

— the female gaze —



Darshita Gillies

The London-based
techpreneur has
created a unique
philanthropy
platform to drive
socio-economic
impact

BRIDES & BORDERS

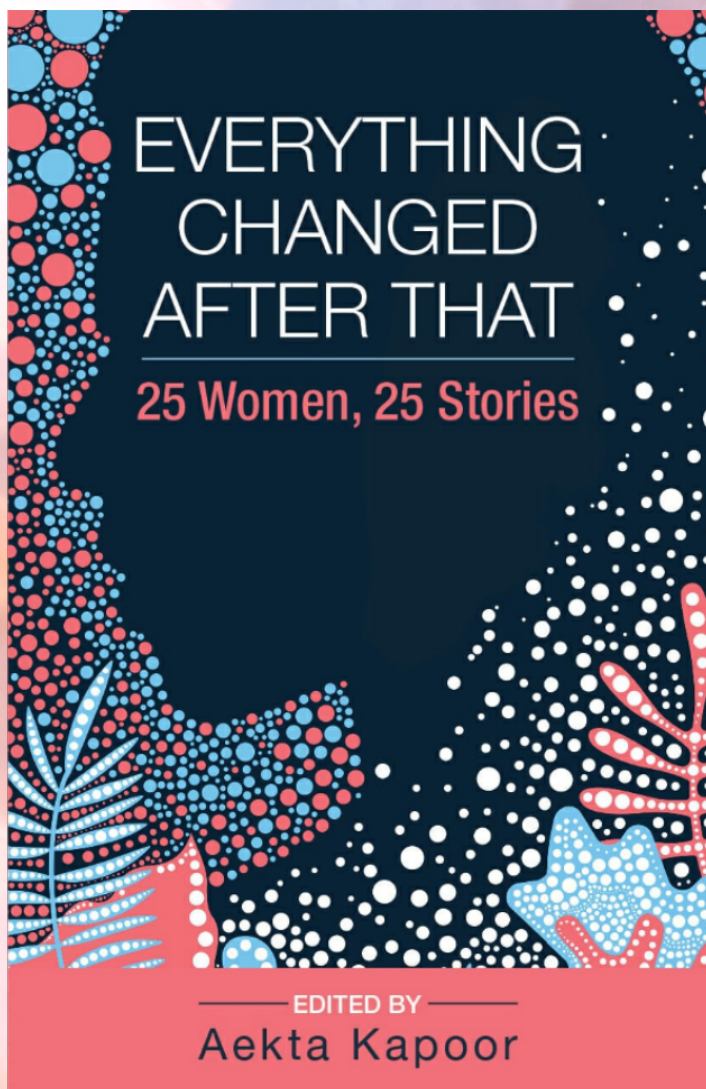
The riveting history of an
Indo-Pak family in which
women bridge cultures

ART OF INVISIBILITY

Academy Award-winning
documentary filmmaker
Haya Fatima Iqbal

FEMINIST NOTES

Indian-Australian
actor Saloni Chopra
on her new book



**25 short stories by
25 women writers
from India**

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contents



12 Firebrand

Actor, director, producer and screenwriter Dr Lakshmi Devy

06

Craft and Couture

Fashion designer Sania Maskatiya

16

The Art of Invisibility

Documentary filmmaker Haya Fatima Iqbal

20

Wealth and Wisdom

Cover personality Darshita Gillies

26

An Extreme Bent of Mind

Adventurist and traveller Nidhi Salgame

30

New-Age Fairy Tale

Actor, influencer and author Saloni Chopra

34

Brides and Borders

One family's fascinating Indo-Pak history

44

Save the Children

Social engineer and playwright Smita Bharti

48

Going by the Law

Corporate lawyer Archana Khosla Burman

51

The Point of No Return

Scotland-based business coach Sudha Mani

THE IMPACT ISSUE

The term 'impact investing' emerged a little over a decade ago to refer to investments that generate a social or environmental impact alongside a financial return. It has now become part of the vocabulary of socially and ecologically conscious individuals and companies who believe there's no better way to earn than by helping others as well.

But where exactly must an organisation invest so that it creates maximum impact in communities or enables ethical enterprise? Enter Darshita Gillies, a London-based entrepreneur and our cover personality, who founded an algorithm-based platform to match impact investors with companies, nonprofits and individuals whose purpose is in alignment with their own (p.20). Darshita's vision is driven by her own journey that began in poverty, and is dotted with compassion and wisdom.

But you don't have to be a philanthropist to create impact. Documentary filmmaker Haya Fatima Iqbal is doing so in Karachi with her insightful films (p.16), while New York-based actor-director Dr Lakshmi Devy is doing so with her new drama set in Hyderabad (p.12). Social-media star and author Saloni Chopra is igniting girls with her feminist notes (p.30) and social engineer Smita Bharti has set out to educate 40 lakh Indian youth every year on how to prevent child sexual abuse (p.44).

You can create impact wherever you are, using whatever tools you have. Are you? ■



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CRAFT AND COUTURE

Not even a pandemic could dampen the optimistic future-oriented outlook of famed fashion designer Sania Maskatiya, who has taken the crafts of the Subcontinent to the ramps of New York



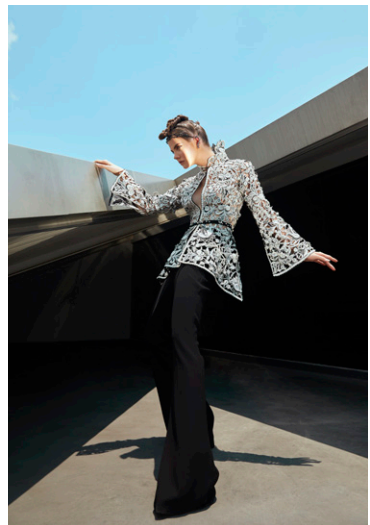
March 2020 marked the third year in a row that Sania Maskatiya showcased her designs at New York Fashion Week (NYFW). Days after her show, the pandemic struck the luxury industry worldwide and the lockdown in her hometown Karachi put a spanner in her operations as well.

But the woman considered Pakistan's most successful fashion export wasn't one to give up so easily. "How does a luxury fashion brand stay relevant in such times when no one can leave home or dress up for an occasion?" the 37-year-old creative head of her eponymous label brainstormed with her team of 15 designers. After all, they had almost 700 workers and artisans across Pakistan whom they needed to keep gainfully employed; they couldn't

just let production come to a halt.

She decided to look within. "What would I feel like wearing during a lockdown, stuck at home in the summer, conducting all meetings online?" The answer led to a new limited-edition casual-prêt line of *desi* lounge-wear, loose lawn or cotton kurtas, and airy bottoms that one could live in while also looking sharp enough for an Instagram selfie or a Zoom call.

Known for her focus on fabric and craftsmanship, Sania's runway shows and new collections are much anticipated in Pakistan and India, not to mention with the diaspora in Europe, UK and USA. A fashion graduate of the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi, Sania launched her label in 2010 along with her brother Umair



L-R: Sania Maskatiya's show at Beirut Fashion Week; a model in one of her New York Fashion Week designs

Brother-sister duo
Umair Tabani and
Sania Maskatiya



Tabani, who is the brand's CEO.

The design brand has held fashion shows across the world, from Mumbai and New York to Dubai and Beirut. With various fashion awards under her belt, Sania's pieces are often spotted on South Asia's stars and celebrities including Bollywood actors. Available worldwide through her e-commerce store, Sania also retails through stores in Pakistan, Dubai, Europe, USA, Singapore and India.

And yet, despite the fame and the attention she receives, Sania is remarkably friendly and chatty over a video call from Karachi. She tells me about her little daughters, Amani, 10 and Noor, eight. She lays back on her couch and shares how she is always "hustling" because

there's always something new to work towards – whether it's Eid or pandemic prêt-wear. "Honestly, between my brother and I, I've got the better deal because I'm on the creative side and I get to have all the fun," she laughs.

Acknowledging that Karachi has, for decades, been the definitive trendsetter for *desi* fashionistas when it comes to *salwar-kameez* silhouettes and for its breathable, luxuriant cotton and lawn fabrics, Sania graciously adds that the craftsmanship of saris from India is unmatched too. "I get very excited when I come across something new from India; your *jamavar* shawls and your *lehengas* are so beautiful," she gushes with youthful exuberance.

For Sania, leadership is about

leading from the back. “My team is brilliant; they do all the work. They make the magic happen. I’m just there,” she says with good humour. But the brand’s professionalism and success only testify to her own creativity and nose for international trends and advancements in design. “You have to keep on top of your game,” she says. “While staying within the realm of modest-wear,

designers apply every season, and one needs an invite to showcase there besides a sponsor to tide over the expenses. “I always wanted to show my Western-wear at all the major fashion weeks in the world. So I put it out there in the universe and I manifested it,” Sania states. The experience was important not only in terms of going beyond her boundaries and exploring an



L-R: A look from Sania Maskatiya's New York Fashion Week show; Sania with her parents, brother and sister

you have to keep experimenting with structure, texture, silhouette... It has to be good quality, well-fitted. You can't be repetitive. Everyone on the team goes mental, they go crazy. It's very challenging but it's always fun.”

