

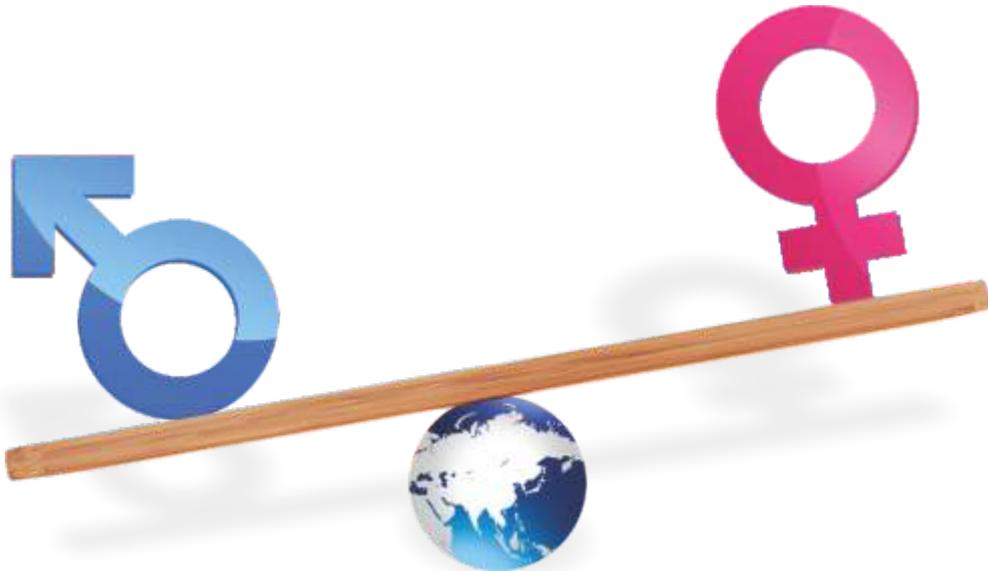
ON TRADE®

2023

Special Edition

on

WOMEN
A C H I E V E R S
WOMEN



in

Corporates / Entrepreneurship

Service Sector

Science & Technology

Social Enterprises

Sports



Bharat Ratna Sir M. Visvesvaraya

(15 September, 1860 - 14 April, 1962)

FIFTY YEARS AND COUNTING

M. Visvesvaraya Industrial Research and Development Centre (MVIRDC) is a non-profit company registered and licensed under Section 25 of the Companies Act, 1956 (currently Section 8 of the Companies Act, 2013). On 26 June, 2020 MVIRDC completed 50 years of continuous service to the promotion of trade and industry.

MVIRDC became a member of the World Trade Centers Association, New York, in 1971 and established the World Trade Center Mumbai, which is the first World Trade Center in India. MVIRDC, having spearheaded the movement of World Trade Centers in India with the establishment of WTCs at Bhubaneswar, Goa and Jaipur, is assisting MSMEs in these regions through various Trade Research, Trade Promotion, Trade Infrastructure including Commercial Offices, Business Center, Trade Facilitation Services and Trade Education Programmes.

Goodwill Message from the Chairman

The most promising strategy to attain overall socio-economic development is to invest in the untapped potential of women, who account for half of the world population. Women's contribution to the economy will be the greatest demographic dividend for India, which is set to become the most populous country in the world by overtaking China by mid 2023, according to a UN Report. Going by this report, the nation will also have the largest women population in the world, which is the most under-utilised resource for economic development. Bridging gender gap in social and economic spheres can provide a major fillip to the development aspiration of the country. Gender equality has attained a prominent place in the public discussion on sustainable economic development. There is undisputable link between women's economic participation and economic growth.



India has made tremendous progress in reducing gender equality across most sectors. Today, around 15% of aircraft pilots in India are women, compared to the world average of just 5%. The number of women sportspersons and athletes winning global sport events has risen in recent years. At the same time, there is a need to increase participation of women in entrepreneurship. Today, hardly 18% of registered MSME units are owned by women entrepreneurs, which is lower than the world average of 33% (as per World Bank Gender Data Portal). According to Nasscom, 18% of start-ups in India are led by women entrepreneurs, which is less than the global average of 40% (according to Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Report) and 15% of scientists in India are women, compared to the global average of 28% (UNESCO). The advancement in digital technologies offer great opportunity to bridge gender gap by improving women's access to education, credit, government schemes and markets.

The role of women is going to be of great importance in realising India's aspiration of becoming a developed economy by 2047. If every woman in the society becomes economically productive, it will give a major boost to our per capita income and elevate our economic position to those of the advanced countries. More importantly, we need more women entrepreneurs who can create livelihood opportunities for youth. It is the responsibility of our education system to instil the risk-taking attitude and entrepreneurial spirit among young women.

In this context, WTC Mumbai has compiled this publication to put spotlight on women achievers who have made extraordinary accomplishments amidst humble family circumstance by overcoming several challenges. According to the World Economic Forum, it will take 151 years to close gender gap in the economy. However, by going through the inspiring career feats of the 26 women profiled in this publication, I feel confident that we can easily bridge the gender gap if each and every family commits to empower their women members. Most of these women dedicated their success to their determination, persistence and supportive family members. The success stories of these women achievers demonstrate that women have huge untapped potential to multi-task and even do better than their male counterparts in some fields. Their stories prove that true empowerment comes from within and it has to be nurtured through self-confidence and courage.

I am happy to note that we are celebrating the admirable work of these great women whose life experiences will be a source of inspiration for many youth and aspiring women professionals.

Dr. Vijay Kalantri

Chairman
MVIRDC WTC Mumbai

Preface

As the world faces multiplicity of challenges, bridging the gender gap holds immense promise for a brighter and safer future. From empowering women in agriculture to greater diversity in corporate boardroom and political leadership, gender inclusion can address many challenges such as hunger, poverty, regional imbalance, corporate misgovernance and geopolitical tensions.

Every year, in the month of March, the dialogue on women's empowerment surfaces in public forum and industry events with new perspectives, inspiring success stories and new research. This year, MVIRDC WTC Mumbai has compiled this publication to honour women entrepreneurs and professionals whose illustrious career journey can inspire other women and aspiring youth.



I am delighted to note that this publication features the stories of 26 outstanding women in the field of entrepreneurship, academia and sports. These women achievers have shown the path for the aspiring youth through extraordinary accomplishments in their chosen field by braving all odds. The achievements of these women prove that passion, persistence and conviction can drive your journey along the most arduous path amidst several odds and challenges. Many women featured in this publication advanced in their career by defying societal pressure, gender bias and stereotypes. Some of these women faced temporary setback in their professional growth amidst compelling circumstances, but they kept their hopes live and pursued their dreams, which were finally realized as a reward for their persistence.

This publication carries stories of several first-generation entrepreneurs who started their business at home and eventually scaled up in volume and expanding across geography through patience and true entrepreneurial spirit. Some women achievers, despite having professional qualification and a cosy corporate job, risked launching social enterprise amidst financial and other resource constraints only to make a positive impact on budding women entrepreneurs and to promote eco-friendly products.

Success was not easy for any of them, as some entrepreneurs had to close their business mid-way; but it made them resilient and gave them an opportunity to un-learn and learn new things to launch a durable venture. Having risen above several odds, today, these entrepreneurs are extending a helping hand to youth and aspiring women entrepreneurs in their journey. The common message from all these success stories is that there may be many government schemes for women's empowerment, but the true empowerment lies in self-confidence and courage to prevail the odds.

This publication is a tribute to the 'enterprising' spirit of these achievers whose life journey holds invaluable lessons for youth and the society in general. This is also a humble effort in our trade facilitation initiatives to make our economy more gender inclusive. International Women's Day is not about making women strong as they are already strong. It is about changing the way we perceive that strength. I am confident that these success stories will change the perception of women about their strength by infusing a renewed sense of optimism and encourage the readers to dream and act big.

Rupa Naik

Executive Director
MVIRDC WTC Mumbai

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PROFESSIONALS

Women leaders in corporate sector serve as role models for aspiring youth to dream big and advance in their chosen career path. Indian women have held leadership positions in major global companies such as IBM India, HP India, Gap Inc, Capgemini and others in the recent past. Today, women lead at least 10% of the Fortune 500 companies, according to a report by Fortune magazine.

Representation of women at the senior management level of corporate sector is a sign of progress in gender equality in the economy. Even though women have equal access to education in most part of the country, they face several barriers in progressing in their professional career, especially because of family responsibilities, child care and gender bias at workplace.

A gender diverse management team improves the overall performance and bottom line of companies by bringing diverse management and problem solving skills to the table. As a result, there are regulatory requirements on minimum level of women representation on the boards of companies. Companies across sectors have realized that a diverse workforce is an important strategy for long term business growth and hence they are taking steps to make their workplace more inclusive and diverse. Some leading companies have launched special training programs to accommodate women who resume jobs after a long career break due to maternity or family care responsibilities. As a result, they are creating work environment, which support and empower women in advancing in their careers.

Even though women are well represented at the entry level and mid-level management position, they find it difficult to advance to the senior and top management level because of career breaks and discrimination at workplace, according to some surveys.

To promote diversity and inclusivity, equal opportunities should be provided to all staff, irrespective of gender, and a culture of zero tolerance to discrimination, conscious or unconscious bias and sexual harassment is adopted. Consequently, the number of women at the C-suite and board level of companies globally has been growing in recent years.

Women also have more options to grow their corporate leadership career with the emergence of new management roles in the last decade. Large companies across the world have created new roles such as chief digital officer, chief innovation officer, chief sustainability officer, chief diversity and inclusion officer and chief brand officer, to name a few to meet the ever growing business requirements.

This handbook features the inspiring stories of women directors who climbed up the corporate ladder through unwavering commitment and sheer hard work.

A healthy level of ambition and well grounded confidence in our own capabilities is an essential catalyst to our success



Ms. BAMA BALAKRISHNAN

Executive Director and CEO
Northern Arc Capital

I was born and raised in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, where I studied until my under graduation. My parents believed strongly in the value of a great education as the best foundation for our future and so, my sister and I had the good fortune of studying in one of the best schools in the city, the Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan group of schools. Being drawn to numbers and businesses, I specialised in commerce, and did my BCom from Meenakshi College for Women, Chennai. I then chose to do my MBA and studied at IIM Ahmedabad, in PGPM programme and graduated in 1999. I picked courses in finance and general management and landed a campus placement at ICICI Limited (which soon became ICICI Bank).

I worked with the bank for ten years across three countries and then moved back to Chennai in 2012. My stint with ICICI Bank ended amidst the global financial crisis of 2008-09.

Slightly disillusioned by the greed that seemed to pervade financial markets and driven by the urge to use my skills to contribute towards a purpose, I joined Northern Arc, then called IFMR capital, a company that believes in finance as a force for good and aims to enable

“ I often feel that much of what we attribute to our own capabilities is only made possible by the ecosystem that we are fortunate to be supported by. ”

access to finance for the underserved.

Northern Arc plays a key role in enabling access to finance to individuals and enterprises, particularly women and thereby empowers them. We work at the intersection of capital markets and financial inclusion with extensive use of data and technology to expand reach and access.

Ten years later, I am the Chief Operating Officer of the company and an Executive Director on the Board. It has been a tremendously satisfying journey of learning, growth and impact at scale.

As I reflect on my journey - personal and professional - I feel truly grateful to my family, teachers, friends, my many managers and mentors, my team and so many others for their guidance and support at critical junctures.

Indeed, I often feel that much of what we attribute to our own capabilities is only made possible by the ecosystem that we are fortunate to be supported by.

My schooling years and home environment largely shaped me as an individual. We were fortunate to have the guidance of the founder, Mrs. Y G Parthasarathy, a visionary in the field of education. Her leadership enabled her to leverage the ecosystem for the best experiences for the students - across academics, cultural experiences and all round development.

The value systems that would serve us well as we progressed in our lives and careers were deeply ingrained in us at school and at home - even as our parents and teachers role modelled it - hard work, integrity, team work, compassion, respect for those who

care for us, the pursuit of excellence in all that we do and so on.

While it may seem strange today, we studied and graduated at a time when the need for and acceptance of women being career oriented and financially independent - in our social strata - was not the norm. At best, education and banking were perhaps suitable career options.

The school and my home provided a completely open environment in which I could dream and aspire to be whatever I wanted without any stereotypes. Our ambition was kindled and nurtured.

Most importantly perhaps, the peer group that I had - friends and seniors, led the path in different ways and were role models for us. They saw the best in us even if we didn't and reminded us of what we could be.

The years spent at IIM Ahmedabad truly opened up my horizons - personally and professionally - as I made friends for life, started spreading my wings and really thinking about how I would like to build my career. My

“The opportunity at ICICI was truly unique - there was a high degree of empowerment and trust as well as a reasonable tolerance for failure - that emboldened us to be innovative and to learn and grow.”

passion for finance strengthened. The opportunity at ICICI was truly unique - as I worked with a group of brilliant individuals in the structured finance team focused on innovating financial solutions to make them work our clients. There was a high degree of empowerment and trust as well as a reasonable tolerance for failure - that emboldened us to be innovative and to learn and grow. This is something that stayed with me throughout my career - as I constantly look for new challenges and opportunities.

ICICI was successful in creating an entrepreneurial culture in spite of being a large institution at that time. I remember being a part of multiple cross team projects during my stints - linked to key strategic initiatives of the Bank - which catapulted my learning and confidence. I

was offered opportunities to stay on and grow in the Bank even as I moved across different locations in India and abroad.

Throughout my career, I have been very fortunate in having managers (men and women) who truly believed in empowering their teams, investing in their growth and success and pushing them to achieve their potential - sometimes even when they did not see it themselves. I believe that this is perhaps the single biggest enabler for all my growth and achievement.

ICICI Bank was a truly equal opportunities employer - gender equality was the norm without having to say so - especially with the presence of many senior women leaders in the organisation who served as role models. The role of senior women leaders who looked out for promising young women - to make sure they stayed and grew as leaders in the bank - and created opportunities for them - truly made a difference - certainly for me. This is an insight that has stayed with me as I grow in my career. The same culture continued and is even stronger at Northern Arc. To this day, we have more women in most meetings - internal and external - than any counterpart we meet.

There are a few things I wish I could have done better or differently. One, I think there is a lot of value in investing in formal coaching as professionals cross their early years of working and as a part of their deliberate career planning process. Two, I believe that as career spans get longer and disruption is the norm - be it through technology, regulations or otherwise, more generally, there is a need to invest continuously in self development - personal and professional. Thirdly, this is the era of leading fulfilling lives - not just having fulfilling careers. We often wait until it's too late to pursue our passions. We must find the time and place to make those things a part of our lives sooner rather than later.

In conclusion, one thing I would like to emphasise is that we are often only limited by our own imagination and view of our potential. We cannot always rely on others to push us towards our better selves and hence a healthy level of ambition and well grounded confidence in our own capabilities is an essential catalyst to our success.

As the Bhagavad Gita says, **'Elevate yourself through the power of your mind, and not degrade yourself, for the mind can be the friend and also the enemy of the self'**.



Opportunities may not present themselves often, what is more enduring is doing what you can, where you are, rather than wait



Ms. MEERA SIVA

CFA , Director, Shelter Venture Fund

“ I knew what I wanted and more importantly, all the things I certainly did not want. That helped a lot as I narrowed down my choices; as even if it is not a great fit, the downside risk is reduced.”

Some women – such as Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai – are born for some causes and inspire the world naturally. But many of us have to work on finding our guiding light that would inspire us first before being able to share that tiny spark. We are not the sun or the moon, but part of the million stars that twinkle to guide the traveller through the dark nights of the soul.

As a kid, I ranked high on smartness per inch or kg – more because I was always little for my age! I knew what I wanted and more importantly, all the things I certainly did not want. That helped a lot as I narrowed down my choices; as even if it is not a great fit, the downside risk is reduced. This made me say no to medicine and study

“ It takes way more courage to embrace your character than to follow a formula.”

computer science (newly introduced in high schools in the late 80's).

My engineering college journey jolted me on to a new world, because I had studied in girls-only schools in middle and high school. The low number of women versus men, and the hidden prejudices that reared its heads frequently, somewhat shocked me.

I resolved to be quiet but do well in college and in work, since always actions speak later, but louder. I passed with multiple gold medals and as the best outgoing student in academics and extra-curricular.

My first job was a story, as was my second. I joined an IT firm in Mumbai but they did not have any real project for us new hires. I simply hated my job right away and became a bit disillusioned about work, after all these years of stellar academics. I was quite a trouble maker - I filed a long list of bugs when asked to do testing and was promptly taken off that role! Finally I quit, shocking my parents (who by the way were sending me money to live on).

I joined another firm as the first women engineer in the department (actually the whole building in Vakola). It was a great learning experience – for me and even more so for the all-men team. It was heartening to note that when I left (to do my Masters in the US), my boss (a very conservative person) said he would hire a woman.

I realized that while being a woman engineer puts you in a minority, it can be an advantage also. For one, you are remembered in a room full of people. Some supervisors who reflected on how things have changed after I became part of the team, remarked that the culture and meeting productivity had improved due to the diversity. I was a sought-after talent, not just for the work I completed or the patents I co-authored, but for who I was as a person.

There is a saying – do what you can, where you are. This simple command has been very effective and helpful for

me right from the start. We may truly wish to accomplish some great things and in specific places or by a certain time. Such opportunities may not present themselves often and what is more enduring is doing what you can, where you are, rather than wait. In some cases, for instance during COVID, the doing may be as simple as being engaged on LinkedIn!

The biggest payoff of consistently doing makes one prepare for greatness when a cause eventually presents itself. This may be dismissed as lack of ambition or 'humility', which is invariably seen as a negative trait in a woman. It is after all a stereotype, and hence something one must shrug off to succeed. But you know what? I am proud to be humble – and I let you grapple with how that is even possible to do!

“I have trained myself to see the spark in other women near me. With that lens, I am finding immense inspiration all around, every place in the world I go to.”

approached as 'hi, how may I use you' rather than 'hi, how may I help you get ahead (and hope you do the same for me at some point)'. Often, rather than networks from the same field, a diverse group that may span multiple sectors can be extremely valuable in connecting the dots and boosting value for any idea/project.

Playing for the long run – life is a marathon, not a 100-meter dash – is also something I found helpful to put things in perspective. For example, I decided to switch career from engineering to finance after seeing the

huge negative effect the global financial crisis had and this was due to something basic in finance – ethics. Many thought it was too late for someone nearly 40 years of age to switch careers. But the long-term perspective helped put the effort to switch. It is satisfying to see the difference being an impact investor working on low-income housing related innovations (sheltermtech) makes.

“Do what you can, where you are.”

I have seen that you can be yourself and don't have to wear men's character traits to be seen as effective. Being compassionate as a boss is refreshingly good and there is no need to fit the mould created by men to be a leader. It takes way more courage to embrace your character than to follow a formula. But you must hone your leadership style and skills slowly but surely over time and with every opportunity you get or create.

One way to do that is volunteering. Rather than rant about how no one willing to give a leadership role that pays, I found that being a volunteer for a cause naturally helps me feel motivated and take up responsibilities to realize dreams. This is one advice I would strongly put forth, as there is a lot one can learn and add to one's resume. It does give your career a boost and financial returns, but you have to pay it forward by delivering on the unpaid work you take up. It boosts your confidence immensely because you have been there and done that.

A mystery I grapple with is the trouble women have in networking. How is it that women who are great communicators, who are generally more people loving as a group, have to be nudged to network? I have worked on the 'your network is your networth' philosophy, and became a HNI over time! The key here is to be giving first rather than taking. Often, network building fails as it is

Certain decisions could have been appropriate for short-term results but may not be ideal in the long-term. And this is where having a good mentor – who is not a family member – can be helpful. There were times when I was taking decisions a bit emotionally. My family supported these but my mentors helped me think through the

“You can be yourself and don't have to wear men's character traits to be seen as effective.”

ramifications of it for my career and helped me see and seek the small support or change that could make me get through that rough patch.

We often see inspiration as a torch that burns bright and is handed over. Yes, that is true but just by probability, it is far and few. Rather than seeking distant stars, I have trained myself to see the spark in other women near me. With this lens, I am finding immense inspiration all around, every place in the world I go to. What will be lovely is to someday be the inspiration (change) I want to see, to paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi's quote.

■

Charting a career path in the male dominated foundry sector



Ms. SHYAMAL AROSKAR

Regional Director, The Institute of Indian Foundrymen (Western Region)

I have been working with THE INSTITUTE OF INDIAN FOUNDRYMEN for over the past decade and gained immense pleasure from supporting and mentoring women who want to be a part of the foundry industry.

With more than four decades of professional exposure, I am of the perspective that only hard work and the right attitude is the keys to great success.

I joined the foundry, at a time when it was mostly owned by male professionals. However, I decided that this patriarchal industry would not shake my confidence and passion. Born and brought up in Mumbai, I started my career in the foundry industry and still continue to succeed in it. As a woman Director, I was a pioneer in educating and supporting the foundry members across the country.

After I completed my B.Sc. from Mumbai University, I completed a diploma in Public Speaking from the Indian Chamber of Commerce and started working in a foundry lab where I had to do most of the work manually without the availability of any spectrometers. Being brought up with three brothers, it became easier for me to work along with male foundry staff. I was not at all wary about it, in fact, I absolutely enjoyed working there. I feel proud

“ With more than four decades of professional exposure, I am of the perspective that only hard work and the right attitude is the keys to great success..”

to have gained a lot of experience working besides male subordinates under their invaluable guidance whilst honing my skills.

A journey from being a Lab Technician, then a Purchase Manager to finally being Foundry Association Regional Director was a complete roller coaster ride with multiple sacrifices and overwhelming experiences.

Of course, there are certain inhibitions that prevent women from working in the manufacturing sector. At the same time, they can easily come out of it if they intend to, as at the end of the day the interest has to come from within. No one can be forced to do any kind of work. I have spent hours in the lab working with dangerous chemicals like Sulfuric acid and Nitric acid but at the end of it all, it was rewarding.

