



# SALUTING THE SHE-ROES



To celebrate International Women's Day in March, **MARWAR** puts the spotlight on femme power. A salute to our she-roes—the extraordinary women who are braving the gender bias and setting new trends in the Indian work ecosystem.



**2023** is the year of she-roes (she-heroes)—women heroes who are making an impact on the world with their extraordinary achievements. All over the globe, we see women breaking the cycle of gender inequality and emerging as leaders in their respective fields. According to research, the current global workforce participation rate for women is 47.7%. This International Women's Day, **MARWAR** brings you stories of inspiring women who have raised the bar for themselves. Come, let's celebrate the spirit of our she-roes.





## NATASHA MALPANI OSWAL

### Founder—Boundless Media, Poet & Film Producer

**Natasha Malpani Oswal** has carved a niche for herself by making genre-bending movies that are locally rooted and resonate globally.

Text ✨ Rachna Virdi

Natasha Malpani Oswal is the founder of Boundless Media, a new-age creative house that tells stories for a new India. Author of popular poetry books *Boundless* and *Reinvention*, she recently co-produced *Uunchai*, a movie that witnessed a stupendous box office success. Previously, she helmed Dice Media that had invested in projects like *Brave New World*, *Birth* and *Little Things*. Armed with an MBA degree from Stanford University, and two Master's degrees from Oxford and Cambridge Universities, she was an Investment Director at a \$1 billion Impact Investing Fund back in London.

#### The love of storytelling

From an investment director to a film producer, Oswal's story unfolds in a very interesting way. Born into a family of doctors (her parents are well-known gynaecologists Dr Anirudh and Anjali Malpani), she was a straight A student who topped in class. After completing her school, she gave her entrance exams and got into a medical school, but soon realised that she had no interest in becoming a doctor, whatsoever. "That was a wakeup call for me. I wanted to carve my own path and hence took admission at Oxford University for studying immunology. It was an amazing experience as it got me an entry into studying and working in England. I became an impact investor at an Impact Investing Fund that invested in education and health. Then I decided to do an MBA and was lucky to have gotten into Stanford University. Silicon Valley is full of brilliant people who genuinely believe that everything is possible and they make it happen. During my MBA programme when I was asked questions like what is it that I like to do in my free time, I realised that my passion was writing and storytelling. I wanted to be in the business of storytelling," says Oswal.

Having to come back to India after 10 years, Oswal started exploring digital entertainment in the new-age space. "At that time, content companies were just starting out. The web series space was

new. I thought this was a very interesting space for new talent and voices. There were two very interesting digital content companies Pop Races and The Viral Fever. I joined Pop Races, which was a sort of a channel where I got my learning in conceptualising, overseeing scripting, managing actors, etc. Later, I set up my own company and launched Dice Media. Eventually, I thought, why not do films and hence Boundless Media came about."

#### Carving her own path

Looking back on how the dots connected, Oswal says, "It has been an interesting journey of telling stories. While I have been on this path in terms of moving from being a scientist and studying immunology to being an investor to coming back to India and being a film producer and poet, I was just following my heart and instinct. I didn't have a plan, and was just keen on carving my own path." The passion of becoming a producer also came from the heart. "It was an interesting way to be able to marry the business and creative sides—the film, putting together the talent, making sure that the vision is intact, and so on."

Boundless Media's debut co-production *Uunchai*, written and directed by Sooraj Barjatya of Rajshri Productions, with a veteran star cast like Amitabh Bachchan, Anupam Kher and Boman Irani, turned out to be a huge success. "I heard the story and knew this was a unique concept and needed to be told and I had to back the movie. This is exactly the space we needed to be playing in. The story of the coming-of-age of the older generation was so relatable. I am lucky and grateful to have worked with directors like Surajji and this veteran star cast. It was a big learning opportunity for me and the experiences were so rare and unique."



Being able to produce this film was a humbling experience for her. "Especially because we were working with the older generation who are at the top of their game. It was so interesting to see people in their 60s and 70s, who love coming to work and have so much passion for their job. The kind of energy and openness they bring is so inspiring for the younger generation."

