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SHALLU JINDAL &
NINA PILLAI
PEOPLE

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OSCARS

ANGELINA JOLIE, CHHAYA MOMAYA & RENU KOCHHAR
WOMEN WITH SUBSTANCE

Strong as Steel

Over the years, the dynamic Renu Kochhar has taken Viraj Profiles to new heights as its visionary managing director. In 2010, Renu was declared businesswoman of the year at the Madhavrao Scindia Leadership Awards (MSLA). Though she has grand homes in cities across the world and enjoys a jet-setting lifestyle, she remains down-to-earth and approachable. Simultaneously eloquent and charming, Renu has limitless passion for her work and undivided love for her family, both of which keep her thoroughly motivated. *You & I* caught up with her to find out more about what makes her tick.

Tell us about your job profile.

I joined Viraj in 2001 as director of the profiles division, actively participating in the department's day-to-day operations. From manufacturing to marketing, I drove the expansion of Viraj's national and global markets. In doing so, I have learned and implemented production processes, researched market demands, understood and achieved worldwide standards of quality, developed strategies, integrated new technology, and personally visited our customers overseas. As managing director, I now don several hats in the company: sales, marketing, corporate social responsibility, corporate communications, etc.

That's quite a lot of responsibility. Tell us more about your career.

After obtaining a bachelor's degree from Delhi University and pursuing a short-term management course from Harvard, I joined Viraj with the sole objective of assisting my husband Neeraj Kochhar in establishing the brand. Today, Viraj is one of the leading manufacturers of stainless steel long products.

During the initial phase, Neeraj was focused on establishing the plant at the grassroots level and keeping the production process

going. So he needed someone who could develop a market for the products being manufactured. This is when I decided to get on board, and there has been no looking back since then. It was very hectic at times, running from one meeting to another, looking after business development and quality improvement while also meeting deadlines. My determination and passion for perfection kept me going.

As they say, hard work never goes waste. The company soon began getting valuable orders from some well-known clients around the world, and that list kept growing. Today, Viraj is synonymous with quality.

Does working with your husband make things simpler or more complicated?

Working with your spouse has both benefits and drawbacks. At home, our relationship is like that of many husbands and wives: healthy and full of love, compassion, warmth and understanding. Once we set foot in the office, though, we become completely professional and ensure that personal and professional matters remain separate. But it is a source of strength knowing that we can discuss all sorts of problems with each other. At times, we do have differences of opinion, but we prefer not to bring business matters home. This lets us both enjoy life to the fullest.

Your company is one of the world's preferred steel enterprises. What distinguishes Viraj from its competitors?

It's the sheer hard work of all our employees that has contributed to the success we have today. The company started with a staff of just 150 people, and today we have a 9,000-strong workforce with several overseas offices. As a management graduate, I strongly believe in proactively preparing according to the needs of the market and keeping up-to-date with trends.

Today, we are recognised as one of the preferred employers in the industry, with comprehensive vocational training programmes that continue to refine our employees' capabilities, keeping them ready to face challenges head-on. Our success has been made possible by the loyalty demonstrated by our clients around the world, so maintaining close relationships with them and emphasising strong customer focus is of critical importance to us.

You established the Viraj Shri Ram Centennial School (VSRCS) in Boisar. What inspired you?

When I first landed up in Tarapur and began interacting with the locals, I realised that there were many parents in pursuit of world-class education for their kids. The need for quality education in Boisar was such that some people were even ready to move away

“I feel a sense of achievement when I see these women happy and content after achieving financial independence.”

ess by Karen Millen, champagne South Sea pearl string,
atch by Cartier (limited edition), Make up by Clint Fernandes



because they were unable to find it. The industrial hub did not have many choices as far as good schools were concerned.

Soon our workforce started increasing, and there were a lot of new employees from cities like New Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad and Kolkata. One of the biggest challenges for them was to find good schools for their kids. This is when I thought of VSRCS, which could provide quality education to the kids of Viraj employees, as well as those of other residents.

