mind, body and soul.





### JANE MILAUSKAS, USA

There are so many things the universe is teaching me right now. The gift of slowing down – both mind and tasks. I can truly pick and choose. Less to do, more thought and time devoted to each task. I've been calling it 'practising for retirement' (two more years to go). And the gift of that is I'm no longer worried about how I'll fill my days... There's always loads to do!

In the short term, I am concerned about how I will do my job when it's safe to do so. The constrictions right now make it difficult to see

how I will travel and make sales as my business is dependent on restaurants opening – when and if. Right now, I can control my environment (safe zone), but traveling puts my safety in the hands of others.

Closer to home, will there continue to be

shortages of certain items? I've learned to 'look' for certain items, for myself and my aunts whom I shop for, every week when I go out to 'forage'. I no longer assume. I make do. I use up. I get creative, I need less, much less. I share... the shopping, things I have too much of. I talk more to strangers than I ever have.

I try to understand behaviours that on the surface don't make sense to me. To see that fear for so many here in the States is how they respond to the uncertainty. This has led me to find a bigger space in my heart for others.



**CYNTHIA MEYER, USA**

Personally, I made life changes about a year before the pandemic occurred. The same changes that many are now considering – a career change, working from home, valuing health and family over money. It's been interesting to watch the world go through the stages I had already passed through.

My new normal before COVID-19 was already socially isolated, shopping online or going to the store once a week, working from home, and doing most of my business via the internet. I liked it then; I like it now. More companies and employees have discovered that the arrangement works well, I will not be alone.

The big takeaway from this pandemic and the resultant lockdown is awareness, which spans multiple facets of our daily lives, for example, the lack of basic hygiene and how precarious the food supply chain is. The news, media and even family say that the post-COVID world 'will never be

the same'. Part of me desperately wishes that is true. Going forth, I hope for positive changes.

However, another part – the pessimistic part – thinks it is only a matter of time before memory fades and the bad habits slip back into place.



Humans are creatures of habit. Once we get back to our usual lives (no matter how long that takes), many people will fall right back into the patterns that landed us in these dire straits. Overspending, failure to save, burying the environment in greenhouse gases, tolerating a mediocre (or worse) relationship – what people are most familiar with will once again become their reality.

## DEBORAH CLAIRE PROCTER, ARGENTINA

To me, COVID-19 has been a big lesson in humility. Somehow the fragility of human plotting and planning has been laid bare.

“The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry,” said the Scottish poet Robert Burns. I’m originally from another Celtic land of Wales so I identify with his sentiment. My New Year started with the word “consolidation” and 2020 has made me re-look and re-check my vision like no other year.

We know that the only constant in the universe is change. As we move further into the technological revolution, change will become ever faster. At the moment, we cannot imagine the new innovations that are about to appear, yet appear they will and our lives will be different yet again.

The pandemic has already created change we could not have expected a year ago.

Zoom, for example, has become the centerpiece of many households: an online platform that allows us to connect with work and loved ones around the globe in an instant. Many people have adapted well to this new way of life and embraced



the new normal, others have struggled.

Yet we cannot go back to the old ways even if we want to. We have moved on. Our relationships are what we will now relish more than ever as if special magic treasure.



## SUSAN GALA, USA

I don't think things will go back to 'normal', because our normal wasn't working. This virus is teaching us a lesson to be present, to stay in 'The Now'. As we move forward, I know that I will focus on cherishing the moment, to just be present and know that I am enough by listening to my inner wisdom.

During COVID-19, space and time have had a different meaning. There is no need for a timepiece, days blend into one another and that is perfect. I intend to embrace every moment I now have.

The coronavirus pandemic has also allowed me to embody my community, to have more awareness of our brothers and sisters regardless of race, sex, social or economic health or religious systems. To believe in faith. Mine is belief in the Great Creator, Mother Gaia, Goddess, and that is what moves me.

I now have certainty that I can



walk towards what's more significant than what I am leaving behind. Simplicity is best; everything can be stripped down to a simpler level. Whether that be taking care of myself first, caring for my loved ones or the planet. The true currency of life is kindness, compassion and love.

## ESTHER APOUSSIDIS, UK

I believe that COVID-19 has taught us a lesson to respect and cherish our oneness and connectivity more. I trust we will become less mindless about our actions and act more consciously, honouring and pro-



tecting our environment and moving more into love for ourselves and each other.