#### The face of new India

Oswal believes in finding her own voice and identity. "It is a process of exploration. It's like my voice is going to different spaces and that is the beauty of storytelling. I hope the work I do will be a reflection of what is happening in today's generation," asserts the proud producer who has managed to achieve success in an industry that is largely male-driven. "I agree that most of the producers, directors and those in the production team in the film industry are men but it is the same across most industries. However, now that the decision making is becoming more women led, there will be a change. We need more female voices. The shift is reflected well on OTT where the popular actresses of the '90s are making a comeback. We hope to see that change in the film industry too."

Oswal disagrees with people who see media and entertainment as a glamorous and easy industry. "I think it is much harder being in this industry than being a scientist or investor. You have to be super sharp, manage so many people, speak so many different languages, and have that innate knack of storytelling. It is a very unstructured, informal and chaotic environment. Hence people need to give credit to those who are breaking in and surviving too."

#### A vision for new India

What does she look forward to? "My vision is to tell stories for a new India. I want to do web series, podcasts, films, write more books, poetry, and create and support other creators. We are already doing that by backing a slate of directors. We need to have a proper ecosystem for sounding and supporting upcoming talent," says Oswal, who is married to Pratik Oswal of the reputed Motilal Oswal Financial Services Group.

After spending 10 years abroad, returning to India and readjusting to this culture, was a bit of a transition for her. But Oswal has always dared to be extraordinary and done things differently. "Of course, I have been fortunate to have the support of my family. They have been amazingly supportive, open-minded and helpful," she concludes. ✨





## SARITA BAZAZ

### Founder—The Food Affairs

**Sarita Bazaz** has revolutionised the catering business landscape in India. Meet the first-ever Marwari woman in the catering food business.

Text  Rachna Virdi

Sarita Bazaz, living in Bhagalpur, a small district in Bihar, always dreamt of infusing life to the flavours and innovations in food and that led her to establish her food catering company 30 years back. “Reading expressions of people as they enjoy and relish food, and seeing them pleased, truly fulfilled me,” says Bazaz, the first-ever Marwari woman to have entered the catering industry which was largely male dominated back then.

In 1993, she launched her catering company Ruskriti (meaning culinary flavour), with premium clients, and catered throughout the world. The catering company later went on to become The Food Affairs, with specialisation in curating bespoke dining experiences. “I was never intrigued by the idea of starting my own business. I was more drawn towards the skill of cooking, for which I sought the right inspiration from my mother and sister. Seeing them cook convinced me that food was more about the art of creating flavours with compassion, and inspired me to be capable of preparing a complete meal by the age of 13,” she elaborates. Given her expertise in crafting food with magnificence and authenticity, Sarita Bazaz has become an ingrained name in the culinary industry today.

#### Challenging her comfort zone

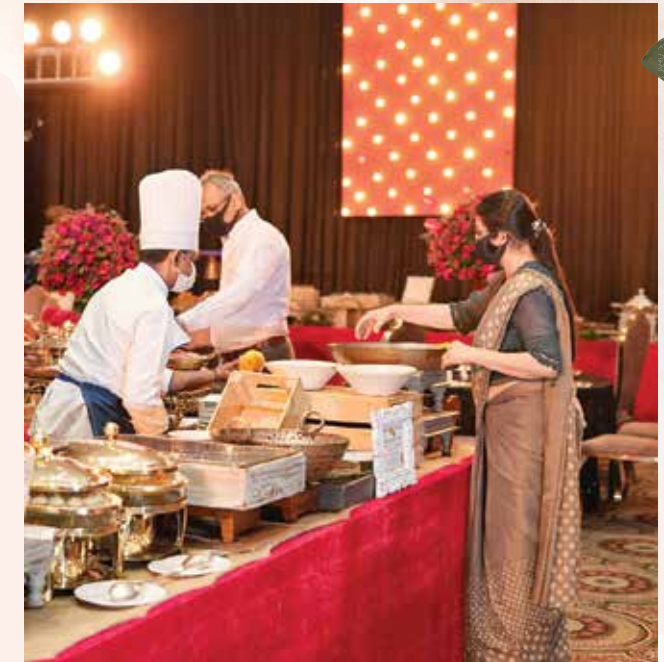
Growing up in a typical Marwari household in Bhagalpur, Bazaz was imbued with the belief of food being as fundamental as religion. “My conditioning resulted from the household’s daily activities in the house centred around food, and every chat was about the menu for the next supper. Thus, food became meaningful to me as a service rendered with the utmost kindness, respect and unconditionality,” she explains. To summarise, the Marwari culture not only incited the value for food in her but also, the hospitality with which it was offered, encouraged her to spread love by serving delectable delicacies.

