

Nadia Samdani

The Dhaka-based philanthropist and arts patron is on a mission to make Bangladesh the new art capital of the world



ART BEYOND BORDERS

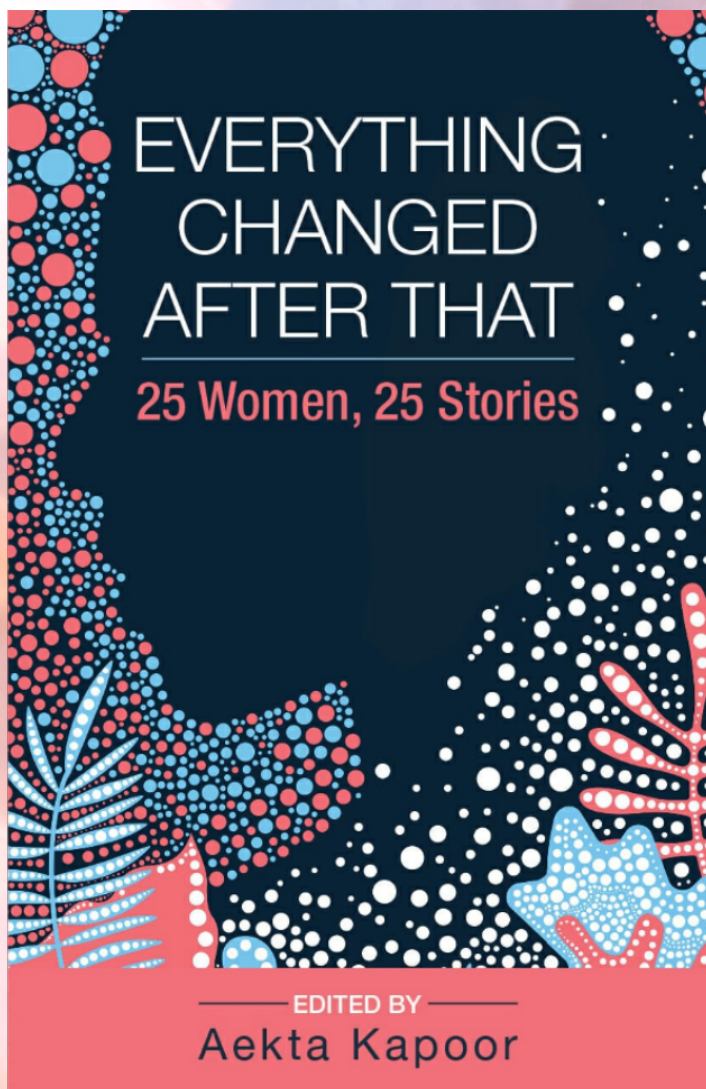
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FILLING THE GAPS

There's a special sort of power that accompanies any human effort when it is driven by service to people instead of just service for profit. Each time I meet or speak to personalities who have set out to fill a pressing need in society, I am struck by their passion and sense of purpose.

This month's issue is full of women like these. Cover personality Nadia Samdani, founder of the Dhaka Art Summit, used her resources, creativity and dedication to create a tremendous non-commercial platform for South Asian art and especially Bangladeshi artists (p.20).



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Young Silicon Valley techie Nitasha Syed has launched a talk show on YouTube to shatter misconceptions about Pakistanis in the Western world (p.06). Sartaj Lamba has set up a system of wheelchair-enabled cabs across north India to help the differently abled live independently (p.10). UX designer Sunali Aggarwal has launched India's first dating app for the LGBTQ+ community (p.14). Audiologist and speech therapist Devangi Dalal is using technology to transform the lives of thousands of hearing-impaired kids (p.16). And former CISCO Canada honcho Ayelet Baron has stepped off the rat race and is now inspiring others to live their authentic lives (p.33).

Like the Japanese art of *kintsukuroi*, these women have filled the gaps in our fragmented world with their own special kind of gold. ■

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Busting Tropes Over Tea

Silicon Valley techie and talk-show host Nitasha Syed is out to shatter stereotypes about Pakistanis, armed with a cup of chai



For Nitasha Syed, a San Francisco-based product manager with a software engineering background, it was the tropes about Pakistani men and women that triggered her to create her talk shows. “Both men and women are boxed,” says the 30-year-old founder of the YouTube channel *Shaam Ki Chai*. “There’s this stereotype of ‘oppressed

women’ and ‘cruel men’ when it comes to Pakistan, and both are unfair descriptions. There’s no third narrative of ‘successful women’ and ‘supportive men’. I wanted to create a new narrative.”

That’s why the Pakistani-Canadian launched her media company Unboxd, where she initially focused on sharing stories of women in STEM fields, and now

runs a talk-show with both men and women from the Pakistani diaspora based in North America. “These are all brilliant people working in some of the world’s top companies. All of them are working on things they are passionate about, and all of them are committed to giving back to their own community. I am proud to see that,” says Nitasha, who herself started her career working on the FIFA14 team as an analyst.

Now a senior product manager at Rally Health in Silicon Valley, Nitasha uses her weekends and free time to create conversations that celebrate her people. Born and raised in a multicultural district of Vancouver, Nitasha’s parents were her biggest role models. “They were one of the pioneers of the Pakistani community in Canada. We hosted all the Eid and Ramazan parties, Pakistan Day, and our home was always packed on weekends with people of all nationalities. We educated our friends about our festivals and traditions, and that’s what kept me rooted and connected to my culture,” says Nitasha.

Her father, a first-generation immigrant, completed his Master’s in Canada and instilled in Nitasha and her three siblings the value of education and especially science. Her mother was the host of a popular talk show, a community builder and a fashionista. “She even wore high heels to the airport, her

hair was pristine and her fashion was always on point,” laughs Nitasha, who says she inherited both the ‘left-brain’ tendency of her dad and the ‘right-brain’ of her mom.

Which is why it irked her when systems forced her to choose between the two sides of her



personality. “Schools force you to choose between sciences and arts. Why can’t I do both?” she wondered. She also noticed how pop culture promoted this image of one or the other – the nerd versus the diva, with no space for anyone in between. “When you dress a



A screen grab of Nitasha Syed's show on YouTube *Shaam ki Chai* where she chats with Pakistani diaspora

certain way, guys don't take you seriously. That bothered me."

Nitasha was in her final year of undergrad at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, where she was studying software engineering and machine learning, when her father was diagnosed with brain cancer. Her final semester went by in a blur. She not yet 22 when he passed away.

"Until then, I hadn't realised how sheltered my life was. All of a sudden, I had to learn to live by myself, pay my taxes, plan my mortgage, function as an adult," she says. "It changed me as a person."

Soon, Nitasha stepped into her parents' shoes in her own unique way. She launched a talk show called *Humans of STEM*. When she ran out of money for full-

blown studio shoots, she shifted to a different kind of interview setup focusing on women in STEM. "These women don't get much of a creative outlet so they were happy to share stories from their lives. Imagine these powerful corporate leaders, software geniuses, talking about things like suffering bulimia or having an abortion. It created a huge impact," says Nitasha, who was approached by brands to create documentaries on the theme.

Then, of course, Covid came along and Nitasha had to change gears once again. "This time I had all the filming equipment so I set up a studio of sorts in my own patio, and designed the set around the idea of sharing an evening cup of tea, or *shaam ki chai*," says the dynamic entrepreneur, who began

filming the talk show for YouTube in October 2020. The videos feature Pakistani diaspora in the US and Canada, and the production is done by teams in Pakistan. Her Instagram page carries teasers for the show with verses like, ‘*aankhen Majnu hon toh, chai bhi Laila lagti hai*’ (if your gaze is like Majnu’s, even a cup of tea could be Laila).

Nitasha, who helps early-stage startups out of the US, Pakistan and India on product market fit, user acquisition, retention and growth, has several observations about women’s empowerment in East versus West. “As *desis*, we grow up with the narrative that sees working women as selfish. The Western world has its own share of gender discrimination in the workplace – from pay gap to sexual assault – but it’s easier for women to build a career here because social responsibilities don’t all fall on women,” she notes.

As a content creator and a techie straddling both worlds of artificial intelligence and media, Nitasha is all too aware of the insidious way algorithms work, producing echo chambers of views online and fostering toxic spaces for fake news and misinformation to flourish. “Brands have power but so does the consumer,” says Nitasha, outlining the ways that hate content can be controlled in market economies. “Consumers must be careful of what they click on, like or share.