During the initial years, after two hours of lab work, I used the rest of my time in expressing keen interest in the manufacturing aspect of work. From the lab, I was shifted to the administrative department where I gained in-depth experience about the manufacturing unit. I was later inducted in the purchase department. I eventually



Myself with EEPC Director & Foreign Casting buyer at Dusseldorf, Germany.



“ I have spent hours in the lab working with dangerous chemicals like Sulfuric acid and Nitric acid but at the end of it all, it was rewarding.”

changed my job when I got an offer to work as a Purchase Manager of a valve manufacturing company.

At the helm of my career, I had to go on a sabbatical of 10 years as I wanted to devote time to my family. However, my grit and determination made sure that even after the hiatus; I never lost interest and was keen on working in the same area.

I started my career at the age of 21 and now at 65, I am the Regional Director at The Institute of Indian Foundrymen. People tend to believe that me being a Director at IIF is a defining factor for the community which comprises not only foundry members but also the raw material and equipment suppliers. Taking charge of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, however, I have to extend my support to members belonging to any part of the country as per their requirement.

I have always taken great pride in imparting my knowl-



“ When you start to work at grass root level, you can learn a lot from the beginning and eventually grow.”

edge to individuals and engage with them by organizing seminars, exhibitions, B2B meetings in India and abroad.

I truly believe that stepping out of your comfort zone is not easy for anyone, regardless of the gender. When you start to work at grass root level, you can learn a lot from the beginning and eventually grow.

I am hopeful about women getting even bigger opportunities in the foundry sector, a business that was once essentially dominated by men, foundry is now more inclusive and has many women members as well.



SERVICE SECTOR

Service sector is an integral part of an economy. Many services add value to the manufacturing and agriculture activities which cannot function without critical services such as banking, finance, marketing, advertising, legal and other professional services.

Services constitute an integral part of the production and delivery process in manufacturing, from R&D, product design in the initial stages to transport, distribution retailing, repair and maintenance in the final stages. Byju's, Nykaa, Mobikwik and Zolo are some of the popular service sector start-ups founded or co-founded by women entrepreneurs in India. According to the latest Annual Report of the Ministry of MSME, Government of India, women entrepreneurs own 20% of micro, small and medium enterprises in the country.

Service sectors such as education, advertising, healthcare, marketing, audit and accounting, banking and human resource management have high growth potential in a rapidly growing economy such as India. As the income level and living standards increase, demand for better education, healthcare, care taker services, hotel, tourism and catering services also grows.

There is also growing opportunity for entrepreneurship in business process outsourcing, knowledge process outsourcing, customer support services and value added IT services in this age of digital economy. Women are specially gifted with attributes such as empathy, emotional intelligence, conflict management, inter-personal skills and adaptability, which are essential skills in client-facing service sectors.

Women are also increasingly exploring entrepreneurial opportunities in other service sectors such as marriage counseling, financial planning, legal advisory, beauty & fashion and tailoring, to name a few. This handbook carries inspiring stories of women entrepreneurs who established businesses in education, finance, recruitment, engineering consultancy, catering and other areas. Many of these women are first generation entrepreneurs who deployed their hard earned savings in their chosen business ventures and scaled them up through meticulous planning and ingenuity.

It's no easy feat to turn your big dream into a successful business, but it is possible



Ms. ADITI THAKUR

Co-founder, MBA +

About me, as a Co-founder of MBA+:

Born in Delhi, graduated from Lady Irwin College, completed my MBA in Marketing from Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management. Today I am the co-founder of MBA+ which is India's largest vernacular audio library for entrepreneurs, students and professionals.

My first stint was at HCL Technologies. This helped me develop crucial marketing, communication, and stakeholder engagement skills.

I have always been determined to make something of myself. Groomed into being a communications expert, I went onto handle digital for 'Brand India' at World Economic Forum. Trip to WEF in 2013 made me realise the power of brand India. That is why in 2023 as honourable Prime Minister shri Narendra Modi ji announced 'Amrit Kaal' we launched MBA+, with an aim of transforming Bharat's Youth into entrepreneurs.

Momprenurship- a win win:

Maintaining a work-life balance and juggling responsibilities is not the only big challenge that mompreneurs face. It's a lot! I understand! But it is possible to turn your big idea into a successful business with a little planning and a

lot of hard work. And of-course a lot of patience!

I deeply believe that mompreneurs are unnamed superheroes who deserve a lot of acknowledgement. The struggle of having to keep up with domestic duties and proving competence at the workplace is something even I deal with. **But being a mom I am used to getting it done!**

Like most mom's mornings are devoted to errands, making lunches, running to the store for forgotten items and afternoons are spent chauffeuring the kid around. This in my opinion is the perfect winning recipe for entrepreneurship.

"Do what you want to do with all your heart. Every woman has the capacity and potential to do it."

As soon as I made the decision to embrace my own potential and curiosity, I began to create a profession that reflected who I am and my feeling of gratitude and in every manner contribute to the growth of India.

About my company MBA+:

MBA+ is Bharat's first audio only Vernacular Business school. We teach business and entrepreneurship in easy-to-understand Hindi to the youth and small business owners of Bharat. This is a massive problem that is not being talked about much today. But it will hit us right where it hurts the most in the coming years.

Imagine. India has 80 crore youth. Even if by some magic 40 crore find a meaningful job, what will happen to the rest of the 40 crore? What will they do?

MBA+ teaches business in a 5 step process. 1. Business foundation 2. Business Strategy 3. Sales & Marketing 4. People Function and 5. Technology. They learn how to start and grow their business with consistency, courage, patience and get tons of support from our community which consists of business owners from all walks of life.

The journey started with nothing. Today we have reached almost 1 crore of minutes of videos watched every month on just our facebook page, without spending a single rupee. This is a validation of our the quality of MBA+ business education. Today MBA+ is making its permanent home in the hearts of Bharat's small business owners and youth!

“ I deeply believe that mompreneurs are unnamed superheroes who deserve a lot of acknowledgement. ”

Being an entrepreneur and a mother, this is what I wish to share with all the aspiring women entrepreneurs out there.

Acknowledge your strength:

Women possess unbelievable inner strength.

Entering motherhood just meant that we maybe sleep deprived but we are now hyperaware of our surroundings, which is an added advantage. Instead, you are the powerhouse of strength, capability and multitasking so now utilise this to your advantage. Don't hold back! Be fierce and now that you have learn to handle challenges better, create a great example of hard work, persistence and success for the kids.

Afterall, there can be no better role model than their mother!

Master work-life balance:

It's not only a concept but since you are your own boss now, you get to decide your work hours and create work life balance. After the kids' bedtime, you might feel tempted to rest and turn on Netflix, but know that starting a business requires energy, discipline and motivation. Even if you work for a brief window of time in the evenings or early mornings, dedicating focused time in your routine communicates, "This matters, and I'm doing it for myself."

But please know. No one's holding back. Enjoy every small moments of motherhood.

Create a support structure for yourself:

Mind yourself this journey will be very lonely, until you become successful. Only then the people will start acknowledging you.

Share your feeling and take help, if possible, from people that you can rely upon. May it be your partner, siblings,

parents or friends. Delegating your household work or using day care services will rescue you from those extra responsibilities so that you can focus on other work.

First step is to join a community of like-minded people, especially small business owners or entrepreneurs. Network or volunteer. Identify a cause that is important to you and get involved because it will in turn give you gratification and support from the like-minded people. Its important!

Choose your team wisely:

Any business owner will tell you that carefully selecting your team members is essential to your success. You need workers who can handle the duties that take up too much of your important and finite time, demand expertise you're not as proficient in, or both. Because mompreneurs have twice as little time as typical entrepreneurs, they must be twice as selective when choosing their work family. Because they are your second family, your employees must support you in the same ways that your company will. Hire the kind of folks who will lessen your stress as well as your burden.

Manage time wisely and take breaks:

Manage your time and work and let your family and support structures manage the stuff which can be delegated. Spend first thirty minutes of your morning to schedule your day, plan your calendar and schedule breaks, and interruptions. Not being able to find enough time, personally and professionally is not going to cut it.

It's a myth that entrepreneurs enjoy lots of downtimes, rather it is a full-time job. But it is so very important to learn how to take time off effectively so that you recharge. It will allow you to better serve your community members or clients. Not only can you complete your societal obligations during this period but also enjoy your favourite hobby or to catchup with family and friends.

This practice will always help you stay motivated, destress and energized throughout the month.

Know that It's no easy feat to turn your big dream into a successful business, but it is possible.

Download the mobile application from our website - www.mbaplus.co



Realizing your full potential is easier now than ever- this could be you too tomorrow!



Ms. ASHWATHY VENUGOPAL

Co-founder and CEO, Avasarshala

Ashwathy is a Social Entrepreneur, Co-Founder and CEO of Avasarshala. Apart from being a TEDx Speaker and a Board Member at Kectil Youth Leadership, USA who featured in '75 Womenpreneurs of India' 2022 released by Atal Innovation Mission for 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav'. She is also a thought leader who wishes to guide young minds to make their life interesting- one day at a time.

Her Story: *"Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life"* is the mantra Ashwathy picked up from her father who was an entrepreneur, transitioning across enterprises over the years. She has said to have experienced many highs and lows of entrepreneurship - the joy of making profits, the pang of losses incurred, the emptiness when a business (unfortunately) shuts down and thrills beginning the next venture. Not surprisingly, Ashwathy truly believe (and knows for a fact) that the world is full of opportunities- there is always a new door to open. "Maybe this is the reason why it did not give me cold feet to quit a well-paying corporate role to become an entrepreneur today" she says.

Opening Doors: Initially, Ashwathy was not aware of the huge number of leadership programs and fellowships available nationally as well as globally. She always thought that her academics and college activities were

enough exposure. But once she joined the corporate jungle she was hit by the need to up-skill and stay relevant. What started as a hunt for webinars and online courses led her to the world of leadership programs and international fellowships. She was surprised at the number of avenues available for the youth. She started applying, and had to go through numerous unsuccessful applications until she was selected for the 2017 'Kectil World Leadership Program' (KWLP). It was a year-long program which tested her commitment and mindset to 'be the change you want to see'. In 2018, Ashwathy was selected as one of the 27 Youth Leaders across 108 countries and 700+ participants to represent ones respective country in the KWLP (2019) at Atlanta, USA. This was a huge avenue for her to meet numerous world leaders, engage in problems faced by youth around the world and truly reflect on what more she can do as a youth for her own society back in India. She realized that life is what one makes of it and there are abundant facilities to gain exposure and bring change to one's own life and that of others around - just that one should be ready to receive it when it comes by.

Founding Avasarshala: It took Ashwathy a while to realize that academic exposure is not enough. She needed access to opportunities that honed her skills and talents to grow in life. Today, she is on the move with a mission to help as many young people achieve the same, with her. Ashwathy said that when she stepped out of her comfort zone, some of the best things started to happen in her life, and she Co-Founded Avasarshala.

Avasarshala is a personalized discovery and comprehensive profile building platform for school students. It connects each student with local, national and global opportunities, recommended to them based on their age, location and interest areas.

Students gain exposure as well as a framework to utilize these avenues to create a personal profile to grow further or even secure seats in foreign universities.

Link to Website: <https://www.avasarshala.com/>

Link to App: <https://app.avasarshala.com/>

Finding Avenues- Shaping Lives:

One opportunity led to the other and now Ashwathy is involved in many leadership and international organiza-

tions. She grew in her role at Kectil to become a Board Member, and is also a part of many international fellowship programs such as Cherie Blair Foundation Mentoring Women in Business, Vital Voices GROW Fellowship, WEDU Asian Rising Star, Youth IGF India as well as EIR at IIM Kozhikode etc. She is the former City Curator of Global Shaper Community (World Economic Forum) and part of Headstart Entrepreneur's Network.

In 2020, Ashwathy was recognized among Top 5 Social Innovators from India and People's Choice Awardee at Youth Co:Lab India (in partnership with Atal Incubation Mission and UNDP India). She is the recipient of Eastern Bhoomika Iconic Women Awards 2020 and her venture Avasarshala has been Internationally recognized as Top 10 Purpose Driven Innovations by Bridge for Billions and Top 30 Most Inspiring Digital Innovations by Partos, Netherlands.

Ashwathy built Avasarshala to connect students with opportunities for growth. Avasarshala students have availed Scholarships, Fellowships and Leadership opportunities worth INR 12.5 million in the past one year, in the regional, national and international scope. 187 students got access to International opportunities including competitions, leadership and growth opportunities last year alone. **Around 63% of Avasarshala opportunities are utilized by girl students.** "I utilize each and every opportunity that comes my way and show students that it is possible to fulfil their dreams if they allow themselves to grab new 'Avasars' (opportunities)."

I knew I was doing the right thing when little girls came up to me and said they want to be like me one day. Moments like that are too powerful and "I feel too happy in the journey I set out to build Avasarshala" highlighted Ashwathy. **She believes that avenues for women are abundant, and now more than ever. If one is on the lookout, the possibilities for are infinite.**

Ashwathy has set herself in the path of realizing her dreams and ambitions, and is moving with a mission to help as many young people achieve the same, with her. This is the core idea behind Avasarshala.

Avasarshala has partnered with event organizers in the capacity of Outreach Partners, helping over 25,000 students get access to aspirational opportunities.

Avasarshala students individually access opportunities that changes their lives. Through Avasarshala, students have been selected for entrepreneurship challenges, Innovation Awards, KODA Grants, etc. This year one of our user, named Eva Mary Hormis became a TEDx speaker through the interventions of Avasarshala. Link: <https://youtu.be/2T061EZioak>

Youth Forum Switzerland is one such program that has been thus far accessible to only students in the US and Europe.

Avasarshala has been the outreach partner for this program for India for the last three terms, hence opening up opportunities to all Indian students. 40 students have reached the final levels and successfully represented India at this forum to meet with Global Changemakers.

Avasarshala facilitates United Nation's SDG Awareness through read-learn-do method with close to around 4500 students across India every year.

Similarly, Avasarshala has been able to bring another International Impact Competition called 'Earth Prize Initiative' to India. 67 Indian schools and their teams participated in this sustainability project competition through Avasarshala.

What does Ashwathy do?

Ashwathy is always on the lookout for new and interesting avenues that can help shape young minds and lives. Did you know about Wedu or Kectil or even Vital Voices till today? Ashwathy's way forward is to make young adults become familiar with such abundance of avenues, and make it easily accessible to them.

Ashwathy is passionate about speaking and sharing her thoughts, so she frequently talks at corporate events, colleges and networking events addressing youth and students to take charge of their life.

She uses such stages to familiarize them with opportunities available locally and globally that can lead on to more avenues for them to think and do things differently. She is a curator for life changing opportunities.

"Each of us has our own story of breaking biases and carving our own space in the world of innovation and business. No matter how much or how less one has struggled to pave their own way – we should realize and remember that we are standing on the shoulders of 'SHeroes of yesterday. It is our responsibility to lend the same strong shoulders for women innovators and entrepreneurs of tomorrow" Ashwathy pointed out.

As you grow you change – As you change you grow



Ms. CHHAYA SEHGAL

Founder & CEO, The Winning Edge

I was the first born in a Maharashtrian teacher's family in rural Madhya Pradesh. Education, culture, and old-fashioned ideals of commitment, hard-work, respect, accountability and ethics were the foundation of our upbringing. Personal integrity and the strength of character were considered the topmost virtues. I inherited self-motivation, and the fire in the belly for accomplishment from my Mother.

My father was a revered and much in demand professor of mathematics; idealistic and honest to the core. But never a favor was either given or taken despite the power he enjoyed. My mother was a scholar of Agra University; MA in philosophy, she was a home maker, our mentor and taught us self-reliance and worked hard to ensure our overall development despite limited resources and opportunities. Due to her committed coaching, I completed the entire education on scholarships. We were two sisters and a brother and all were given equal opportunity outside and equal responsibility at home. The work division and the rulebook for our conduct was quite gender agnostic. The atmosphere was pretty liberal and conducive for all-round growth; however, the routine discipline was enforced with an iron rod. I learned early in life that discipline and consistency are non-negotiable for attaining success.

My schooling and graduation happened in Hindi medium

“ I learned early in life that discipline and consistency are non-negotiable for attaining success. ”

in obscure villages of MP. Then I secured merit-based admission in ICT (then UDCT) and thereafter in JBIMS Mumbai for Professional Education following which I joined the Maharatna Oil Giant Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd. in June 1983. During my stint there for thirteen long years, I had the opportunity to work in almost all the departments of the Finance stream. Thereafter, it started stagnating, and the responsibilities at home front grew rapidly. So, I decided to give up the job in the interest of effective work life interface and freedom to choose my path for self actualisation.

My husband Arun Sehgal and I (always wanted to be entrepreneurs) met while pursuing MBA in JBIMS. My job for thirteen long years gave security and stability to my family until 'Chempro Exports India' started by him established its business of merchant exports of chemicals, colors and pharmaceuticals as a Government recognized Export House successfully. Today, we have presence in about 50 countries with over 500 products. An accelerated growth and progress is possible when we give 200% to our partnerships and focus on complimenting each other.

After I quit my job, I engaged as a visiting faculty with my Alma mater JBIMS and a journey of fast paced learning began. Soon corporate training, development and consulting offers started to pour in; and association with the industry, prestigious professional bodies and institutions commenced. The entrepreneur in me recognized the opportune time to set up my company 'The Winning Edge'.

Simultaneously, as a passionate educator, a believer and an early promoter of Entrepreneurship, I became a much in demand Mentor and Faculty in niche programs such as the 'Program on Enterprise Training for Women' as early as in 1997 with 'Scottish Enterprise Foundation, University of Sterling' and 'SIDBI'. During this period I also coached the Women Entrepreneurs of 'Agakhan Development Network' for business acumen in their native languages.

“Second to the top - no matter what: This prejudice about their competence makes women tireless workers, bestows them with a never-say-die spirit, humility and does not allow the complacency to set in; which in due course prepares them to become tough entrepreneurs and capable leaders in their chosen professions.”

All said and done, women do face additional challenges; more so if they wish to pursue a professional path. Most of the working women are permanently under scrutiny at work as well as at home and have to continue proving their professional competence and personal commitment. Legally speaking, they may have equal rights; however in reality they still continue to be considered second to their male counterparts in family, society and workplace. Having to spend the day away at workplace; they have to regularly work twice as hard and invest their personal time of rest and recreation at home to fulfill their familial obligations and once back to work they have to consistently show initiative for taking on responsibilities and not shy away from clocking in extra hours to prove that they mean business.

Although the blessing in disguise here is that this constant treatment of being 'second to the top - no matter what' always pushes them to aim for higher. This position of disadvantage makes women tireless workers, bestows them with humility and with a never-say-die spirit and does not allow the complacency to set in which in due course prepares them to become tough entrepreneurs and capable leaders in their chosen professions.

Mother Nature has also loaded women with greater responsibility of childbirth and motherhood! However, the joys and rewards of motherhood are unparalleled and bring in rich dividends of gratification and fulfillment and make us better human beings filled with empathy, compassion, tolerance, patience and a realization that as a leader we must think of our team, organization and other stakeholders before us. This empowers us to develop a thought leadership competency rooted in the heart which is a great asset at the work place in launching

and leading the transformational initiatives to support the society and conserve the environment in addition to economic wealth creation which is the need of today.

The best gifts of this less than fair deal and never ending call of duty with multiple priorities, variety of struggles and conflicting responsibilities, are high Social Quotient (SQ) and Emotional Quotient (EQ), and becoming more resourceful, collaborative and tenacious. Along the way, we learn to prioritize our efforts and time more effectively to ably merge both, personal and professional goals. So, I see the challenges faced by women professionals as the very foundation of their success. Every delay and a roadblock in the beginning of a journey becomes eventually a source of empowerment and enrichment. Be it health issues, monetary crunch, non-acceptance and non-appreciation; there is a lot to be grateful for those unwanted obstacles, rejections, limitations, and sheer toil which seal her will to succeed no matter what!

“The best gifts of this less than fair deal and never ending call of duty with multiple priorities, variety of struggles and conflicting responsibilities, are high SQ and EQ, and becoming more resourceful, collaborative and tenacious.”

In long term, she is rewarded generously by a contented predicament and due respect and love of her people in addition to professional recognition as she grows through these difficult and painful experiences and acquires unshakeable confidence! And believe me, confidence has no competition!

My childhood upbringing, education, struggles and lessons learned over the forty years of my professional journey while trying to give my best at home helped me develop an unwavering customer focus, service orientation and a desire for constant learning. An experience as an employee as well as an employer, working for a massive corporation and later starting my own company with only one person that is me, working through the public sector culture to later with multinationals as well as MSMEs and having 'been there everywhere and had done it all', I could understand the customer expectations

with precision. During this journey, the list of collaborative association with prestigious professional bodies of 'The Winning Edge' has been equally long which enabled me to network and showcase my capabilities well in professional circles.

As an educator, I constantly learned the global best practices through research and get reverse mentored by the youngsters. These kept me updated, competitive and relevant through the rapidly changing business environment and deliver the best possible sustainable value proposition while never compromising on ethics and the excellence in execution; while dealing with customers, students, mentees and colleagues.

I am also a Fellow of the Institute of Directors and a Certified Independent Director with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs.

“Today, my multifaceted experience is found extremely valuable as a mentor and coach by the youngsters and women in Entrepreneurship Schools, Start-ups and E Cells of universities.”

I was unanimously elected as the second woman President of Bombay Management Association (the first Management Association of our country) during 2019 – 2020 and successfully launched and conducted many futuristic and novel initiatives to enhance industry academia collaboration, research, L&D modules for leadership development and high level conventions; which also resulted in a handsome contribution to the bottom-line of association.

A pioneering initiative during my presidential tenure was to institutionalize – 'BMA ASSURED Enterprise of the Year Award'; an improved, more relevant and futuristic version of traditional 'BMA Entrepreneurship Award' under the guidance of Chief Jury Dr. R. A. Mashelkar, inspired by the progressive concept of ASSURED INNOVATION from his book 'Leap Frogging to Pole Vaulting' – The Winner of Business Book of the Year Award during the Tata Literature Live 2019-2020.