I will certainly be listening to my calling to share a greater unconditional love through energy work, no matter what the naysayers or sceptics say or do (including those within my family). Too long,

I have hidden my voice because of seeking the approval of others.

Whilst I'm not ready to shout from the rooftops, I will slowly inch out of my chrysalis. I'm learning that to make an impact in the world, we first have to make an impact on ourselves and transform our own inner world, moving from fear, self-doubt and self-judgement to love, grace and freedom from inhibitions.

I am fascinated to see how female leaders around the world are rallying to this cry. To protect our environment and the sacredness of human life rather than worry about the economy. It will be interesting to see how other nations begin to align their policies towards helping humanity and Mother Earth over the next 10 years. ■

*If you would like to contribute and connect to these amazing women, you will find them all at [Face-book.com/groups/MidlifeStrategies](https://www.facebook.com/groups/MidlifeStrategies)*





# DADDY'S GIRL

*When fathers take on a proactive role in parenting, daughters grow into stronger, more confident and better adjusted individuals*

**By Manvi Pant**

PHOTO: CAROLINE HERNANDEZ / UNSPLASH

**T**he dynamics of parenting have changed over the years, but what's intact is the clichéd view of looking at child-rearing as a mother's prerogative. This outdated notion has raised several questions, such as: how important is fatherhood? Do men contribute more to the parenting pyramid than just money?

Professor of child psychiatry at Yale, Dr Kyle Pruett sets the record straight: "Fathers don't mother and

mothers don't father." His emphasis on paternal engagement suggests that fathers can be distinctive caregivers not only to their sons but also to their daughters. Psychologists like Marie Hartwell-Walker also insist that fathers have an unparalleled role in their daughter's lives.

So, what difference do fathers really make? An important element that weighs in this is the way fathers interact with their daughters. Their style of communication is usually





Former US President Barack Obama with wife Michelle, and daughters Malia and Sasha

more candid, honest and less modulated as compared to a mother's. Fathers also tend to inculcate self-dependency by allowing more room to make mistakes. Former US President Barack Obama is a prime example of that. When asked about raising two girls Malia and Sasha, he asserted that making mistakes is a part of the process of development and that kids should be given enough ownership to manage their lives on their own.

Way back in 1993, award-winning author Victoria Secunda, in her book *Women and Their Fathers: The Sexual and Romantic Impact of the First Man in Your Life*, concluded that women who do not feel affirmed by

their fathers fail to trust the men in their lives and hence always remain on guard. Her conclusion seems to hold relevance even today, as several recent studies confirm the same.

Girls look at their fathers and the image they register sets the default for the men they allow in their life, which is why grief counsellor Caitlin Marvaso believes that girls raised in fatherless households have less insight on respect and boundaries. They are also more likely to get involved in relationships without being too emotionally invested in them. University of Delaware professor Rob Palkovitz cites paternal absence as being a major reason for teen pregnancy in girls in the US.

Girls look up to their fathers for everything – from their career choices to their self-esteem, relationships and mental wellbeing. Girls who develop a strong bond with their fathers from a young age experience less anxiety and stress. They feel more secure and often grow up to become confident and solution-oriented individuals.



Indian film icon Rajinikanth with Soundarya and Aishwarya

Further, when fathers lead from behind, instead of positioning themselves in the front, it helps build trust. One example is actor-director Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson’s relationship with his three daughters. He once shared that the eldest, 17, says she can trust him and lean on him for everything. The now retired professional wrestler also participat-

ed in the childbirth of his youngest daughter and called it “a life-changing moment” in an emotional post.

If we are talking about best celebrity dads in India, then superstar-politician Rajinikanth’s name cannot be far behind. The Tamil legend, who started his career as a bus conductor, shares a beautiful bond with his daughters Aishwarya and

Soundarya, both of whom are successful professionals now. Soundarya once said her father had taught them to never forget their roots, and to live a humble life.