We must collect people and build communities to promote healthier algorithms. Media houses that create hate-filled content should have a financial loss in doing so,” she says, adding that emerging and niche content creators can also help by creating alternative spaces



for consumers seeking meaningful, uplifting and humane stories.

While the internet has erased physical borders, Covid has changed the way we interact. “People were forced to connect digitally,” says Nitasha, and that’s good, in a sense. “We now realise we have more similarities than differences.” ■



IN THE CAUSE OF THE PEOPLE

Meet three Indian women whose enterprises were born from a pressing need in society: Sartaj Lamba launched Buddy Cabs to cater to wheelchair users; Sunali Aggarwal's dating app AYA is India's first to address the LGBTQ+ community; and audiologist and speech therapist Devangi Dalal is out to enhance the lives of the hearing-impaired

PHOTO: GERD ALTMANN / PIXABAY



SARTAJ LAMBA, FOUNDER, BUDDY CABS

Last year, while India grappled with the double challenges of a mysterious pandemic and an unprecedented lockdown, unlikely heroes emerged to rescue those in need. One of them was Buddy Cabs, founded by Chandigarh-based Army wife-entrepreneur-supermom Sartaj Lamba.

The specialised cab service, operated by ex-servicemen, was designed in fact to help wheelchair-bound customers become mobile. It turned into an emergency service ferrying Army officers who had been stranded without public transport during lockdown and needed to report to duty or rush home from duty due to personal emergency (in

one sad case, a spousal suicide). On one foggy December night, Buddy Cabs also helped evacuate an 82-year-old woman, two children and others from a car wreck on the Delhi-Chandigarh highway, and to arrange to take them to the nearest hospital.

“Our aim is to ensure total mobility for the most vulnerable sections of society, while also keeping our venture as eco-friendly and people-friendly as possible,” says Sartaj, whose larger-than-life personality and unflinching optimism can light up a room. Daughter of an Air Force officer and wife of an Army officer, Sartaj – who was born in Ambala and



Sartaj Lamba with some of the crew of Buddy Cabs

raised mostly in Chandigarh – says she has gone the entire gamut of an Army wife’s life from joining the Army Wives Welfare Association to hosting events for charity to even volunteering as a traffic marshal with the Chandigarh police.

Ten years ago, in order to give employment to women in need, she launched AJ Travels providing travel and tourism related services. She involved her entire family in the venture, even her adolescent son and daughter, who designed the logos. “I always keep everyone busy – my husband, my kids, my parents, my in-laws, my staff,” laughs Sartaj, whose daughter, 23, is now a dentist and son, 21, is in final year of engineering college.

When her father-in-law was

diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease and needed frequent visits to the hospital, Sartaj realised her position of relative privilege. “We have support staff in the Army, and even then, my husband and I were stretched thin in caring round the clock for an ailing senior citizen. I wondered what normal civilians must go through when faced with similar challenges,” she recalls.

Unafraid of taking entrepreneurial risks, Sartaj jumped headlong into her second venture in summer 2019 – India’s first wheelchair-enabled car rental system. The name Buddy Cabs was inspired by the Army’s custom of ‘battle buddies’ assigned to defend soldiers. With a fleet of about a dozen cars specially outfitted and customised for wheel-

chair-bound patients, the service is headed by five ex-servicemen who train all other drivers and porters in soft skills and safety protocol.

Available in Delhi, Gurgaon, Mohali, Chandigarh, Ambala, Faridabad and Noida, Buddy Cabs has tied up with hospitals such as Fortis to ferry their patients. In addition, it also serves as a regular point-to-point cab service for wheelchair users, the elderly and even unaccompanied pets.



Buddy Cabs are wheelchair-enabled with imported parts and technology

“We send porters or handlers who are courteous, properly trained and know the protocol of dealing with physically challenged people and seniors,” says Sartaj, who is now working on an app so that people can book services directly from their smartphones. They also plan to offer a membership system

for those who live abroad and may be concerned about their elderly parents back home in India. Each cab goes through a 20-point check every morning before it is released for duty, and is equipped with a music collection to suit all tastes.

So far, they have a base of about 1,500 to 2,000 customers across north India, most of whom are repeat clients who need regular transport services for chemotherapy or dialysis visits to the hospital. Since the company had curfew passes during the lockdown last year, they were able to help many people from other sections of society as well. They are now entering the category of assisted living for those with special needs by giving them a disciplined, safe driving experience along with a ‘buddy’ at their beck and call for daily chores and shopping.

“In India, we have not created an ecosystem to allow those with special needs to be independent. There’s this concept of terming the elderly and specially abled as *bechara* (helpless persons),” regrets Sartaj. She adds with her customary gusto: “This is what I want to erase from our vocabulary.” ■

SUNALI AGGARWAL, FOUNDER, AYA - AS YOU ARE

When it comes to the laws of Google, “LGBTQ+ matchmaking” is hardly a search-worthy term. And so when Sunali Aggarwal launched AYA – As You Are, India’s only homegrown matchmaking app for the LGBTQ+ community, she went with the more common descriptor: “dating app”.

“It’s an SEO [search-engine optimisation] requirement,” says the 40-year-old Chandigarh entrepreneur who wants to still be clear that AYA, launched in June 2020, is a serious platform for those looking for serious relationships.

Besides the first-mover advantage of addressing the needs of a niche audience that has so far been underrepresented on social networking platforms, Sunali has several things going for her: the energy of a second-generation entrepreneur, the creative thinking of a design graduate, and the skills of a tech professional with years in the field.

Having been exposed to the challenges of the LGBTQ+ community since her student days in the iconic National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, and later at IIM Ahmedabad, Sunali researched existing dating and social-networking platforms and saw a clear gap in the market. “This community already has challenges to begin with,” says the UX and

product designer, who co-founded Mobikwik.com in 2009.

In September 2018, India’s Supreme Court made a historical ruling on Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code to decriminalise consensual sexual conduct between



adults of the same sex. Though the judgement was hailed by human-rights activists and the gay community worldwide, it did little to address deep-seated social and cultural taboos that the LGBTQ+ community has grappled with for centuries in India. Most still don’t

express their sexuality due to fear of ostracism and discrimination, and those who do find the courage to come out of the closet find love and romance to be a potholed journey, ridden with complexities, incompatibilities, and lack of avenues – both offline and online.

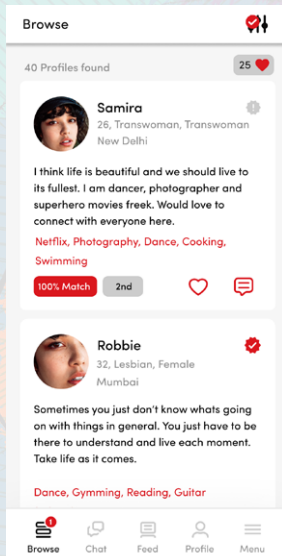
“Apps like Tinder have facilitated more of a hookup culture,” says Sunali, referring to the current trend of casual sex encounters without long-term emotional commitment. Though Grindr is the most often-used app by the gay community in Indian metros, it is male-dominated, and others on the LGBTQ+ spectrum have no options for finding meaningful matches.

That’s where AYA comes in. Launched during the pandemic, the app’s key features are customised keeping in mind the suitability and sensitivity of the users. Prioritising accessibility and anonymity, it offers users a ‘no-pressure’ zone when it comes to declaration of sexual orientation and gender identity. The focus is on the user’s profile rather than their photograph – unlike in regular dating apps where users often browse based on the photograph alone.

The app also offers a three-level verification protocol. Available for Android users, the app has had about 10,000 downloads so far. “We are working on including regional languages as English may not be the official or first language for a large majority,” says Sunali, who has worked with over 100 startups.

More focused on designing business apps, this new venture is challenging for Sunali not only because it is in the consumer space but also because it fills in a pressing need among sexual minorities. “We have been trying to create awareness about mental health, besides gender identity and sexual orientation through our blog – because people often don’t know how to identify themselves,” she says.

Sunali wishes for the day when – like ‘regular’ matrimonial apps – Indian parents sign up to register their LGBTQ+ children for prospective matches. “I wish more Indian parents would accept their children’s sexuality,” says Sunali, calling family acceptance the most debilitating obstacle in the lives of the LGBTQ+ community. “Once parents accept them, they can face the world.” ■





DEVANGI DALAL, AUDIOLOGIST AND SPEECH THERAPIST

For Mumbai audiologist and speech therapist Devangi Dalal, every single patient she helps and inspires is a reverse source of inspiration for her as well.