Today, my multifaceted experience is found extremely

“My childhood upbringing, education and the struggles and lessons learned over the forty years of my professional journey while trying to give my best at home helped me develop an unwavering customer focus, service orientation and a desire for constant learning.”

valuable as a mentor and coach by the youngsters and women in Entrepreneurship Schools, Start-ups and E Cells of universities.

At this juncture at 'The Winning Edge', our main focus is going to be on developing more and more happypreneurs, values driven leaders, ethical teams, international business creators with a focus on ESG. We specialise in grooming entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs and business owners into creating Scale ups from the Start-ups. Also, the focus with our mentees will be on sustainable business building by promoting Green Entrepreneurship and Frugal Innovation, socially responsible initiatives, coaching and guiding women entrepreneurs and family businesses. I am a registered mentor with Atal Incubation Centre – Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini Sansthan and actively engaged in contributing there in their vision of nation building under the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan'.

I love my work and the opportunities for giving back to society and personal growth, interaction and engagement with youngsters, women and colleagues it creates; and unwind with music, dance, dramas, movies and cultural activities. I love animals and like to indulge my children, family and friends by cooking for them. I enjoy travel and discovering the places of historic importance, natural beauty and wonder by exploring museums, local culture, food, handicrafts find really rejuvenating. My diverse professional engagements and personal indulgences resulted in me co-authoring and publishing a book on parenting titled 'Can Moms Take a Chill Pill'; launched all over India in 2008, having sold over 5000 copies. I feel blessed to be living my passion.



From a job seeker to an entrepreneur in the placement industry, journey of Ms. Ubale



Ms. CHITRA UBALE

Founder - WAY-UP Placements & Consultants

“I decided to quit my secure, full-time banking job to start my own recruitment business. I was 47 then, but I did not let that deter me at all.”

I was born in a lower-middle class family where we lived in a single room home of (10ftx10ft) in Mumbai's Shivaji Park area. We were the six of us, living in that home, my three younger siblings, my parents and I.

Our family had very limited means—we had a sole breadwinner in my father, with his job as a small-time employee in a cooperative society. It was not easy to sustain the family within such limited means. Despite that, all of us siblings completed our education, instilled with the firm belief that gaining education was the only way to social and economic prosperity.

I studied in a marathi language municipal school, but despite which I went on to finish my graduation from Bandra's MMK College (in an english medium) followed, much later on, by an MBA in Social Work from Mumbai University.

“It wasn't easy and setbacks were many—my first business partner duped me. It was heartbreaking, but I did not give up.”

Growing up, I would often be in awe when I saw my uncle and my grandfather, both of whom were prosperous businessmen. Seeing them, a belief took strong roots within me: I wanted to become an entrepreneur, in order to break out of the vicious circle of semi-poverty. But my family's precarious conditions meant that I had to take up a job, as an assistant in the erstwhile Bank of Madura which later merged with ICICI Bank.

Our already-delicate existence snapped when my older sister, a gold medalist from UDCT, was detected with a serious kidney ailment. Whatever sparse savings we had accumulated were wiped off in a stroke, towards her treatment. Despite this, we could not save her. Financially and emotionally, this phase dragged us down and set us back by many years. My dreams of being an entrepreneur were dashed and I was forced to stick to my job.

I had, however, refused to give up on my dreams. Things gradually changed after my marriage in 1991. Our bank merged with ICICI Bank and life became very busy. My daughter was born in July 1992 and life revolved around motherhood and the demanding job of the bank.

Despite that, I kept thinking of ways in which I could pursue my dreams. Finally, after years, I decided to make them happen. After my daughter became an IT engineer, cleared all gate exams with flying colors and left for higher studies to USA, I decided to take a break from my banking job to pursue my entrepreneurial ambitions. My husband's career was flourishing and he had been appointed the General Manager by then. That's when I decided to quit my secure, full-time banking job to start my own recruitment business. I was 47 then, but I did not let that deter me at all. I decided that I needed to study more, and hence, enrolled myself in an MBA in Social Work. My husband and in laws stood by me and encouraged me to pursue my education, even at the risk of losing the stability my job offered. They stood by me as I took my baby steps into becoming an entrepreneur. It wasn't easy and setbacks were many—my first business

“ I have firmly believed that to be a successful entrepreneur, one needs to show care and empathy towards those around you, especially those who have stood by you through your struggles.”

partner duped me. It was heartbreaking, but I did not give up.

My dreams bore fruit. In 2013, I started a new firm by name Way-Up Placements in partnership with two young acquaintances. Although we had started getting work from major private banks, life was not easy. The working conditions were grueling—the banks were very demanding, and we often had to swallow humiliation at their hands. We stayed on, slowly working to establish our rock-solid credentials and gaining the confidence of some of India's biggest banks. From hurling insults at us, these banks started holding us up as examples worthy of emulation, before other vendors. Our business grew steadily, but I was aiming higher.

I wanted to take on more challenges, and I decided that I wanted to branch out to foreign placements. It wasn't easy to do so. It required grit, persistence and perseverance: for two years, I followed up with the Ministry of External Affairs to finally bagged the license that allowed me to conduct foreign placements.

These efforts have paid off: I am now conducting overseas placements full-time. Having struggled and emerged through various challenges, I have also consciously mentored others around me. I have constantly encouraged Sarika, my business partner, to pursue her engineering post-graduation. I am thrilled to say that she has now finished her MBA and is now appearing for her final LLB exams. Gratitude is a cornerstone in my value system: I have firmly believed that to be a successful entrepreneur, one needs to show care and empathy towards those around you, especially those who have stood by you through your struggles.

My success, born from a life of struggles, has pushed me to mentor other budding entrepreneurs. As a result, I have now joined DICCI, which has been actively promoting entrepreneurial skills and culture among business persons coming from backward classes. DICCI Chairman, Padmashri Dr. Milind Kamble has been a great support and a mentor who has trained me in nuances of big businesses.

DICCI has played a crucial role in helping me expand my business. I am now exporting human resources to Middle East and Europe and UK.

The journey has been a long one: from being the young girl in a cramped lower-middle class home, studying in a municipal school, I am now traveling extensively across the world and domestically. From struggling to get jobs, I am now creating employment opportunities for thousands and helping others get their dream jobs. None of this would have been possible, if not for my sheer determination to become an entrepreneur and the unflinching support from those around me.

Despite this, I have remained humble and rooted, ever ready to learn and grow. For instance, one of my most important lessons came from a roadside cobbler, who told me to never give away anything for free. Business had to be carried out as a business, not as charity, he told me. One needs to be clean and transparent in their dealings and must have the grit and courage to absorb setbacks, both mental and financial, to stay afloat. My advice to young entrepreneurs is this: you won't get results, nor win success overnight. It will require your constant, tireless efforts, 24x7. You will need to have patience, persistence and perseverance if you want to succeed. Lastly, always have deep knowledge about what you are doing—your line of business, your market, your competition and the surrounding eco-system, you should be a master in knowing all these.

These are some of the awards I have been recognised with:

- Awarded by the Chief **Minister of Maharashtra** as the '**Best Banking Sector Employee**' for sheer determination and hard work.
- Received the '**Punyasholk Ahilyabai Holkar**' awarded for excellence in the field of Social Service by the **Chief Minister of Maharashtra**
- Received the '**Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal**' award for excellence in the field of Women Entrepreneur by the **Chief Minister of Maharashtra**
- Felicitated by members of **Saturday Club Global Trust** for motivating the next generation youngsters to become successful entrepreneurs

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We must overcome self-created invisible ceilings



Ms. JAYASHREE SATHY

Managing Director, Investment
Analytics delivery Head – India, State Street Corp

Over the years, women have been making their mark in careers across various fields and industries (some being traditional male bastions). These women have been continuously moving beyond the proverbial glass ceilings at various levels and redefining stereotypes. If I look back at my own personal journey thus far, it has been challenging and at the same exciting as I learnt through new experiences and achieved my goals.

My career journey began well before college, as I grew up watching my elder sisters muster the courage to make critical decisions of their life, under the guidance of my father. My father, though a computer professional and Science major, encouraged my sisters to pursue graduation in Commerce as he saw larger potential in the industry that could be explored. While there was a dilemma, since I was very keen on computer engineering with a dream of coding robots that could do cool stuff, I decided to follow the path paved ahead by my siblings. Having said that, my passion for finance was strong, since as a young girl I watched my father spend weekends analyzing stocks through newspapers and making his investments by going to the stock exchange sacrificing his lunch hour at work. On select Saturdays, he would take us

three girls to the exchange to show how the bidding process really worked, and the hustle bustle, energetic vibes on the trading floor immensely fascinated me.

I studied hard, earned excellent grades and became determined to make my mark in the finance industry. Being an inherently shy personality, but with my decent academic record, I cleared my CA foundation course exams and was also selected in multiple firms (BIG 4, back then BIG 5). However, I had to break the first ceiling that was built in my own very mind – *of social apprehension*. As an audit articulated trainee, I was required to have a strong engagement with the personnel of the companies that I audited. It was initially a struggle to demonstrate command over my role, but quickly I learnt the tact from my seniors who helped me navigate my transition from a naïve individual to a strong auditor.

Coming from an educated albeit conservative family background, the exceptionally long working hours expected from a large consulting firm was a concern at the beginning, especially with the raising eyebrows of the society when I landed back home from work in a cab at the same time as the milkman. But with my father's support and my sister's already treaded pathway, it became easier for me to navigate and break the second ceiling of societal perceptions. As I gained experience and knowledge of various industries ranging from industrials to consumer to telecom to financial services, my career trajectory became more enriching and well rounded.

This was also the time where I decided to make the next leap and expand my horizons and learning beyond accounting and assurance into the area of investment banking. Having spent a long time in an audit role, it was not considered easy to shift tracks to especially in the area of Mergers and Acquisitions, which was dominated by MBAs, who have been working since the start of their career in that field. Here is where, I decided to break my own third ceiling of self doubt and applied for an analyst position at a top investment bank in their Merger and Acquisition wing, and was hired after a grueling interview process. While the working and waking hours were all muddled up, I truly relished the excitement and fast pace nature of being able to learn and contribute.

After learning about complex pricing and structuring of deals as well as financing, I was presented with a unique

opportunity to set up a knowledge services unit to support sell side global market fixed income research for one of the European banks. This opportunity presented new firsts for me – setting up a unit, working with teams as well as gain confidence with clients as we started initiating coverage for hidden gems in the emerging market fixed income space and owning the end-to-end research pieces with trading recommendations to the street.

The experience further fueled my hunger (this time, thirst having quenched) to learn setting up a company from the start and engaging through all aspects of the business with an entrepreneur mindset. My ex- boss/mentor gave me this opportunity, as he along with other colleagues, were working on a new business idea to set up a managed accounts service platform designed to protect the interest of alternative asset class investors.

This was one of the pivotal points in my career where a huge opportunity presented itself but this was uncharted, filled with all the uncertainties and risks. My mentor helped me knock off this fourth ceiling of resistance to take risk in my career. It was one of the best decisions I made, as the experience helped me evolve as a professional and as a person. As with any startup environment, working and challenging oneself with young Turks refueled my purpose and the work itself became more fun and every interaction was akin to a mental gym and spa – helping me flex my brains and calm them at the same time. This business went to achieve several awards and recognition in the industry.

I now had an elevation in my personal profile, getting promoted to a status of a mother, and at around the same time, our start up business became a wholly owned subsidiary of a large US financial institution. This meant the most dreaded equation came knocking at my door - 'work life balance'! I was ridden by guilt in not being able to devote full time to my lovely kid with added societal pressures once again judging a good full-time mom vs. bad working mom each time, especially more so since I conceived a baby quite late compared to Indian standards.

There were occasions where I felt like giving in to these pressures and taking a career break, but then decided not to, remembering very well how my mother worked

through her career with three kids, with not a single vacation, leave alone breaks. Having overcome my own mental conundrum, I decided to seek support from my family (my parents, in-laws, my husband and baby), who adjusted so well to multiple nurturing hands, become my pillar of support that helped me navigate through the tough times. This helped me shatter my fifth ceiling and made me embrace the art of reaching out for help when needed.

Quite often, that is the toughest part! If I look back, I do miss not having been around with my child when he first crawled or he first toddled on his little feet, but it is also a mix of emotions when I remember that it did bring smiles to all those near and dear ones who gave me support and witnessed these moments on my behalf and narrated each of it to me, as I would return home from work.

I, now, Head the Investment Analytics function (a delivery role, very different from product/solution roles held in the past) within the larger corporation and cater to the needs of several institutional investors, including

retirement funds. I learnt the art of pay forward, and aim to seize every opportunity to share my knowledge and experience by teaching finance related subjects in universities, tying up with NGOs for child education as well as mentoring

women in the industry and beyond. In all this, I learn immensely, as I share.

As I continue my journey through the knowns and unknowns, I look forward to enriching not only my own personal standing and experience but for other professionals, especially women folk, whose challenges I can easily resonate with. I have learnt the art of work life balance, by not separating my work and personal identity from each other. This has helped me embrace both with reasonable ease, and this is explicit to my surrounding social ecosystem as well. The journey of any successful woman finance professional is one of grit, determination and hard work - a story of overcoming guilt, breaking barriers, and shattering stereotypes. Most often, the invisible ceilings are self-created, and it is important to identify and avoid it from resurfacing once broken. Let's all progress along the path of gender equity, with confidence to deliver on equal opportunities, drawing inspiration and learning from people around us in our quest for excellence.

“ I had to break the first ceiling that was built in my own very mind – of social apprehension.”

From academia to entrepreneurship – my journey towards a breathtaking destination...



Dr. JENNIFER LEWIS

Partner, Kamat Infra Tech

Growing up in the era when girls were mostly confined to kitchen duties and trained for their life ahead, my parents encouraged my education. I always had an attitude to participate in extra-curricular activities. Being born in a conservative middle-class family as a fourth child, in the city of Vasco-da-game, Goa who would have imagined that I would be breaking many stereotypes and paving way for many women to choose their careers and life of being educated and independent? My upbringing was a mixture of love and care by my parents and older siblings *as a protected child with some opportunities to express myself.*

I did my schooling at MES Higher Secondary School with consistent grades. I wasn't much aware of careers then. My father wanted me to be a Doctor, but I was wary of blood. Engineering seemed to be a better choice, and I chose Civil engineering over Computer Engineering, which I completed in 1995.

My first stint as an Engineer was at BDK consultants. When I met PM Kamat who was to later become my father-in-law and saw his visiting card, I aspired to one

day have more qualifications in my name than his. And I think I have achieved that. We take inspiration from people in our lives every day.

A year later, under the advice from my father, I started the journey of being a lecturer in the Civil Engineering Dept of Agnel Polytechnic. I always had the urge to educate people ever since my school days. Apart from being a full-time lecturer, I attended self-development courses almost every vacation and conducted various educational training programs for the industry. I remember teaching a 70-year-old man the Basics of AutoCAD drafting software within five days, when he had no basics in computing at all. *These are the simple things in life that give immense satisfaction and will forever remain etched in my memories.*

I'd always wanted to study further. Pushed by my husband, Bharat, I applied for further education in the beginning at IIT Powai. I was told at a meeting that they preferred not to have women, married or with children,

“ I had chosen a laboratory-based Ph.D. involving physical loading tests on over 100 concrete specimens. This was physically challenging and required me to work on my wrist strength in the gym. But I am never one to back down from challenges.”

for their courses as they tend to leave the program midway. This drove me to apply to foreign universities.

Though I had no master's degree, I was accepted for the PhD course at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom and was also awarded a scholarship. The mandatory English proficiency test was also waived off. This was a turning point in my life. I had chosen a laboratory-based Ph.D. involving physical loading tests on over 100 concrete specimens. This was physically challenging and required me to work on my wrist strength in the gym. *But I am never one to back down from challenges.*

While at university, I kept myself occupied by participating in a variety of activities adding to my international

“ I tried bringing changes, during my chairpersonship of the Women's Wing of the Goa Chamber of Commerce & Industry. We looked into Agriculture, Food Processing, Packaging, Access to Markets, Finance, and Policies, encouraging women with programs like Asturi Exhibition - (a platform for women entrepreneurs).”

experiences. I volunteered in various positions including the Student Mentor Program for new students; holding the position of 'Student Mentor Leader' and interacting with students from various countries.

Among other experiences, I was a Post-Graduate Teaching Assistant, Conductor of Training Programs to orient school children to Civil Engineering, Invigilator of University Examinations, Assistant at various Open Day functions at the University Halls of Accommodation, the Civil Engineering Department, and the International Office (University of Birmingham).

I also participated in activities of various cultural organizations. I felt at home with the Mexican Society. *This added to my wonderful international experiences and friends' circle.*

I completed my Ph.D. in Civil engineering with a thesis on *'The Effects of workmanship and configuration of Glass Fibre Reinforced Polymer sheet strengthening on the behavior of reinforced concrete beams'*. This topic was inspired by the rehabilitation efforts after the 2001 Bhuj earthquake in India. *My hard work was rewarded and the international educational exposure opened up my mind while enhancing my technical skills.*

When I returned to my old job in Goa, I was invited to head the Training and Placement Department which involved interceding between Industry and seven engineering courses of the institute at Agnel Polytechnic, Verna. As the TPO, I was on the committee for curriculum development of the Mechanical and Electronics Engineering diploma courses at the Board of Technical

Education (2008).

I was proficient in my work and equally being admired by my students and colleagues for bringing much-needed changes. I enjoyed my work life but as the saying goes; *You are always one decision away from a totally different life.* The restrictive academic career with a government badge was a big decision to trade with my desire to explore the potential in the professional arena.

My association with various organizations required me to be able to travel at will. I was selected for a CII MSME Indo-German Managerial training program, a month-long residential program in Germany sponsored by the German government. I was also scheduled to be the Chairperson of the Young Indians at Confederation of Indian Industry, Goa Chapter. Both needed flexibility and

“ I am on a journey that leads me to breathtaking destinations. A place of being content and living the moment and looking back smiling for all the challenges taken up!”

time and such exposure was relevant to help shape a mindset and my future. And I moved on.

With all the expertise and experience gained, I first joined my husband's firm and later we started a new firm together- 'Kamat Infra Tech'. with a focus on green buildings and structural rehabilitation and repair. We now run a partnership firm specializing in sustainability, architectural and structural engineering consultancy services.

With years of experience and expertise, I strive to bring changes in the lives of people by various means. Education should be the one where you lead people to follow a path that is a subtle combination of well-being and kindness to offer. I have associated myself with many programs where I get opportunities to meet and pour my knowledge into people and policies.

Chairing the CII's Young Indians brought about a mindset shift to bring impactful changes in society, via different kinds of programs in Education, Employability, Environment, Healthcare, Sports, Arts and Culture. Programmes such as the Goa Green version of the

National Green I contest for schools, training program for taxi drivers, heritage projects (heritage cruise from Panjim to Old Goa and visit to the Old heritage Capitals of Goa), 2011 Vasco Lets Go Green series etc.

With various designations, I tried bringing changes, during my Chairpersonship of the Women's Wing of the Goa Chamber of Commerce & Industry. We looked into agriculture, food Processing, packaging, access to markets, finance, and policies, encouraging women with programs like Asturi exhibition - (a platform for women entrepreneurs). Community programs such as uniting the masses or solving social and community issues became my forte, I gained an overview of resources apart from my engineering domain.

Most of my programs are **meant to make an impact on development and sustainability**. I have always been on my toes rarely taking time out. *All of these experiences enhanced my knowledge on sustainability and supplemented my green building skills.*

When invited to be the President of the Fire and Security Association of India, Goa Chapter, during the Covid period, I said yes to this position as I think that much change can be brought about by being women leaders, especially in a male-dominated arena. We launched the Women's wing in this organization to address women safety issues, amongst other programs.

It is also my privilege to be the second woman on the Managing committee of the Goa Chamber of Commerce & Industry and to be part of the GCCI Industry committee and the GCCI Infrastructure committee besides being mentor to the women's wing.

Always one to say yes to life-altering experiences, I have attended G20 Young Entrepreneur's Summits in Nice, France, and Mexico City, Mexico, Yi Learning missions to Malaysia, as well as CAAEY mission to Pakistan.

I have often been recognized for my social and entrepreneurial work and received awards for the same by various clubs like JCI, Lions Club etc. I have also have been felicitated by various Institutes for my work over years viz. Institution of Engineers, the Indian Concrete Institute, the Fire and Security Association of India, and BNI Goa Chapter. I also have been felicitated by the Institute of Company Secretaries during my term as Chairperson of the Women's wing. I am or have been on the committees of various business, professional and social organizations which have helped to shape my life.

“ Working hard and thirsting for knowledge led me on a journey filled with hard work and a desire to make a positive impact on people's lives.”

It has been said that I have done many firsts in my family, from choosing engineering to becoming a doctorate, everything I do seems to be a first and it really makes me and my family proud.

Though I have won many laurels, I prefer to remain humble and focus on improving the future with my experience, expertise, and passion. My father would have been proud to see what I have accomplished.

Working hard and thirsting for knowledge led me on a journey filled with hard work and a desire to make a positive impact on people's lives. But when asked if I wasn't in this field what else would I be doing, I may have been in a more expressive artistic or creative career. As a fun-loving student who has won numerous awards for athletics and cultural activities, during my school days, I still sometimes wonder, "where am I?" I am on a journey that leads me to breathtaking destinations. *A place of being content and living the moment and looking back smiling for all the challenges taken up!*

My advice to young women entrepreneurs is to say 'YES' to experiences, give their all to learn, make the most of every opportunity and never to give up. Today, there are many opportunities to self-educate especially online. Make the best use of resources available. Reach out to organizations and networks that will help build you and your career and businesses. Do not get discouraged when you hear 'NO'; as that is a part of the journey. Manage your time; maintain a calendar. Market yourself; use social media and any other technology available.

For an entrepreneur, failure is just a stepping stone to success; there is no option but to get there. Be kind to others and more to yourself. Work Hard and Play Hard. Finally, I leave you with the quote of Louise Hays:

'Every thought we think is creating our future' so always tell yourself 'I am in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing.'