Her first NYFW sojourn was a dream come true for Sania, considering that thousands of

international aesthetic – while still using handmade local weaves and embroideries from Pakistan – but also because of the sense of being part of a much larger landscape of exceptionally talented professionals. “It was a priceless experience. I didn't have to design something to sell; I was selling a dream. My team and I feel alive when we do



Three looks from Sania Maskatiya's Spring-Summer 2021 collection titled 'Dahlia'

such projects," she shares, starry-eyed. Three shows down, she is still awestruck about the possibilities.

Sania is particular about developing her own prints and even fabrics like organza when the design demands it. The pandemic not only changed the way the company worked in 2020, but it also served as a trigger to introduce a new range. "I had been contemplating an 'Essentials' line for ages. We had all our other lines – luxury, luxury-pret, occasion-wear, bridal. But this was something I'd wanted to do, and then the lockdown forced us to do this almost overnight," she says, adding animatedly how the team worked over Zoom meetings and overcame hurdles of sampling

and production. Despite the initial obstacles, they now come up with seven new designs from the 'Essentials' collection every two weeks, in addition to their luxury and formal-wear collections.

It's Sania's next dream now to launch an accessible ethnic-wear label on a larger scale under her brand name. Something like Anita Dongre's Global Desi line, I suggest. "Oh no, she's, like, a goddess! She's the queen," Sania grins, shaking her head as if the comparison with the Indian fashion baroness is too shocking to even imagine.

But then she contemplates the idea and adds, "Yes, that's exactly what I'd love to do. Who knows? Maybe someday." ■ By AK



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FIREBRAND

Indian-American actor and filmmaker Dr Lakshmi Devy is sending out a strong message of women's empowerment through her directorial debut

There are large parts in Lakshmi Devy's directorial debut film, *When the Music Changes* (2020), that are intensely gut-wrenching in their portrayal of gang-rape. Without the use of voyeurism or nudity, Lakshmi – who is also the lead actor in the drama – manages to make the viewer queasy enough to want to turn the screen off. “Imagine, if you – as the viewer –

Born in New York, Lakshmi belongs to a typical Malayalee family “where most of the men are engineers and most of the women are doctors”. One of three siblings, Lakshmi spent part of her childhood in Thiruvananthapuram and hadn't considered any other course of education other than medicine. “When I was growing up, I didn't know films were a career option,



L-R Lakshmi and her co-actor Shreya Navile in a scene from *When the Music Changes*

feel so sick, how must actual victims of rape feel? I kept the full length of the scene because I want stomachs to churn. I want to burn it into the viewer's memory – so that the next time someone makes a rape joke, this is the scene that will come to your mind,” says the feisty and talented young woman who wears various hats as a doctor, actor, screenwriter and now director.

even though dance and drama were a huge part of my upbringing,” says Lakshmi, whose mother is a nephrologist and compensated for her own lack of dance training by making sure her daughters learnt dance and drama all through school.

Being pretty was not “a thing” when Lakshmi was growing up; it wasn't a virtue to be attained. “The only thing we were expected

to do was study. If anyone called me pretty, my mother would tell me, ‘I made that,’ meaning that my looks were not counted as an achievement and if I wanted to be proud of something, I had to go out there and make it myself,” she grins.

Lakshmi’s first experiences of watching film shoots were at her ancestral beachside house in Thiru-



Lakshmi plays the role of a rape survivor in her film

vananthapuram, which was regularly used by Malayalam filmmakers as a set for films and television serials. She was even “spotted” by one of the filmmakers and offered a role, but when Lakshmi’s family realised it involved a romantic scene with the much older lead actor, there was no more talk of it.

Later, while studying at Government Kilpauk Medical

College in Chennai, Lakshmi began getting modelling offers. From there to films was a short step away. “I decided to give it a shot; if I was bad at it, I would have quit it. But I noticed that I was able to put in hours of work without getting bored. I was, in fact, willing to be bored *and* poor. That’s when I knew this was the right career for me,” laughs Lakshmi.

Having acted in several Tamil films, Lakshmi ventured into screenwriting with the film *Masala Padam*, starring Mirchi Shiva and Bobby Simha. The first film Lakshmi produced was the Hindi-Tamil *Daro Mat* (2019), which she wrote, produced and co-directed. Available on YouTube, the 20-minute short film, in which Lakshmi also plays the lead role, has garnered over three million views.

After that, she set up her own production banner FiDi Talkies based out of Manhattan, New York, and named after her favourite part of the city – the Financial District! The first film under this banner is *When The Music Changes*, which Lakshmi has written, directed and produced.

“I was very particular about casting. I wasn’t looking for someone famous but they had to be fabulous actors,” says Lakshmi, whose film is based in Hyderabad and employs all local talent. Besides acting skills, she also sought high IQ in her cast.

“I like hiring smart actors. I don’t want them to just mimic what the director is telling them to do, but to bring something of their own to the table,” explains Lakshmi. She deliberately leaves room for improv (improvisational theatre), and is very flexible about changing the script on set. Since most of her shoots are done in sync sound or synchronised

just because you close your eyes doesn’t mean it’s not happening. We aren’t doing enough,” she says, citing figures that a woman is raped every 16 minutes in India and those are only the reported numbers.

“Women and girls of all age groups are raped, whether they are babies or old women. It astounds me that all this still exists today – as



Lakshmi has written, directed and produced *When the Music Changes*, and also plays the lead role in it

sound recording, there is scope for impromptu changes in script as there is no dubbing required later.

Lakshmi was triggered to shoot a film on rape because she noticed people swiping through news headlines on their phones on this topic without stopping or thinking twice about it. “Rape has become so common that we have become immune to reading about it. But

if women are not people,” she says heatedly. Through her film, she says, she wants women to stop equating rape with “losing one’s honour”. It is such kind of misogynistic misconceptions that are at play when Indian judges tell rapists to marry their victims. “If you decide your honour isn’t gone, it isn’t gone. It’s not a thing you can lose, don’t believe that lie,” she says. ■ By AK



THE ART OF INVISIBILITY

Academy and Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Haya Fatima Iqbal is using her camera to highlight untold stories and unseen perspectives

For someone who has won global acclaim as an Academy and two-time Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker, Haya Fatima Iqbal has in fact perfected the art of invisibility. Her documentaries, sometimes shot in Pakistan's most backward areas or most conservative communities, require her to blend into her surroundings physically and psycho-

logically. She does this by earning the subjects' trust, sharing their lives, understanding their challenges and their motivations, and by being respectful of their culture. She may also do this in a more symbolic way: by wearing a dupatta over her head.

"Coming from Karachi, armed with a camera, I appear like a big-city girl to them, a 'madam' coming from a position of privilege,"

says the 34-year-old co-founder of Documentary Association of Pakistan (DAP), “so the dupatta signifies that I’m from a similar value system, and that I’m not an outsider.” It also has other advantages: as most shoots are done in the blazing daylight, it shields Haya from the sun. “And since I keep my hair short, it lets people know I’m a woman,” she laughs.



Haya Fatima Iqbal

Engaging conversation, empathy and humour come naturally to Haya, who was born in Saudi Arabia and raised in Karachi after the age of eight. Her engineer father and homemaker mother encouraged her and her two siblings to explore the career of their choice, no matter how unconventional. Socially aware

and curious by nature, Haya did her Bachelor’s in mass communication at University of Karachi, which exposed her to a very diverse student community. “You have all kinds of people there, from Marxist to fundamentalist, different ethnic groups, the haves and have-nots. If you don’t go to a public university in Pakistan, you only end up living in bubble,” she says.

Having earned a Fulbright scholarship to do her Master’s in news and documentary from New York University, Haya made her first student film on the Pakistani community in New York. “They were following the same systems and traditions they had migrated to America with decades earlier, while we in Karachi had moved on so much; it was an eye-opener for me,” she narrates.

Though, as Haya says, “New York was a more organised, less chaotic and less violent version of Karachi,” and though both her older siblings live in the US, she chose to move back home. “I’m the one who gets all the attention and all the tension of being a single woman living with parents,” she jokes. She feels lucky that – unlike other Pakistani moms – her mom doesn’t remind her every month to get married. “It’s more like a six-monthly hint.”

Working as a producer with multiple-award-winning Pakistani-Canadian journalist and filmmaker

Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy set the bar high for Haya. “Sharmeen is crazy about work and she hires people who have a similar work ethic. That habit doesn’t leave you – to be *paagal* (crazy) about your projects,” says Haya.