Destiny twice directed the course of Devangi's life. The first was when, as a student in Mumbai who aspired to be a doctor, she couldn't get through into a medical college of her choice. Unwilling to travel to a medical college in another town, she took up the next best option at the time: a Bachelor of Science in audiology and speech therapy from Nair Hospital, Mumbai.

So rare was this profession in those years that the hospital only offered 10 such seats, out of just 65

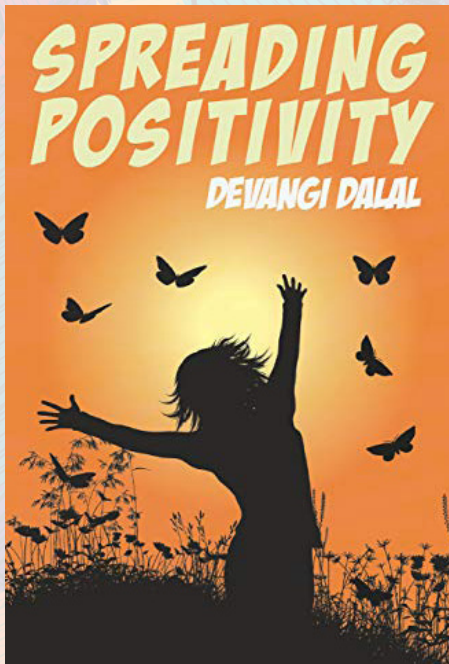
in all of India.

After graduating in 1991, Devangi joined ENT specialist Dr Jayant Gandhi as an occupational therapist. Fluent in six languages, she began working with all age groups of people but veered towards children. From 2000 onwards, she began travelling internationally to update herself on technological advances in audiology and speech therapies.

It was in 2004 that destiny altered the course of her life once again.

"I had travelled to Denmark for an international conference when I learnt for the first time that babies there were being screened for hearing defects," says Devangi. "There was no such protocol in India."

After returning to Mumbai, Devangi asked government officials and gynaecologists about this. “The government did not find it compelling enough to offer screening for free, and gynaecologists and obstetricians were concerned that if any defect was found in the baby, they would be blamed for making a mistake during the delivery,” she says.



Moved to act, Devangi got together with Dr Gandhi and launched JOSH Foundation (Juvenile Organization of Speech and Hearing) the same year. “The idea was to create awareness among people to go for neonatal screening. We wrote articles, hosted events and

started supporting schools by giving specialised hearing aids to students in need,” she narrates.

With the help of CSR funding and donations from philanthropy associations, they managed to arrange digital hearing aids – a pair of which costs anywhere from ₹60,000 upwards – for more than 1,300 children, all of whom Devangi personally fitted and trained.

Wife of an IT industrialist and a mother of two, Devangi spent a lot of her time advocating for the use of technology in helping those with hearing impairment. “I still go to a lot of institutes, give a lot of talks, address top managements of organisations to help fund hearing aids or screening tests,” says Devangi, who also published two books on the subject in Gujarati and Hindi to reach out to low-income groups.

Indian parents still don’t realise the importance of neonatal screening. “If their child hasn’t started speaking like other babies, the parents assume the child is shy or quiet, when in fact it could be a hearing problem,” says Devangi. Since zero to five years is the best age to learn a language, one loses precious time in delaying diagnosis of hearing impairment. “Abroad, even little babies are fitted with hearing aids and cochlear implants,” she says, regretting that in India, such children end up using gestures and sign language instead of spoken language.

“We call them ‘deaf and dumb’, but they are certainly not dumb. Instead of teaching them sign language, just get them a good hearing aid. The technology is available,” says the 50-year-old, who has so far helped over 5,000 students with hearing impairment get into mainstream education systems. “Once their handicap is addressed, most of them end up as brilliant successes in their careers – from interior design to sports management,” she says.

Devangi has consistently represented India in paediatric audiology conferences worldwide. She is also the recipient of several awards, and was the only audiologist from India appointed for Coalition Global Hearing Health, which works with the World Health Organization.

“From 65 seats in the early 1990s to 4500 now, speech therapy has definitely grown as a career option in India but the numbers are still too small to address the magnitude of the problem,” says Devangi, adding that almost half of India’s trained audiologists leave the country; 20 to 30 percent join institutes to teach further; and only a few actually run private practices or NGOs like herself in service of society.

But the need is greater than ever, says Devangi, who was the first Indian to win the humanitarian award from the American Academy of Audiology in 2012 in Boston.

The pandemic year has been es-

pecially difficult for hearing-impaired children for whom online learning is not as conducive, says Devangi, who trains children for six months after fitting them with customised hearing aids as per their needs. “We must see them as national assets and not liabilities, and



we must empower them to achieve their potential,” she states. Author of the motivational book *Spreading Positivity*, Devangi finds a huge sense of fulfilment in her work. “I see their smiling faces every day, and every day I am so inspired.” ■

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NADIA SAMDANI
A LEGACY
OF ART

Dhaka-based art curator and philanthropist Nadia Samdani is on a determined mission to put Bangladeshi artists on the global art map

By Aekta Kapoor

The most powerful woman in the world of Bangladeshi art, Nadia Samdani is driven by an overarching vision to promote her country and its artists. The co-founder and president of the Samdani Art Foundation and director of South Asia's biggest non-commercial art event Dhaka Art Summit, Nadia's vision is as much about showcasing Bangladeshi artists as it is about promoting Bangladesh to artists and curators from around the world.

Over the past decade, Nadia and her husband Rajeeb Samdani have created a platform that is truly unique, co-opting talented professionals from around South Asia and the world, powered by their own philanthropy. "I'm a collector, yes," admits Nadia, "but what I enjoy most is being part of the journey of these artists, watching them grow, and seeing their life change once they reach the international platform."

Her other great pleasure comes a close second: "When we commission works to international

artists, they come to Bangladesh, see the country and are inspired to create something for this milieu. It's exciting for me to be part of the process from ideation to execution," says the Dhaka-based philanthropist, who is a member of Tate Museum's South Asia acquisitions committee and on its international council.

One could say that, for Nadia, art runs in her blood. Growing up in UK, she was influenced by her parents, who were collectors of Bangladeshi art. In the 1980s, Nadia's father became one of the pioneers of Bangladesh's garment industry, and the family moved from UK to Dhaka in the early 1990s.

Having attended art biennales around the world, Nadia began collecting art herself from the age of 22. With a likeminded partner in life and work, the Samdanis developed a formidable collection over time, including works of Bangladeshi and global artists. Works from the Samdani collection have been loaned to various prestigious art museums and galleries around

"THE DHAKA ART SUMMIT HAS COMPLETELY CHANGED THE IMPRESSION OF ART IN THE MINDS OF THE COMMON PEOPLE"



Nadia Samdani was born in the UK and moved to Bangladesh in the 1990s with her family

the world, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to Centre Pompidou, Paris. In 2017, the couple became the first South Asians to receive the Montblanc de la Culture Arts Patronage Award.

A mother of three daughters – two teens and a seven-year-old – Nadia has a youthful passion for the arts that is visible even across a Zoom call. Mid-conversation, the 39-year-old picks up her laptop and takes you along as she walks to the window of her home office to show you a sculpture in the garden. “It is a park bench with bird spikes all over it where people are supposed to sit,”

she describes with both wonder and triumph. “Isn’t it brilliant?” The work in question, *Parkverbot (Looted Art)*, was made by Russian-Tunisian artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke, and is one of thousands of works housed in the Samdani residence, where the art famously came first before the rest of the architecture, even the positioning of the walls.

In 2012, the Samdanis launched the Dhaka Art Summit. Five editions later, the biennale has grown beyond even Nadia’s own expectations. The most recent Summit – held in February 2020 and directed by American curator



Nadia with husband Rajeeb Samdani, MD of Bangladesh's leading conglomerate Golden Harvest Group

Diana Campbell Betancourt – saw contributions by 500 artists, scholars, curators and thinkers, and included panel discussions, workshops and performances. Entry was free to the public, and over 400,000 visitors reportedly dropped in.

“The idea is to make art accessible to all socio-economic groups. People assume that art is just about paintings, but this is precisely the myth we wanted to shatter. Imagine a taxi driver coming in with his children and they see all these different kinds of art – performances, architecture, sound installations. The Dhaka Art

Summit has completely changed the impression of art in the minds of the common people,” Nadia asserts.

The Samdanis support art production and artists but do not claim ownership over the final works. “This is not a collection-building exercise,” says Nadia, who is on the advisory council of Art Dubai and is one of the founding members of The Harvard University Lakshmi Mittal South Asia Institute’s Arts Advisory Council.