Up skilling oneself and being aware of industry needs is the most important knowledge one can be equipped with



Dr. MANJULA POOJA SHROFF

MD & CEO – KALOREX GROUP

“ If the mind, body and spirit is aligned then nothing can stop you from achieving what you set out to do.”

We are a group which caters to the education industry specifically in the K-12 segment and offer a range of opportunities and services to all nature and groups of students. The company set up operations in 1995 in Ahmedabad – setting up many schools under the Kalorex Banner over the years, namely ‘Delhi Public Schools’ and ‘Calorx Public Schools’ located in Ahmedabad, Mundra, Bharuch catering to CBSE, IB and State Boards. Apart from this, we also have a chain of Pre – Schools and also offer pre-school products and kits. We offer Digital learning through our eKal Academy for learners of all age groups across the world and also cater to Edutainment through our Yali Animation Series for pre - schoolers through our YouTube channel Yali Adventures.

As a promise to cater to all educational and vocational needs of students, we have a school for special learning

needs, specifically Dyslexia, called ‘Prerna’, and an institute called ‘Visamo Kids Foundation’ which is home for the under privileged but bright students who study in our partner schools across Ahmedabad and are offered premium K-12 education and vocational guidance beyond school years too.

We have also opened a Vocational and Educational Institute of Calorx (VEDIC) for skill development for destitute girls. This institute trains girls towards setting up their own businesses or getting employment. Our product line thus covers not only the K-12 segment in academic areas but also addresses vocational and skill based needs.

My source of inspiration:

I have been fortunate to have recognized my calling very early in life. I was very sure about what I didn't want my life to be like. Though born in the luxury of a Royal family, I could not understand why there was so much of a gender bias towards the boys when it came to educational opportunities and preference giving to them over girls in general. I wanted to break away from the shackles of patriarchy and empower myself with higher education which was mostly elusive for most girls in the family. In my own house though, I saw my grandmother as an inspirational figure. In her dignified way she managed the affairs of the house most efficiently and smoothly while always motivating me to greater challenges. I have many great ladies who I have drawn inspiration from. The lives of Mother Teresa, Indira Gandhi, Michelle Obama, Princess Diana, and Condoleezza Rice have influenced me greatly. Being an avid reader I still take inspiration from visionaries and thinkers like Elon Musk and Michio Kaku who look far ahead of their times and make it possible to achieve their dreams.

I also believe strongly in the power we have within ourselves to shape our lives. We are our own inspiration. I have trained myself to a higher consciousness where if the mind, body and spirit is aligned then nothing can stop you from achieving what you set out to do.

Turning point in my career journey:

My decision to move out of my hometown in Orissa, despite resistance, to pursue higher studies in Delhi was life changing for me. It gave me the wings which I didn't know I had. There was no looking back. From a sheltered

and comfortable life, I chose a path which was going to be full of hardships, but for me it meant liberation! Education empowered me with the confidence to give my dreams the substance and clarity of vision which until then was just a blur. I was destined to meet my husband during an IIM Ahmedabad executive MBA program and I finally moved to the city after my marriage. Here, I saw the potential of my dream turning into a reality.

Challenges faced and overcome:

I started with setting up my first venture as the Delhi Public School in 1996. There were already few traditional CBSE schools in the city, but an outsider coming into the system and setting up a modern Delhi based franchise model was looked upon with wariness. There was a lot of initial resistance especially from the business community, as women entrepreneurs were not a very common phenomenon. Getting into that space for me as a young woman and trying to convince the government and the business community about my sincerity and seriousness took some time but I could soon break everyone's trepidations. DPS became a trendsetter of sorts in the city with its state of art infrastructure, tech based systems & processes and also its yellow buses plying across the length and breadth of the city.

My high and low moments:

Even after being in this industry for almost 3 decades, I still feel the same excitement when I start a new venture. It's like welcoming a new member into the family. I'm nervous and at the same time I want to see the venture kick off with all plans in place. Those are definitely the high moments for me. The other high points are when I see the alumni of our institutes doing well in life and being proud ambassadors of the Kalorex name across the world. That's an indescribable feeling.

Starting off with one school and having run 55+ plus institutes over a span of 28 years is something I am proud of. Today 65,000+ students have been taught in our institutes over the years and 4000+ staff members have been empowered. Our flagship school, 'DPS Bopal' in Ahmedabad has been a front runner in quality education in the state of Gujarat. Over the years our school's 10th and 12th board examination results consist of city toppers across all subject streams.

Kalorex students have been making a mark on national and international levels in the co scholastic areas too. Students excelling in Sports, Music, Dance, Art,

“ A visionary leader has to have the ability and knowledge to study and understand futuristic trends and markets and take bold decisions.”

Innovations etc. have been encouraged and have brought laurels to our schools.

I cannot claim that there haven't been low points in my journey. But my philosophy is to never look back in regret, but keep learning from mistakes and move ahead. We have closed projects which haven't been successful even after putting in our full efforts. Of course, it hasn't been easy. But those are short lived phases which we overcome and look forward to better times ahead. Trying to find the positive in negativity and not wallowing in self-pity or doubt has always been my thought process.

Bold decisions:

As a leader it's important to take decisions which only you know will be the best for the company in the long run. A visionary leader has to have the ability and knowledge to study and understand futuristic trends and markets and take bold decisions.

It takes courage and grit to take bold decisions when a lot is at stake. When a venture is taking away a huge amount of time, energy and resource but is not taking off as planned due to unforeseen reasons, its best to take some hard decisions. Over the years there have been such decisions taken but that has always been for the larger good of the company and never at its cost.

My message to youth:

The youth of today is smart in every sense. They need proper direction for their potential to be tapped to the fullest. Up skilling themselves and being aware of what the needs of the industry are, is the most important knowledge that they can equip themselves with. While they are on their course of study they must also take on some online self-paced courses to make use of their time and enhance their knowledge. The time lost today will not come back. They must also realize the potential of social media and how it can be used not just for recreational purposes but to take up a cause to give back to the society and to the planet, towards sustainable and responsible living. The need of the hour is to bring back tolerance and empathy in this world full of strife and apathy.

There is nothing like work-life balance, the balance has to be within



Ms. MITU SAMAR

CEO, Eminence Strategy Consulting

“It has done me well by neither fretting over failures nor celebrating successes; instead I have taken every life experience in my stride and have lived every moment fully.”

“The universe is not logical, it's magical” - Understanding my journey to where I am today starts with understanding my unwavering faith in this quote. You have to believe in the magic life has to offer for you to see, hear and live it. If there's one thing my journey so far has taught me, it is that the universe does not function around the constructs we have built, and the more we become one with it, the more our experiences tend to be positive and our moments tend to be memorable.

That is precisely why I treat all rejections as redirection and genuinely 'trust the process'. It has done me well by neither fretting over failures nor celebrating successes; instead I have taken every life experience in my stride and lived every moment fully – and magic did play out!

I am often asked what worked for me.

“Be it as a woman, as a small-town girl at heart, or as a professional in a boardroom, I have never let my background, obstacles, or stereotypes define me. I am defined only by my choices.”

I would say, both personally and professionally, it starts with my determination to better myself, my conscious efforts to invest in relationships resulting in a supportive ecosystem, and the utter joy that I derive from having a 'solution-oriented' mindset. Accepting that little is in our control, so why count and crib about the challenges? Instead, equip yourself to befriend them, reach out to the support system whenever needed, and there, you have a solution before you know it!

I was raised in a small town and a family who highly valued education but treated a woman's career as secondary. My parents were very clear – Family comes first. So, while we were given the best possible education, we were clearly told that our career cannot be our priority. Unlike my urban, metropolitan peers, the great education I was offered was not to be a means to a profession, but to an end. To me, it was simply a great education - knowledge to feed my curiosity about the world. After I finished my masters in Economics, I struck a deal with my father that I would work for a year before I get married. I got exact and precise 365 days to explore the corporate world and I chose to work like my lifelong career was this one year - an attitude that I've since found to be my biggest strength.

Guess what?

That one year is now 22 years of my career so far! An understanding life partner is extremely critical for transforming dreams into reality and that is one of my biggest blessings.

I went on to work in various corporates like The Great Eastern Shipping, ICICI Prudential MF, CRISIL and Standard & Poor's (S&P) before choosing to turn into an entrepreneur and setting up Eminence Strategy Consulting.

With my experience in working up the ranks in my corporate jobs and my exposure as a director on various boards, Eminence has developed solutions that capture bottom-up as well as top-down perspectives for corporate reputation.

Over these years, there were times I stuck out like a sore thumb - I spoke in broken English among well-spoken peers, I was often the only woman in huddles of men, and I was evidently more regional than my counterparts. However, every time my differences were pointed out as a barrier, it only pushed me to invest in myself further. I consider that these obstacles were my mirrors that showed me who I am, what I am made of, and what I am made for.

No wonder the girl with broken English now has a career in communication and coaches well-known business leaders in their public presence.

“Every time my differences were pointed out as a barrier, it only pushed me to invest in myself further. I consider these obstacles to be my mirrors that showed me who I am, what I am made of, and what I am made for.”

But as they say, it takes a village to raise a child, and a woman's career is no less. It indeed takes a huge ecosystem to work smoothly to help women stay in the workforce and my career was no exception. There were instances when I had to choose between my career and more conventional roles for women - but at every turning point, I reminded myself to ask for help when I needed it and I'm always just as pleasantly surprised when the universe reciprocates as it did the first time. My husband, father, siblings, friends, home staff, and colleagues at work have unexpectedly, at different milestones of my life, been some of my strongest pillars of support both professionally as well as personally.

When I was contemplating leaving the workforce after my first child was born, to my surprise my father reached out and told me to continue working while he will oversee the care of my little daughter. The same individual who

“At every turning point, I reminded myself to ask for help when I needed it and I'm always just as pleasantly surprised when the universe reciprocates as it did the first time.”

always emphasized prioritising family over everything, could see my love for my two worlds and came to my rescue!

Similarly, I specifically remember getting promoted when I resumed after my maternity break. My then reporting manager said, *“You flawlessly worked through the nine months accomplishing all that had to be completed in a year. If you don't get promoted then who else?”*

These small but significant episodes washed away all my fear and self-doubt forever.

Be it as a woman, as a small-town girl at heart, or as a professional in a boardroom, I have never let my background, obstacles, or stereotypes define me. I am defined only by my choices. Today, I multi-specialise in reputation management, strategic insights, brand communication, crisis management, diversity & inclusion and so much more than the roles that were laid out for me.

My journey continues to unfold as I move forward in my career, and as I learn more, I continue to send the elevator back down for more women to aim and reach higher in their careers through mentoring and leadership coaching with initiatives like CII IWN's '100 hours of Change' where I have guided over 100 women. My message to all women struggling to balance their professional and personal lives is very simple - There is nothing like work-life balance, both are fully integrated; The balance has to be within.

Mitu Samar – CEO, Eminence – A strategy Consulting Company focused on reputation. Mitu is a director on the Boards of Aegon Life Insurance Co Ltd., Times Internet Ltd. and Times Guaranty Ltd.



You can achieve anything if you believe in yourself and go as far as your mind lets you



Ms. NEETI SHARMA

President & Co-Founder, TeamLease EdTech

“Neeti’s adapt and overcome approach combined with a positive mindset has helped her sidestep or overcome problems.”

“In a world where you can be anything, be Yourself - an advice I got decades ago, has held me in good stead and that is exactly what I tell the young generation today” mentioned Neeti Sharma, Co-Founder & President of TeamLease EdTech - a company that specializes in providing Learning Solutions for traditional and employed learners.

In a professional journey of over 30 years, with a blend of building and managing businesses, strategic thinking, leadership, and making a difference in the lives of many, both in the Indian and International markets, Neeti has acquired domain expertise and operates at the intersection of Employment, Employability and Education.

Neeti has had the opportunity to interact with various stakeholders and each interaction has been a learning

“ In a world where you can be anything, be Yourself - an advice I got decades ago, has held me in good stead and that is exactly what I tell the young generation today.”

experience. A lifelong learner, Neeti would like to highlight that while there have been many challenges that she has had to face during her professional journey, she has always come out of these difficult situations learning many valuable lessons.

She has always faced barriers or challenges head on and understands that as a woman entrepreneur, the levels of scrutiny are different. Neeti’s adapt and overcome approach combined with a positive mindset has helped her sidestep or overcome problems.

As a women leader and entrepreneur, Neeti has always exhibited a can-do attitude and pushed forward. Navigating certain situations can be tricky, however, as an entrepreneur and leader one has to remain focussed on the larger goal and be prepared to take some risks. Neeti has forged a path of success through sheer determination and hard work.

Through her journey, she has also strived to maintain a work-life balance and therefore ensure that personal and professional priorities are met in an equal manner.

Neeti believes in the importance of working smart and understands that time spent outside of work is equally if not more important. She ensures that her time is divided between friends, family, and her work commitments by planning her day/week effectively.

As a strong campaigner for more women leaders in business and entrepreneurship, Neeti has paved the way for the next generation by being an inspiration across various online and offline platforms.

She continues to inspire women through coaching and mentorship. With over 30 years of excellence, Neeti has led from the front and shown both men and women the

“At the core of her leadership, she understands that everyone is human and every human requires a different approach.”

path to sustained success. As an entrepreneur, she adopts a positive mindset and takes a collaborative approach toward leadership.

Her leadership can be described as driven by dialogue and she takes a holistic approach toward setting her and her team's impact goals. At the core of her leadership, she

“As an entrepreneur, it is important to trust your instincts and surround yourself with positivity. It is also important to accept help from others because most journeys cannot be completed alone.”

understands that everyone is human and every human requires a different approach.

Neeti derives inspiration from various sources and understands the need to look beyond traditional role models. Her family and friends have been a source of incredible strength and support and have always helped her through her journey.

Moreover, her inspiration is derived from leaders in India who have paved the way toward equality and equity. As she says *“I have been extremely lucky to have worked with great leaders and mentors and was given opportunities to set up or drive businesses, even when I felt I wasn't ready. And that is exactly what I believe we need to give our next generations - Opportunities.”*

Neeti has always been a champion of youth and one of the reasons that she decided to take the entrepreneurship route was to ensure that the next generation of Indian men and women have the necessary skills to succeed.

From a social entrepreneurship perspective, she strives to create an environment of inclusivity. Throughout her journey, she has always made an effort to give back and ensures that she passes on her knowledge to the next generation.

Neeti conducts various workshops on leadership, entrepreneurship, and business. She is keen to pass on her continuous learning mindset to the next generation of entrepreneurs and ensure that they have the best possible stepping stool. She understands that entrepreneurship comes with a set of challenges like no other and young entrepreneurs, especially women, must not be disheartened by failure. All entrepreneurs face challenges and failures along their journey, the key is to view these challenges as just another obstacle to overcome and also as a learning opportunity.

Her message to any young entrepreneur; be it male or female, is to believe in themselves, not limit themselves, and go as far as their mind lets them. “As an entrepreneur, it is important to trust your instincts and surround yourself with positivity. It is also important to accept help from others because most journeys cannot be completed alone. One must celebrate small victories and also

“All entrepreneurs face challenges and failures along their journey, the key is to view these challenges as just another obstacle to overcome and also as a learning opportunity.”

constantly adapt and learn through their journey” highlighted Neeti.

As a leader, Neeti's approach has been to create an enabling environment for her teams – this would mean get the necessary budgets, products, skills, technology and then ensure that all her next in line push themselves to perform.

Neeti concluded by saying that she strongly believes in the power of collaboration and works towards building strong and capable teams across all functions by constant communication, continuous feedback, firm support and being there for her teams.



A Chartered Accountant turned entrepreneur of a bakery chain - the story of Ms. Salgaocar



Ms. PALLAVI SALGAOCAR

Founder-Director, Desserts N More

I am a Chartered Accountant by profession. My interest in baking was kindled when I was staying in Pune for three months post marriage with my husband, an Orthopaedic Doctor by profession. After a couple of short term bakery courses in Pune, I returned to Goa where after the birth of my son, I started experimenting with my cooking after watching recipes online. This led me to start my website named 'mysweetguide.com' which has various sweets and dessert recipes from across the globe. Further, I decided to get the recipes printed into a cookbook named 'Desserts First'.

The copies were retailed in bookstalls across Goa. Today, the edition is almost sold out and though my publisher had offered me to go for the next edition; I thought that I have done what I wanted to; and have moved from writing to actually selling desserts and bakery products.

Once during a cooking competition, I happened to meet an interesting lady who had a pastry shop and we decided to partner in the bakery business. We opened a new shop and started anew under the brand name 'Desserts N More'. Our partnership did not survive for more than a year and we decided to part ways. It was a difficult time for me to set up a new bakery, as I was from the accounting line and had zero knowledge on the

intricacies of bakery production. My husband was a staunch supporter who helped get all bakery permissions and with my family support we decided to start a bakery division of our family owned Pharmaceutical company called 'Dainty Delights' and the division started retailing under the brand name 'Desserts N More'.

At this point in time, I also had a high labour attrition. I worked to get together a good team as I always believed running a good business requires a great team from production to marketing, and from counter staff to helpers. In this business a unique feature is the seasonal highs and lows and your ability to sustain the lows determines how far you can go.

Meanwhile, after separating from my partner, we set up a state-of-the-art FDA compliant bakery to manufacture cakes, savouries, breads, cookies and desserts. Post which I set up two franchisees; both of which failed, mainly because I could not draft a good franchisee model at that stage. With a heavy heart, I took a business decision to shut both. That was a low point for me as I saw

“ In businesses, a unique feature is the seasonal highs and lows and your ability to sustain the lows determines how far you can go.”

my rival bakery chains expanding fast under the franchisee model which did not work for Desserts N More.

Meanwhile, I read a book of Nandini Vaidyanathan who did mentoring services and got in touch with her. Nandini offered to mentor me. While my initial thought was that a mentor is like a consultant who would give me business consultancy advise, I was proven wrong by Nandini. She had a different approach, where firstly she told me to study my business, find out who my customers were, what product range was I looking at and what geographical areas I would be covering. It was an interesting mode of education for me where I started introspecting my own business.

Basically, when I started this business I had no plan in mind, just a passion which was converted into a business. Nandini brought a lot of clarity into my thinking and

encouraged me to draft the vision document for DESSERTS N MORE (DNM).

We started posting updates on social media to eligible establishments and suppliers to join the DNM family. Soon, we started consolidating our hold in North Goa and then recently we forayed in South Goa too.

Although we started with print advertising, I think by far, the most effective means of advertising for us is social media. We are very active on social platforms especially Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp. We realised that a whole lot of age groups from young to old are on social media and that's the preferred mode of advertising for us and hence we announce all our offers and new products first on social media.

We were amongst the first to make designer customised cakes and that is still our mainstay. To our advantage, we have our loyal customers who keep coming back to us and recommend us to their friends.

Also, we have season's special - Christmas goodies like plum cakes, marzipan fruits, marshmallows, jujubes during December, easter eggs and bunny themed cakes during Easter, chocolate modaks during Ganesh Chaturthi, Diwali cakes during Diwali and heart shaped delicacies for Valentine's day. Festival and special day offerings are a big trend in the bakery business of late. We also are among the first to start the concept of healthy cakes, breads and cookies which has now become a preference post-pandemic.

We keep innovating and adding new products and offerings year after year as customers these days fancy new flavours. So, innovation is the key in this segment. We accept bulk orders, and also take corporate and individual gifting orders which include chocolates, cupcakes and macaroon gifting. We also accept bulk orders for events and functions and have supplied for marathons, inaugurals etc.

Today we have 5 self operated outlets, 7 Franchisees and 5 Express Counters.

People nowadays have access to products available on the other side of the globe too, thanks to the internet which has made the world a smaller place today. So it is very essential to keep yourself updated on the latest

trends. The competition in the bakery products segment in Goa is fierce but at the end of the day, like they say, 'it's the survival of the fittest'. There are bakery shops in every nook and corner, and now there are also bakers who operate from home without any overheads, and unless one has happy customers who are satisfied with one's products, it is very difficult to survive. Also, in this cut-throat competitive market, with so many players in one segment, pricing is an important aspect.

Feedback is something that I have always encouraged my staff to take, as it gives us input from our customers about the product and also helps us know what works and what doesn't. We also keep feedback books at all our self-operated counters where customers can write in their comments and thus can help us improve on our weaknesses.

“ We were amongst the first ones to start the concept of healthy cakes, breads and cookies.”

Proud moments and the future:

Frankly speaking, I have never planned anything in my life. I was academically a topper since childhood, not too fond of science so a CA course was the natural progression those days. I neither have a management background nor do I have a background in the food industry; So, whatever I learnt, was on the job through trial and error. Luckily, I am a fast learner, and though my talented team is absolutely efficient with the execution, I always oversee production and keep myself up-to-date with the marketing process.

I have won the Skyline Magazine Businesswoman Icon award in August 2021 and was bestowed with accolades such as Best of Biz Women Culinary Stars, Best of India Business Covid Warriors and Best of Biz Multigrain Cake and Times Hospitality Icon awards. I have also received the Priyadarshini award in Delhi, organised by MSME-Govt. of India and FIWE. I recently received the Lagu Udyog Bharati award from the Chief Minister of Goa and MSME Minister Narayan Rane. I believe that awards are a validation of all the efforts and hard work one puts in their business besides encouraging one to surge ahead.

On a closing note, I wish to laud my Team who have been instrumental in the success of the bakery chain. My husband and son who have been my staunch supporters, my in-laws and parents who have always stood by me and friends and family who have always backed me. And last but not the least, our loyal customers without whom DNM would never have moved from strength to strength.

From a shy and introvert executive to a successful entrepreneur, Sonica has defied all stereotypes



Ms. SONICA ARON

Founder and Managing Partner
Marching Sheep

“She worked in a factory, she also worked in a city as well as in remote areas. This experience helped her realize, how diverse people viewed, worked with and also dealt with women workforce.”

***E**ach day is an opportunity to live our purpose- make a difference in people's lives and careers and drive respect and equality for all. – Sonica Aron*

Sonica Aron, is the Founder and Managing Partner of Marching Sheep, an HR consulting firm specialising in Diversity and Inclusion, Leadership Interventions and OD consulting. Sonica founded Marching Sheep in 2013 as a solopreneur, and today Marching Sheep is the leading HR firm not just in India but globally, with a thriving team of passionate HR consultants, having delivered on projects across 80 countries across the globe, for clients across industries.