Native Marwari expressions like ‘Manohar’ and ‘Aagraha’ which denote respect in serving meals, were the impetus behind Marwari cuisine and no guesses here, they also laid the groundwork for becoming the core of The Food Affairs. Having moved to Delhi three decades ago, she observed that the vegetarian food palate presented there was very basic. Seeing the limited varieties being repeated with no variation in flavour, she embarked on her first endeavour, made from her home kitchen after being pushed by her family. With her home kitchen as the starting point, Bazaz seamlessly ascended the ladder to corporate parties and small-scale events. Known for the authenticity of Indian *chaats*, The Food Affairs ensures retaining the local authentic flavour, while giving a unique way of presentation. She gradually progressed in her business by treating her clients like family and growing bigger and stronger by the year.

#### A delight for the palate

With Indian food and speciality *chaats* from Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata being her personal favourite, Bazaz’s passion for food is evident in every dish prepared and seasoned perfectly using the season’s freshest produce, sourced locally. “I live to eat and feed”—is her food mantra or, more accurately, a life mantra that she proudly proclaims. Coming from a household with a backyard full of fresh homegrown and organic ingredients kept her ‘ingredient conscious’, helping her choose the best ingredients while providing her service.

Known for her expertise in international cuisine, fusion foods and experimental recipes, the food expert emphasises that food is a personalised craft for her and despite changing times and the growth of new ideas, what persists in her cuisine is its authenticity and essence



of ingredients. From paying attention to the smallest of details—including sourcing the right product to reinventing and recreating recipes to suit different palates—her perfection is invincible. Her persistence and passion helped her revolutionise the catering industry.

#### Woman’s the way

In her 30-year journey, Bazaz’s catering company has spread their love through food and served an impressive range of clientele including Indian restaurants and hotels in places like Abu Dhabi, Phuket, Bangkok, Hua Hin, Spain, Turkey and Bali. Having travelled to different countries and met new people, she has discovered new ingredients and learned new cooking skills—all of which inspired her to curate new recipes.

Women are breaking societal taboos and creating possibilities for themselves. Bazaz is one such woman entrepreneur who, despite varied opinions, uncertain expressions, and squandered opportunities owing to a woman single-handedly managing business, earned the recognition of being the first woman entrepreneur in the catering industry. “I embrace the pleasure of working in the food sector. It gives me an opportunity for endless learning in settings as huge as cities and as modest as neighbourhoods,” she states. ✨





## MALLYKA SINGH DUNDLOD

### Founder—A Baisa's Adventures

**Mallyka Singh Dundlod** beautifully marries rural experiences with horse-riding safaris, and much more at *A Baisa's Adventures*.

Text  Benaifer J. Mirza

Mallyka Singh Dundlod, an Experience Curator and Founder of A Baisa's Adventures—a travel company celebrating Shekhawati legacies—lives by the mantra 'passion is energy' and feel the power that comes with it while focussing on what excites you.

Singh Dundlod grew up in a joint family at her ancestral home in Jaipur. Reminiscing her childhood memories with the legendary Marwari horses, she says, "I was barely six years old and riding had just started for me. These beautiful horses would come out of their stables and roam around freely in the garden at night. They would come to my window and at that moment I knew we would have a deep connection ahead."

After studying at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Vidyashram, Jaipur, from the first to sixth grade, she was admitted to the boarding school of the prestigious Mayo College Girls' School in Ajmer when she was 13. Then she studied hotel management at the Welcomgroup Graduate School of Hotel Administration (WGSHA) in Manipal.

#### Pushing her limits

Travel was an integral part of her life. After spending a few years in-between jobs, where she realised that marketing was her area of expertise, she decided to join the travel industry in 2015. By 2019, she was ready to make her dreams a reality and embarked on a journey independently.

An entrepreneur of royal lineage, Singh Dundlod has a passion for horse riding and the rich art and culture of Shekhawati. Launched in 2020, A Baisa's Adventures evolved from her passion, and taught her that the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.