Her job also led to global recognition when Sharmeen’s documentary *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness* (2015), which was co-produced by Haya, won an Oscar award for Best



Haya wears a dupatta to put her subjects at ease


Documentary Short. A stark look at honour killings in Pakistan, the film also triggered Haya to take up more such meaningful subjects that could impact the way people think.

“Maybe it was someone you hated and, after seeing my film, you don’t hate them anymore,” she explains, citing another of her films on the transgender community *I Am a Creation of God* (2019).

Creating empathy also works both ways for Haya – not just in terms of humanising those that society casts as ‘the other’ but also those that are seen as infallible symbols of state. Her Emmy Award-winning documentary *Armed with Faith* (2017) follows the life of a member of Pakistan’s bomb-defusal squad and was four years in the making.

For the past five years, Haya has also been teaching communication and design at Habib University in Karachi. “You can’t work on passion projects alone, you have to make a living as well,” she reasons, adding, “If you’re good at something, the money comes.” Passionate about travelling and giving a voice to the voiceless, she is unafraid of engaging with those with extreme views, even those that go against her as a woman or as a city-bred professional with streaks of red in her cropped hair. “I am interested in understanding why they think that way,” says the Acumen fellow, who also works with global filmmakers and helps produce their projects from the grassroots in Pakistan.

One such project was with Brandon Stanton, the photographer, author and storyteller behind ‘Humans of New York’, a blog with close to 30 million followers across social media. The duo travelled from Lahore to Karachi and Hunza, interviewing 30 to 35 persons per day. It was a hugely enriching



Haya has been part of Oscar- and Emmy-winning projects

experience for Haya, who is quite an expert on the culture of cities, such as the differences between Lahore (“patriarchal, traditional, homogenous”) and Karachi (“diverse, tactful, heterogenous”).

She has no special hobbies outside of her work as an educator and a documentary filmmaker. “I listen to music and I want to take up singing classes,” she shares when prodded. Other than that, she enjoys people-watching. “I’m a creep like that,” she grins. But one could argue that reading the room is part of her work, as is being an expert on human behaviour and psychology.

These days, Haya is training emerging documentary filmmakers

as part of her voluntary work with DAP. “We set it up in 2017 to make our lives more difficult,” she quips, adding on a more sober note, “It’s really rewarding to build this community of a really committed bunch of people. It’s slow-paced, intense work but you can see how the seeds are being sown.”

It certainly takes up many hours of Haya’s week, but the vision that keeps her going is compelling and humbling: “It’s about passing on the craft to others and enabling them to be better than you.” No doubt Haya has mastered the art of invisibility, making a whole world of people visible in her wake. ■ By AK

WEALTH & WISDOM



London-based entrepreneur and philanthropist Darshita Gillies is using technology to connect impact investors with those doing good in the world

By Aekta Kapoor

Founder and CEO of Maanch, a multiple award-winning global impact platform for investors, corporates and the philanthropy ecosystem, Darshita Gillies' journey goes "from the bottom 1 percent to the top 1 percent for the whole 100 percent". Born in Mumbai into a "scheduled-class" non-English-speaking conservative family, her determination to create a better future for herself and her family led her not only to the "conventional" kind of success and joy, but also provoked her to ask a bigger question: "What if the whole world is my family? What would I do for a collectively successful future? And my answer to this is Maanch," says the London-based entrepreneur, impact investor and philanthropist.

Launched in 2018, Maanch is a technology platform that connects impact investors, companies and philanthropists with those who need it the most. Having earned a client base of over 700 organisations in 30 countries in less than three years, Maanch helps companies and asset

managers in re-allocating capital and resources towards achieving the UN's sustainable development goals, while also enabling them to evaluate the impact of their investment and report it to their stakeholders in an efficient way.

On the other side, Maanch serves nonprofits and foundations by enabling operational efficiencies, cutting down the cost of fundraising and impact measurement activities.

"We provide systems for all the ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) and impact needs of our clients – through data, intelligence, dashboards and networks," says Darshita, who studied fintech and

blockchain strategy from Said Business School, Oxford University, and business sustainability management from Cambridge University.

Darshita's journey has been remarkable by any standards. One of three siblings born to a lawyer father and homemaker mother, they lived with limited means in a poor neighbourhood in Mumbai. "But we lived a happy life and

**"WE EXCHANGED
SCRAP FOR MONEY
TO BUY RICE. WE
WERE TEMPTED
TO BUY SAMOSAS,
BUT WE KNEW IT
WOULDN'T FEED
THE FAMILY"**



Darshita with her siblings when younger; both contributed their expertise to help her set up Maanch

our parents always found a way to meet our needs. There were days when things got challenging – for example, no food in the kitchen and no money at home. We would go around the house collecting scrap newspaper, boxes, empty glass and plastic bottles and go to the local *raddiwalla* (recycler) to exchange them for money and buy some rice. Sometimes we were tempted to buy samosas, but we knew it wouldn't feed the family," narrates Darshita, who is today listed among 100 Most Meaningful Business Leaders 2020 and 100 Most Influential in UK-India Relations.

Her parents instilled in all children the value of education. Working hard day and night, Darshita earned her Bachelor's in commerce from the prestigious Narsee Monjee College, and Master's from Mumbai University, while also qualifying as a chartered accountant. Of the four job offers she had at the time, she chose Standard Chartered. "I enjoyed the fast-paced, stimulating environment and the role gave me an overview of how banking works inside out," she recalls, adding that she was among the few employees who was promoted three times within two years.

Darshita was 24 when she left home to live in Jakarta, Indonesia. Since then, she has lived and worked in Cape Town, Johannesburg, London and Azores Island besides Mumbai. She met her future partner Rowan Gillies, a lawyer and Director-Asia at Standard Chartered Bank, at work. “Both of us worked quite hard and often came in on weekends to the office. We developed a beautiful, open and radically transparent friendship over time,” she shares. The two got married in 2008 and had their daughter Tara in 2009.

With Darshita’s experience in finance, strategy, leadership, and passion for fintech and blockchain,

her sister’s strength in operations refined by nine years at JP Morgan, and with her brother’s technology skills, the siblings built the first demo of Maanch in April 2018 in their little one-bedroom family home in Mumbai.

“I returned to London and tested the idea with 70 different stakeholders. Each was blown away by the idea and encouraged me to go further. And here we are, a team of over 40 passionate changemakers who have put in sleepless nights and lots of algorithms to bring Maanch to the world,” beams Darshita, who loves dancing – “especially Bollywood!” – and is learning to play the violin under renowned



L-R: Darshita giving a TEDx talk at University of St Andrews in 2015; with husband Rowan and daughter Tara



Darshita with her family; she is currently based in London and visits her hometown Mumbai frequently

violinist Jyotsna Srikanth.

Motherhood changed Darshita's approach to leadership and entrepreneurship. "Tara is our collective experiment at parenting," says Darshita, who takes her daughter along for meetings and conferences whenever feasible. At one such conference at the Vatican on 'Ending Modern Day Slavery', Tara made drawings of her key insights and auctioned them to some of the audience during lunchtime, raising €70. "She taught me how passion plays a huge role in sales and not everyone will buy what you have for sale. So, NO simply means Next One," smiles the proud mom.

Darshita sees happiness as the state of being able to experience the ups and downs of life with equanimity. "No matter how hard the situation I find myself in, I am constantly looking for the learning and growth opportunity," she says.

Staying tuned with industry innovation and emerging technology, and meeting people with diverse backgrounds, helps her constantly broaden her horizons. Her vision for Maanch keeps her inspired every day: "When I see children and youth, I feel the urgency of my work. I want our future generations to inherit a very different world where access to necessary resources



ON DARSHITA'S BOOKSHELF:

Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaeufer

Inspired by Marty Cagan

Measure What Matters: OKRs: The Simple Idea that Drives 10x Growth by John Doerr

Impact by Sir Ronald Cohen

is not determined by where you are born or which family you are born in or by luck.”

Darshita believes Asian women bring an inclusive and pragmatic approach to solving challenges. “Most of us have lived in very challenging environments and have seen the worst and best of life. Our empathic abilities are quite honed. This makes us great companions to solve complex multi-stakeholder challenges in a fast-changing world,” she avers.

Spirituality is an “experimental and evolving process” for Darshita. Raised with secular values, she trained as a yoga teacher in her 20s, studied Buddhism, attended spiritual workshops and also trained

as an ontological coach and trainer. “I love Sufi whirling practices; I can whirl for hours non-stop. I enjoy Tarot reading, I pull cards for myself and near and dear ones every now and again. I have had life-shifting insights from medicine journeys in Ecuador with the Achuar tribe shaman. Diving in the middle of the ocean in Andaman Islands, Banda Sea, Bali and Galapagos were also spiritual experiences. Often, simply walking in a noisy urban surrounding and observing life passing by alters my state of being! Spirituality is not a pursuit for me; it is infused in my everyday living,” she says. A life rich with purpose and wisdom, indeed. ■



AN EXTREME BENT OF MIND

Founder of an offbeat and expeditionary travel community, Nidhi Salgame exemplifies the idea of courage, fearlessness and the spirit of adventure

By Manvi Pant

At age seven, Nidhi Salgame undertook a difficult outdoor journey encouraged by her parents who wanted to make their daughter independent. Little did they know she would get hooked and make a life and career out of it.