“One needs to evolve each time to meet the needs of the clients to stay relevant. This teaches flexibility and adaptability.”

Sonica comes from a family of doctors. The youngest of three siblings, no one in her family has studied or practiced business management. No one has been a business owner. So, this was a completely new world for Sonica as times now have changed drastically, from having medical discussions at the dinner table with her family as a child to now deliberating on social justice, gender expression, awareness about disabilities and inclusion.

Sonica is an HR professional with more than two decades of experience. While working at PepsiCo, she was exposed to diverse roles and geographies in sales and sales HR. She worked in a factory, she also worked in a city as well as in remote areas. This experience helped her realize, how diverse people viewed, worked with, and also dealt with women workforce.

Marching Sheep is focused on building long-term organizational capability and effectiveness for its clients through structured and customised interventions and solutions. They work closely with clients to arrive at customized and effective HR interventions that support their strategy in the current life cycle stage, as well as support them in the realization of their long-term business plans.

Being a consultative service provider, Marching Sheep takes pride in the fact that they do not have canned products or services. Every solution or intervention offered is curated after an extensive diagnostic and engagement with the client team to understand the real need or problem statement. This ensures high-impact solutions and outcomes. Sonica's team comprises of experts from the industry who have experience of having worked as HR practitioners across different industries. They bring in not only consulting expertise but a strong understanding of what businesses expect from HR

interventions. They are not just trainers or facilitators, but HR professionals who have recognized their passion for contributing to client organizations in tangible ways. They don't just consult, but also help in the implementation process.

Their programs on Gender Diagnostics, Women@work, Unleash Diversity@Work, Inclusion boot camps and Women Leadership programs have been very well received by the industry. They are seen as a thought leader in the area of diversity and inclusion, and progressive HR practices. Their opinions have been published by leading publications including TOI, Hindustan Times, The Hindu, The Statesmen, The Chronical, DNA, Business World, and many more.

Today, the firm boasts of a healthy roster of Indian and global clients, including Uber, Concentrix, UPL industries, Mercedes Benz, Avery Dennison, GSK, John Deere, Sterlite Power, SBI cards, Clifford Chance, JCB India, Continental Tyres, Reckitt Benckiser, QA Qapitol, Orix to name a few.

Marching Sheep invests in substantial research and non-profit campaigns in addition to working with clients. In order to understand what clients and today's workforce need to stay relevant and meaningful, they do research involving significant industry outreach, panel talks with CHROs of top organisations on pertinent issues, and pulse polls.

Their on-ground awareness campaign, 'Marching with Pride', saw the team engaging with people from the LGBTQIA community in candid conversations about life, growing up, challenges, inclusion at work and much more. Another campaign named '21Marching' contributed to raising awareness of the 21 disabilities recognised under the 2016 Rights for Persons with Disabilities Act.

Sonica was also listed among the top 10 women entrepreneurs in 2020 by Forbes India, among India's Most Valued People in June 2021 by Forbes India, Among Inspirational Icons in Leadership by Fortune in 2021, among the top 100 digital influencers by Yourstory, Woman Entrepreneur of The Year by Indian Achievers Forum at 75th Atmanirbhar Bharat Summit in 2022 and most recently she featured in BW Businessworld Jan 2023 edition as one of the 'Dynamic Achievers for fiercely

“Today, where Marching Sheep stands, is a defiance of all the above stereotypes.”

driving diversity and inclusive culture in organizations'.

Sonica is an HR professional turned entrepreneur. When she started Marching Sheep, she faced many challenges like understanding the statutory requirements associated with having your own setup, whether it should be an LLP, LLC or a company or

a proprietorship. Making her own website from scratch was a challenge as was being bootstrapped.

She was in a vicious cycle, to hire a team member or to make for revenues to reach a certain level. She was doing everything from business development to delivery to invoicing to client management to paying taxes herself. Doing Business development, that is sales, did not come naturally to her.

“The basic tenets of Inclusion are to question stereotypes and perceptions, and to value an individual for what the individual brings to the table irrespective of gender, age, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, religion, caste, or any other difference.”

She was hesitant about singing her own praises as a consultant, but that was needed. It took her time to learn this art. Then came the issue to managing cash flows.

Slowly and steadily, she learnt, she hired, she grew. Her client base grew and revenues stabilised. However, there were environmental challenges that came time and again. Demonetization, GST implementation and more recently the pandemic.

Each time, the industry got de-stabilised, the client focus shifted from HR interventions to business continuity. They had to evolve each time to meet the needs of the clients to stay relevant. That taught them flexibility and adaptability.

"We take satisfaction in staying together as a team and

“We take satisfaction in staying together as a team and surviving the challenging year of COVID. No one in Marching Sheep was laid off or sent on furlough. No salaries were reduced. We worked very hard during the year, but it was worthwhile. This has been our biggest achievement.”

surviving the challenging year of COVID. No one in Marching Sheep was laid off or sent on furlough. No salaries were reduced. We worked very hard during the year, but it was worthwhile. This has been our biggest achievement. Not only did we win each other's trust, but of the industry and our clients as well” highlighted Sonica on being asked what the most significant achievement has been for her so far.

As an industry, several stereotypes come in the way of individuals succeeding. For instance, in the early part of Sonica's career, one of the senior leaders wrote her off as a resource because she was shy and an introvert, and would stay quiet in meetings.

When she started Marching Sheep, a well-meaning acquaintance advised her not to start her own venture as ‘women cannot do sales or business development.’

Irrespective of which country, geography, or social strata we come from, gender norms do exist and everyone working in an organization comes from the same society. When they come to work, they bring their belief system along with them to the office. These belief systems unconsciously seep into their behaviours and decision-making. Such beliefs lead to malicious gossip, maternity biases, and expectations that are driven by societal gender norms.

Today, where Marching Sheep stands, is a defiance of all the above stereotypes. Sonica remains an introvert and is still shy. But that does not stop her from being passionate about her purpose and her work.

It's been almost 10 years since the inception of Marching Sheep, and they have clients across geographies and industries, and Sonica is proud to say that most clients end up becoming friends, seeing Marching Sheep as a trusted partner because they do not hard sell. They authentically solve issues.

“The basic tenets of Inclusion are to question stereotypes and perceptions, and to value an individual for what the

individual brings to the table irrespective of gender, age, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, religion, caste, or any other difference,” says Sonica.

Her mantra has been simple- “I cannot and will not please everyone. I have one life and I will live my life to the fullest. My life revolves around myself, my work, my immediate family, and my team. Within these, I have prioritized what I will do and what I shall not do. I have defined my ‘all’ and I stick to it. I recommend that every woman should shamelessly, unflinchingly define her ‘all’ and go after it with focus and passion.”

“Diversity is a fact; inclusion is a choice, and allyship is action!”

“Diversity is a fact; inclusion is a choice, and allyship is action!” – Sonica Aron.

Every day, every moment, people in the world have a choice that they can exercise. By raising awareness, streamlining policies and HR procedures, fostering managerial and leadership abilities, building transparent and effective communication platforms, and doing so much more, the team supports people in exercising that decision. Inclusion is a journey, and organizations require a consistent 180 degree approach.

Organisations can change the direction of their journey toward their goals by using a disciplined, step-by-step framework that starts with diagnostics and ends with monitoring impact.

Sonica's success Mantra: It's very important to be passionate about what you do, and keep learning and growing. It requires stepping out of your comfort zone and pushing yourself and the results are extremely exhilarating.

Sonica's advice to today's youth who are our leaders of tomorrow: Follow your heart, and be persistent. There will be obstacles, there will be naysayers, but you need to be confident about what you are doing and keep at it. **Nothing succeeds like success!**

My journey as an entrepreneur has been one of small milestones



Ms. TEJAL GANDHI

CEO and Founder, Money Matters

My beginning as a teenager:

I started my journey at a young age of 17 when I joined my uncle who was a Chartered Accountant and helped him set up his practice. I used to feel a sense of purpose since I was working and studying together which was uncommon in the eighties. I think that was the foundation of my working life and I did not know that it was to become my way of life through the 3 and a half decades of my career.

The deep impression my first few experiences as intern and assistantships cemented my sense of purpose to contribute to the society in my own little way. At an early age I had joined the Rotary movement and am an active Rotarian till date.

Influenced by:

My values have been instilled in me to a great extent from my home where the focus was on work ethics, my grandmother and my father instilled in me to work hard and be sincere and that paved the path for me to be where I am today.

My schooling was in a Parsi school which was strict and that has helped me to be disciplined in many ways and reflects in the various activities I pursue.

Early Career:

I started working with a NBFC in the Systems Department soon after I graduated and was really proud about bagging a job on my own merit. After working for 2 years I pursued my Management degree from Jamnalal Bajaj which after completing I was selected to join the Standard Chartered Bank as an Officer Trainee.

My tenure at Standard Chartered Bank spanned over 13 years from 1989 to 2002 and I worked in different roles including customer facing, branch operations and marketing at various branches across Mumbai city.

The early part of my career gave me insights everyday and also, I slowly began understanding my strengths. I realized I could multi task effectively and was good at customer relationships.

My stint at Corporate Communications (Public Relations then) was a mixed bag. It was a pan India role and I was reporting to the Head of PR who reported to the Chief Executive, India. Working with various Senior Management Heads gave me an enormous exposure to think not only at a national, but even an international level in managing the various events the bank participated in. We did CSR activities for various communities and that increased my exposure to business and community partnerships.

My experiences at the bank motivated me to take the plunge into entrepreneurship and venture on my own. Initially I was a little nervous, but I did not let that get into my way. I had lined up the next 6 months with 2-3 teaching assignments and on the side I studied the market and found that there was a huge gap in Financial Training and Education, which I was more than happy to fill. It would mean taking a cut initially in my well paying bank job till I reached a certain level, but I set out knowing that I would be able to make it sooner or later. I was as confident as I was uncertain, but still, I took a leap of faith and it is over 20 years today that I stand where I do.

My 1st Assignment as an Entrepreneur:

I was scheduled to give a lecture at the Times of India office in Mumbai. I was overwhelmed and slightly nervous to have 60 attendees who had come to listen to me. I delivered my lecture, which was quite interactive

“Growth and change are constant factors. You cannot afford to stagnate in this dynamic world.”

and also received a lot of interest from the participants, as they asked lots of questions.

This assignment gave me a lot of mileage, despite of not being paid any remuneration for the same. That's how it starts...not all the work that one gets may have monetary benefits. It may help you gain experience and boost your confidence and that's what matters during the initial phase.

Over the next 2-3 years, the journey was not easy as there wasn't too much work but the business lesson for me was to constantly try and keep moving.

I was keen to move up the ladder and make a difference in the society. To get into the depth of the market, I realised I had to be a practitioner to understand market dynamics, hence I empanelled myself to become a sub-broker (after reading about it in the papers) with IL&FS Investsmart (a Wealth distribution firm). I started working and handling portfolios of clients which went to become my main-stream vocation. I started enjoying the process and realised that I was able to educate others in a much better and authentic way as I was practising what I were teaching.

I worked hard and turned my challenges into opportunities to favour my work and derive benefit out of it.

Silver Lining :

In 2008, the the Stock Market worldwide crashed, which put my Investment business in a tough spot. At that time my 2nd vertical 'Training' stood by and I got various assignments which kept me so busy that I had to increase my team size. This turned out to be a blessing as I got great exposure through it.

Hence, I learnt that 'adverse periods are just testing times for one's organisation to relook at its goals, vision and commitments which need to be reviewed along with various personal goals as well. Growth and change are constant factors. You cannot afford to stagnate in this dynamic world.'

Hence, another business lesson learnt is to not depend

on just one business, but diversify. Have another vertical or another source of income, because the external and economic scenarios can change any time and having a diversification can help to weather the storms.

My business from 2010 to 2015 went through ups and downs. I shifted to an office space and was battling between my ailing father and increasing work. I could not take up assignments where I needed to travel on work and hence I had to loose opportunities which came my way. In the meantime, I made the most of it through my Mumbai contacts and was able to do several training assignments and work with large corporates in many capacities as a Consultant, Trainer and Content Developer. It groomed me in many ways to multi skill and learn so many dimensions of Financial Education and Planning.

In 2015, I got a Scholarship to go to the USA to do Financial Life Planning in Portland Oregon and I am still licensed with them to use their tools which help me to enhance my skills and use international practices.

In the last 5 years, my organization has diversified into various other areas of Fixed Income and Equity Trading. We have a small set of clients who have remained with us on an average of more than 10 years. Some of the families have been with us for 20 years across multiple locations.

Being a lean and flat organization, we have various challenges, mainly retention, which we have been able to tide over gradually. The business climate has favored us since we are now investing for the 2nd generation and in some cases even for the 3rd generation.

My business has been built on trust, honesty, simplicity and empathy. The vision is to create wealth and educate communities and families which we work with and which we are very much a part of.

My journey as an entrepreneur has been one of small milestones and the smiles which we have been able to bring on the faces of many while helping families achieve their goals. It is indeed immensely gratifying to be where I am today and have the flexibility to do what I want and live the life I like and have designed for myself.

Learnings :

Have a blueprint and pursue it. Don't give up in the face of failures ... there's a twist ahead and it's not the end of the road. Be honest and sincere !

Naro Ki provides market linkages for women flower growers in North East



Ms. WATILA LONGKUMER

Founder, Naro Ki

A post graduate with MSc in Agrochemicals and Pest Management from Delhi University, and Partner/Project Coordinator (North East) of Siliguri based firm 'North Bengal Floritech', which deals in supply and installation of hi tech polyhouses, irrigation systems, water reservoirs, planting materials and also technical support for plant management and post harvest technology, I started a fresh flower boutique called 'Naro Ki' after being fuelled with the need to help farmers, prompted by frustration, that despite of many efforts they were not getting their return on investment.

My Initial contact with farmers brought to light the lack of a market for these growers. They could sell only when there was an event in the church or at weddings, hence most of their produce was just getting wasted. This caused dismay and frustration among them, and ultimately most of them gave up cultivation of flowers.

Initially, I started buying from them for my home and also started gifting flowers on birthdays and other

“ For almost a decade since the boutique first opened, Naro ki has grown from fresh-flowers-only outlet to one-stop shop for all things flowers and related accessories.”

occasions. Soon, I was selling bouquets and floral arrangements out of my house to friends and family on various occasions. Word began to spread, and within a year I was doing events including weddings, selling customized bouquets and also selling the flowers at bulk to clients in Dimapur.

As my clientele grew it was difficult to manage from home, and the obvious answer came with the opening of a physical outlet by the name of Naro ki, which means 'a house of flowers' in Ao(Naga) dialect. Naro Ki initially started as a fresh flower boutique, with the sole aim to help sell products (cut flowers) of the local growers, and cater to the wholesale market. I bought mostly from local growers who were trying to find customers for these flowers, making it a one-of-its-kind flower outlet in the state. Due to growing demands, I started a second outlet in Kohima to cater to the market of fresh flowers in the capital.

“ By buying from local flower growers who are all women (from Dimapur, Kohima, Mokokchung, & Wokha districts of Nagaland and from Mao Gate), Naro Ki prides itself in the contribution to income generation for these women.”

Strategy and success story:

Since the establishment of Naro Ki has succeeded in the creation of fresh flowers market for local growers as well as buyers, farmers now not only grow and sell in large scale, but also grow throughout the year. The boutique's first priority is local growers, and it has been able to maintain and fulfill that goal from the beginning. Continuous demand in the market for fresh flowers ensures that even small growers get an outlet for their produce.

By buying from local flower growers who are all women (from Dimapur, Kohima, Mokokchung and Wokha

districts of Nagaland and from Mao Gate), Naro Ki prides itself in the contribution to income generation for these women. The boutique also purchases flowers throughout the year from the flowers growers of Meghalaya, Darjeeling, Siliguri and Sikkim.

Naro Ki not only meets the needs of the retail and wholesale markets, but also that of event planning. With buyers ranging from different walks of life; from home makers and offices to event managers and floral committee of the churches; and all with different budgets, the boutique is now recognized as 'the place' to go for good quality products, varieties of cut flowers and services.

Naro Ki started with a staff of 3, which now has grown to 6 on a regular pay roll. And during the peak season and events, the team is supported by 6 to 8 additional part time workers to help relieve the added work load. Besides the generation of employment, our staff gets trained in-house in the art of floral design and decoration. Taking on part timers also translates to generation of income for unskilled workers. Over the years, the boutique has also added dry flowers and home delivery services, increasing the potential to tie up with more youth and part time employees.

What started as an outlet for local farmers now prides itself in the generation of offset markets as well.

Naro ki is also associated with local artisans for its range of baskets and other local makers and entrepreneurs for its services.

Influence in the market:

Since the opening of Naro ki almost a decade ago, it has grown from a fresh-flowers-only outlet to a one-stop shop for all things flowers and related accessories; from sourcing flowers locally to linkages with sellers from many parts of the country like Ooty, Pune, Bangalore and Northeastern states. This has made the boutique popular with event planners and managers in the state who want to forgo the hassle of sourcing from different markets and prefer the convenience of getting all their needs ordered at one place. Today, Naro Ki as a brand is synonymous not only with variety but also quality and eye-catching custom bouquets, arrangements and wreaths for every budget.

My challenges and my message:

I started working from home around the year 2009 by buying flowers from the farmers in small quantity and reselling them as part time. By 2015, I started my full-fledged boutique business. Before Covid, my boutique used to buy cut flowers from around 250-300 women flower growers on a regular basis from Meghalaya, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Manipur and Nagaland. But post-covid, many gave up on flower cultivation as the growers were not given facilities unlike the vegetable farmers or other farmers by the government or any agency.

Now, we have around 50 women growers from whom we buy regularly. We are trying to encourage more women to grow in their garden as part time and to add to their economy in whatever small plot of area they have in their backyards.

“ Now, we have around 50 women growers from whom we buy regularly. We are trying to encourage more women folks to grow flowers as part time in their garden. ”

We distribute flowers to nearby North Eastern states of India such as Imphal in Manipur, Guwahati in Assam and Shillong in Meghalaya. Though there are demands from pan-India, we are unable to distribute due to logistic issues.

When I started, the biggest challenge was the stiff competition from easily available cheap artificial flowers in the market. People preferred artificial flowers as they were cheap and durable. With our persistent marketing strategy, over the years, the demand and supply need of the population for fresh flowers has been solved to some extent. People have accepted the use of fresh flowers and have made it a habit to keep them at home too.

Now, we have started advocating how buying fresh flowers support small time growers and how it can save the environment by not using artificial flowers which are not biodegradable.

My message to aspiring entrepreneurs would be, **Do what you love and love what you do**. Be committed, maintain consistency, be creative and think out of the box. Patience is also very important, as things do not happen overnight.



SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Entrepreneurship is the best way for women to be economically empowered and independent. Women are the primary caregiver of their children and family, and hence at times it is difficult for them to balance their work and personal life if they take up a full time job. Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, gives them the flexibility of time to manage their household responsibilities and their business venture according to their convenience.

Science and technology is an emerging field where women can explore entrepreneurial opportunity. In order to enhance women's participation in science and technology, we need to increase their representation in science & technology related jobs. The proportion of women enrolling for science and engineering courses has been improving in recent years. The share of girl students in IITs has risen from 8% in 2016 to almost 20% now.

At the same time, we need to bridge the gender gap in the job market for science and technology field. Even though 40% of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) graduates in India are women, only 14% of STEM jobs are held by them in the country. Thus, there is huge underrepresentation of women in science & technology employment. By increasing women's participation in science and technology jobs, we can pave way for their entrepreneurial ventures in this sector as highly experienced professionals choose to pursue entrepreneurship at the advanced stage of their career. There are many organizations domestically and globally that promote women's representation in the science and engineering field. The Department of Science & Technology, Government of India operates several schemes and incentives to enhance participation of women in entrepreneurship.

Similarly, the Chicago-based Society of Women Engineers has been working since 1950s to promote women in the engineering profession. The Paris-based World Federation of Engineering Organizations (WFEO) represents about 20 million engineers from more than 90 countries and it promotes gender equality in the engineering profession through its Committee on Women in Engineering (WIE). This Committee works toward empowering women in engineering and technology profession by breaking the glass ceiling, conducting leadership and empowerment programs. This Committee addresses the glass ceiling in corporate sector by promoting workforce diversity, assisting companies in attracting, retaining and promoting women engineers.

This handbook carries inspiring stories of women who successfully made entrepreneurial career in contract research, industry 4.0 technologies, bioscience and industrial drone.

Dr. Anupama Mallik, one of the pioneering women tech entrepreneurs in India



Dr. ANUPAMA MALLIK

Founder, CEO and Managing Director,
Vizara Technologies

“My advice to anyone who wishes to start her journey of entrepreneurship is to do so with a clear head, strong heart and a passion towards her product or service. The road ahead may not be smooth but commitment to working hard and to achieve will ultimately bring laurels and success” says Dr. Anupama Mallik,

Dr. Mallik is a Ph.D. from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi. With 25 years of experience in the industry and academia, she has worked extensively towards bringing art and science together and is the author of two books and several published papers in international journals and conferences.

With a graduation degree in Physics and Masters in Computer Applications (MCA), Dr. Mallik chose to pursue a Ph.D. after 10 years in the IT industry, with full responsibility of a house to run and two kids to look after, and at the same time teaching MCA full-time at the Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University of the Delhi Government.

Interestingly, she credits the successful completion of her Ph.D. program and the path that she chose ahead, to an IIT Delhi (IITD) professor who sat her down to advise her on all the reasons why she would fail. She chose to ignore this advice, and started her Ph.D. program, completing

her course work and competing against students half her age. It was Dr. Mallik's grit and determination to prove her detractors wrong that have made her come a long way since that sit-down.

Her Ph.D. thesis at the Electrical Engineering Department of IIT Delhi focussed on using Artificial Intelligence based exploration of Indian Classical Dance, and was titled **‘Ontology based Exploration of Multimedia Content’**. Her research interests at IIT Delhi included Semantic web, Multimedia, Artificial Intelligence, Internet of Things and applications of Extended Reality (XR).