A Baisa's Adventures curates royal experiences such as horse riding, cycling around the countryside, food and frescoes, engaging in local cultures, to put the spotlight on the culture of the region, her childhood in Dundlod Fort and her first encounters with the legendary Marwari breed of horse.



#### Galloping her way to success

Singh Dundlod and her father Raghuvendra Singh Dundlod run their ancestral home, Dundlod Fort as a hotel. Currently, it is a joint family ownership, out of which they run 22 keys. She tells us more. "We take pride in the fact that our guests reach out to us because of our passion for indigenous horses. We are specialists in curating experiences, and, in 1985, my father started the horse safaris. Therefore, the 'Dundlod' family name is synonymous with big personalities across the world."

Singh Dundlod has a soft spot for her homeland, and felt like her roots were calling out to her to protect her lineage, heritage and culture. And, she felt that the best way to keep this alive was by engaging in it. She considers every small achievement as a huge learning.

Marwari horses are well-known for tent pegging and endurance events, and in the recent few years, she has participated twice in endurance races. She has won a gold medal in the 40-km national, silver in the 20-km international, and bronze in the 60-km state-level categories, along with a silver in national endurance races. She owes her success to her brave equine partners who work with her as a team.

#### Shattering stereotypes

Speaking about how she made her mark as a female entrepreneur in a man's world, Singh Dundlod says, "I've never believed in this notion; but over the years, I did experience that we still live in a predominately man's world. However, things are changing. As I grew older, like many, I had my own struggles, when it came to making choices, as they deferred from the path usually chosen by many."

She adds, "Two prominent men in my life—my father, and my husband, Amit Chawla—have always inspired me. My life partner has always understood my dreams and stood by me. Also, we all have to earn our respect and freedom, which comes from taking responsibility for our actions. Last but not the least, we women should always keep our girlfriends close because strong and loyal women can be your biggest treasure. I'm thankful to my mother, Ganga Singh, for all the security, confidence and support that she has always given me."

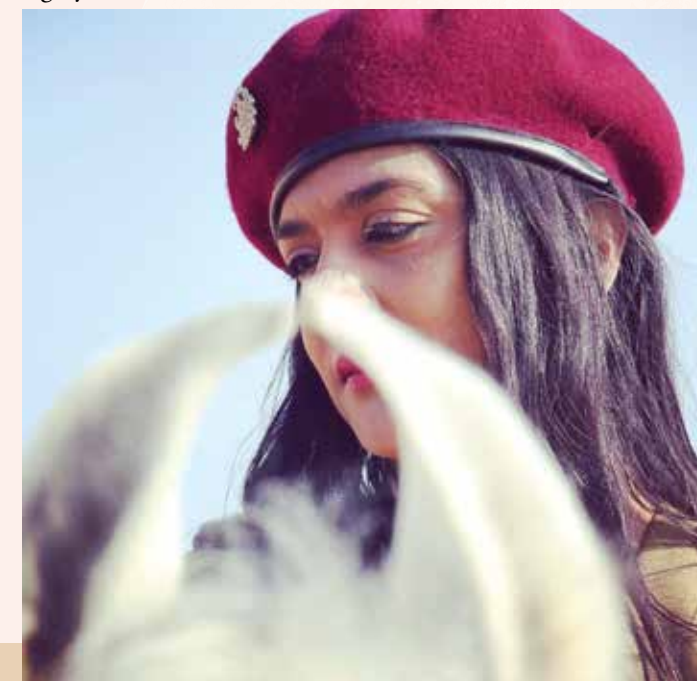


#### Expanding her horizons

Singh Dundlod says, "I looked deeper and realised that apart from visiting forts, palaces and *havelis*, there was nothing more that would pull tourists to the region. To add to it, there were just a handful of moderately-experienced guides. Shekhawati is known as an open art gallery, thanks to its frescoed *havelis*, but even then, it is not well-orchestrated for travellers. The knowledge about this region is minimal, in spite of travellers coming here for half a decade now."

Her vision is to create a platform—a community of artisans, musicians, dancers, craftsmen and local experts. She wants to depend lesser on the fort hotel, and rather, focus on their growth. She also wants to create a meticulous curation, where travellers look forward to enjoying a slice of local life.