Each edition of the Summit also includes the prestigious Samdani Art Award, which is open to Bangladeshi artists between the



Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani received the Montblanc de la Culture Arts Patronage Award in 2017

age of 20 and 40, and typically gets thousands of applications each time. The shortlist of about 10 to 20 artists make to a show and are judged by a jury of international art experts. The winner gets a fully paid three-month art residency at the Delfina Foundation in London.

Nadia speaks animatedly about how the Summit has given women artists in Bangladesh a space to be seen and heard. “The award shortlist almost always has women artists in the majority,” she says, “and they bring up very strong points of view in their work, from feminist movements to politics to tackling social taboos and the subject of

shame. They are more open and fearless than you’d expect.” She describes how the jury members of the 2020 award finalised not one but two winners, both women. So convinced were they of the value of the second winner’s work that they gave up part of their own judging fee to fund the young artist’s residency in UK.

The pandemic has forced changes in the Summit schedule, and the 2022 edition has been pushed to 2023. In the meantime, the Samdanis are looking forward to launching their Srihatta–Samdani Art Centre and Sculpture Park this year in Sylhet, a city in northeastern



Nadia has three daughters, two of whom are teenagers studying in the UK while the youngest is in Dhaka

Bangladesh where both Nadia and Rajeeb have ancestral roots. Spread over 100 acres, the couple plan to make the Sculpture Park a new art destination in South Asia, one with an international approach.

Nadia fiercely defends the value of art in an evolving society beyond entertainment and aesthetics. “Art is political, it is a statement on current events,” she says. “You may hear about injustice or crises on the news but when an artist presents it through their own unique perspective, you are touched to the core.”

She references a photography installation by Bangladeshi artist-photographer Munem Wasif, in

which he presents the belongings of the homeless Rohingyas, who took refuge in Bangladesh in large numbers after persecution in Myanmar. Each frame of the exhibit showcases one item that is small enough to fit in a hand – a currency note, a photograph, a bit of soil – insignificant objects to a stranger, until the viewer realises this is all that the fleeing refugees could carry with them, something that meant the world to that one person leaving their world behind. “Art is subtle,” says Nadia. “At first, it appears ordinary. But when you read the concept note, it breaks your heart.” ■

EMPOWERING BUSINESSES

These women-led firms are powering Indian businesses with finance and sustainability solutions



MINIYA CHATTERJI - SUSTAIN LABS

Dr Miniya Chatterji, founder and CEO of Sustain Labs Paris, helps traditional organisations become more sustainable and profitable. Based in India, France and New Zealand, the enterprise

is supported by the French government's wing for scientific and academic exchange in India. "We leverage the private sector towards improving the state of the world," explains Miniya, former chief sus-



Dr Miniya Chatterji, founder
and CEO of Sustain Labs

tainability officer at Jindal Steel and Power Ltd. She has also been an employee of the World Economic Forum as well as a Global Leadership Fellow from 2011 to 2014.

Sustain Labs' philosophy is that every organisation must be a social entrepreneur such that its business model must not only ensure long-term financial stability but also social good. Leading sustainability academic experts from across the world are brought together to work on projects. "I incorporate all my interests within Sustain Labs, and ensure all team members at Sustain Labs are able to do the same. That is the company culture," says Miniya, who has been a speaker or moderator at Davos and at other

World Economic Forum regional summits, the United Nations, European Union and various other prestigious platforms. She is also the author of the book *Indian Instincts – Essays on Equality and Freedom in India* (Penguin Random House, 2018) about the social consequences of economic growth in India.

The challenges she has faced on her journey are "the same that most girls who rise from middle-class families would face," she shares. "My advice would be to not burn bridges with parents, partners, and friends who might be unsupportive at specific instances of a girl's life. Your parents, partners, friends are victims of a certain context that you are breaking out from. You

think differently from them but you cannot expect them to think like you. Instead, do what you have to do for treading in uncharted waters while taking everyone along with you. Rebellious is easy, getting your way while keeping the most important people in your life is more challenging yet ultimately rewarding,” says Miniya, who was invited by the government of France to be a permanent member of the parliament of Francophone women writers.

Miniya and her team of experts including human-rights specialist Janna Furig at Sustain Labs Paris are also seeking solutions to more humanitarian problems. “The Stargazers Foundation is the not-for-profit arm of Sustain Labs. It has been working across South Asia and the Middle East since 2010 on the health and education of children and women, with the help of funding from the International Labour Organisation, R-Labs and Lebarra Foundation, amongst others,” she says.

Currently, they are working on giving a home to the 11 million children living on the streets of India. “We have just finished the research and extensive stakeholder consultations for identifying a practical solution based on a public-private partnership. We will be presenting the policy proposal to the government,” Miniya informs.



Funded by Sustain Labs, a city-level pilot has been set up in Mumbai at the 7th lane Kamathipura Municipal school. The solutions developed from this will be implemented in Delhi, Jaipur, Kolkata and other parts of India.

A mother of a little boy, Miniya shares that along with her husband and toddler, who are all fitness enthusiasts, she enjoys playing sports and works out every day. “I also enjoy good aesthetics in clothes and at home that are minimal, sustainable and that tell a story.”

By Neha Kirpal

AMRITA MALIK - INNOVITI SOLUTIONS



Amrita Malik is the cofounder and chief business officer (CBO) of Innoviti Solutions, a Bengaluru-based fintech player that provides digital-payment solutions for merchants, banks and brands. The award-winning company leverages artificial intelligence and Big Data to offer innovative solutions to over 1.3 billion consumers, 2 lakh brands, 30 million merchants, and 1,000 banks and financial service providers.

Amrita's journey in Innoviti began 12 years ago. After doing her Bachelor's in computer applications

followed by an MBA specialising in marketing and finance, Amrita joined Innoviti in 2009 as a senior sales manager. She rose through the ranks to become a part of the apex management. Recognising her contribution and commitment with the vision of the company, she was designated as the cofounder along with the CBO.

"Women are blazing new trails and shattering the proverbial glass ceiling even in the finance sector. Work knows no gender, and that has been the underlined work mantra at Innoviti. There are many young employees who have grown very fast in our organisation – I am one of them. Women are very good at managing complexity and can take on any kind of a role," Amrita avers.

Along the way she also went for a senior executive leadership programme at Harvard Business School. "Study at Harvard helped my ideas to become a reality. Our country has a lot of potential for business and to earn more. Globally, India is a big market to invest and to earn from. All have high hopes from India," she says, adding that it's time for businesses to think large and for employees to develop entrepreneurial mindsets. "Our Indian companies should design the product locally, market it, distribute it and improve it continuously. This

will not only increase revenue for a company but will also create jobs for people in tier-2 and tier-3 markets,” says the 37-year-old, who says she is “married to her work”.

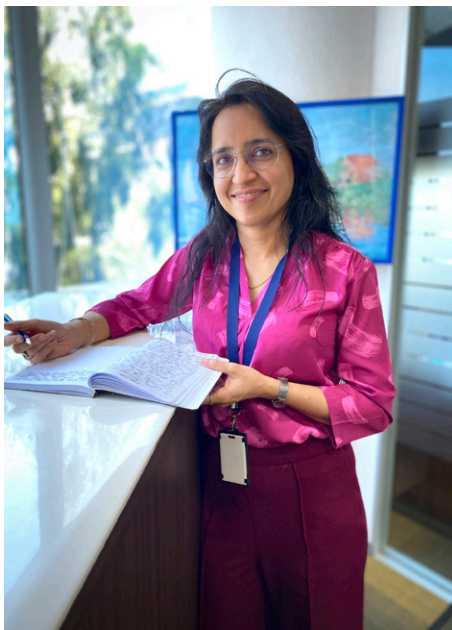
With 450 employees on board, Innoviti works with leading organisations in the retail, hospitality, healthcare, travel and education segments and is the only company that supports payments through all customer channels – offline, web and mobile. “We run sales offices in all key metro cities and a few tier-2 cities; however, our service offices are present in tier-4 cities as well,” says Amrita, who was herself raised in an Army family and has travelled and lived across India.

She credits her father for sowing the seeds of hard work and ambition in her: “My dad has been the root of my drive and inspiration to become who I am today. He clearly taught me to develop my own identity instead of being known by whom I am related to. As a child, my father would always tell me, ‘There is no replacement to hard work, so follow your dreams, work hard for it and you shall reap benefits’.”