Post the completion of her Ph.D. program, Dr. Mallik engaged in a long association with the Multimedia Research group at the Electrical Engineering Department, IIT Delhi, and worked at Senior Scientist's position in projects sponsored by the Government of India and private Indian companies like the TCS Research Labs and Samsung Research India.

Prior to starting her academic journey, Dr. Mallik worked in the Information Technology (IT) industry for several years and was amongst the first Indian women tech entrepreneurs in the Information technology (IT) industry in the 1990's.

Her IT company developed several successful MIS applications for lawyers, retail firms and the tourism industry. Her clients were famous Indian law firms like the J.B. Dadachandji & Co., Orr Dignam & Co.; Retail firms like that Wimpy fast-food chain; and Tourism agencies like the Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation.

Later, as part of academia, she taught Computer Science courses as a visiting faculty at Technical colleges of the Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, and the Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology (IIIT) of the Delhi Government. She continued to author multiple papers in various national and international conferences and journals, and is the co-author/ editor of two books in the domain of multimedia ontology and digital heritage.

The books are ‘Multimedia Ontology: Representation and Applications’ and ‘Digital Hampi: Preserving Indian Cultural Heritage’.

Dr. Mallik has served on the programme committee of

various workshops and events in Digital Heritage domain including the 1st International Heritage Symposium and Exhibition (IHSE) 2020, held at the National Museum, Janpath, New Delhi, India, in January 2020.

She has also served as an International expert for global universities such as the Tongji University, Shanghai, China. She is a member of the ACM and ICOMOS India.

In 2016, she set up her own Tech startup, Vizara Technologies Private Limited, that offers knowledge based solutions employing cutting-edge technologies such as the Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and 3D printing, for domains including Heritage, Tourism, Education, Entertainment and Retail.

Having been one of the first entrepreneurs in the 90's, she was not quite ready to take the plunge again, especially after enjoying the comfort zone and cocoon of being in the academia and research sphere, but her new startup initiative was a way to prove her abilities to herself.

Disregarding the doubts in her head, Dr. Mallik leveraged the right timing, especially with government initiatives like StartUp India and Digital India being given a push by the incumbent government, and set-up Vizara Technologies in 2016. She strategically navigated through the complexities of running a successful business with a Business-to-Government (B2G) focus.

From her early days of envisioning Vizara, to her ongoing efforts to be agile and keep innovating consistently, she has understood the industry demands and her target audience well.

With new encouragement being given to women entrepreneurs in the new India, with opportunities galore, she has found it much easier than the 90's to start a company, find a supportive incubator such as the Technology Business Incubator Unit (TBIU), IIT Delhi and get certified by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT).

The special tax benefits given to Vizara by the Inter-Ministerial Board (IMB) of DPIIT due to its contribution to social upliftment and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of UNESCO, made the journey smoother. Dr. Mallik believes that Indian government initiatives like Startup India, Invert India, Digital India have provided woman entrepreneurs like her a forum to meet investors, ministry officials and explore opportunities in the B2G space.

Currently at Vizara, Dr. Mallik and her team aim to change the way people experience history and learn about heritage. Her vision is to get the youth curious about our roots and our past, and show the same to them using AR, VR and the latest tech. They must be interested enough to actually want to visit heritage sites and museums using AR apps and get immersive experiences built around them.

The mission of Vizara is to map each global heritage site into digital space through documentation, archiving and preservation.

The company's vision is to be seen at the forefront of new-age technology, and the core values that Dr. Mallik has sought to implement in the company's culture are integrity, innovation and 100% commitment to the job at hand.

“ Dr. Mallik firmly believes that today is the time in India for a woman to step out and achieve what she has always dreamt of, and in this long and challenging journey, there are multiple partners and supporters, ready to encourage, entrust and empower the visions of women changemakers like her.”

Dr. Mallik firmly believes that today is the time in India for a woman to be the founder of a start up - to step out and achieve what she has always dreamt of, and in this long and challenging journey, there are multiple partners and supporters, ready to encourage, entrust and empower the visions of women changemakers like her.

Dr. Mallik's journey has been one of resilience, perseverance and self-belief. Even while leading an unconventional tech company, it is her willingness to take risks and learn from mistakes that has enabled her to stay focused on her goals. Her success today can hence be attributed not to the milestones, but rather her determination to not let failure influence her, and to turn challenges into rewards.

A scientist and an entrepreneur, making India proud



Dr. CHAITRA HARSHA

Co-Founder, Vipragen

“Many women laid down their lives and through blood sweat and tears earned several rights. Young women and girls need to imbibe the spirit of this day.”

This year marks the 120th year of us celebrating International Women’s Day. This day now in many cases has become another celebration with balloons, cakes and the works. Newer generations of young women are not aware why this day came to be observed and what it really means for us.

The day came to be observed after women came to the streets to fight for equal rights. Many women laid down their lives and through blood sweat and tears earned several rights. Young women and girls need to imbibe the spirit of this day.

With that being said, we are in the 21st century and things have come a long way. But, it is also true that there is a long way to go before women get true equal footing as men in our society, especially in this dynamic world. How

do we achieve this?

Today, I stand as the co-founder of Vipragen, a Contract Research Organization (CRO), a field traditionally dominated by men. I am going to share some experiences of my journey in the hopes that it could inspire many girls and young women to follow their passion and become successful in this male dominated world.

The most preliminary step to be successful is to first figure out what you are passionate (or not) about. What I mean is that you may not easily figure out what you are passionate about quickly, but, you must come out of this mindset of settling for something whether you like it or not.

I used to be this curious young girl during my college days. I was doing my MBBS but I knew my passion was not in clinical practice but elsewhere. Always curious about the world around me, I often questioned, “how can the world around me be made better and how can I be a part of it?”

This curiosity landed me in the prestigious IISC and from there I finished my doctoral program. Even at this point, I will admit, I was hounded with a question of “what next?” At this point I was sure that I wanted to do something of my own. So, I started a couple of start ups in cosmetic dentistry and medical tourism.

In 2009, during this brief dribble, I found a course in Indian Institute of Management’s NS Raghavan Cell for women entrepreneurs. It was called Management Programme for Women Entrepreneurs (MPWE). I enrolled into this program immediately, without blinking twice.

This made me more aware of the nuances and challenges that business owners need to endure. That’s when I realized how essential a stable ecosystem is to a company’s success, how to build teams that are relevant globally, and how to be cost-competitive in the global market. This marked the pivotal moment.

My decision to start a healthcare business was made. A short while after this, I founded Vipragen with my IISC Senior Dr. Chandrashekar Siddamadappa.

Even at this stage, it was a pretty uphill task. I was to lead a team of mostly senior scientists who were men. Due to

“ The best feeling is when you can offer many more women an opportunity to succeed in their life and break the shackles of this male dominated society.”

my past experience at the two start ups where I had to perform multiple roles, I had gained so much experience in leadership. Even on the science front I had the necessary attributes needed for my role.

However, it still took a while till I could successfully prove my capability to my team and earn their respect. This took sheer hard work and I had to walk the extra mile every step of the way to prove I was no less. Thinking about it, maybe this would have been much easier for a man who was at my position.

There is a strange paradox when it comes to be a successful woman entrepreneur. It is true that women will have a harder time and face many more obstacles to succeed in the realm of entrepreneurship, particularly in the scientific sector. Yet, if you allow this to bother you, it will bring you down.

You need to develop this dual mindset where you are aware that the world is an unfair place to women but also believe that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I know it hard to wrap your head around this, but if you master this mindset, then sky is your limit.

Every day, you might see yourself struggling twice as hard to get to the same footing as your male counterpart. Every time you might see yourself struggling for something that is taken for granted by male entrepreneurs. You might face people making fun of you behind your back, especially when you fail at some point just for the fact you are a woman.

My sincere advice is to not let this bother you. Embrace the hardship and ignore the taunts. Your success will be the best response you can give.

Today, I can boast that I was the key participant representing India in many international events including the AsiaBerlin Summit; Global Economic Dialogue in Hamburg, Germany; World Economic Forum (WEF) where I literally rubbed shoulders with the likes of Ivanka

Trump; etc. Isn't this enough of a response to all who didn't believe in me?

However, the best feeling is when you can offer many more women an opportunity to succeed in their life and break the shackles of this male dominated society.

There was a time when women had to fight on the streets to gain rights. Though now, the battle still exists for us but in a different form. I believe real independence for women is achievable only when we become educated and financially independent.

“ Independence for us is never going to be won by someone else and gifted to us. We must fight for it and take it for ourselves.”

There is a wonderful by-product to this. The more women come into the work force, the more our country can progress. In fact, third world countries should look towards this untapped potential.

Remember, there was a time when women in India weren't allowed to study. The likes of Savitri Bai Phule had stones and cow dung thrown at her for giving education to women. It is because of people like her, you and me are even

able to see a classroom.

Whenever you feel the going gets difficult, just remember her, how she endured all of this with a smile. Is your difficulty even remotely as similar to hers? This will give you strength.

What I feel is that this struggle to be really emancipated is not just for ourselves. We owe it to history and the greats to prove that what they did was correct.

This International Women's Day, let us women come in support of each other and work in tandem to make this world a more equitable place.

One more thing I would like to say is that independence for us is never going to be won by someone else and gifted to us. We must fight for it and take it for ourselves.

■

A pioneering entrepreneur who set up a first-of-its-kind pan-India biobank



Dr. JUGNU JAIN

PhD, Co-Founder & CEO
Sapien Biosciences

“ We live only once and I believe we should not have regrets later that we did not take the risk. ”

I am a scientist-turned-entrepreneur who moved from Boston, USA back to India to co-found Sapien Biosciences with two of my colleagues. By training, I am a molecular and cell biologist with a PhD in Genetics from Trinity College in Cambridge University, UK. My post-doctoral training was in Immunology at the Harvard Medical School, Boston. I then had a 14 year drug discovery experience at Vertex Pharmaceuticals in Boston, prior to returning to India in 2011.

I wanted to test my capabilities; creating something out of nothing, using my skills, time, effort and money to build a clinically impactful enterprise in India. After all, we live only once and I believe we should not have regrets later that we did not take the risk

I admit that it was a big leap of faith, at the not-so-young age of 50, to resign from a successful career in USA with a

“ My co-founders and I took a huge financial risk by working without a salary for more than 1 year to conceptualize the business and get it off the ground. ”

6 figure salary, stock options, bonus, 6 weeks' paid vacation etc. When I quit my job, neither Sapien nor the funding was in place, so my entire move was at risk. It took a lot of courage, steely resolve and optimism to go through the transitions and a number of my friends and family circle tried to dissuade me!

My co-founders and I took a huge financial risk by working without a salary for more than 1 year to conceptualize the business and get it off the ground. Even after the company started, we took only a nominal salary to conserve cash, and this went on for a few years. I also gave personal loans, all at risk, to keep the company going. Finally, it is a profitable venture at present.

Personally and professionally also, adjusting to India after having lived in the US for 26 years was very difficult for me. I had never lived in Hyderabad before and it took a lot of tolerance for me to deal with the unreliability of the most basic amenities such as internet, electricity, water and patience to deal with the bureaucracy to get a simple phone SIM, gas connection etc., all of which I may have taken for granted in the US.

During tough and frustrating times like these, I reminded myself of the larger purpose for which I had come back to India – to create India's first biorepository that India needed, but didn't have. India has high disease burden and large number of patients. Yet there were no significant collections of disease specimens with matching data when I started.

Globally, there are 500+ biobanks but the few Indian biobanks that existed in 2012 were small and covered very few diseases. So we set up a pan-India biobank with Apollo hospitals comprising all diseases, to work with healthcare industry to translate discoveries into products. A biobank where Indian data on different diseases is

digitized and stored securely to spur research into the causes and cures for the diseases, because good data and patient sample sets are the very foundation on which clinical solutions are built.

Our biggest challenge was the fact that the concept of a biobank was new to India, and hence we faced enormous resistance at every step, be it Pathology departments where pathologists were reluctant to have a central biobank manage their samples and felt they would lose control over them, or the ethics committees where we had to engage with members, raising awareness about the guidelines for biobanking. Within hospitals, getting structured data from IT and medical records departments was extremely difficult, and we slogged over defining standard templates to extract data in bulk in an automated manner, rather than manual retrieval which

“During tough and frustrating times I reminded myself of the larger purpose for which I had come back to India – to create India’s first biorepository that India needed, but didn’t have.”

carries high risk of errors. Defining processes for coding and storage of samples and data efficiently and securely was another challenge for us to overcome.

Today, Sapien Biosciences has more than 2,50,000 patients’ samples and data, becoming the largest biobank in India and among the top 10 in the world. We have a strong framework of Ethics within which we work, following Indian and global guidelines. One of our role models is the UK biobank which has fostered healthcare innovation by democratizing research samples and data, leading to 400+ publications. At the moment, the samples and data of Sapien Biosciences are from private hospitals. For it to be a representative of India, participation of public hospitals is needed in a public-private, mutually beneficial partnership, where we offer biobanking expertise to public hospitals to conserve and digitize valuable samples and datasets which can contribute large unbiased data to drive public health policy and funds.

A biobank is a social enterprise that has many benefits for its stakeholders and society. These include generation of employment for high skilled biotech professionals,

catalysis of innovation with state, national and international universities and industries devoted to improving healthcare delivery and preserving digitized health records of tens of thousands of patients undergoing treatment at hospitals. A biobank fulfils the need of clinicians and researchers to manage large volumes of patient samples. These benefits also help the government to understand the country’s patient demographics and to tailor their policies and resources to best serve its people to promote health and well-being.

I am a team builder who nurtures diversity and excellence at workplace. Women comprise almost 80% of our company’s workforce, including some who have joined after a break in their career for child responsibilities. I strive for a nurturing work environment, gender equality including equal pay for equal work, flexi-time including discretionary work-from-home, mater/paternity benefits, career growth opportunities and yearly performance feedback. We are blessed to have many long-term colleagues who take pride in the company and the work we do.

My colleagues and I have been invited to present our work at Indian and international biobanking conferences. In 2019, Sapien Biosciences was selected among the 3 start-ups from India in healthcare for the Global Entrepreneur Summit (GES) in Netherlands. I was recognized as a ‘Woman Transforming India’ by Niti Aayog in 2020. I also won the TIE Women entrepreneur competition from the combined states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. My story and work have been covered by social and digital media including India Today, Economic Times, Biospectrum, Your Story, Feminism in India.

Links to a few coverages:

Niti Aayog:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Grg30L36B50>

<https://www.biospectrumindia.com/features/18/10536/international-womens-day-dr-jugnu-jain.html>

<https://feminisminindia.com/2021/12/14/jugnu-jain-scientist-biomedical-science/>

<https://health.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/industry/there-is-a-great-demand-for-ethically-procured-high-quality-human-specimens-jugnu-jain/66142203>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jugnu-jain-3839b4/>

My journey from fear to familiarity to force



Ms. NIHARIKA KOLTE ALEKAR

Founder & CEO, Volar Alta

"This is a chapter in a story that is yet to reach its crescendo and still has been so enthralling for me that I now find it inextricable. Affording the privilege of hindsight or calling it nostalgia is premature, so this is merely the First-person View (Or FPV as it is called) of the journey so far"

Volar Alta which means 'Fly high' in Spanish, was the result of mere pursuit of solution to some real-life problems faced by the industry, 'procedural delays due to asset inspection and risk mitigation.' Little did I know that this pursuit would land me the biggest unknown so far, one which I have now come to not only admire but also relish if I dare say. This is my experience of the journey with that unknown so far. This is a journey from fear to familiarity to force, enabled by unwavering support from my family and friends.

Fear: I remember having read somewhere that fear is the oldest and strongest emotion and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is that of the unknown. My career in investment banking, working with two of the Big 4's was already a dream fulfilled. An up-close and inside view of the corporate world, a privilege to call some of the sharpest minds in the business as my colleagues and access to repositories of enviable intelligence are things too precious to walk away from. Yet, I did that out of the thought of making a difference, however small, in the world as I know it.

The world of drones was then and even now to a great extent a mystery land for me who comes with a background in banking and finance. Being part of the conversations on technological aspects of drones and aviation was nothing short of listening to a foreign language you have not yet learnt. Talking to people who were native to the domain of technology was always accompanied by a question 'Do I belong here?' Naturally, there was always skepticism about being accepted as a part of the community that is dominated by individuals who are passionate about and resplendent with ideas for the future of technology and its impact.

It is obvious that I did get my fair share of rejections for being in the service segment of engineering industries without prior first-hand experience. The realization struck soon, what a steep mountain I had to climb if I were to prove that I had made the right choice. The only thing in my control was to show up every day and treat every day as my first day at a new job.

Aldous Huxley, one of the foremost intellects of his time has famously said, "there are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are doors of perception." The fear of the unknown is precisely that, a perception. I feel it is only the lack of clarity or visibility. And there started the journey to 'familiarity.'

Familiarity: I consider myself to be fortunate to have started my journey in entrepreneurship at a time that I did. I would be surprised to know if there was ever a more conducive environment for entrepreneurs in India. A host of quality incubation programs, access to industry stalwarts, easy opportunities to network with fellow travelers on this journey and overall encouragement by the establishment has made it a much more pleasant experience.

It provided an incredibly valuable orientation and focus to our efforts. Each passing day posed a new question and provided an opportunity to get acquainted with a different business aspect. Be it technology or human. Understanding the 'why' behind every action and decision, made it easy to figure out the 'how.'

Volar Alta faced one of its biggest challenges so far, in its very first month which was the Covid-19 pandemic. Stepping out and getting to know more about our target customers was made impossible by the pandemic. But it taught an important lesson in adaptability. If not the

industry, we took this opportunity to collaborate with local civic bodies and law-enforcement agencies to help them in effective implementation of quarantine protocols.

This entire experience helped me gain a distinct perspective on being swift to embrace change and open to new possibilities by leveraging existing strengths. This collaboration needed us to adopt different operation methods and form new strategic partnerships to cover more geography. Passing this first test of survival reinforced the belief of being able to tackle the challenges successfully.

Although, as I mentioned in the beginning, it is still a chapter in a story that is yet to reach its crescendo, I cannot overstate the critical importance of my support system. Be it through the incubation opportunity at the prestigious IIMs, TiE and Atal Innovation Centre (GoI) as well as through different accelerator programs across the country, I have been fortunate to have met some great mentors and business leaders across industries. Their advice has helped shape me into a better version of the entrepreneur that I was 2 years ago. I am indeed lucky for the steadfast support and encouragement I have continued to receive from my teammates, family and friends.

“ The fear of the unknown is precisely that, a perception. I feel it is only the lack of clarity or visibility. And there started the journey to familiarity. ”

When the industrial operations resumed normally, we had gained enough experience of effectively carrying out flight missions and developed better anticipation of contingencies. That helped our customers increasingly believe in our capabilities and be more comfortable sharing their different operational challenges and requirements. This is the familiarity with customers that any business seeks to be able to better serve them and it has now become our driving force for our journey ahead.

Force: Embracing the initial fear and undergoing the rigorous process of familiarizing myself with both drones and the customer industry has been transformative. I feel if you approach each discussion with your customer as an opportunity to learn and listen to them actively, be honest about your competences and consistently deliver on your promises, no matter how small, it will lay a sturdy foundation for a lasting association.

With no formal background in business, I had to learn on the job and hence these conversations were my master classes. This is a demanding and iterative process. You are not only an entrepreneur but also a skilled manager as well as a diligent employee at the same time. While being on the ground and close to customers lends a perspective and ideas, realizing them takes incredible determination and discipline. After three years of this practice, I am in a much better position to not only provide service to our customers but also be an active participant in their solution development process. I consider this to be my biggest gain and the trust we have earned is our driving force for future operations. Thus, we have been able to turn the fear of the same unknown as our force for exploring it.

Every business needs to be like a closed-loop control system for continuous feedback and appropriate course correction. While critical feedback helps you improve, positive feedback is equally important for a startup in its initial days. They reinforce the belief in the start-up's adopted methods and help quell the doubts. Volar Alta has been lucky to have received such positive feedback in terms of quite a few institutional recognitions. Be it the opportunity to be a part of India's NITI AAYOG's panel discussion, inclusion in NITI Aayog and Atal Innovation Centre's list of 'Innovation for you' for top 75 women entrepreneurs in India in 2022 and various other panel discussions. Most recently, a recognition by Women and Drones at the prestigious CES 2023 in Las Vegas, NV, USA was not just an affirmation, but it was also accompanied by insights as well as warm advice from industry veterans whom I could only have dreamt of meeting.

Along the way, I have also come across some incredible entrepreneurs and amazing individuals who keep on pushing the envelope to redefine what is possible. Businesses are doubling down on innovation and startups lead the way. However, I am convinced that achieving these innovations with sustainability and a resolve to minimize our carbon footprint is the key to business in the future. At Volar Alta, we are determined to make positive contributions towards reducing our carbon footprint along with increasing efficiency through our products and services and our journey to be a leading technology service provider has only begun.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

The recent years have seen tremendous growth in organizations developing profitable business models while also creating positive impact on people and planet. These enterprises, also called social enterprises, have served as a role model for traditional business organizations that mindlessly pursued profitability, at times by compromising human values and environmental standards. Social enterprises are the catalyst for social change as they address the most pressing societal problems of poverty, gender inequality, poor access to healthcare and education through profitable business models.

Often, social enterprises take on the responsibility of government to protect environment and improve people's welfare while pursuing the business goal of profitability. Often, their unique business model that ties profitability with social and environmental goals helps them attract capital from institutional investors who prefer to deploy capital in ventures that meet the highest ESG (environment, social and governance) standards.

There are many social enterprises in India that work to alleviate poverty, improve access to education, healthcare, improve agriculture productivity, farmers' income and promote eco-friendly sectors such as renewable energy, waste management and circular economy. Many of these enterprises are start-ups run by passionate young, first generation entrepreneurs who are motivated by the zeal to work for a social cause by leveraging cutting edge technologies.