So, what is the future of fatherhood? In 2009, American author Kay Hymowitz made the picture very clear when she predicted, “In a decade from now, a majority of fathers would be spending less time on the field and more on cooking pancakes and changing diapers.” Well, the COVID lockdown may have ensured that but there’s more to come. Fathers may

not become the ‘new mothers’ but going forward, paternal presence will definitely hold a deeper meaning. And if more fathers are able to have healthy relationships with daughters, the world will see a league of women who are tougher, more self-assured, financially independent, mentally strong and have a greater sense of clarity. ■

# A DESI SPREAD

*Atmanirbharta (self-reliance) is the word of the day in India, so whip up these four popular Indian breakfasts that are high on nutrition and taste*

*Recipes by Kaveri Jain. Photography by Ananya Jain*

## ALOO POORI

### **Ingredients (aloo sabzi):**

2 tbsp oil; 1 tsp jeera; ½ tsp hing (asafoetida); 2 tsp chopped green chillies; 1 tsp ginger paste; ½ tsp methidana (fenugreek seeds); 1 tsp coriander powder; 1 tsp red chilli powder; 1 tbsp kasuri methi (dry fenugreek); 1 tsp garam masala; ½ tsp haldi (turmeric powder); 1 tsp jaggery; salt to taste; 3 tomatoes, chopped; 3 tomatoes, pureed; 6 medium-sized potatoes, peeled and chopped; 2 tbsp chopped coriander

### **Instructions:**

1. Heat oil in a pressure cooker. Add jeera and methi dana. Once it splutters add hing, green chillies and ginger paste.
2. Add tomatoes, tomato puree, haldi, coriander powder, red chilli, salt and jaggery. Mix and cook for 3-4 mins.
3. Add the cut potatoes and mix. Add the kasuri methi. Put 500 ml of water,

mix and put the whistle on.

4. Let it cook for two whistles. Open it, add garam masala and cook for 5-7 mins on low flame. Mash some of the potatoes to make the curry thicker. Check the salt and add if required.
5. Garnish with the chopped coriander.

### **Ingredients (masala poori):**

2 cups wheat flour; 1 cup besan (chickpea flour); 1 tsp salt; 1 tbsp kasuri methi; 1 tsp ajwain (carom); ½ tsp coriander powder; ½ tsp red chilli powder; 1 tbsp oil; Water, as required; 500 ml oil to fry the pooris

### **Instructions:**

1. Add ingredients to flour and make a stiff dough. Let it rest for 30 mins.
2. Heat oil in a pan or kadhai.
3. Make small balls of the dough and, using a little oil, roll the pooris one by one in round shapes.
4. Deep fry in the pan. Enjoy hot!







## DAL CHILLA

### **Ingredients:**

200 gms green split moong dal;  
1 tsp finely chopped green chillies;  
1 tsp finely chopped ginger; 2 tbsp  
finely chopped onions; salt to taste;  
water; lemon

### **For the filling:**

Mix of 100 gm mashed paneer, 50 gm  
boiled peas, salt and red chilli powder

### **Instructions:**

1. Soak the dal for a minimum of 2 hours. Then, drain the water and grind the dal with 1 tbsp water. It should

look like a thick paste once done.

2. Take the mixture out in a bowl and add salt, onions, green chillies and ginger.

3. Add water so that the batter has a pourable consistency.

4. Heat a girdle or tava.

5. Pour a ladle full of batter and slowly spread it out in a round shape. Add some oil. Once cooked, flip to the other side. Flip back and add filling on half the chilla.

6. Fold the other half on top. Serve with curd / mint chutney / imli chutney.



## POHA

**Ingredients (serves 4):**

125 gms poha (flattened rice);  
¼ tsp turmeric; ¼ tsp chilli powder;  
50 gms green peas; 50 gms potatoes,  
peeled and chopped; 10 ml oil;  
½ tsp mustard seeds; 20 gms roasted  
peanuts; 1 small onion, chopped;  
1 small tomato, chopped; 1 green  
chilli, chopped; 10–12 curry leaves;  
salt to taste; chopped coriander to  
garnish; dash of lemon juice

**Instructions:**

**1.** Rinse poha on a strainer under running water until soft. Add ½ tsp salt and toss to combine. Set it aside.

**2.** Heat oil in a pan, add mustard seeds. When they crackle, add onion, green chilli and curry leaves. Cook for 2 mins until onions soften.

**3.** Then add tomatoes and cook for 2 mins; add turmeric, chilli powder, salt.

**4.** Add green peas and potatoes. Splash some water and cook covered until the vegetables are cooked.

**5.** Add in the poha and toss. Cook for 2 mins. Then cover the pan with a lid and turn heat to low for another minute. Turn off the heat, add the roasted peanuts and mix.