As she grew up, Amrita took inspiration from other role models in her life. “I picked up the best traits from people around me at various stages: strangers who later became friends, my colleagues, from our customers, and from my cofounder at Innoviti. I am a curious person

and that’s why I believe in seeing the best in others and ignoring the grey areas,” she smiles.

A health freak who loves cooking and shopping, Amrita cites a lesson that she learnt early in her career as one that has served her well in all aspects of her life: “Rajeev Agrawal [cofounder and CEO of Innoviti]



taught me that anything is possible; you just need to work hard and believe in yourself. When things went wrong, he taught me to break the problem down into bite-size pieces and push ahead, taking on each piece one at a time until the issue was resolved. As a result, no problem was insurmountable and no goal out of reach.”

SHRUTI AGGARWAL - STASHFIN



Shruti Aggarwal is the co-founder of StashFin, an app-based digital lending venture that aims to disrupt traditional lending in India. “The idea behind StashFin was clear and simple – financial freedom for one and all,” says the 41-year-old Delhi-based entrepreneur, who graduated from Sri Ram College of Commerce, Delhi, pursued chartered accountancy and did her Master’s from Columbia University, New York.

“We realised that there is an untapped category of borrowers – the underbanked and individuals who are new to credit – which traditional lenders are wary of due

to factors like weak credit profile and so on. So, we were excited to introduce products that would fulfil the financial requirements of millions of consumers, ensuring their financial inclusion,” she explains. The company provides instant loan in a hassle-free manner.

Shruti started her professional journey with PricewaterhouseCoopers two decades ago. She went on to lead strategies for top banks, spearheaded her family business, and launched two successful start-ups before cofounding StashFin in 2016 along with an eclectic mix of finance professionals in India and USA. The company – which covers

600 pin codes in India – recently made it to LinkedIn’s list of ‘Top Startups from India’.

“While I would say that we are definitely on the right track, we are far from being satisfied with where we stand. Fintech is a sector where the rules and the game change almost every fortnight. And so, keeping up with the pace of technological and financial advancements while keeping our goal in mind is the way forward for us,” says Shruti, a mother of two.

A multi-tasker, Shruti enjoys travelling, running and photography. She is also an avid reader. “One book that stands out is *Wings of Fire*, which was probably one of the first biographies I read. The inspirational life of Dr APJ Abdul Kalam and his constant pursuit towards perfection has always inspired me to adopt the phrase of ‘simple living, high thinking’ as a way of life,” she shares.

Shruti credits her time at Columbia University for nurturing the entrepreneurial streak in her: “I worked as a research assistant to Professor Arvind Panagariya which exposed me to real-life intricacies involved in the business and finance sector on a global level. Working in close quarters with a fellow Indi-

an, I gained amazing insights about how business and leadership in India work and how they are starkly different from the work culture that exists in the US.”

While the finance industry – and especially the fintech sector – is a more male-dominated one, the role that women are playing in the sector is noteworthy, Shruti says, narrating her experience of being invited as a speaker to the Festival of Fintech conclave organised by Cambridge University. “It was then that I real-

ised how significantly women are contributing to the fintech sector,” she shares.

Shruti believes there is definitely a lack of female perspective when it comes to creating financial products, which can be harmful for the in-

dustry’s growth. “Isn’t a significant share of this industry’s consumer base female? How are we making sure we’re making inclusive financial products?” she asks. At the same time, she sees hope for change as more female entrepreneurs foray into the financial sector.

Shruti’s mantra for success? “Changing with time and adopting technology while maintaining discipline. Time management, hard work and a lot of reading to stay ahead of the curve.” ■

“FINTECH IS A SECTOR WHERE THE RULES AND THE GAME CHANGE ALMOST EVERY FORTNIGHT”



KICKING THE BUCKET LIST

Former CSO of Cisco Canada, Ayelet Baron veered away from the rat race and became a truly global citizen connected to the people and planet

By Kay Newton

Ayelet Baron has been described as a force of nature when it comes to envisioning a more humane world. A former corporate honcho who has worked in global boardrooms in Silicon Valley, London and Singapore, she touched the pinnacle of her career as chief strategy and innovation officer at Cisco, Canada.

And then, Ayelet jumped off the

regular grid of 'success' and charted her own path. She went on to win an award for her book trilogy, *F*ck the Bucket List*, based on her own learnings, and is among *Forbes'* top 50 global female futurists.

Having just sold her Canadian home, Ayelet is now ready for her next exciting adventure, a trait she has had since birth. "I was almost born on a plane and started

travelling when I was a few weeks old. World travel helped me nurture my ‘cut-off switch’. I often think, hang on a minute, *this is not working for me*,” says the writer and visionary.

As a teenager growing up in Israel, she believed in the usual parameters of success: go to University, get a job, be successful, and basically do what society expects of you. When she was 16, her family moved to the west coast of Canada. “It was a

science and a minor in theatre.

She rose quickly in her corporate career from then on. “I travelled an average of 300,000 miles a year. On the one side, it was awesome. I had exposure to over 100 countries. I love people, to connect, listen with empathy and understand things from a different perspective, not as a corporate person. I understood the inner workings of China and I fell in love with Africa,” she narrates.



traumatic time. I had to start over in a new school leaving behind friends who were getting ready for the army and to fight a war in Lebanon,” she recalls. Being an outsider, she gravitated towards the theatre department in school and learned to “look at the edges”. Her father did not allow her to go to theatre school, so she completed her Bachelor’s with a major in political

Despite all this, travel made her ill.

One day, at home in San Francisco, she got an invite from United Airlines to attend an event at the Asian Art Museum. “I felt like royalty. There was an open bar, a four-course meal and pomp galore. It turned out, I was one of the top 100 flyers for the airline in San Francisco; 75 of us were at the event. But as I looked around the

tables, I saw nothing but exhaustion and disease.”

It was a wakeup call for Ayelet. “I was a dedicated employee and work meant everything. I did things at my own expense. All those hours flying, jetlag, the unhealthy food, the uncomfortable hotel beds and lack of sleep. Disease had started to show and I knew something had to change. My marriage also fell apart. Life *was not working for me*,” says Ayelet. “I fired myself from corporate America and took off to the Amazon rainforest.”

In 2014, Ayelet joined 17 remarkable women as part of the Jungle Mamas programme organised by Lynne Twist, co-founder of the Pachamama Alliance. “Visiting the Amazon allowed me to see the global impact on the rainforests firsthand. I saw the deep separation we have from nature, and the need for action to help sustain a rapidly diminishing environment. The obligation to create healthier leadership. To plant new roots using the ancient natural wisdom around purpose, harmony, integration, and holistic wellbeing,” she says.

The Amazon also led Ayelet to find the courage to discover my path. She said goodbye to a lifestyle

and life that did not work for her. “I stepped into my power, a path with greater meaning and purpose. Sometimes it takes being sick to see the way forward,” she says.

Today Ayelet’s purpose is to help people become aware that they too can step into their own power. “I have been the steward of the *F*ck the Bucket List* books; I do not take ownership as we wrote them universally. I don’t want people to know my name. I hope these books get to millions of people so they too can find their true stories,” says Ayelet.