According to Amani Institute India, which offers higher education to social impact professionals, women run around 25% of all social enterprises in India. Some of the leading social enterprises in India are: Goonj, which is a community development organization, Mann Deshi Bank, which offers credit to rural women-owned enterprises, Aajeevika Bureau, which supports migrant workers, Akanksha Foundation, which promotes education among the economically weaker sections of the society.

In the financial year 2019-20, Government of India introduced the concept of Social Stock Exchange to promote the flow of risk capital to these social enterprises. Social Stock Exchange connects social enterprises with investors who are looking to deploy funds in business organizations that promote social causes.

This handbook carries inspiring stories of ordinary women who made extraordinary impact on the lives and livelihood of disadvantaged men and women through innovative business models. Some of these entrepreneurs also made a sustainable impact on environment by developing and promoting reusable sanitary napkins and eco-friendly products.

Fighting period poverty



Ms. ANJU BIST

Founder, Ayurarogya Saukhyam Foundation

“That was the first time I realized that the sanitary napkins we take for granted are not as easily accessible or available in low-income rural communities.”

Women Transforming India. The name says it all. When NITI Aayog announced its latest cohort of 75 Women Transforming India awardees, I was pleasantly surprised to find my name included. But what was even more surprising and especially gratifying was that there was not one, not two, but three of us in the cohort building social enterprises to solve the many problems related to menstrual hygiene product access.

I remember the first time that I came face-to-face with some of these problems. I had heard that girls drop out of school in rural India when they start menstruating. I had heard that they otherwise miss school during their period days. But nothing had prepared me for what I saw. We were trying to recruit teenagers for receiving free reusable pads that the women in the same communities were stitching. We had trained these women earlier, and before initiating sales of these pads, we wanted the first

batch to be given free to their daughters and the daughters' friends. We were clear that only teenagers would get these free handouts; the rest would have to buy, albeit at subsidized prices.

In five contiguous villages, we set about recruiting twenty teenagers each, for a total of hundred beneficiaries. I was shocked when I learned that only two of these hundred girls attended school. The rest were at home awaiting marriage. They had all dropped out. I asked if any girls in these communities ever went to college. 'No one', came the answer and I wanted to know why. That was the first time I realized that the sanitary napkins we take for granted are not as easily accessible or available in low-income rural communities. An opportunity to complete their education can give one the key to break free from the cycle of poverty. Sadly, these girls would never have that opportunity. This was the first time I understood what period poverty really is and the terrible harm it can do.

Our mission statement reads, 'Combat climate change, support zero-waste communities, empower women and transform lives – all through our beautiful reusable pads.' Our social enterprise trains rural women groups to make reusable menstrual pads. Who would have thought that reusable pads have the power to transform lives! They do! They are also an essential weapon in the fight against climate change. Trees are cut to obtain cellulose fiber, which is the absorbent material in 99% of the disposable sanitary napkins made and sold globally. It's a pity that this is not commonly known.

Amma, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, is revered worldwide as a spiritual and humanitarian leader. During India's Presidency of G20 this year, Amma was appointed by the Government of India as the Chair of C20 which represents civil society interests. Amma started the Saukhyam Reusable Pads project so that women in remote, rural areas also have easy access to high-quality and affordable products for menstrual hygiene that do not pollute. In collaboration with State Governments, NGOs, PSUs and Corporates, today we are building production centers in several states of India.

We are on a mission to make reusable mainstream and disposable widely known as the bad idea that it really is. We maintain that nothing that is disposable can ever be sustainable. The planet does not have enough resources for us to keep taking, making, using and throwing and



Anju receiving NITI Aayog's Women Transforming India Award

“ Our mission statement reads, ‘Combat climate change, support zero-waste communities, empower women and transform lives – all through our beautiful reusable pads.’ ”

doing that endlessly.

My personal journey with sustainability started when I met Amma some twenty years ago. I was living in the US at that time. I had grown up in urban India. Like many other engineering students from middle-class families, I too aspired to make a good career. Upon graduation, I headed to the US. I had a research assistantship at the University of Maryland at College Park, and I graduated from there a couple of years later with MS and MBA degrees. With my first job out of college, I was already earning in six figures. But luckily fate had something else, something better, in store for me.

I met Amma soon after I had started working. My husband (then fiancé) met her some six months later. Both of us were immediately attracted to the ideals of simple living and high thinking that Amma embodied, and we impulsively asked her if we could live in Amma's ashram in India. Amma's answer was very simple. “It won't be easy, but if you have decided, you can come”. It took us 3-4 years to actually move to India and to Amma's ashram thereafter. After returning to India, we didn't feel sorry that we had left behind promising careers and a life of affluence. On the contrary, we wished we had come sooner. That was in April 2003, exactly about twenty years ago.

Today, my husband serves as the CIO at Amrita Hospital in New Delhi. This hospital built by Amma's ashram is one of Asia's largest hospitals and it was recently inaugurated by our Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi and I am referred to as the Padwoman of India.

Amma says, “The beauty and charm of selfless love and service should not fade away from the face of this earth. The world should know that a life of dedication which is inspired by love and service to humanity is possible.” We

are both immensely grateful for having had the opportunity to experience the fragrance of such a life first-hand.

Today, Saukhya pads are in use not only in India but also in low-income communities in countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Spain and Mexico. They are exported to the US, Germany, Kuwait, Netherlands and UK. We have produced, sold and distributed more than 1 million pads. We are building capacity now so that 10 million (or 1 crore) pads will be produced, sold and distributed annually. Saukhya pads were launched in 2017, and upon Amma's instructions, Ayurargya Saukhya Foundation was founded in 2021 to serve as the umbrella for all Saukhya related activities. I am very fortunate to have Co-Directors Meena Bhate and Pavithra S guiding the Saukhya journey forward.

And what about that community in Bihar? We still do not have as many college going girls in the community as I would like, but not a single girl drops out of school there today when her periods begin. The women in those communities stitch pads and make them available not only to their daughters and daughters' friends but to girls and women all over rural Bihar. They are proud of the work they do. The income they earn helps their daughters complete their education.

We have a lot more to do. In many ways it feels that our work has only just begun. The foundation laid is strong. The journey has crossed several milestones, but the ultimate goal is still far away.

Today India has over 20 brands of reusable pads available, all of them excellent. Most are sold online; very few teams work in rural areas like we do. Our vision is that for menstrual hygiene, reusable pads should be the first choice for girls and women, benefiting them and our planet. This International Women's Day we renew our efforts and our firm commitment to this vision.

Values and valuation of an enterprise!



Ms. KARON SHAIVA

Chief Impact Officer – Idobro and
Managing Trustee – RISE Infinity Foundation.

As an entrepreneur, one of the aspects you are concerned with is the valuation of your business and the amount of capital you can source or retain, so as to ensure long term sustainability, be it for operating requirements or asset creation. This is no different for a Social entrepreneur.

In fact, it is even more so for social entrepreneurs who are mission driven and work for the benefit of the society and the world at large. As I look back at the capital I have created, I see it as a reflection of what I have valued the most. Let me start at the beginning of my journey. Since childhood, I have been involved in social projects, first in school and then through the Church. Watching children beg, I often asked my Father about poverty. Questions my Father found difficult to answer to a nine year old. As a teenager and young adult, I was very much involved with volunteering. After I qualified as a Computer Engineer, volunteering activities took a back seat. Especially, as my professional life was quickly on an upward graph.

Shortly, I started my first business as an Apple Computer solutions provider. I then got married and was soon expecting my first child. My company received a Special Achievement Award for our very first year of operations. Just as I thought that life could not be better, I was told that I could lose my life if I decided to have my baby. I was

hospitalised three times during my pregnancy and required total bed rest. I shut down my business, went into isolation, had my baby and survived to tell my tale. My personal story was covered in the iconic series 'Chicken Soup for the Indian Women Soul'.

Closing my first business and a very successful one at that, was difficult to put it mildly! It was also a turning point in my life that made me realise how little we actually controlled our lives and how quickly situations can change. The vulnerability in critical moments of our lives, makes one realise the value of those around us, the support we need and the emotional touch that hastens the healing process. While I always was affected by human issues, my own trauma made me decide to help others even more. Soon after, I moved to the USA, and got considerably involved in multiple charities. Two that were particularly close to my heart and head were the 'Women in Transition' program to help women get back to the workforce and the second was the 'Cleveland Museum of Art Fundraising Campaign' to support inner city kids access art facilities and more. I also started to consult on a part time basis and began to piece my professional life together.

On returning to India, I took a decision that many thought was ill-informed. Instead of leveraging my USA experience to get a plush job, I decided to volunteer with an NGO. I was to stay six months to help them get their ISO 9000 certification and implement an ambitious growth plan. I ended up staying for 18 months by when we had grown from six centres to 21 centres nationally. I realised, there were so many more amazing NGOs doing yeoman service, but there was also a real need for a professional approach to scale up their impact. I then decided to start out on my own to work with other NGOs and Women entrepreneurs in particular.

When I set up my enterprise as a for-profit, many again questioned my decision not to set up an NGO. Much easier raising grants than providing service to the social sector that is always constrained by lack of resources, finances or otherwise. My belief was that billions of dollars have been spent on aid across decades if not centuries and still we grapple with poverty, violence and disasters. We have traditionally relied on philanthropy and cross-subsidization (CSR) to support humanitarian and development interventions. However, there is a pressing need to find new solutions to the challenges the world faces and to take them to every corner and cluster that requires them.

“As I look at the other forms of capital that we have been able to create through our work – Human, Social and Natural, I can happily say that I am satisfied with our valuation (for now!). After all, what we Value = Capital we create!”

I also wanted to support women entrepreneurship and employment and hence 'Idobro' was launched as the Marketplace for Impact, that promoted products and services by Women, Social and Green enterprises (WSGE). We were also committed to creating a unique organisation that would be conscious of a woman's need to be professionally active while managing the home front, a dual duty that is expected of women all over the world. We started as an all-women team and only after two years began to include men as we felt it was discriminatory not to do so and also because gender balance is an equally important aspect of society.

Our policies were the most flexible and open culture you could imagine. Though not formally expressed, our first preference was always for women team members especially those in need. For a small team, we have welcomed a very diverse spectrum of women from vulnerable backgrounds - acid-attack survivor, tuberculosis survivor, TB and cancer patients, single moms and divorcees, women with physical and mental disabilities, young students and late learners, young brides, minorities and senior citizens in our team. All with their own special needs and criteria for a safe space and income.

It has not been easy to implement these policies nor apply the gender lens to everything we do – from procurement to partnerships and yet women have been at the centre of all our activities. Senior team members and advisors warned that such practices would lead to sub-optimal performance and productivity of staff, not to mention loss of revenues. While some of this has been true, and even worse, negative and unintended fall-outs have resulted in us losing good professional staff and once almost coming to the brink of shutting down, I believe that somewhere we have made a difference in all these women's lives and that is enough.

We have constantly experimented with the best ways to help individuals and institutions to **'Think different, and Act together!'** We have designed unique solutions,

hosted interesting conversations and pushed the boundaries of convening people based on models and frameworks driven by the universal RISE Values – Responsible, Inclusive, Sustainable and Eco-system friendly. The best manifestation of our approach is the RISE World Summit, our flagship event that bridges silos, sectors and stakeholders, bringing together unlikely partners and giving voice to those typically ignored. It has given us the opportunity to meet some of the most inspiring people and learn of some incredible actions that are truly saving our communities and the Earth!

The pandemic was yet another testing time. We were almost on the verge of being wiped out (again!) and my team was extremely concerned. Realising the situation, I assured my team that they would be paid irrespective of funds and in the meantime, to just go out there and help whenever and wherever possible. This one decision brought us centre stage at a time when organisations were falling short. It changed our lives dramatically! From struggling to pay salary, we went to struggling to find people to manage the avalanche of work we got. Ironically, it was at the most difficult time in the history of the development sector that we started to sustain ourselves! We also developed some of the most enduring relationships during this period that continue from strength to strength in our joint efforts.

It is the values we share that help us to create shared value for the eco-system. It has been a tough journey with many twists and turns, both professionally and personally, and there is much to be done given the world's problems, but we have to keep moving to improve people's lives and create a better world and a greener planet. At times that is enough to motivate us, at other times we dig deeper within ourselves, to find innovative ways to do more and the journey continues.

Now, to go back to the start of this narration! Many of my decisions have been questioned on the basis of 'the norm' or the sensible yardstick. Moreover, in financial terms, I may be found wanting but as I look at the other forms of capital that we have been able to create through our work – Human, Social and Natural, I can happily say that I am satisfied with our valuation (for now!). After all, what we Value = Capital we create! I firmly believes that PEACE is the ultimate indicator of development and Partnerships, Entrepreneurship and Citizenship can solve some (if not all) of the world's problems.

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Transforming the livelihood ecosystem for women



Ms. NEELAM CHHIBER

Co-founder, Industree Foundation

Neelam has been a voracious advocate of the 'Creative Manufacturing Industry'. She is driven by the vision of reviving India's artisanal sector. She sees India and the world's artisans, as both flag bearers of critical cultural continuity and strong pillars of the next regenerative economy. Her vision is to enable the sector's resurgence supported by policies conducive to their growth and success.

Her journey:

Neelam is an Industrial Design graduate from NID, Ahmedabad and has for the past four decades been working on the economic and social transformation of women from the most vulnerable communities to redefine Indian and global creative production which is pivotal for the Next Regenerative Economy. 'A regenerative economy is built on the foundation of localization, enabling inclusion, leveraging economies of scale, retaining the inherent diversity within communities' - thus landing the Industree model at the intersection of Equity, Climate and Gender- ECG.

Neelam's deep experience with enterprise growth models built on all kinds of impact capital- equity, debt and philanthropy, make her a strong proponent of Innovative Finance, as defined by local needs of communities on the ground.

More than 90% of the producers Industree engages with are women. In 2000, Neelam co-founded a charitable trust, Industree Foundation to engage with creative producer communities to augment their capacity, infrastructure and institution-building efforts, co-creating solutions, stunting the growth of India's high-potential creative manufacturing sector. Neelam upholds a belief that social and economic prosperity for women and youth, within India and many other parts of the world, can reach scale, with an appropriate focus on a sector that is a direct vehicle for sustainable production and consumption, globally.

An advocate of the creative manufacturing sector, she is working to connect underserved rural women artisans with urban and global consumers, with strategic and sustainable market linkages. Under her stewardship, Industree has already impacted 500,000 lives and ensured cumulative market access of over USD 58 million, with a clear focus on Equity, Gender and Climate. Neelam Chhiber's strong spirited thinking and action have ensured women producers becoming a part of mainstream value chains with customers such as IKEA, Carrefour, Triberg, H&M Home, and Future Group and have given women micro-entrepreneurs greater control over their economic security and resources to significantly improve social gains such as social security, better health care, and resilience to crises. Their ownership of net positive creative production value chains gives them added confidence as societal agents of change.

Her education and training as an industrial designer helped her connect design thinking with problem-solving. The biggest problem, she felt, was the stark poverty faced by communities and individuals who are exceptionally talented with valuable traditional cultural skills. She has worked towards creating a better life for communities who in spite of being immensely skilled were unfairly endowed in society and belonged to underserved communities. Her enthusiasm has been noteworthy for spearheading women's economic empowerment which is seen as a springboard for social empowerment which facilitates trickle-down results toward family education, health, and nutrition indicators. She is a recipient of the World Economic Forum affiliated Jubilant Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneur (2011), L'Oreal Paris & Femina Women's Award for Social Impact (2012), Womanity Foundation Women Changemaker Award (2013), FKCCI Outstanding Women Entrepreneur of the year (2015), Economic Times Evoke Social

Entrepreneur of the Year (2020), Women Transforming India by NITI Aayog (2021) and SHE is:75 Women in STEAM by the Office of Principal Scientific Advisor to the Govt. of India (2021) awards.

Efforts towards collaboration:

Her stewardship has supported Catalyst 2030, a global movement to realize Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 through collective action and strategies that facilitate systems change. Further, she has streamlined efforts towards Creative Dignity, established to provide relief and rehabilitation to Indian artisans during first wave of Covid for which Industree Foundation is the initial volunteer secretariat and Community Livelihoods Coalition (CoLive) which is a network of 84 Covid response grassroots organizations who are deeply interested in how livelihoods are being retained with resilience.

Her collaborative efforts towards Covid resulted in the Foundation being recognized by the World Economic Forum COVID Response Alliance for Social Entrepreneurs under India's Top 50 COVID-19 Last Mile Responders. It is her belief that all these initiatives signal a ray of hope and understanding that it is only co-creation and collaboration that is really going to provide the solution for all the problems that face us.

Neelam, Industree Foundation and its allied entities are working relentlessly towards the welfare and economic progress of artisans and their communities, using a strong gender lens, to ensure a lasting positive impact with the theory of co-creation. Industree envisions a world in which millions of producers rise out of poverty by building sustainable livelihoods within regenerative production practices. When producers have access to an enabling ecosystem they are able to pursue their futures with dignity. When women earn, their empowerment is enhanced at home and in their communities.

As a social entrepreneur: Neelam has observed that there are processes and systems wired into traditional practices that need not be lost. Her vision as an entrepreneur, therefore, extends towards building a supportive ecosystem that can serve as a toolkit for the agency as

she wanted for herself, and for everyone, so that all feel empowered to become and do things that give them a sense of fulfilment. Years of work with Industree has led her to form an ecosystem that supports women and youth in rural India and across the world. The aim of the ecosystem is to support the underserved to achieve their potential to become economic facilitators and emerge as entrepreneurs, enabling them to use production or livelihood practices that already exist in their communities. At the same time, they become connected to modern markets and consumers who are slowly leaning towards sustainable production, consumption, and cultural equity.

“As of 2023, Neelam, the Industree ecosystem and co-convened networks are co-creating solutions, aimed at impacting 100 million lives positively through good health, occupational safety and sustainable livelihood.”

She has embodied a commitment that respects other people and the natural world. Inclusive economic growth, reducing inequalities of women, and supporting cultural and creative industries has been essential areas of focus. As a social entrepreneur, Neelam foresees how upholding progressive frameworks and models could impact millions of artisanal enterprises with sustainability and influence income generation within indigenous communities in the Amazon, Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia and regions within the American continent. Traditional

skills and capabilities span a vast material base, be it stone, metal, gems, or textiles. Her aim, therefore, is to lend thought leadership for the revival of the creative manufacturing industry in India in ways that it becomes a strong pillar of resilient India and its regenerative economy.

As of 2023, Neelam, the Industree ecosystem and co-convened networks are co-creating solutions, aimed at impacting 100 million lives positively through good health, occupational safety and sustainable livelihood. The networks and Industree serve as ecosystem builders in the cultural, creative manufacturing space that can boost growth and economic viability for the most vulnerable communities. Neelam now envisions an enhanced status for the Indian craft sector as the creative manufacturing industry that enjoys the same recognition of economic contribution as it was before the country's colonization, especially before the industrial revolution.



This is truly the best time to build



Ms. SWATI SINGH

Founder, Aseemshakti Enablers Pvt. Ltd.

“ I have created my own 3P’s which I think are essential to build a high impact business viz. Purpose, Passion, Persistence.”

“An entrepreneur is someone who jumps off a cliff and builds a plane on the way down. Your willingness to jump is your most valuable asset as an entrepreneur. Nothing summarizes my journey of entrepreneurship better than this quote by celebrated Silicon Valley entrepreneur Reid Hoffman” says Swati Singh, Founder, Aseemshakti Enablers Private Limited.

My willingness to jump was all I had when I started. I did sincerely prepare for it like a good student in my naivety but I was blissfully unaware of its inadequacy. Had I known what the next 4 years were going to be for me I might not have gathered the courage to start. Ignorance is bliss indeed.

I run a women’s wear brand called Aseem by AseemShakti, which makes and markets design patent approved instant wear sarees with pocket. We are making saree globally accessible. We started as a small self-help group. Today, we are a DIPP recognized startup

with thousands of paying customers who love our brand. But, that’s not why I started it. I was not passionate about making sarees a globally acceptable piece of clothing. I wasn’t passionate about being a business owner. The product didn’t come first. I started because I was passionate about the people who would create this product. I was passionate about creating new work opportunities for a segment that often gets left out from the existing system. I was passionate about creating a model and scaling it to create opportunities for thousands of women. All I wanted was to make a group of women in my neighborhood happy because I was tired of witnessing their misery and shocked at what they had to resort to due to lack of opportunities. I wasn’t working for their future or mine, I just wanted to make their present happy. That is what fueled me every single day. That’s what inspired me to create a product which adds value and has a huge market.

Building a business from scratch is sheer hard work. Building a profitable social enterprise comes with its own additional challenges. I have created my own 3P’s which I think are essential to build a high impact business viz. Purpose, Passion, Persistence. These are the basic necessities for building a social enterprise. Everything else can be learned, delegated or acquired. These three cannot be fed or cultivated. It cannot be found. It is what emerges when you find your calling in what you do.

Having clarity of purpose is what births your passion, and passion fuels the resilience needed to persist.

I was always clear about wanting to work for social impact. To change lives!

Taking it on myself to solve a problem for local women of my community came from that sense of purpose. From doing it for ten women to wanting to do it for thousands of women is what I felt passionate about.

Anybody who is looking to work with, or for women from disadvantaged backgrounds should know that it isn’t a child’s play. Often, you might not get the support that you seek from your beneficiaries because they don’t know how to. You are not just building a business from scratch but also creating your own workforce. Not just setting up a work culture but defining, explaining and instilling it in the team members from scratch. It can get overwhelming sometimes and that’s where being passionate helps. Being passionate about the cause helps you shift your

perspective to look at it as challenges to overcome and not dead ends.

I had to convince women to give it a try and help them believe that they can do it. Throughout the training they would come crying thinking they would never be able to learn sewing, that they are letting me down and I had to make them as well as myself believe in trusting the process and give it all we had to learning. It took time, but the efforts finally paid off and I swell with pride when our customers appreciate the quality of work done by our seamstresses.