The founder and director of the off-beat and expeditionary travel community Wander Beyond

Boundaries (WBB), Nidhi began trekking and mountaineering when still a little girl. At the age of 11, she went on her first Himalayan expedition. By 13, she became an adventure trip leader in the Western Ghats. At 17, hoping to study 'outdoor education', which was not offered by most colleges in India, she quit her studies to build her



On one of WBB's
extreme trails

experience around real learning. “It was tough to convince my parents, but I guess I sailed through,” recalls the adventurer, who was raised in Bengaluru in a middle-class family. Her mother is a retired scientist with a PhD in dairy microbiology and her father has been an engineer with Bosch. As Nidhi puts it, her father is the inspiration behind her flawless driving skills and her passion for vehicles.

But apart from that, it has taken conviction and perseverance of her own to map this journey – from carrying her children on her back while hiking into the wilderness to even building her own jeep.

Recalling the old days, the mother of two says, “When my

children started growing, I needed a vehicle to take us to remote areas. Back then, I did not have the resources to buy an SUV or invest in any vehicle. So, I bought an old condemned chassis, picked up an accident vehicle’s Bolero engine, worked with a mechanic and built my own four-wheel-drive. In 2007, for the first time, I drove from Bangalore to Ladakh. That’s how long-distance off-roading with the children started and by 2014, I had done quite a bit of it.”

In 2015, Nidhi helmed one of the first all-women transcontinental expeditions from Delhi to London by road. It was a trip for which she had to start from scratch – from raising the money, to getting the

visas and burying herself in all kinds of government paperwork. Another catch was to get the vehicle. When no sponsor came forward to support, Mahindra First Choice Wheels offered her a Scorpio. “They said it had driven 170000 km. Would I still take it? I said, of course! And the journey was totally worth it.”

In 2016, the outdoor educator

regrets,” avers the 40-year-old.

In 2018, Nidhi met Colonel Satty Malik, her partner in life and business. He is an Army veteran with several years of off-roading and extreme terrain driving experience. Today, they run WBB with an aim to bring exposure, experience and opportunity for growth to a niche group of people who are



L-R: With WBB participants on one of their extreme journeys; Nidhi Salgame and Colonel Satty Malik

embarked on yet another solo drive – of around 5000 km from Delhi to the middle of Siberia!

Nidhi has always held strong to her convictions. She also never shied away from talking about the toughest phases of her life, be it walking out of her marriage or raising her children alone. “There have been mistakes, learnings, successes, celebrations but no

inherently motivated to push themselves. WBB has now evolved into a community of 50 people known for not only introducing the idea of extreme overlanding but also for finding extreme terrain that gives them the opportunity to test their inner mettle. Together, they have driven through frost-covered and extremely unpredictable highways and places where temperatures can



Driving through unpredictable and treacherous terrain

drop to as low as -70° Celsius.

Nidhi recalls, “During our Winter Himalayan expedition, I was leading a convoy of 11 vehicles with drivers of diverse backgrounds and participants who were accomplished professionals. It was snowing for about eight hours, and we got stuck. To be driving on an unfamiliar road in the dark with continuous snowfall was hugely unnerving. My leadership was tested to the hilt, and it was one of the most humbling experiences.”

Besides exploring trails, WBB also undertakes Expeditions for Education (E4E), which introduce students to remote corners of the globe. In 2018, Nidhi and Satty drove 3,000 km and partnered with over 10,000 students across eight schools in mainland India and helped them interact over a video call with their counterparts

in schools bordering the Line of Control in Kashmir. The idea was to facilitate direct dialogue between students across borders and expose them to a multiplicity of views and perspectives about a region that has seen long-standing conflict.

For Nidhi, expeditions are a source of self-growth. She says, “After being an overland adventurer for several years now, I have learnt that one is just a speck in this gigantic universe and that it’s a journey of hope.” A journey where one tastes the rawness of nature, where one requires more of mental training than physical, and where one needs to have a mindset of enduring, surviving and learning. A journey where one is left with only two options in the face of adversity – crib or get out of it winning! Nidhi has always chosen the latter. ■



NEW-AGE FAIRY TALE

In her new book, actor and social-media star Saloni Chopra subverts fairytale endings and puts forward more feminist solutions instead

By Manasvi Jerath

For the past many years, Indian-born Australian actor, model and social-media influencer Saloni Chopra has been using her voice and visibility to create awareness about intersectional feminism and body positivity in often provocative ways. With over a million followers on social-media platforms, the 29-year-old, who works in Hindi films and television, has just authored a book of short essays, titled *Rescued by a Feminist*.

In the 350-page book of essays, she voices her thoughts, opinions and experiences on gender equality, violence against women, the importance of inclusive language in creating socially just societies, and taking care of one's mental health in the time of social media.

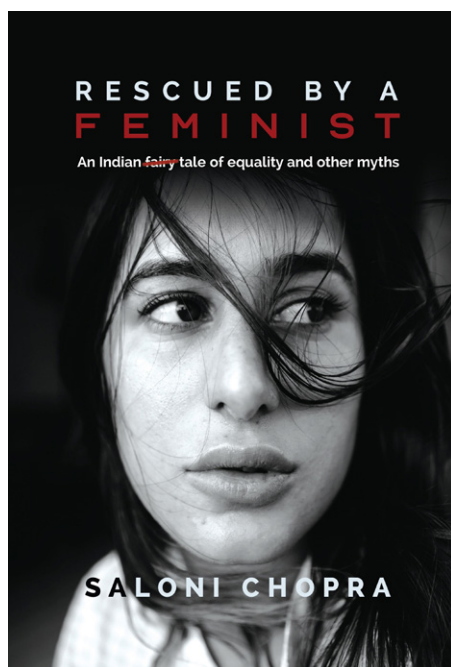
We spoke to Saloni about her views and the experience of writing her first book.

Did writing this book change you in any way?

It's been quite a journey. So many anxiety and panic attacks later, I'd say it was one of the hardest, yet most important things I've done. I want enough young womxn to know that they are not alone, they are not at fault, and they are enough. It's everything I wish I was told in my early 20s.

Since you're already popular and vocal about your thoughts and opinions on Instagram, why did you decide to write a book on this subject?

I wanted to remind as many Indian womxn as I could to take up more



space. Remind them that their dreams, their desires, their orgasms matter. *They matter.*

It's a book of anecdotes and essays, little reminders to womxn to stand up for themselves, reassure them that we've all been here, we've all felt like we deserve more – this

book, to me, is a love letter, a journal, a reminder, that you are enough.

You've mentioned you changed the word woman to womxn because you wanted to be more inclusive. Why do you think language and such nuances are so important when it comes to gender equality?

What we say, to whom we say, and how we identify with ourselves is a huge part of who we are and how

freedom to be distributed between us all. Instead, we can pick whatever works for us, and let others pick for themselves. Be a woman, be a womxn, be anything under the sun that makes you feel closer to home. And let others do the same.

Language needs to be inclusive, intersectional, and open for all.

You've shared very personal anecdotes from your life such as about abusive boyfriends or facing discrimination at the passport office. How did you reach the point to be able to look back at painful incidents with this kind of objectivity?

That's where all the panic attacks happened. My partner Rahul really helped me through most of those days when I couldn't breathe. He'd make me take walks and smell lavenders and breathe. I can't really put into words how difficult it was to not only recall those memories and write them down, but then also rewrite, edit, and

go through it over and over again for months. Some days just felt so suffocating. It wasn't objective at all.

But the entire time I knew that I needed to do this. I kept thinking about the time I was actually in a physically abusive relationship, I kept thinking about the thousands of womxn that are still in one, and I knew that I had to. I knew that if I could reach out to even a single



Saloni Chopra and her family holding copies of her new book

we learn, evolve, collect, connect and exist. Language is often an identity and a place of comfort. It is highly influenced by the community of people using it. Language evolves with time, and hence it is such an important part of our growth.

To me, the word womxn helps me identify with myself. As a community, we don't all have to pick just *one*, it's not like there's limited



womxn and remind her to choose herself then all of this would be worth it.

You cannot imagine how many womxn actually need to read it, to be reminded to love themselves and not be sucked into thinking that they need to save the men that limit them and hit them. I wanted to create a safe space for young girls.

How can the internet and social-media platforms be a tool for feminism?