Singh Dundlod is grateful for her Rajput lineage, and feels fortunate to be born in the royal family of Dundlod, which is a *thikana* of the Shekhawati dynasty. She is the fourth generation of Rawal Thakur Harnath Singh Dundlod, and looks forward to being the custodian of this legacy. ✨







## APARNA RAJAWAT

### Founder—Pink Belt Mission

**Aparna Rajawat**, a renowned motivational speaker and self-defence trainer, has changed the lives of thousands of women.

Text Neha Kirpal

An international martial arts medallist and multiple times martial arts champion at the national level, Aparna Rajawat's inspiring life has been encapsulated in a two-time international award-winning Hollywood documentary film by John McCrite.

Though her family roots lie in Jaipur, Rajawat was born and raised in Agra. She began practising karate at the age of seven, and won several international medals by the time she was 14. She went on to win a martial arts medal for the country a record 16 times. After fighting against various obstacles in the field of sports, she established herself as a successful sportswoman.

#### Off the beaten track

Rajawat's journey has not been easy. She met with a major road accident at the age of 17 and was forced to take a break as the recovery took about a year. After being pressured by her family to give up sports, she moved to Delhi and joined a dance group. She began excelling at her new-found passion but was forced to drop her career midway and return to Agra after her family learnt about her new profession.

In her early 20s, Rajawat planned to join the tourism industry. Back then, there were no women tourist guides in Agra, hence it wasn't an easy feat. With every rejection, she became more determined in her resolve until at last she got the job of a local tour guide in Agra. She put in a lot of hard work and rose to the rank of being one of the finest tour managers in the country. Over time, she began training others and touring various countries as a professional trainer. In 2014, she bagged the job of a tour director in London. Thereafter, Rajawat spent a decade as an international tour manager in Europe and South Asia with the world's best companies in US and UK.



#### Dealing with gender bias

During her growing up years, Rajawat found that the rules set for her brothers and for her were different. "My brothers could pursue any career they wanted to, but my potential was limited," she says. Hence, she decided to fight for her rights as a woman and chose a path that was different from the one expected of her. "I was passionate about sports, and had given my heart, soul and sweat to follow my dream despite the opposition," she says. Rajawat's courage to pursue sports left a trail for other women in the family to emulate. She inspired them to become torchbearers by walking the same path together.

The Nirbhaya case that took place in December 2012 shook the nation and Rajawat was equally traumatised. Having herself been often bullied by her brothers during childhood, she was convinced that it was important for women to attain physical strength. In 2015, she returned to India, and started a self-defence training programme for eight girls' schools in Agra. The following year, she formed an organisation called Aaleya that worked towards adopting needy children and sponsoring their education. As a part of Aaleya, she taught self-defence to young girls in schools, colleges, universities, corporate and ladies clubs. In 2017, she formed the Pink Belt Mission with the aim of ensuring complete safety and protection for women. Pink Belt Mission provides young girls and women with physical, mental, emotional, legal, fiscal and digital strength. So far the organisation has almost 1,68,000 women in the country.

#### Leading a social change

In 2020, Rajawat joined hands with entrepreneur and international Karate champion Mansi Chandra, a shoe factory owner based in Agra. Currently, they have employed more than 150 women at the factory, thereby providing them with financial security and independence. In February 2020, she created a Guinness World Record for holding the largest self-defence class consisting of 7,401 women ranging from the age of 5 to 86 years. "I knew that I was born to do something different in life," muses the international medalist in martial arts, guest speaker at Woodland Hills, USA, and guest of honour at Rotary Club of Calabasas, Los Angeles, USA.

In 2018, Rajawat received the Iconic Woman Award and got nominated for an HT Award for giving self-defence training to 1,50,000 women in India. Pink Belt Mission recently launched a brand called Pink Soul Mission, which creates shoes solely "Of women, For women, By women". Along with her co-founder Mansi, Rajawat plans to expand her business to different cities across the country. Her vision is to train 10 lakh women and provide financial empowerment to 50,000 women by 2025. \*







## NITA BAJORIA

### Fiction Writer

**Nita Bajoria** renounced her avatar of a businesswoman to pursue her passion for knitting stories around relationships, emotional needs and perceptions that build up the drama of life.

Text ✨ Ritusmita Biswas



reativity is in Nita Bajoria's blood. As a little girl, she had exclusive access to her mother's maroon jacket diary in which she would write poems as an expression of her day-to-day feelings. This gave birth to her interest in reading and ever since she read her first Enid Blyton novel, she could not turn her back on the world of literature.