Raising capital also turned out to be a huge challenge. I read a lot about government initiatives for women entrepreneurs and felt like it was the best way to raise capital. My journey of applying, processing, and getting the bank loan was six months long and unbelievably torturous. It didn't end there! Even after I got the loan, it turned out that the product wasn't suitable for my business so I still had no access to the funds. Eventually, the situation got even worse, I had no access to my company's bank account. It took a lot of my time, energy and debt to get out of that trap. It was horrible! Not all schemes and initiatives designed by government would suit your business. New initiatives take time to roll out, so in most cases the banks are unaware too. Moral of the story is: Not exploring can lead to such disastrous experiences and delay in growth. It is very important to make quick decisions and explore all options. Today, there are many options and my advice is: Please choose wisely. I didn't know better and made my share of mistakes. Passion and support of a few friends and peers was what helped me survive this challenging period. It is very important to have a support system and I was fortunate enough to meet people who supported me, advised me, heard me, cheered for me, promoted me and partnered with me in my journey. Building relationships with utmost integrity is the key.

Skill training emerged as our third big challenge and it was taking a lot of time too. It was the first batch ever to be trained and we were trying to figure things out. When we were finally ready to launch the lockdown was announced. Making it our fourth big challenge. Two years of struggle to stand up on our feet was met with uncertainty. Suddenly, it all turned into a struggle to survive. Literally! saving lives was undoubtedly more important

“ Having clarity of purpose is what births your passion, and passion fuels the resilience needed to persist.”

than saving businesses. We had to shut our unit for 5 long months. Slowly, the lockdown was relaxed and we too started to revive our work. We created a tutorial video on how to drape our instant wear pocket saree in seconds and miraculously it went viral. There was no looking back since then. We didn't just start getting orders but great feedback from our customers too, and this led to repeat orders and word of mouth publicity. Persistence works!

We still haven't figured everything out yet. We are still learning, still building and still persisting.

“ Being passionate about the cause helps you shift your perspective to look at it as challenges to overcome and not dead ends.”

From requesting home makers to try out high-end sewing machines and learn a new skill to now having them as a high performing workforce. From thinking if a saree with pocket would work to getting 5-star reviews for it. From not knowing if we would survive the pandemic to building a brand loved by thousands of customers in a post-pandemic world, we have come a long way and we have a long way to go.

It has been a beautiful journey so far filled with purpose, places, people, and tons of learning. It has been great to witness and be benefitted by the ecosystem present in India. I feel grateful for the support offered from incubators, peer based networking groups and the freely available resources. Entrepreneurship is truly being celebrated in India.

Reid Hoffman once tweeted 'We don't celebrate failures in Silicon Valley, we celebrate learnings'. It makes me very happy to see it now happening in India too, especially after Shark Tank India.

This is truly the best time to build.

The fear of failure or not having enough resources, qualifications, guidance or support should no more be an excuse, make it up in hard work and jump!



Revival and growth of institutions – A social entrepreneur's trial



Dr. VANITA VISWANATH

Social Entrepreneur and Founder, Udyogini.

“Shashank Tripathi of Jagriti Yatra says “women are balance-sheet builders, while men are focused on profit and loss” .”

A woman's work, it is said, is never done. With more women in the workplace and without them being able to reduce responsibilities at home, this statement is even more applicable now. For social entrepreneurs who build their own enterprise, the responsibility to see opportunity in every challenge is almost an imperative for success. For women social entrepreneurs, success is achieved when it is holistic – holistic because the work at home and work outside home are rarely separated in women's cognitive and emotional state of being or relationships. This is why women's efforts for society are 'built to last'.

And so it was with my journey as a social entrepreneur. I came into this role as CEO of NGO called Udyogini that was on the verge of being closed due to a funds crunch and little motivation to carry on among its few employees. In the private sector in India, a similar scenario would

characterize the company as 'sick', and there are many examples of 'sick' companies being turned around by motivated and committed CEOs. When I was offered the responsibility of turning Udyogini around, I took it on with a strong belief that it should not be allowed to cease without even a fight and without some substantial effort made to revive and grow it. This was also a personal cause because Udyogini had been implementing an innovative, pioneering, medium scale program for microenterprise management training for assetless rural women in India which was funded by the World Bank and conceptualized and monitored by me and my team while I was working at the World Bank. The program was done in partnership with local NGOs that worked with such women so the NGOs also got trained in microenterprise to be able to sustain the program over the long term. Decidedly, there were many 'firsts' for Udyogini – venturing into a field like microenterprise training when even microfinance was new; working with local NGO partners when partnerships were not part of the vocabulary of development that it is today; and sustainability for the long-term through such partnerships at a time when sustainability was just starting to gain traction as a concept and practice. Udyogini had built a good reputation for quality program implementation and learning. Once the program closed, however, funds could not be mobilized to sustain it and build on the good work.

The initial years as CEO were challenging as I had no experience of running an institution much less try to revive one that was about to close! Other challenges were that I was living and working abroad for many years and had lost touch with my college or professional network that most leaders tap for support. Most NGO leaders were in any case alumni of professional rural or corporate management institutions in India (which I was not since my academic discipline for higher studies was, Political Science). They were able to network through those connections. There were also not many woman founders/CEOs of non-profits at the time (even if there were, I did not know them anyway) so it was a trial by fire in a male-dominated leadership landscape! Solo leadership requires grit because it is a lonely journey and I had wished many times that I had found another professional, equally committed to institution revival, who could be a sounding board and provide emotional support. It is probably for similar reasons that, for start-ups today, many mentors suggest that the entrepreneur get a co-founder even if the journey starts solo.

“ I was offered the responsibility of turning Udyogini around, I took it on with a strong belief that it should not be allowed to cease without even a fight and without some substantial effort made to revive and grow it.”

Revival can be more painful than starting a new institution. I always say it is like renovating an old house (where some residue of the old infrastructure remains to cause problems later) rather than pulling it down and laying the foundation again. Parts of the foundation of Udyogini were strong in terms of knowledge products, training curriculum and materials on microenterprise management for poor women as it was a first-of-its-kind program for generating such resources in a nascent field. But other parts like qualified human resources that had been there before, were no longer available to shape for high performance. So, the early years in Udyogini were spent in foundation building work and in managing expectations of the CEO – from the NGO community, the governing board and the donors. It was fortunate that Udyogini did pioneering work during the World Bank funded program which gave it the intrinsic merit and standing to be considered worthy of institutional revival.

The accumulated reputational dividend and rebuilding efforts helped Udyogini over the next many years. As CEO, I slowly gained many supporters and felt less alone at the top. What is very gratifying is not just having revived and grown an institution, but receiving some significant awards for the work done in the course of my tenure. Many knowledge resources created during this time are still being requested and cited. I moved on as CEO many years ago but Udyogini sustains and grows even when I am not at the helm. This is, surely, the ultimate reward!

I continue to use my learnings in Udyogini to shape the gender and entrepreneurship work with other institutions that I am now part of; learnings that need to reshape or shift the lens on how we approach women and their aspirations in Tier 3 and 4 districts of India in a setting that is in flux at an unprecedented speed, especially given the power of technology. The globalization of markets that was celebrated for the opportunities for poverty-alleviation and growth has been disrupted at all levels and not just because of the pandemic, but also politics and geopolitics. When globalization was at its peak, women and their work needs were chasing global markets but their capabilities did not keep pace. Aggregate analysis has generally showed how women were being left behind. My learnings now underlie my belief that with the understanding of how globalization may have precipitated environmental problems that are

urgent and compelling to solve, women will need to be at the forefront of actions of the future like climate because they are holistic in their thinking and conservationists for the well-being of their families and local ecosystem.

We need to look at this unique perspective of ‘the whole’ that women bring in society. As Shashank Tripathi of Jagriti Yatra says “women are balance-sheet builders, while men are focused on profit and loss” Women in rural India with whom Udyogini worked were balance sheet builders in the care and enterprise workspace in and outside the home to maintain equilibrium in their social ecosystem. As a woman social entrepreneur, I too always saw myself as a balance sheet builder and in Udyogini it meant taking everyone along in a participatory way and building incrementally rather than rapidly – focused on novel discoveries and learnings to transfer to other institutions as we developed the resources. This is how Udyogini’s work scaled to many parts of India and the world (its curriculum and microenterprise training materials were used by local government, NGOs and community institutions in World Bank projects in Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe). This participation and partnership approach to addressing development issues has now been termed ‘whole of society’ approach (OECD, WHO, UN-SDGs).

Women’s balance sheet building capability is an embedded value so women are the most appropriate resource for the ‘whole of society’ perspective and action (taking everyone along and building bridges within and with institutions like family, community, public officials and elected representatives, market players). Women in localities already use this approach and in rural areas they are the practitioners of sustainable agriculture. They are encouraged and supported by the NGOs who integrate government, market and local resources to scale women’s practice and models of ‘building to last’ across many geographies. Participation, partnership and perspective have been rooted and driven by women in sustaining local ecosystems. For young entrepreneurs, it is important to understand how this has worked and will continue to work because it is holistic. Compartmentalized initiatives are being rethought globally and none too soon.



SPORTS

Sports inculcate qualities such as confidence, teamwork, resilience etc. which are essential to lead a successful life. Recent years have seen increase in the number of women who excel in indoor and outdoor sports, which defies gender stereotypes by proving that women can equal and at times excel men in developing extraordinary sporting acumen.

The increasing success of women in sports has challenged traditional attitudes and gender-based bias that restricted women's participation in sports, especially in games such as cricket, hockey, boxing, weight lifting which were traditionally male dominated. The year 2000 was a landmark point for Indian women in sports as Padma Shri Karnam Malleswari became the first Indian woman to win an Olympic medal. This inspired other Indian women to dream big and claim global fame against several odds. Today, India has seven Olympic medal winners, including PV Sindhu, Saina Nehwal, Mary Kom, Mirabai Chanu, Sakshi Malik and Lovlina Borgohain. Many of these women grew up in poor economic backgrounds and were not fortunate enough to have proper facilities to practice their sports. The extraordinary success of these women sports stars goes to prove that one can achieve anything in life if we pursue it with single minded focus.

Yet, it is unfortunate that India, which is the world's most populous country, has only seven women Olympic medalists. Even small countries such as Austria, Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine have produced more women Olympic champions.

In India, reports suggest that women continue to face gender discrimination, sexual abuse etc. while participating in sports. Developing muscular and physical stamina to excel in athletic games is perceived as masculine and hence at times parents discourage their daughters to practice these games. Even physically fit women hesitate to opt for career in athletic sports to avoid unpleasant comments from their relatives and social groups about their body and appearance, as they undergo rigorous muscle training.

The government and sports training institutes should change this societal perception and provide facilities for more and more young girls to practice athletic games. The central and state governments can set up adequate sports infrastructure facilities in public schools and unused grounds in towns and villages for women to practice sports. Also, we need to develop a cadre of women coaches to train aspiring young girls in Olympic sports. Today, there is a dearth of women sports coaches as there are only a handful of senior sportswomen in the country. By encouraging women's participation in sports, we can create adequate number of senior women coaches to train the next generation of sportswomen.

The time has come to take multi-faced efforts by the government, academia and non-government organizations to create an inclusive environment for women to participate in sports and develop a cadre of globally renowned Indian sportswomen. This handbook carries the inspiring life of Padma Shri Kunjarani Devi who made our country proud by winning several prestigious global titles in weightlifting.

Lifting: Barbells and Societal Barriers



PADMASHRI N. KUNJARANI DEVI

Former Indian weight lifting champion

What do you picture when you think of the word 'weightlifting?' I would not be surprised if the imagery that enters your mind is that of a tall, muscular man, instead of a woman from North-east India holding up a barbell to the sky. Perhaps, the source of this bias lies in our societal conditioning: it begins when the teachers in our classrooms ask for a 'strong boy' to lift and carry a chair, and seeps all the way into our adult lives.

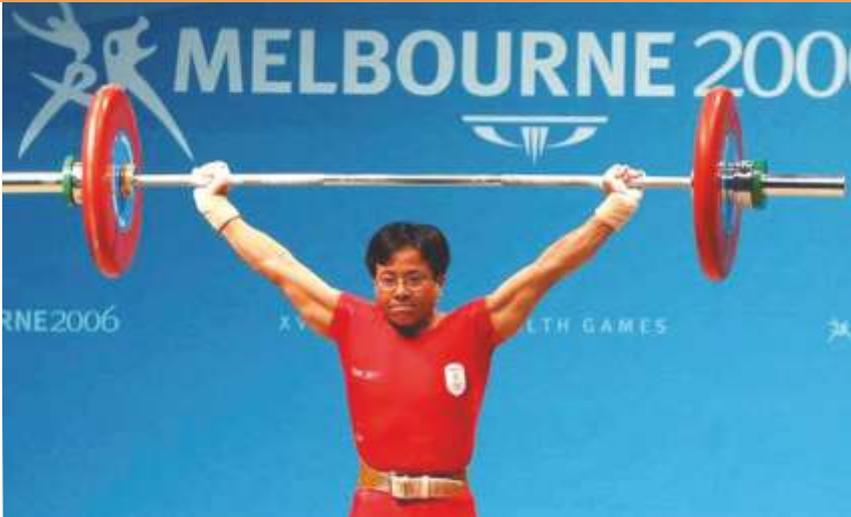
In the 56 years of my being, I have spent every single day challenging this bias by following my inner calling and passion-weightlifting.

My fervour for weightlifting ignited at a time when we neither had proper equipment to train, nor did we appreciate women engaging in this field. I spent a large portion of my life sweating in secret, dedicating myself to a sport that was considered 'too manly' for me to participate in. As a teenager, I used to wake up at 3:30 am, finish all the house-work and by 5am, get ready to go to a gym ten kilometers away from my house. My parents were under the impression that I would wake up early to play with my friends. Little did they know that their daughter was using bamboo sticks and rocks, training with a target to become one of the best weightlifters in the world.

The biggest turning point in my life was when, as a 19 year old, I got selected for my first competition- the 1985 National Games. After days of tossing and turning, I mustered up the courage to tell my mother that I had the opportunity to travel to Delhi and represent our state Manipur in the weightlifting category. Given that I came from a family that was not as economically well-off, she somehow managed to collect Rs. 100 by selling cow dung to fund my travel. I vividly remember seeing her silhouette through my tears and promising myself to give everything it takes to return this money to her ten-fold; and so I did. I secured three golds in the competition, and became the first Indian athlete to win in these games, and in the weightlifting category. After winning, I received my first ever cash prize of Rs. 150 by the Olympic Committee President of Manipur, followed by two other cash prizes from the Olympic Secretary and from the Manipur State. Winning these medals transformed the spark for weightlifting in me, into a raging flame of zeal, gusto and commitment.

“ For every single smiling photo with a trophy or medal, countless hours of blood, sweat and tears had been shed.”





“ My only message to everyone is- Sports has no gender, your dreams should be as big as your heart, and societal norms are meant to be broken.”

For all sports people in the country, receiving the Arjuna Award is a source of immense pride and honour, a dream that drives us to do better, train harder.

The years 1989-1990 were monumental and paved my way to become the recipient of this award. In the 1989 Asia Championship, I secured two bronze medals and one silver medal, followed by the 1989 World Championship where I bagged three silver medals. In the 1990 Asian Games at Beijing, I brought home India's first win by landing a bronze medal in weightlifting. I recall that I was on a flight back to India from a championship in Bulgaria when I saw my nomination on the front page of a newspaper. To this date, I cherish the memory of receiving this award so fondly since it was my very first.

During my preparatory stage, however, before I had won any award, I was often subjected to severe criticism and discouragement. The boys in my village would often go as far as teasing me by asking me if I was a man or a woman, simply because I did not fit into their idea of what a woman should be. Although the echoes of their taunts did ring my ears, they did not stop me from achieving my fullest potential. In my heart, I had set a goal of fiercely dedicating my life to weightlifting and did not let a single person, thing, or event, become an impediment in my journey. As time passed, and the weight of the barbells I lifted increased, I became the recipient of many more accolades and awards. Some of the most notable awards being - K.K Birla Sports Award (1996-97), Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award (1996-97), Presidents Police Medal for Distinguished Service And Police Medal for Meritorious Service (2015), and the Padmashri Award (2011).

Gradually, people's perception about me changed. The same people who once laughed at my dreams, came to congratulate me after I had accomplished those dreams.

To date, I have won 68 medals in international competitions.

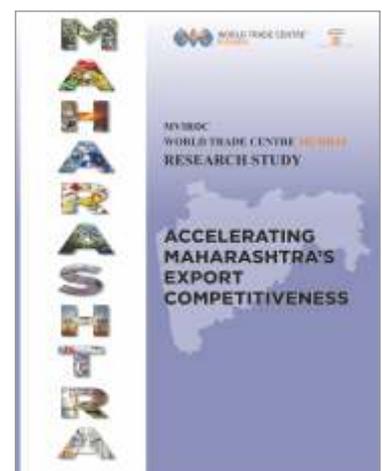
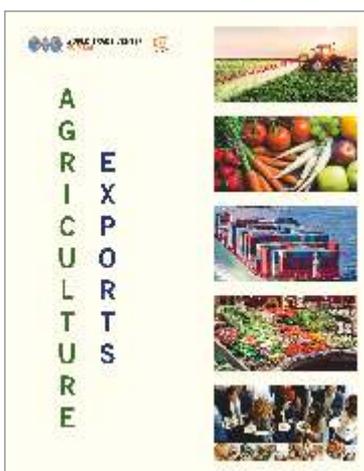
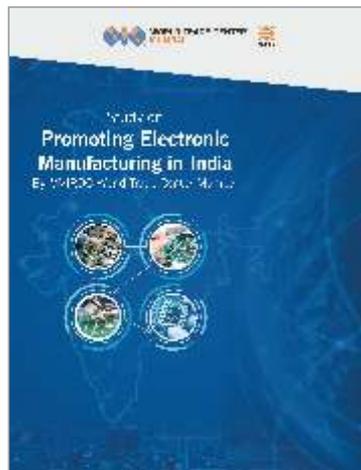
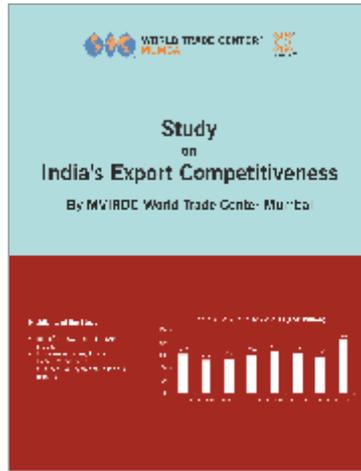
For every single smiling photo with a trophy or medal, countless hours of blood, sweat and tears had been shed. I followed a regimented routine with a particularly strict diet to maintain my bodyweight. I would continue to practice for hours, days, months and years at a stretch. In fact, I would even go as far as saying that I sacrificed many other things in life to achieve my goals, including missing the marriages of all my brothers and sisters.

There have also been many moments in life where I have felt extremely low and distraught, especially the time during the 2000 Sydney Olympics. However, in all the darkness, what kept me going was the light that shined from my dedication to weightlifting. Currently, as I serve as a Commandant and the National Coach, Sports Team, at the Central Reserve Police Force, I have immense gratitude for every learning and challenge in my life. To say the least, my journey has been nothing short of a rollercoaster ride. **With each barbell that I have lifted, I have also lifted away and broken societal barriers.**

I believe that often times as women, we find ourselves tangled in the web of societal expectations. These expectations dictate how we sit, how we eat, how we talk and what we choose to do with our lives. Today, I aspire to serve as a role model for all young girls who dare to dream, and find camaraderie in women who hold the reigns of their expression of womanhood. My only message to everyone is- Sports has no gender, your dreams should be as big as your heart, and societal norms are meant to be broken.

*** Ms. Stuti Banga (an independent writer) assisted Padmashri N. Kunjarani Devi in writing this article**

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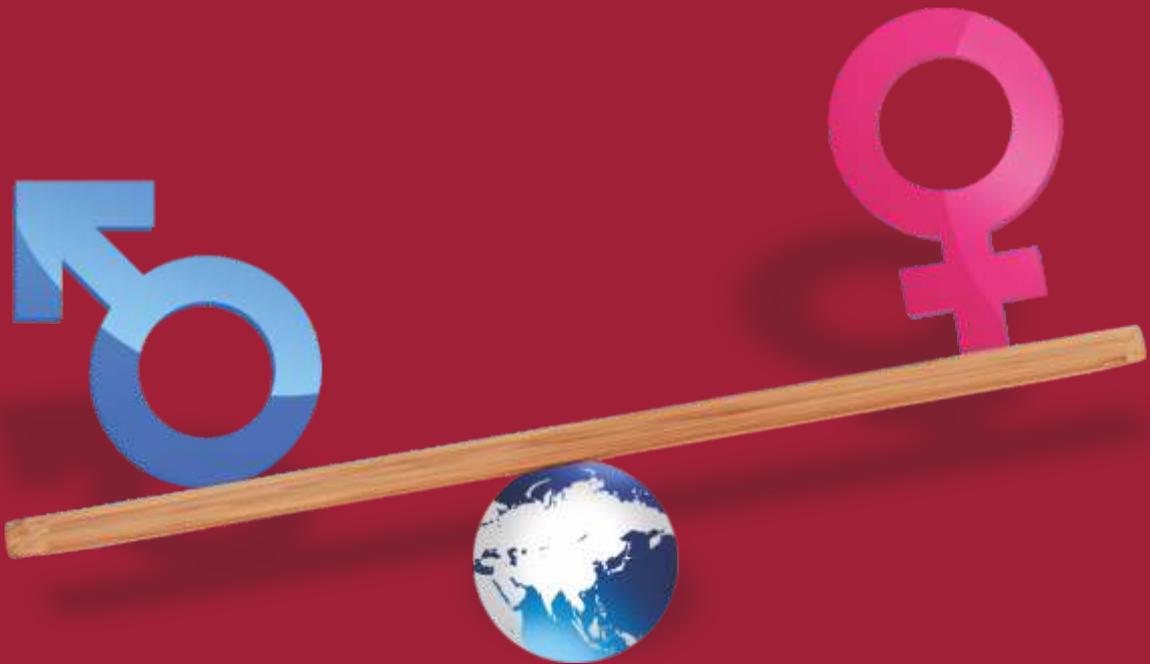


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