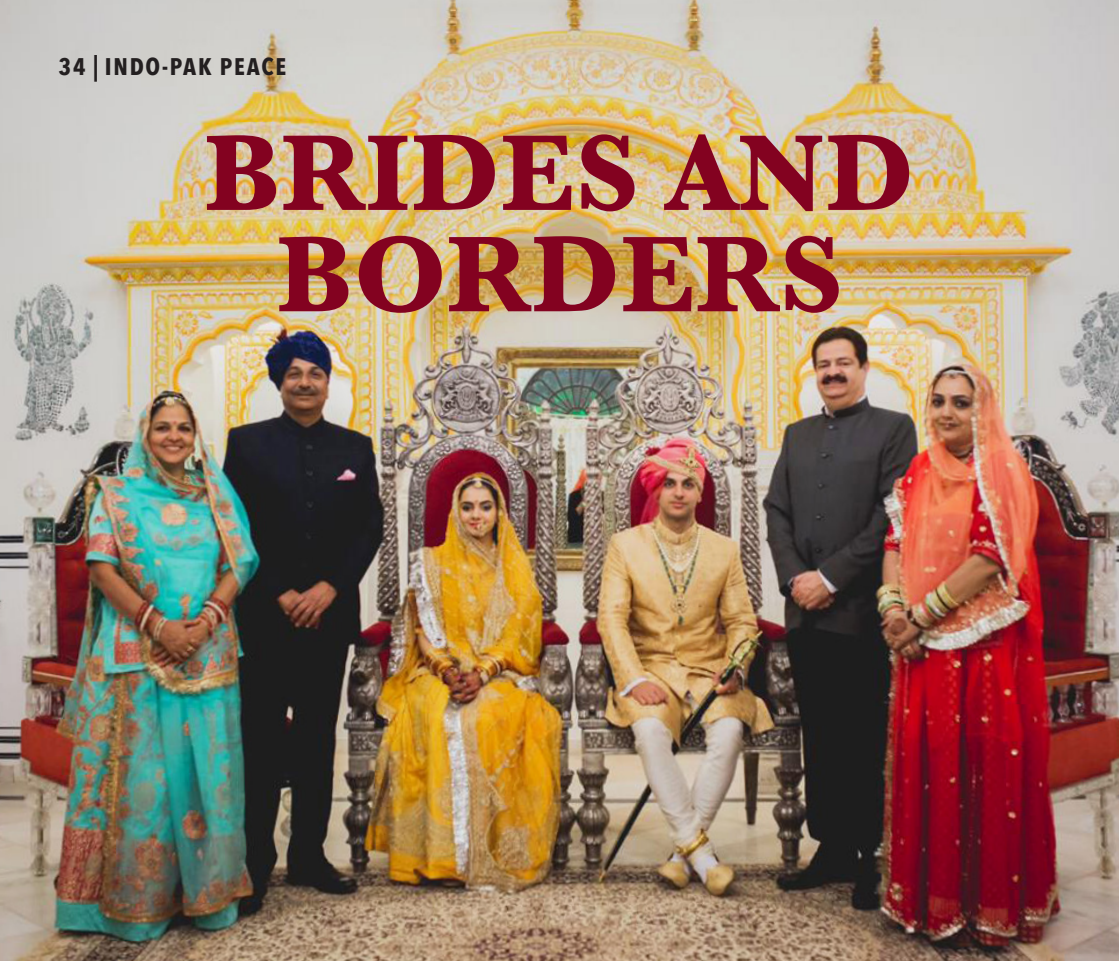
In so many ways, it already is. We know more about diversity and womxn's rights and intersectional feminism and consent and our bodies – all thanks to the access of information we have on the internet. What a crazy yet amazing time to be alive! We should be

grateful for it, but also be well aware of the responsibilities placed upon us and the place we hold in this world. We all have an impact on someone else's lives in ways we aren't even aware of.

It's important to now be aware of what we follow, what we share, what we click on, and the information we forward. It all depends on how conscious we are of not being part of any herd mentality. I am grateful that I have a platform where I can hear so many different stories of so many womxn, and I would like to keep that space as safe and as versatile as possible. We could actually all do our part, by following more womxn that we believe in. ■

Read more on eShe.in

BRIDES AND BORDERS



As this Indo-Pak family's history proves, women and brides have always been the most capable ambassadors of transnational culture

By Priyamvada Singh

This January, [eShe's Indo-Pak Peace Summit](#) beautifully celebrated the co-existence of centuries old socio-cultural legacies across recently drawn lines of control. As I binge-watched an interesting ensemble of women panelists from both nations discuss art, architecture and literature, I was compelled to validate the sensitivity

and sensibility of the quintessential feminine. The categorical relevance of this initiative inspired me to revisit the Indo-Pak relation dynamics within my own extended family, and the journey down memory lane reinstated my belief that women have and always will be the most capable ambassadors of transnational culture.



Clockwise from top left: Indira Kumari with her mother-in-law Dev Kanwar; Indira Kumari with husband Balbir Sodha; Indira Kumari with daughter Sarita Kumari in 2016; Indira Kumari with Sarita Kumari in 1970

Pakistan for me has never been a forbidden word because I have always had family on the other side of the border. I belong to a village called Meja in Rajasthan, and my grandfather's sister Indira Kumari is married in Amarkot, Pakistan. Throughout my life, I have witnessed Indira Ba visiting us along with her family just like her two other sisters who visit us from Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. In fact, Agra and Amarkot meant the same to me until I grew up and geography lessons got the

better of me!

Indira Ba was married to the late Balbeer Singh Sodha. The Sodhas are known to be the only Rajput clan in the new nation of Pakistan, and since they cannot marry within their clan, they must seek matches with families in India. Sodhas are proud practitioners of Hindu traditions and culture, but also full of reverence towards their country Pakistan. Indira Ba's father-in-law had passed away just before Partition, so the pressure fell upon



L-R: Dhruv Singh and Kiran Sodha's wedding; Sonal Sodha with husband Yashraj and children Neil and Rayna

her mother-in-law Dev Kanwar to decide whether to migrate to India or stay back and face an uncertain fate. Her family in Jaipur tried their best to pursue her to return but, as the matriarch of the family, she decided to remain in Sindh.

Years later, Dev Kanwar's choice was validated when her son carved an exemplary political career spanning half a century. The fact that one of Indira Ba's sons Vikram Sodha has earned a prestigious position in the civil aviation sector goes to prove how the country has embraced them wholeheartedly.

It was quite an extraordinary

feat for a relatively naïve woman to take this unconventional decision of sheltering her family under a tattered shroud of an ill-fated Partition. Yet, it was a female foresight that led to Indira Ba's family creating such a successful and secure life for themselves in spite of being a Hindu family in an Islamic nation.

In the past few years, Indira Ba's family has had several reasons to rejoice as her grandson Tejvir Sodha from Pakistan married Rajshree Kumari from India, and her granddaughters Kiran and Sonal from Pakistan made India their home by marrying Dhruv Singh

and Yash Raj from Jaipur and Baroda respectively. I was ecstatic about attending all these weddings as they not only united two families, but were captivating communions of two previously integrated countries.

“Marriage is all about striking a perfect balance between one’s own cultural lineage and the cultural milieu of your new family,” says Kiran, who moved to Jaipur five years ago after marriage and

opinion that transformation is inevitable even if one is married within the same country so why make a big deal about cross-border weddings? “I am married in Gujarat, and even if I belonged to Rajasthan instead of Pakistan, I would still have to freshly encounter and embrace things like *dhoklas*, *fafras* and *meethi daal!*” she smiles.

Even as we witness numerous instances of cross-border matrimony resulting in happy marriages, the restrictive visa regime between India and Pakistan often poses problems. Half of Kiran’s trousseau could not get to India in time for her wedding as the family member meant to carry those bags did not get a visa. Days before her wedding, the would-be-bride was sprinting around shops in Jaipur getting things made right from scratch.

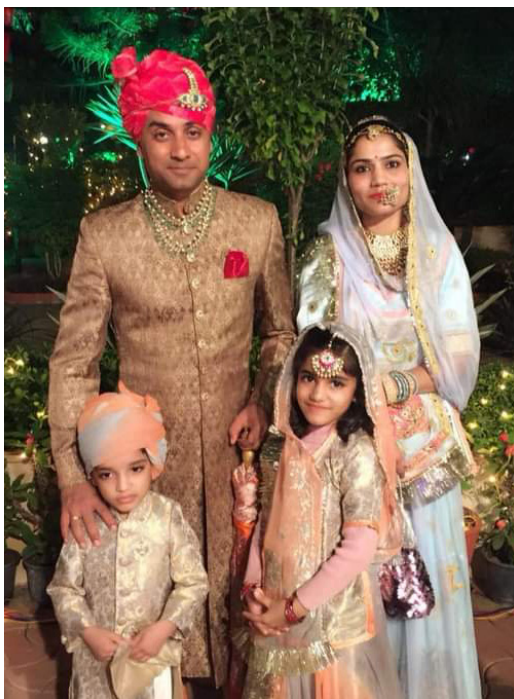


Ram Kanwar with son Gajraj; she hails from Rar Mau in Pakistan

instantly fell in love with its skilled art forms and jewels. Encouraged by her family, she pursued a course in jewellery design and launched a brand of handcrafted jewels that has garnered a positive response on both sides of the border.