**6.** Squeeze in fresh lemon juice. Garnish with coriander. Serve warm.







## NAMKEEN JAVE / SEVAI

### **Ingredients (serves 4):**

1 cup jave /vermicelli / sevai; 15 ml oil;  
1 tsp mustard seeds; 1 tsp urad dal;  
10–12 curry leaves; 1 green chilli, finely  
chopped; 1 onion, finely chopped;  
1 cup mixed vegetables (peas, carrots,  
bell peppers); 1 large tomato, finely  
chopped; salt to taste; ½ tsp turmeric  
powder; ½ tsp coriander powder;  
½ tsp chilli powder (optional); 1½  
cups water; juice of 1 lemon; roasted  
peanuts and coriander for garnish

### **Instructions:**

**1.** Dry roast the vermicelli in a pan.  
Once lightly golden, transfer to a bowl

and keep aside. In the same pan heat  
the oil. Then add mustard seeds. Once  
they crackle, add dal and curry leaves.

**2.** Once the dal changes colour, add  
onions and green chillies. Cook till  
translucent. Add tomatoes and other  
vegetables, salt, turmeric, chilli powder  
and coriander powder. Add ¼ cup  
water, cover, cook for about 5 mins.

**3.** Add the remaining water and bring  
to a simmer. Add roasted vermicelli  
and cover. Keep flame on low heat and  
let it cook (about 6–8 mins).

**4.** Gently fluff up the vermicelli and  
add a dash of lemon juice. Garnish  
with roasted peanuts and coriander. ■

# Not Her Choice

*Why is housework a woman's job?*

*By Aekta Kapoor*

**W**hy would anyone want to do the dishes? Or clean the kitchen counters with soap till they shine, or soak just-bought vegetables in warm water to remove traces of pesticide, or wipe the fridge shelves, or make lists every day so that salt, masala, sugar, dal, rice, flour, fresh produce, tea and coffee stocks never diminish?

Why would anyone want to dust the shelves every day though they're dusty again the next? Or sweep the floors, or wipe the windows and tabletops?

Why would anyone want the onerous task of laundry, which goes on mind-numbingly for eternity? Or clean a kid's potty, or a sick person's puke, or make

the beds in the morning and unmake them at night, or draw the curtains open in the morning and closed at night, or arrange and rearrange the dining table at every meal, or fill and refill soap dispensers, or put all the garbage from all the bins together and then go outside and leave it all for the garbage man every morning?

If given the choice, who would opt for these actions versus, say, watching a web series, surfing comedy shows, dancing, chatting with friends, writing a book, praying, eating or sleeping?

No one would opt for these unless it was for their own personal upkeep. The only reason one would choose to do these life-maintenance tasks *for others*

was if it was a job that came with payment or perks.

That's why it's a travesty of justice when tasks that no one would opt for are thrust on one section of the population who are gaslighted into believing it is their 'duty'. In the above cases, these duties are left to the woman of the house. If a man does any of them, he is hailed as a noble soul, a selfless bodhisattva. As if he has never had any need for laundered clothes, cooked meals, a clean home, and the kids aren't his.

No matter what a woman's choice, inclination, ability, education, employment, or financial or social status, tending to the home and family almost always falls in her kitty. Privileged women hire other women to assist them, though they continue to be responsible for the net result. The not-so-privileged do it themselves, and their lot is the worst. No one in the world ever wants to exchange places with an underprivileged Indian wife.

Hours every day go into these maintenance tasks, tasks without which a household cannot function. Yet, there is very little by way of reward. There is definitely no money in it, unless one counts the extra hours the man of the house gets to 'unwind' in front of the TV and hence put in

more effort at his workplace and perhaps earn more money, but few look at it that way. There is also very little personal incentive to do so, though the candidates are brainwashed to believe that by virtue of being biologically equipped to give birth, women are untiring and self-sacrificing by nature and so unpaid care

### WOMEN @ HOME

Women in India spend up to 297 minutes per day on domestic work, versus 31 minutes for men.

The value of women's unpaid care work has been estimated to be 3.1% of India's GDP.

India and Madagascar are the only countries where urban women spend more time on unpaid care work than rural women.

Source: ILO

work is their calling and dharma, though there is no scientific basis to link the two phenomena.

Let's get this straight. Housework is not a woman's job. It's not her choice, her calling or her dharma. She did not opt for it. She was not born to do it. She does not want to spend decades of her life doing it. It's not her burden or her cross to bear.

It's everyone's work. Do your share. ■



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**Actor Maanvi Gagroo with The Red-Black Accordion**

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