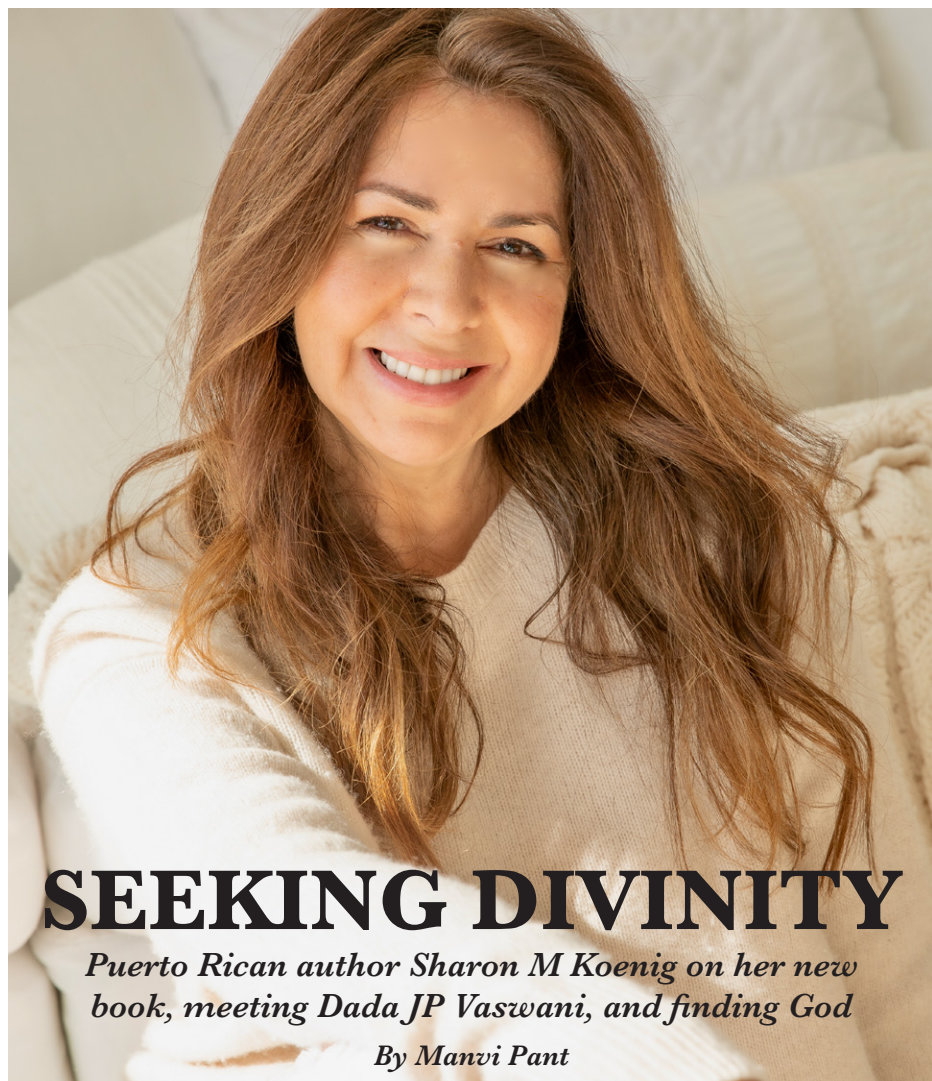
And they already are. Tim McDondald, former director of community, *The Huffington Post*, says, “Living life fully can be a very lonely journey. Ayelet metaphorically holds your

hand as you take your own steps. What you discover is the connection you find not just within yourself but with the community you find along the way.”

Now that Ayelet has sold her home, she is a digital nomad. She is also designing an international community of purposeful creators. “Who knows where the adventure will take me. Expect me one day to turn up at your doorstep!” ■

[Follow Ayelet on ayeletbaron.com](https://www.ayeletbaron.com)

**“I STEPPED INTO MY
POWER, A PATH WITH
GREATER MEANING
AND PURPOSE.
SOMETIMES IT TAKES
BEING SICK TO SEE
THE WAY FORWARD”**



SEEKING DIVINITY

Puerto Rican author Sharon M Koenig on her new book, meeting Dada JP Vaswani, and finding God

By Manvi Pant

Puerto Rico-born and Miami-based spiritual writer and author of three bestselling books, Sharon M Koenig's English translation of the book *Los Ciclos del Alma* (2011), titled *Seasons of the Soul* (Pan Macmillan, ₹399) has re-

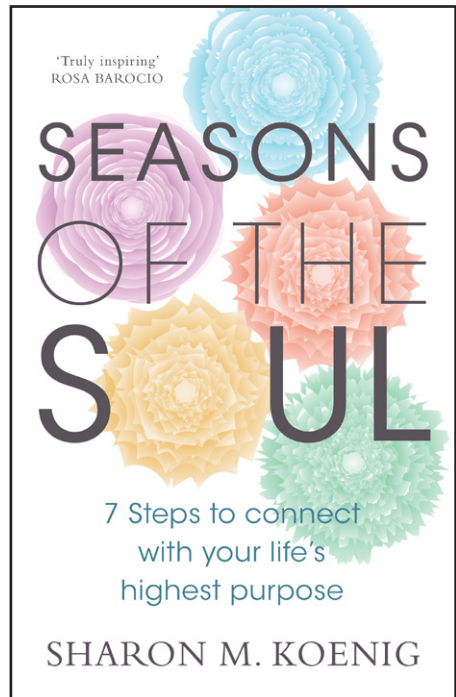
cently hit Indian shelves. Especially relevant to current times, as Sharon mentions in the prologue, the book is more of an "instruction manual" and presents a guide on how to attain "spiritual divinity". "In my book, I go through a simple pro-

cess to help us live in the present, connect with divinity, and see everything anew,” reveals the author.

For the longest time, a certain curiosity has revolved around spirituality. Many people have tried to establish and discuss a connection between spirituality and religion in a subjective framework. And, a lot of people have questioned it too. In a lucid tone, Sharon presents clarifications to many such confusions in her book. According to her, “Spirituality is the universal need and search to transcend yourself. Religion is the individual language and physical means to attain it – practices, metaphors, and rituals that help calm the mind to connect. Everything is spiritual when you believe a divine force sustains the material world. You can be spiritual without practising a religion. Having said that, I am not against religion because different cultures have different ways to connect with what lies beyond our senses.”

Neatly divided into four parts and written in a pellucid manner, the book also offers its audience a more balanced approach to survive in this far more polarised, fragile and vulnerable world. The readers will witness several personal anecdotes and learnings of the author as she tries to establish a connection with them. For instance, in the first chapter, Sharon describes a forest walk in Puerto Rico and how she

found the invincible strength of Tabonuco trees worthy of a lesson. She writes, “On the surface, the trees appear to be isolated and separate from one another. Yet, we have discovered they are all holding one another by their big roots – like the long arms of a giant octopus. They embrace each other forever



connected in a chain of love.”

Love, especially self-love, is another element that sees a lot of prominence in the book. “We love ourselves by paying attention to the quality of our thoughts, words, and actions. Traumatic experiences can affect our minds, such as a recent

loss, chemical or hormonal imbalances, and other disorders. Do not blame yourself – feelings of hopelessness are not your fault,” writes the self-proclaimed change catalyst.

Indeed, if one has closely followed Sharon’s journey, one would know how far she has come by overcoming some of the most painful childhood experiences. Born out of wedlock, she was more like an ‘unwanted child’ surrounded by hate and shame. The sense of abandonment and rejection affected all areas of her life. The emptiness resulted in an insatiable void that she proceeded to fill with outside means by love relationships, accomplishments, and material comfort. Soon, she realised that trying to find happiness this way was unhealthy and was giving her even more pain. Nevertheless, the negative beginning inspired her to seek answers to the most critical question: who am I?

Before becoming a ‘change catalyst’, Sharon had a successful career as a fashion designer and manufacturer, but who knew the professional path she had taken would introduce her to an entirely new world within? Sharon got the opportunity to study world religion under the tutelage of great spiritual

leaders, including a Buddhist lama, a guru from India, and a priest. How did she find them? “I believe they found me. I met my dear teacher Dada JP Vaswani through a family from India that I had met in the buying and manufacturing business. They were also clothing manufacturers. It was a beautiful night in Puerto Rico, and when I saw his (Dada’s) eyes, I was never the same and immediately knew he was a saint. I met my Buddhist teacher on a trip to California, and

**I use Dada JP
Vaswani's mantra:
*I am not alone, God
is with me, and I
added another, I am
not alone, God is
within me.***

the special priest in a church right across the street from my apartment building! Being open to God, seeking Him, led me to these unexpected encounters,” she shares.

Sharon also volunteers her time and leadership for various wellness and faith community-based

projects representing mothers and children. All this began 23 years ago, when she gave birth to her daughter, Gabbie. “I began to learn about mothers and babies and how we disrupt the natural birthing process. At that time, I got involved with UNICEF’s Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative and participated as a board member for some years in the US chapter. I also wrote a breastfeeding guide for mothers and babies given

free by the Government of Puerto Rico. This year, I plan to expand this project on social media.”

Since the original publication of *Los Ciclos del Alma* in 2011, several editions have been printed and distributed in various countries. “You never know where a book will take you, and *Seasons of the Soul* has certainly surprised me with

mantra in times of stress to help her through a particular situation? “I use a mantra I learned from the dearest spiritual leader from India, Dada JP Vaswani: *I am not alone, God is with me*, and I added another, *I am not alone, God is within me*. There are various practices that I do and recommend in the book. Still, one that I do frequently is that I stop and



L-R: Sharon has authored three books, all of which have been translated to other languages; at a book launch

an unexpected journey,” she says, adding that she plans to continue translating books she has written in the past that were successful in Spanish and to write a new one on the spirituality of the East and West. She is also simultaneously working on a children’s book.