Like Kiran, Sonal has also formed a harmonious bond with her new home in Baroda. She is of the

As recent as early 2020, my cousin Sheodutt’s *baraat* which went from Udaipur to Karachi had to be reduced to nine people including the groom as visas were only granted to immediate family. When I watched the videos of his grand wedding with Priya Sodha and drooled over enticing visuals of exotic Pakistani cuisine, I genuinely wished that more people from India could have got



L-R: Neeta Kanwar celebrating her electoral victory with the women of her village; Neeta with her family

the opportunity to experience this hospitality across our borders.

Talking of hospitality, nothing comes close to the pampering one gets in their *nanihaal* (maternal grandmother's home). I recently went to mine in Ajmer after a long gap due to the pandemic. As I expressed my gloom about not being able to visit them for 10 months, my cousin Gajraj reminded me that he has not been to his *nanihaal* for several years. His mother, my aunt Ram Kanwar, belongs to Rar Mau in Pakistan, and she has not visited her parental home for a very long time either.

There is a wonderful tradition irrespective of social stature or city of dwelling: if a Pakistani Sodha visits India, he makes it a point to check on as many *baaya* (affectionate word for girls) who are married on this side of the border.

One of the Pakistani *baayas* Neeta Sodha stirred a buzz in 2020 when she contested the local elections just four months after being granted an Indian citizenship and was elected the sarpanch of Natwara Panchayat in Tonk district. Neeta had migrated to India almost 18 years ago from Sindh's Mirpur-Khas to pursue her higher education. She settled here



Pakistan-born, India-based Sarita Kumari (second from left) with her family during her son's wedding

after marrying Punya Pratap Karan in 2011. “Since the time I have come here, I have received great support from my family and the people of my area, which has given me the confidence to do something meaningful with my life,” she shares.

After endless conversations with all these cross-border ambassadors of culture, I have come to realise that underneath all our propagated differences, we are all the same, entangled in the threads of common values and ethics. My eloquent aunt Sarita Kumari, who spent the first 20 years of her life in Karachi before getting married in Ghanerao, India,

35 years ago, sums up this situation: “For 70 years, both our countries have been quarrelling like bickering sisters. It is ironic that we cannot establish peace with each other and yet we shared a Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 [referring to Malala Yousafzai and Kailash Satyarthi]. Borders can try to tear us apart but our destinies are joined at the hip.”

A member of the Global Women's Peace Initiative, Sarita Kumari believes that whatever the political situation may be, one cannot take away the fact that both the countries have offered unconditional love and acceptance to brides from across

borders. She reminisces how, during these peace talks, the Pakistani delegates would refer to her as “*hamari beti*” (our daughter) and the Indian delegates would retort saying, “*hamari bahu*” (our daughter-



Mili Duggal and Sajid Sahibzada after their wedding

in-law). “The magnanimity of our culture is reflected in the fact that it does not discriminate. It embraces everyone who wishes to bask in its splendour, and marriages emerge as the most definitive and organic form of cultural dissemination.”

I witnessed another display of cultural camaraderie in recent times when my college friend Mili Duggal married a Pakistani gentleman Sajid Sahibzada in 2019. The wedding celebrations in Lahore were followed by a couple of ceremonies in Chandigarh after which the newlyweds headed back to Washington DC where they currently reside. I constantly stalked Mili’s Facebook profile in those days to admire the gorgeous pictures of all the wedding festivities, but the image that remains most strongly etched in my memory is one in which she is walking across the Wagah border all dolled up in her post-wedding glow.

The caption said: “Dear good souls of Pakistan, I am going back today and taking back a heart full of love, beautiful memories and warm friendships. I have been truly humbled by your generosity and large-heartedness. I wish that my family, friends and I get a chance someday to show you our world and welcome you into it just the way you did for me. Thank you for opening up your world to me. *Phir milenge* (we will meet again).” ■

A former TV professional, Priyamvada Singh is now pursuing her vision of restoring her family’s 150-year-old ancestral fort in Rajasthan. She won the Nari Shakti Puruskar in 2019 for this endeavour that blends heritage restoration and socio-cultural resurrection.



Luxury & Livelihood

Social entrepreneur Gauri Malik's label Sirohi provides women artisans design support to make sustainable products for eco-conscious buyers

By Shweta Bhandral

Born in Muzaffarnagar, the Uttar Pradesh town infamous for its 2013 riots, and educated in an elite residential school in Dehradun, Gauri Malik acquired a keen understanding of both worlds. Today, the 34-year-old cofounder of lifestyle brand Sirohi is using her experiences and resources to build a luxury label that empowers women from small-town India.

While pursuing her Master's in finance and economics from the University of Warwick, Gauri had a chance to work in a small village in Peru. The project provided microcredits to single mothers helping them to start businesses, making them self-reliant. The experience marked the beginning of Gauri's journey to do impactful work.

At the age of 23, Gauri launched



L-R: A handbag made using upcycled twine; Sirohi products have a functional design and traditional appeal

her first project, Skilled Samaritan Foundation, which aimed to light up villages in India using solar power. The project provided electricity to three villages, 10 schools and impacted over 25,000 lives. But Gauri had to pull the plug. She shares, “I never believed in charity as a model for impact, and so we charged the locals a small amount. Six months down, people started defaulting. I began questioning my business model, and took a step back.”

In 2019, Gauri re-launched Skilled Samaritans to work with the same community and skill them to build a brand of home and lifestyle products. “Sirohi is the first village we had lit in Haryana, so the name of the brand comes from there. We utilise the existing skills of women. In these communities, women do not have access to formal education

and are married young. Sirohi is trying to provide them with income opportunities by creating well-designed products that people will love, backed by a strong narrative of empowerment and sustainability,” Gauri explains.

It wasn’t easy in the beginning as women are not encouraged to work outside of the home in these communities. Gauri began her work in Muzaffarnagar with only one woman. Soon, more women realised that this was a legitimate source of income, and came forward to work with Sirohi.

Using culturally significant Indian patterns and weaves, women make home décor products with ropes of textile waste, plastic waste, and natural fibres. On average, a Sirohi product consumes 6.5 kg of waste or natural rope, thus saving the



L-R: A group of women artisans who work with Sirohi in Muzaffarnagar; an artisan using upcycled ropes

earth from more than 20 kg of CO₂ emission. This calculation is arrived using a WHO Global Challenges Report that found that for every kg of plastic recycled, 1.5 kg of CO₂ emission is avoided.

Sirohi devised a mechanism to create ropes from discarded cloth and plastic waste. Gauri explains, “We have invented a simple indigenous machinery operated by women to twine shreds of cloth strips into usable bright ropes.”

The investment banker-turned-social entrepreneur shares how her diverse experiences as a child shaped her. “On one hand, I learnt to sew, and on the other how to shoot a gun!” she smiles sharing how her father made sure that she became a fiercely independent woman. “This upbringing has made me flexible and balanced. I love that, one day, I

could be sitting with 50 men from a gram panchayat talking to them about why women need to work, and the next day I am standing at an investor meeting, pitching my startup to men in suits.”

The brand employs designers from NID, RCA and other prestigious design schools across India, who provide the artisans with 3D drawings and train them to develop products. Gauri also initiated a change in consumer perception, “The moment you say, ‘this is made by an NGO,’ no matter how amazing the product is, the brand value comes down, so we decided to build it as a brand. We want to make people perceive artisan-made products as well-designed luxury products. We are empowering people with skills as we are growing.” ■



SAVE THE CHILDREN

Through the Rakshin Project, social engineer Smita Bharti is spearheading a youth-led movement to create a social tipping point to stop child sexual abuse

Having been a feminist and activist for the greater part of her life, Smita Bharti has come to the conclusion that the great Indian middle class is the one most trapped in the morality of what “good girls” and “good families” are supposed to be. “Women are taught that the family comes before us – not just your partner and children but the entire extended family comes first,” says the executive

director of Sakshi, a pioneering rights-based NGO working against sexual harassment and child sexual abuse (CSA) in India.

With experience in diverse roles from educator, writer and translator, to playwright, director and actor, Smita is the recipient of the global civilian honour KarmaVeer Puraskar 2016 for Social Change given by the international confederation of

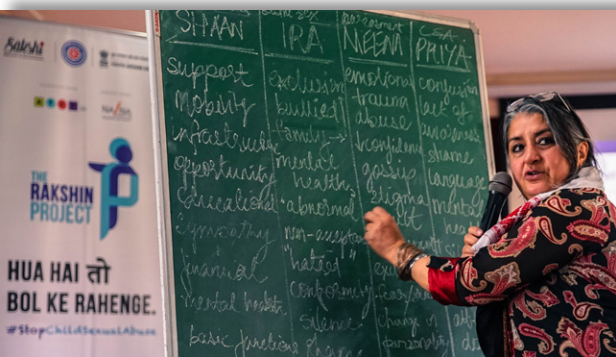
NGOs in partnership with United Nations. Working primarily with women and the youth, she always asked herself why women never seem to realise their own potential. After years of learning, she realised that, “Women aren’t taught to have a sense of self, nor given to understand that we have autonomy and a responsibility to ourselves.”