Viraj Shri Ram Centennial is associated with a prestigious educational group in New Delhi called Shri Ram New Horizons, a joint venture between the Shri Ram Group and New Horizons Worldwide. Today, we are the most popular school in the vicinity in terms of education standards, infrastructure, facilities and other parameters.

Was a foray into education on the cards?

Yes. Providing quality, world-class education had been on my mind, but due to professional commitments, it had to take a backseat. However, once I realised the need for it, I wasted no time in making things happen. It was like a dream come true for me. As stated earlier, I believe in empowering people, and what better way than to provide quality education to the future generation?

Education is not just about the ability to read and write. It is in fact about nurturing the individual, and preparing him or her for real life. Today, in addition to running our own school, we also support other schools in nearby villages. We have appointed full-time teachers who visit these schools every day to impart education through digital content, and the kids find it very interesting to learn their lessons while watching videos. We also take care of infrastructure requirements such as benches, computers and reading material, as well as undertaking renovation projects.

What are your views on the country's system of education?

Of late, we have seen increased awareness among parents about the importance of quality education, especially in rural India. Though the shift has been slow, I am optimistic that it will turn out to be remarkable. If we dig deeper, we discover that the success ratio of kids going to school actually depends on the immediate support system extended by teachers, parents and the community.

Teachers must be qualified, comprehensive and motivated to do their jobs. Parents – who too often are illiterate – must become aware of the long-term opportunities that good education provides. They must support their children to give them strength and confidence. Last but not least, studies show that villages where the whole community is involved with education have better school attendance rates.

But the real problem is not about getting children to attend school, but to give them the will to go by themselves. Implementation of the Mid-Day Meal Program by the government, which provides a warm meal for every child attending school, has actually proven very useful in increasing attendance. However, this is only a short-term solution. At some point, children will have to go to school to satisfy the hunger of the mind, not that of the stomach.

We understand that you also work for women's empowerment.

Absolutely. Women's empowerment is about creating an environment where women are treated as equals, not a weaker section of society; a setting in which they can make independent decisions about personal development and receive equal opportunity. All this can happen only when they are economically sound.

At Viraj, we run a dedicated community centre that also functions as a training facility. The company imparts training to local women for the manufacture of incense sticks, masalas and candles; stitching and embroidery; and establishing their own businesses.

Some of the women trained at our centre have been taken on by well-established textile companies such as Pantaloons and De Décor. Today, they are enjoying success.

We have also started a computer learning centre where girls from nearby villages are provided knowledge free of cost. We hold regular health camps in the vicinity so that women can consult doctors on any kind of health problem and obtain free medicine. I feel a sense of achievement when I see these women happy and content after achieving financial independence.

How do you balance work and play?

At times, it becomes very challenging to strike the perfect balance between two lives and give your best to both roles. On the personal front, I spend time with my family and grandchildren, go shopping, and meet with my friends. However, in my professional life, I don't like to control everything. I want everyone to be involved and work as a team. I'm very particular about systems and processes, and believe that you have to empower people. My style of working is based on equality and participation.

Which of your achievements would you rate as your greatest?

Professionally, my greatest achievement has been the growth of the business over the past two decades. We have been able to add some of the most important and highly respected clients in the entire industry. Understanding market demands and planning accordingly is always my prime focus.

We recently commissioned our fully automatic section Rolling Mill, which is one-of-a-kind in India. This is a fully automated plant with packaging and labelling lines, and has a manufacturing capacity of 180,000 tonnes per annum.

Tell us more about yourself – your own qualities and what you most value.

I like sincerity, punctuality, discipline, honesty and the ability to shoulder responsibility. However, dishonesty and laidback attitudes put me off.

Which living person do you most admire, and why?

Admiring successful people stimulates the motivational enzyme within us, and we wish to emulate their paths to success. I most admire Chanda Kochhar, the managing director and chief executive of ICICI Bank, because she is a successful woman who rose from management trainee to one of the most powerful women in the country. Her success story is an inspiration to all women who aspire to make a mark in the corporate world. **Y**

– as told to Niharika



Dress by Roberto Cavalli, Watch by Audemars Piguet (limited edition), Clutch by – Judith Leiber