Books play an integral part in Bajoria's life. Since childhood, each time she came across a captivating book, she too wanted to write something similar. She was writing as a hobby—just like her mother—however, she vowed to publish at least one book before she drew her last breath.

#### Joining the family business

Coming from a Jain background herself, Bajoria completed her graduation and got married into a Marwari business family of Kolkata. "My husband Namit Bajoria ran a kitchen appliances business under the brand name Kutchina, and joining him was a natural course of action. I studied an interior designing course and joined Kutchina Modular Kitchen to help him develop the division, while also managing home and motherhood," she says. However, she always felt that tinge of uneasiness while leaving her daughter behind and stepping out of the house for work. "As I turned 38, a thought started crossing my mind. I had passed almost half my life but my passion for writing still stayed a secret within me! Hence, I decided to quit my work and pursue writing." It was a tough decision but her calling to write was too strong.

#### Playing second innings

With no formal education in literature, Bajoria took up her writing venture

as a new challenge. From being a boss, she was now a struggling author. The decision resonated well as the mother got more time to spend with her daughter during her growing years. "I believe it was beginner's luck that helped me further to continue with the decision. My writing journey started with short stories and travelogues and most of my work got a place in magazines—I still have my first remuneration cheque that was lovingly framed by my husband for posterity," she adds.

A few months later, Bajoria came across an article about migration to mars that gave her the idea to write a novel on the subject—*Migration To Mars*. "Being my debut novel, it took me three years to finish thanks to all the research that went into it. However, the publishers told me that science fiction was not as popular as romance and thrillers in India. Not ready to give up, I opted for self-publishing my novel on Amazon," says the author. Eventually, she published two graphic novels (*Urban Chronicles 1* and *Urban Chronicles 2*), duo novella (*The Casket* and *Besky*), and a children's book (*Myra and the secret library*).

Over the years, Bajoria sensed a gap in her writing and wanted to update her writing skills. Inspired by her husband who signed up for a Harvard Executive course of three years (with one month of class attendance at Harvard University in Boston), she pursued a Master's in Creative Writing. Being a mother, it was challenging to do a full-time course, hence she opted for a part-time online course from Manchester Metropolitan University and attained her Master in Arts in Creative Writing.

#### The survival instinct

In a community where you have countless leaders and business magnates, it is natural to have an identity crisis. Bajoria had to struggle to explain to her relatives that writing was her career and not a hobby, and that she needs to give as much time to writing as to any other profession that exists under the sun. "Unfortunately, women's work is considered secondary in a man's world. So, while my husband could be busy with work and my daughter could be engaged in studies or sports, I was supposed to be always available. With the prevailing notion that no concentration was needed for writing, I found my work getting shelved most of the time. Even my friends thought once I had written a book and submitted the manuscript to any publisher of my choice, the book would be published instantly," she relates. With much pain, she had to explain that there is a fair amount of struggle and rejections that an author has to go through before getting a book published. However, she is glad that she has been able to educate them about the importance of her work and the publishing process.

Belonging to a Marwari background, she had challenges convincing her in-laws that a woman can be more than just being a housewife and that it is her right to utilise her talent and not waste it under the pretext of becoming a good housewife. However, with her husband's support—who always believed in her dreams—she was

able to cross the hurdle. Things have changed now for the better and her in-laws are proud to introduce her as their 'author *bahu*'.

#### Scaling greater heights

Knitting stories around relationships and emotional needs is her forte. Currently, Bajoria is on an experimental mode and exploring varied types of fiction. Nevertheless, she is sure that her readers will drive her toward the style she is best at and help her find her niche in the writing world. She prefers to call herself a budding writer now, and aspires to become a renowned author in the future. Writing is destressing for Bajoria. She loves reading while travelling and is at her best when left alone to scribble on her laptop in a library or a café. Writing is the pillar that has held her in the face of all adversities of life and kept her sane. She is also grateful to her family, teachers, mentors, friends and readers who supported her in this journey.

A writer who is yet to touch the ceiling of top publishers in India, she is hopeful that her work will reach them soon and will get appreciated too. For now, she is in no hurry and wants to make the most of her journey. ✨