It is something she began to question two decades ago – through her self-education explorations such as applying for a fellowship to

grandfather was a doctor. That was also where she had her first experience of CSA, which turned her into a quiet child. Later, she moved to Bhilai, Chhattisgarh, to live with her paternal grandparents, and had an opposite experience of running through vegetable orchards and milking buffaloes. She calls it a rich experience going “from fork-and-knife to farm life.”

She enrolled at Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi for her Bachelor’s, got engaged in the first year, married in the second, and went to college with a baby in her third year. Another baby came along in a few years as did incessant abuse in her marital home. Twelve years into the marriage, Smita walked out with both children and set out to find herself and make a new life.

Referencing her storytelling workshops with women prisoners in Tihar Jail, Smita noted, “When they were asked to ‘rewrite the story’, the women in jail had more gall than women outside. Those outside assume they are free and have a choice in their life. But any career they choose should not inconvenience the family, and the credit or debit card in their hands is an add-on to another card or account that belongs to the male head of the family. They cannot travel on their own if they wish,



Feted writer, theatre director and social engineer Smita Bharti

WISCOMP (Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace) in the late 1990s and later through her writing, producing theatrical performances, talks and educational programmes.

The Delhi-based 55-year-old’s own personal story contributed to her understanding, but only in retrospect. Smita spent her early childhood in Shimla with her maternal grandparents, where her

they do not even know how to change the car tyre on their own. A woman's potential is meant for others and not for ourselves."

Smita credits the NGO Sakshi for empowering her with its legacy that focuses on "prevention, not protection; making equality a ground and not a goal; and systemic interventions instead of working on one individual at a time".



Rakshin Project sessions are creative and interactive

Founded in 1992 by Supreme Court lawyer Naina Kapur, who was the lead instructing counsel on the Vishaka Guidelines 1997, Sakshi was the force behind two critical public-interest litigations that led to the formation of the POSH Act (The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace – Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Act, 2013), the 172nd Law Reform that informed the Sexual Assault Bill (2010) and POCSO (Protection of

Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012).

Smita, in her role as Sakshi's executive director and president, is currently fully immersed in its ambitious Rakshin Project, a workshop included in the 12-hour National Service Scheme (NSS) curriculum that is offered to college students. NSS students are only educated about the POCSO law and their Constitutional Right to Equality but also equipped to provide CSA survivors access to creative expression, counselling, legal aid and sustained engagement.

"One in every two children in our country is a survivor of sexual abuse, and 90 percent of these are by people known to them," says Smita, explaining why having young adults trained to spot and intervene in CSA cases is the best way to stop it within families. The 10-year Rakshin Project has been launched in partnership with the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports and has a target of reaching out to NSS units in 40,000 colleges and universities across India thereby equipping 40 lakh youth every year to become *rakshins* or preventers of child sexual abuse.

Rolled out in February 2020, the pandemic stalled some of their plans but even so, Sakshi managed to take workshops online and has already trained 12,500 youth in 200 colleges in the past year.



The Rakshin Project aims to deliver pro-bono workshops to NSS units in 40,000 colleges across India, reaching 40 lakh students every year

“Sexual abuse in childhood leads to 40 percent lowered productivity as an adult,” says Smita, whose sole motivation is to spread awareness so that “someone somewhere can make informed, real choices, and know how to heal and resolve dysfunctionality”.

“I was not born a feminist,” says Smita, who explains patriarchy as a mindset favouring one gender above all others that society collectively buys into. According to this mindset, she says, “The woman’s sacrifice is valorised, whether it’s through the concept of *bhadralok* or *khandaani* families (respectable people) or by terming her *ache ghar ki ladki* (girl from a good family). The alternative possibility – the feminist – is attributed negative values and stigmatised.”

Since patriarchy is so nuanced and insidious, women co-opt into it without realising it, claiming they don’t need financial freedom or it is their choice to give up their jobs after marriage or pregnancy. “It’s like the frog in a pot of slow burning water; you don’t notice it until it begins to burn. Until then, you are nice and cosy,” she says wryly.

There’s a lot of work ahead, she admits: “It’s not just about educating women but all genders. Everyone has to buy into the vision of an equitable world.” What is her own inspiration for always pushing on and forward, safeguarding the rights of children and empowering women to discover their own truths? She takes a deep breath before she replies, “I don’t know any other way of being.” ■ By AK



Archana Khosla Burman is the founder partner of Vertices Partners, which is considered among the top 10 law firms of India in the private equity and venture capital space. With a team of over 40, the firm has handled over 200 cases in the past four years since its launch.

Raised in an armed forces family, Archana opted for a career in corporate law early on. “It allows me to maximise my impact on the startup economy as well as women’s empowerment. These are

the two fundamentals for a healthy economy,” says the 39-year-old mother of a little boy.

Archana and her husband and cofounder Vinayak Burman closely work with young entrepreneurs, offering legal solutions to help navigate through their journeys. They also conduct workshops for the holistic development of new and future entrepreneurs.

Based in Mumbai, Archana is fond of music and plays the keyboard and guitar. She sits on the advisory board of several new-age



Archana was on the Asia Legal Business (Thomson Reuters) 40 Under 40 Top Lawyers List in Asia Pacific Region

ventures and is an active member of POSH (The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace – Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Act, 2013) committees of several companies. We asked her about the POSH Act and its implementation, and the barriers to women's empowerment in India.

What holds women back from achieving their fullest potential?

In a society where there may be forces that consciously or subconsciously hamper women's growth, globally, I believe that the only antidote women have for themselves is their thinking. These circumstances in fact call for us to rid ourselves of restrictive or negative thought processes so we can break the glass

ceiling for ourselves, and in doing so, for other women.

Do you believe the POSH Act has had any impact on the ground and what is your view on women's equality and safety in Indian workplaces at present?

The POSH Act has indisputably brought cases of sexual harassment to light and increased the visibility, awareness and recognition even at the grassroot level of the organisations. It has empowered women employees by prescribing a comparatively convenient mechanism of complaint redressal in such cases.

However, there are still many organisations that have not implemented POSH policies. Due to poor implementation and awareness of the POSH Act, this problem



L-R: Archana with her family; Archana with husband Vinayak (who is also her business partner) and son Saadhil

continues to be pervasive and rampant. While the POSH Act is widely regarded as a milestone legislation in India's history, a great deal of work needs to be done to ensure a safe, equal, and secure working environment for all women.

Some critics of the POSH law say that organisations will be more wary about hiring women after this law came into being. What are your thoughts on this?

There is no data or a substantive study on sexual harassment to support the argument that organisations have become more apprehensive of onboarding women after the POSH law came into force. The POSH law only provides complementary protection to women and the same must be clearly addressed in training sessions for such policies in every organisation.

The fundamental problem here

is that the various stakeholders involved primarily view the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace as a 'woman's issue' and not as an employment issue. The focal point needs to be on creating a safe work environment and in developing gender-sensitive social protection policies by addressing the real problem of hostile work environment.

The definition of employer and workplace under the POSH law is wide enough to cover even one's home in the current lockdown scenario and, therefore, it is practically impossible to escape the ambit of this law. Employers must view compliance with the POSH law as instrumental in achieving greater growth of business and a sustainable work environment. ■

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WHEN YOU REACH THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Scotland-based business mentor and digital marketing strategist Sudha Mani coaches women on developing leadership potential using lessons she has learnt from her own life

By Kay Newton

In 1519 CE, Hernán Cortés, a Spanish commander, arrived by sea to Mexico. The first task for his 600 men was to destroy the ships they had sailed on. They had to conquer the New World or die. There was no turning back.

When you reach a point of no return, you have to continue with what you are doing. It is too late to stop. It is a powerful exercise that most of us can relate to at times in our lives.

Edinburgh-based business coach

and digital marketing strategist Sudha Mani is a professed introvert. Born in Chennai in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, her Hindu upbringing was very diverse, a balance of spiritual and academic. Sudha's grandmother was fascinated with the occult sciences, and her grandfather, a mathematician and educator. Her father became a businessman and her mum an office stenographer.

Sudha's grandma woke her at 4 am for meditation, yoga, breakfast

prepared using Ayurvedic principles, and chores before school. Sudha still actively practises yoga and meditation and loves to cook.

She says, “As a teenager, I wanted to be a doctor, but I could not get into medical college, so I ended up taking computer science, which I did not like! One day my grandmother said, ‘When you get a lemon, make lemonade. There is no need to throw away what you have, you can just sweeten it up’.”