After having practised spirituality for so many years, what is Sharon’s

maintain silence for a few minutes, remembering that God is within me, that nothing is missing, that He is all-loving, that everything will be alright. From this state of awareness, everything else flows easier. That I rest in His Being. Taking our eyes away from worldly troubles for a few moments and placing them in God during the day creates miracles.” ■

FEMINIST PARENTING



In her new book, Seattle University professor Dr Sonora Jha looks at notions of gender identity and equality in the modern-day context

Text by Neha Kirpal. Photographs by Elise Wang

Essayist, novelist, and professor of media and politics at Seattle University, Dr Sonora Jha had a successful career as a journalist in Mumbai and Bengaluru before moving to Singapore and then the United States to earn a Ph.D. in political communication. Her new book *How to Raise a Feminist Son: A Memoir and Manifesto* (Penguin Random House, ₹399) follows her personal struggles and triumphs as a single mother and an immigrant raising an American feminist son.

Sonora is also the author of a novel *Foreign* (Random House India, 2013), and co-editor of *New Feminisms in South Asia* (Routledge USA, 2017). She talks to us about her latest book, how the #MeToo movement differs in the US from South Asian countries, and how parents can shield children from the influence of patriarchal attitudes.

*How did you decide to write your latest book **How to Raise a Feminist Son**?*

I was writing a memoir, and then, every now and then, as something came up in the news, I would write a political / personal essay around issues related to masculinity, boys, and feminism. Those essays would get a huge response, with people writing to me from across the world. I sensed a hunger, a need for

a reckoning in society with the way we raise men. I decided to write a feminist memoir on how I raised my son to be a feminist. It became a personal story and a manifesto for others to come along.



Why do you feel it is more important than ever in this day and age for our sons to be raised as feminists?

Raising boys to be feminists is an act of love and compassion towards them. Not only do they work to empower the girls and women in their lives, they also then empower



er themselves to laugh in the face of the kind of masculinity that traps them into being hard, aloof, alienated, emotionally unavailable, stoic. They can have more equal and satisfying partnerships if they're free to feel the whole spectrum of emotions available to all humans. And imagine how our world would be if it were led by compassionate leaders – women and men – who didn't have to be brutal to other nations.

Tell us how the personal experiences of raising your own son Gibran helped shape this book.

I learned more in the moments in which my son and I floundered with feminism than in moments that were easy. And a lot of the “raising” of a feminist son was going

on organically – in the moments of fun, for instance. The first chapter is about how I raised a feminist at the movies. So, each chapter has an anecdote from our lives and how it blended in with the feminist enterprise.

As part of the book's research, you interviewed psychologists, researchers, scholars, and parents. What were your most interesting findings?

I feel so fortunate that all these people were so enthusiastic about talking to me. It's as if we're all rolling up our sleeves and saying, “Okay, yes, let's do this!” That enthusiasm itself was an interesting finding. Another thing I found interesting was that there's such a yearning among boys, to be tender

and to connect with others, rather than be sardonic or self-sufficient.

How can parents shield their boys (and girls) from the influence of patriarchal attitudes that are reinforced time and again in popular culture, the media, and the world around us?

I'd say we can't "shield" them, but we can disarm some of the power of those patriarchal influences. With media, I highly recommend talking, talking, talking to them. Watch things with them, be open, don't be judgmental. Poke fun at stereotypes. Reinforce and reward those media and those relationships that affirm gentleness in boys and centre the stories of girls and other genders. With relatives, decide if you can reason with them and recruit them to help in your endeavour, or reinforce your different values with your child, or then draw boundaries.

What is your take on the #MeToo movement? Does it differ in the US from South Asian countries? Do you see the movement leading to a more gender-neutral workspace?

It's one of the most significant and long overdue moments of reckoning for humanity. The differences are minimal between the US and South Asian countries. One thing I will say is that women in India – especially Dalit women – have been speaking of sexual assault and harassment for decades, but we didn't seem to care because we wanted to present this myth to the world that "such

things" didn't happen to girls and women in middle / upper caste / class families.

India has a horrific rape culture. We have hidden it well. We need to emerge from our culture of "shame" so that the men around



us can no longer prey on our girls and our women. In the US, people need to scratch through the veneer of "first-world values" and take a good, hard look at how they have held women back and abused them at the workplace while claiming to be "the leader of the world." ■

Read more on eShe.in



WHAT THE ART REVEALS

Mona Rai's unconventional abstract artworks are as mesmerising for the viewer as for the artist herself, revealing secrets at every step of the process

By Manasvi Jerath

Born in the year of India's Independence, Delhi-based artist Mona Rai creates abstract artworks that appear to sing a song through each discrete square inch making the whole piece come alive like an orchestra. Currently showing at Bikaner House, New Delhi, at an exhibition titled 'On | Site', Mona's works immediately catch your attention, crafted as they are in an intricate, colourful, detailed and mesmerising aesthetic.

Mona completed her Master's in psychology from Delhi University while attending art classes at Trive-

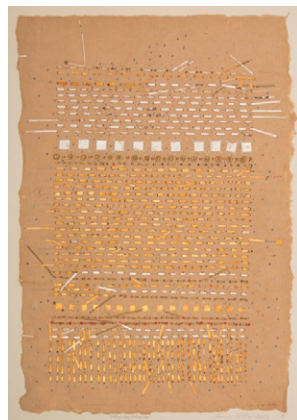
ni Kala Sangam, one of the capital's oldest art institutions. She credits her mother for encouraging her artistic pursuits. "My mother was a progressive woman. She gave me the freedom to move around and go to parties. She encouraged me to bring everybody home," Mona narrates. After completing her education, Mona set up her own studio along with her husband Amitava Das, who is also an acclaimed artist. "It was almost like he became my mentor," she says, looking back.

The couple held exhibitions collectively until Mona was signed up

by major art galleries, the current one being Nature Morte.

Mona tries to capture all that is happening around the world through her work but she allows herself to be fluid in its creation. “Imagining something and bringing it to actuality are two entirely different things,” she says. “You start going with the flow of the work, whatever direction it takes

and silver foil. “I like burning paper with charcoal, cigarettes or electric rods,” she says, adding that she also enjoys tearing her artworks and stitching them together to make something new. Having visited museums around the world, she is influenced by artists like Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Matisse and Francis Bacon, and believes that both men and women artists bring something



Some of Mona Rai's works are currently showing at the exhibition 'On | Site' at Bikaner House, New Delhi

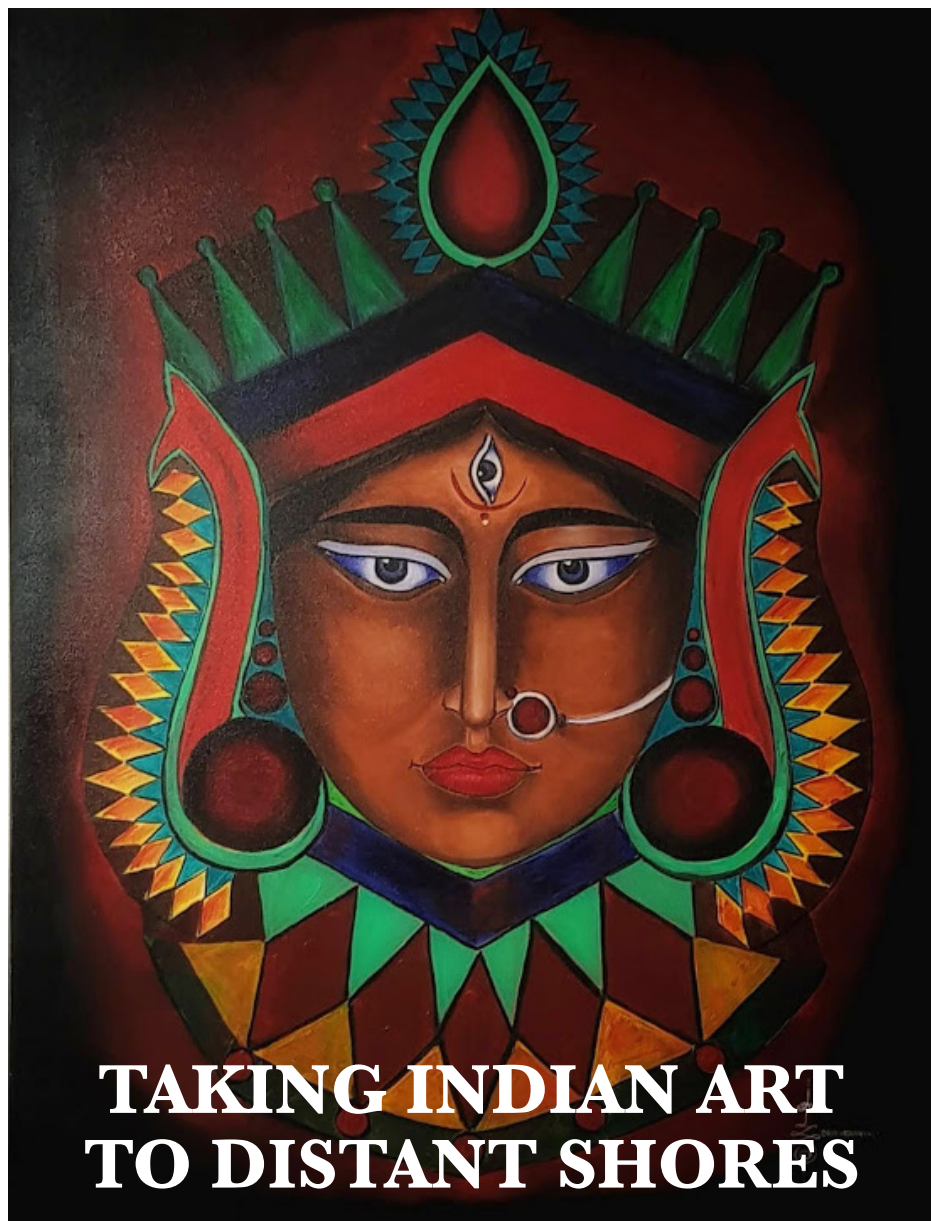
you. Each step of the painting is a revelation for you,” she describes.