A few weeks later, she came across an opportunity to create a project at the University. “I had to work in the college as there was no computer at home. I completed it in three days. It led to a small financial scholarship, which I used to buy computer science books,” she narrates.

It was not always easy for Sudha. As a woman in computer science, she was an outsider in a class full of boys. “Yet I never let this be my story. I listened to what others had to say, to the unconscious bias, yet I always chose my own council. Because I love being analytical and innovative, computer science kept me on my toes,” she says.

After graduating from Bharathiar University in Coimbatore, Sudha

started a tech and digital entrepreneurial journey with two friends. Unfortunately, one of the business partners died suddenly from a brain illness, and the entrepreneurial adventure came to an abrupt halt.

“I had an aspiration to go abroad, but I was denied a visa to the US. Shortly after, I was approached by a UK agency to work for British Petroleum as a technical architect in London,” shares Sudha. At the age of 26, Sudha moved to the UK

with just £150 in her hand and a one-way ticket. There was no going back.

“It was not easy. I was naïve yet determined to make it work. I am an eternal optimist, which helped me deal with permits, agencies, and stalled or failed payments. I learned so much about life in

general,” she says. Three years later, Sudha got a project in Scotland. “I moved in 2003, and I fell in love with the area immediately. There is something in Scotland that calmed my hyperactivity. I felt as if at last I had come home.” She went on to do her MBA from the University of Edinburgh.

As well as consulting with private and public organisations on change and transformational

**“WHEN CRITICAL
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projects, Sudha is also passionate about empowering girls and young women to study STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths). She often gives talks on business and leadership.

Sudha has five pieces of advice for anyone at a crossroads in life.



YOU ARE HERE FOR A PURPOSE

Life is not easy. You are here on the planet for a purpose. Do what you have to do, as long as it doesn't harm anyone. Find a way to work towards your goals, despite what others tell you. Have the belief that you will make it happen. Hold onto the faith in yourself and the universe.

BE THE ETERNAL LEARNER

Equip yourself with knowledge and skills. You never know when you will use what you understand. Find rare skills to differentiate yourself.

NEVER LOSE YOUR INDIVIDUALITY

Learn where to bend and where to stand stiff. When critical feedback is given, ask – is it for your sake or their sake? Believe in your intuition, and it will lead you to the truth.

DON'T ADOPT OTHERS' IDEOLOGY

People always have an idea about you in their heads. It is not about you – it is about them. Disrupt this. The only thoughts that matter about you are yours.

FREEDOM IS AN INTERNAL PROCESS

Time is the most valuable resource, and when used wisely, it leads to freedom. Freedom is an internal process, not an external one. Do not be afraid to fail, as the feedback will help you correct course.

Finally, Sudha says, “You do not need to be like Hernán Cortés and burn everything. Decide which boat or bridge you want to burn. Some bridges are crossed once in your lifetime. Others should never be attempted. Finally, there are those that you will want to cross more than once. Be brave with your decisions and, most of all, have no regrets.” ■

Find Sudha at www.sudhamani.com



WOMEN & THE WEB

Why the internet is the definitive tool for women's empowerment in this century

By Aekta Kapoor

Twenty years ago, when Indians were just getting accustomed to the sound of the modem making its strange buzz connecting us to the world wide web, I took to the medium like a captive fish being released into open water for the first time.

Coming from a traditional Indian family with patriarchal value systems, I hadn't so far had a say in my choice of husband or career or even hobbies. Nor did I have access to likeminded people and communities, and opportunities for growth. My life and movements

were restricted to whatever physical and social spaces the adults in my life chose for me.

The internet opened up my eyes and my avenues. I found platforms to express my views and creativity. I landed my first job. I found my life partner. I got a glimpse into a world community far out of the reach of my own little existence, and I got access to infinite possibilities.

Over the past two decades, having interviewed thousands of women and girls in the course of my internet-enabled career as a magazine editor, I see countless

stories that reflect my own. The internet has given Indian women exactly what patriarchy denied them – agency. Within the confines of the device, the user has complete autonomy to choose what to click, what to view, what to follow, and what to close. And since one's device is all the key one needs to enter an unlimited universe, the internet has democratised accessibility and opportunity between genders,



Bengali village teen Mili Sarkar found fame online

classes and age groups. It is the antithesis of patriarchy.

For all their privacy pitfalls, social-media platforms have given millions of young Indian girls avenues to achieve freedom, financial independence and even fame. Take Mili Sarkar, a teenager in a West Bengal village, who got sponsorships and a source of income when

her Tik Tok videos doing backflips in a sari went viral. Or the 'Smule twins' who popularised classical Indian music as a digital art form.

The internet also brings women together into empowering communities, where they can encourage one another, network with those outside their own locations, and find jobs and freelance opportunities. Dating and matrimonial websites have further enabled women to find partners outside the shackles of caste, class and geographical limitations.

E-commerce has made it easy to source products that were once out of the reach of small towns. This not only benefits women buyers but also women sellers and entrepreneurs in smaller towns who can now operate from their own homes and reach national audiences.

Online education and edtech platforms – often run by women – have made it easier for those confined at home to earn formal certificates and become job-ready. Podcasts like Suno India and digital-media platforms like *eShe* have made it possible for ordinary women's voices to be amplified.

And yet, precisely because of its success in emancipating women, the internet is seen as a threat to 'Indian culture and morality' and girls are systematically denied access by not just controlling families but also the patriarchal nation-state.

Khap panchayats in India have been known to ban girls from using mobile phones and the internet because it ‘encouraged them to elope’. At a talk I gave (online!) a couple of months ago, the audience – most of whom were in their sixties or older – considered the internet to be dangerous and worried their daughters and granddaughters would get into trouble online.

But the answer to online safety for women is the same as that for offline safety for women: Educate boys to respect girls and treat them as fellow human beings, educate girls to respect and protect themselves.

Increasing women’s participation online leads to gender equality and nation-building in all spheres – social, economic, political. Instead of restricting girls from venturing online, we must instead enable them to do so with security and confidence, and restrict boys from behaving like boors.

Offering free WiFi for girls’ colleges everywhere in the country would encourage girls to go to college every day, even if their parents may be sceptical. Giving free or subsidised data for mobile-phone connections taken by women has

the added benefit of raising their social standing in their families. Incentivising online education and making it free for girls is another way to get them on the internet.

Like sex education, making ‘internet education’ mandatory in schools – teaching kids about algorithms, trackers, cookies, digital footprint, privacy – is wiser than letting kids learn the hard way through trial and error.

INSTEAD OF RESTRICTING GIRLS FROM VENTURING ONLINE, WE MUST ENABLE THEM, AND RESTRICT BOYS FROM BEHAVING LIKE BOORS

Both the private and public sector should make the cause of getting Indian girls and women online a top priority. The Indian government’s Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan was set up to make six crore rural Indians digitally literate. Google India’s ‘Internet Saathi: Helping Women Get Online’ proj-

ect has trained over 10 lakh village women since 2015 on how to use the internet. Both are steps in the right direction.

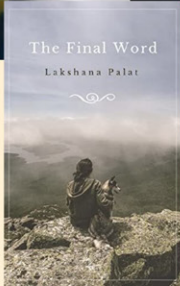
But with only one out of three internet users in India being female at present – many of whom will encounter harassment, abuse, threats and intimidation online by virtue of being female – there is still much work to be done. ■

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Women in Literature Festival 2021

Gender Voices

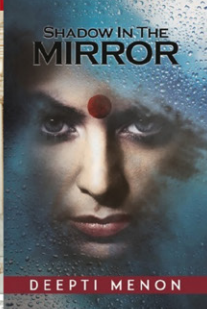
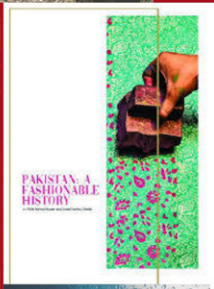
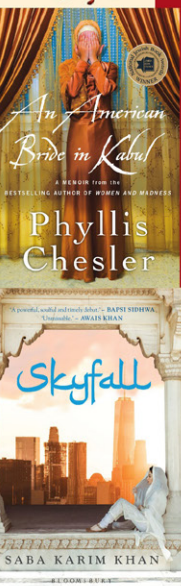
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A digital event rediscovering literature under a gender lens. Celebrating the literary genius, creative journeys and lived artistic experiences of the female gender to realize an inclusive future.

Register to attend

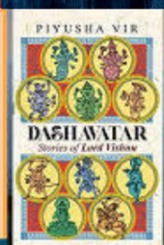
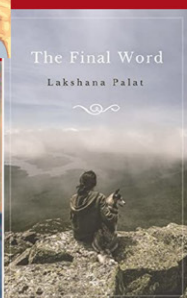
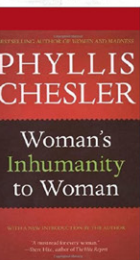
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