When it comes to abstract art, knowing when to stop is also important. “That’s when the artist realises, I have nothing more left to say. That’s when the final work reveals itself to you. The process is much more important than the end result. That can be a big surprise for you.”

Mona enjoys using every material she can find – from oils and acrylic paints to flashy materials like gold

different to the table.

The septuagenarian is still on a joyous artistic journey. She and her husband listen to world music and create artworks in their living room together. She says, “Normally, after each exhibition, I need rest mentally to restart. But the pandemic has disciplined me. Age is not on my side so I don’t want to waste time on frivolous things. I want to utilise my time, and go on working till my last day.” ■



TAKING INDIAN ART TO DISTANT SHORES

Melbourne-based artist Anudeepa Kadiresan has created a new audience for ancient Dravidian art among modern art lovers

By Manvi Pant



Melbourne-based Anudeepa Kadiresan specialises in Dravidian art, notably of Indian gods and goddesses

With increasing knowledge and a growing demand for Indian art in the Western world, a lot of indigenous artists now have the opportunity to showcase their work in international galleries. Some of these artists are using a rich array of traditional and ethnic art forms to keep Indian mythology and customs intact in a foreign land. Meet versatile self-taught artist Anudeepa Kadiresan, an Indian artist in Australia, who uses Indian culture as a central theme and core voice for her artwork.

Born and brought up in Tirupur, Tamil Nadu, the 39-year-old was introduced to the world of art by her father at a very young age. But like all middle-class families, making ends meet was not easy for Anudeepa's parents, let alone

support her choice of career. "Even though I did my Bachelor's in computer science, my parents never hesitated to drive me around Tirupur to buy art material that was above their monthly budget," says Anudeepa, who is now based in Melbourne and is the founder of the Dravidian Art Gallery in the southeastern Australian metropolis.

Anudeepa moved to Australia after marriage in 2003, and her new life brought fresh beginnings, challenges and opportunities. "My husband, Kadiresan, works for Infosys. Since he is in the IT space, we moved a lot. Now we are settled in Melbourne and I am grateful that this place has presented me with a plethora of opportunities to witness amazing art at the National Gallery of Victoria. I also got access

to great books that enhanced my understanding on sketching techniques and the theory of colours.”

Specialising in Tanjore painting, which saw its golden period in the fifth century BCE, Anudeepa believes, “Art is not just a medium of expression, it is a universal language that goes beyond boundaries.” After settling in another country, when she started missing her culture and the traditions back home, she used

her knowledge to try fresh styles. She has participated in more than 30 exhibits in and around Melbourne. Her oeuvre ranges from pencil sketches, to kalamkari painting, to aluminium carving and even clay jewellery.

Each artist has their own quirk when it comes to art creation. In Anudeepa’s case, once a piece of art is completed, she leaves it in the living room of her home for a few months and allows herself the



L-R: Anudeepa Kadiresan in Melbourne; one of Anudeepa’s famed Tanjore paintings of Lord Murugan

this void to the best of her creativity. “I started communicating and connecting to my roots through my paintings,” she says.

Anudeepa’s work minutely displays both antiquity and character from a traditional point of view. With time, she has also learned realism, impressionism and contemporary forms of art and uses

time to improve the output before signing it. She also runs it by her husband and her sons, Rithvik, and Advait, whom she considers her most valuable critics. “They say a picture is worth a thousand words. I believe an artwork needs no words,” says Anudeepa. “My best language of communication is my brush and my colours are my vocabulary.” ■



Seeing & Believing

When an eye problem leads to an opening of the eyes

By Aekta Kapoor

There was a problem in my left eye and I put it down to being indoors for so many months during the lockdown. “I am getting too much of the computer and too little of the outdoors,” I thought to myself, assuming the issue would go away once lockdown ended and life went back to ‘normal’.

Of course, life never did go back to ‘normal’, and my eye problem persisted. One morning, I resolutely drove down to the neighbourhood optometrist. He checked if I needed spectacles but found that it was ‘something else’ and told me to see

a retina specialist.

I drove home in a state of shock. Worst-case scenarios loomed in my mind, as did the simultaneous cries of denial. “But I am too young to have age-related disorders!” “But all my work is related to the computer!” “But, God, I am following your purpose for me – then why hast thou forsaken me?” (Yes, I can be melodramatic with God like that.)

That night – hours ahead of my ophthalmologist – I had an existentialist crisis.

What if this was due to all my work on the laptop? Had I just

ruined my eyes in pursuit of a passion? Was all my work at *eShe* – the defining work of my life and what I consider my true purpose – worth losing my vision for?

I'd been working crazily on the computer for the past few months, there was no doubt about it. But what else would or could I have done? What else would I want to do with my life? Do we have our destiny already written out for us or do we create it with our free will? Is my purpose something I am born with or do I get to choose?

I barely slept that night, tossing in waves of anguish and a sense of my entire life having been a complete waste of time.

The next morning, there were 12 patients waiting ahead of me at the ophthalmologist's office. To dilate my pupils ahead of the retina scan, the doctor's assistant came put a medicated solution in my eyes. I had no choice but to sit quietly for almost two hours with my eyes closed while awaiting my turn. I prayed in my mind.

And there, in that crowded OPD amidst all that noise and mayhem, I had an opening of the eyes.

I observed the other patients with severe eye issues, wearing dark glass-

es or patches to fix bigger disorders than mine. And I was humbled to realise that my problem was (probably) not as bad as theirs.

I introspected on my purpose, and realised that, yes, we are born with a purpose but, yes, we also give our consent to it as we go along.

I thought about my work and my writing, and I realised that's all I really want to do and even if my left eye was to misbehave, I would still probably find a way to continue to do it.

I thought of the divine paradox – and how every truth of life comes with an opposite truth. Yes, we must be proactive and make things happen in our lives but, yes, we must also surrender to the process. Each time I have gone too far in one direction, the universe has reminded

**YES, WE MUST BE
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me to keep this balance between action and acceptance.

Take a step forward, *inhale*. Surrender, *exhale*. Ad infinitum.

The doctor – a very handsome man I could see – said it was not an age-related or computer-related disorder but I do need vitamins and eye drops for a while. He asked me to come in again after three months.

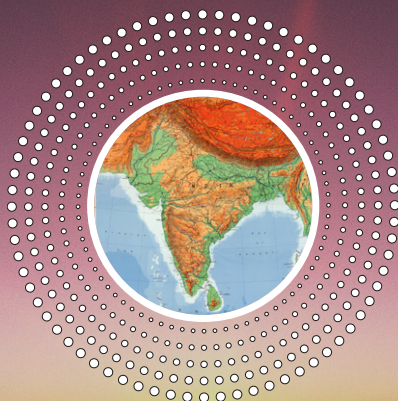
The funny thing is, I had got my answer even before I met him. ■



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