

Stories of Indian Women to inspire us on Women's Day

by Aditi Mahadware

"Feminism isn't about making women stronger. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength" -G. D. Anderson

Almost every story of a woman starts with a person telling her what she can't do. And many of them face struggles to overcome such notions and achieve their goals. But what about those women who lost their dreams in the face of such adversities? Have we failed them as a society?

The purpose of Women's Day is to recognize the social, political, economic, and cultural issues that women face and bringing attention to them. The need to advance and advocate for women's rights and justice.

A perfect world wouldn't be biased; where everyone would be equals. So some women set out to build the perfect world. These women are rebels. They are painters who see the world as a canvas and their palette as a tool to show even the colourblind some colours.

They have changed the world forever, responsible for the world's development in various fields such as politics, medicine, literature, or engineering. Let us remember and celebrate a few of these women on the apt occasion of Women's Day.

Anandi Gopal Joshi: India's first lady doctor

A common feat in the 19th century, Yamuna was married at the tender age of 9 to Gopalrao Joshi. He was a widower 20 years older than her. Her husband then changed her name to Anandi.

At 14, she gave birth to a boy. But due to the lack of medical care, the boy tragically passed. This proved to be a paradigm shift in Anandi's life.

Anandi expressed a desire to study medicine and practice as a physician. Gopalrao was a considerably progressive thinker for that era. He encourages this bold decision of Anandi and in 1880 sent a letter to Royal Wilder, a well-known American missionary, stating her wife's ambition and an inquiry of a suitable post in the US for himself.



Theodicia Carpenter happened to read the letter and impressed by their progressive thinking, which leads to Carpenter and Anandi developing a strong friendship. Later, Carpenter would host their stay in the US.

While still in Calcutta her health began to get poor. Despite such a circumstance, Gopalrao sent her by herself to the US to pursue medicine. Eventually, at the age of 19, she began her medical training.

However, due to the cold climate and unfamiliar diet, her health worsened and contracted tuberculosis. Overcoming the adversities, she graduated with an MD in 1886. The topic of her thesis was "Obstetrics among the Aryan Hindoos." The thesis utilized references from both Ayurvedic texts and American medical textbooks. On her graduation, Queen Victoria sent her a congratulatory message.

This was when Anandi set an example for millions of other women by deciding to pursue higher education. She, unfortunately, passed at the young age of 21, yet her spirit continued to live through her ambitions. By becoming the first Indian lady doctor, she inspires women and men alike to this day.

Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw: India's richest self-made woman

“I want to be remembered as someone who put India on the scientific map of the world in terms of large innovation. I want to be remembered for making a difference to global healthcare. And I want to be remembered as someone who did make a difference to social economic development in India.” – Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw



Her achievements are endless. She was most recently named the EY World Entrepreneur of the Year 2020. She was also featured in 2010 on the Forbes “100 Most Powerful Women” list and Time magazine’s “100 Most Influential People in the World” list. In 2012 the Economic Times placed her second in India Inc.’s “Top 10 Most Powerful Women CEOs,” and in 2006 Nature Biotechnology voted her the most influential bio-businessperson outside Europe and the United States. She is also the receiver of many honourable awards.

She studied biology and zoology, graduating from Bangalore University with a bachelor's degree in zoology in 1973. She wanted to pursue medicine but was not able to get a scholarship. Her father, a brewmaster at United Breweries, suggested for her to study fermentation science and train to be a brewmaster. In the 1970s, this field was very non-traditional for Indian women.

She was the only woman enrolled in the brewing course and topped in her class. She earned the degree as a master brewer in 1975.

Kiran started Biocon India in 1978 in the garage of her rented house in Bengaluru with a seed capital of Rs. 10,000. She faced a lot of obstacles concerning her credibility, untested business models, youth, and gender. However, she leads as an incredibly successful entrepreneur and made Biocon India one of the leading business in India.

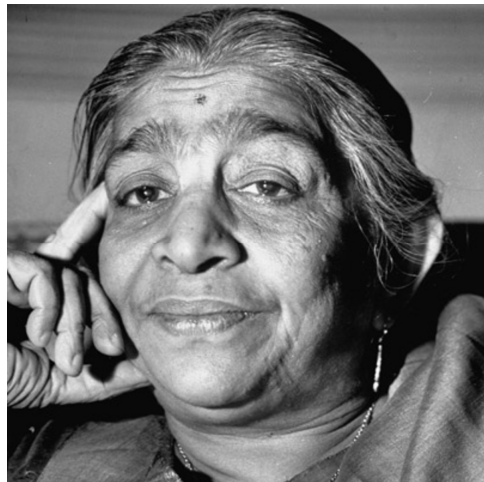
The company has sold 3 billion doses of insulin to date and has Asia's largest insulin factory in Malaysia's Johor region. Her philanthropic initiative, The Mazumdar Shaw Medical Centre, aims to create a sustainable, affordable cancer care model. With her innovative thinking and a vision for herself and the nation, she taught women all over the world to never give up and achieve their dreams.

Sarojini Naidu: the Nightingale of India

Naidu was a political activist, feminist, poet, and the first Indian woman to be president of the Indian National Congress and to be appointed an Indian state governor. She was an important figure in India's struggle for independence from colonial rule.

Naidu joined the Indian independence movement in the wake of the partition of Bengal in 1905. Between 1915 and 1918, Naidu travelled to different regions in India delivering lectures on social welfare, the emancipation of women and nationalism. She also helped to establish the Women's Indian Association (WIA) in 1917.

Sarojini was one of the major figures to have led the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement led by Mohandas Karmachanda Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) She faced repeated arrests by the British authorities during the time and even spent over 21 months(1year 9months) in jail.



She was also a brilliant poet, her work 'In the Bazaars of Hyderabad' remains the most famous to this day. Sarojini began writing at the age of 12. Her play, Maher Muneer, written in Persian, impressed the Nizam of the Kingdom of Hyderabad. Her poems were admired by prominent Indian politicians like Gopal Krishna Gokhale. Her poem 'The Gift of India' is known for its patriotism and the actual environment of 1915 India. For her work in the field of poetry writing, Naidu was given the title of "Nightingale of India".

Kalpana Chawla: the first Indian woman in space

“There are so many people who are arguing or fighting over issues which don’t have much relevance. We must all realise it is not worth it.” – Kalpana Chawla

In the small city of Haryana, Karnal, a mere dot on the map then, was soon found to be famous because of the spirit of a young girl named Kalpana.

As a young girl, Kalpana loved to fly. She drew pictures of aeroplanes and was most excited when she flew on a plane for the first time with her brother. She was passionate about the sky, space, and was notorious for annoying her siblings by constantly showing them constellations on the rooftop at night.



She was resolute about her dream which convinced even the orthodox members of her family. For those years, women pursuing higher studies was not common. She was the only woman pursuing Aeronautical engineering in Punjab Engineering College and passed with flying colours. Then, she moved to the United States in 1982 and obtained a Master of Science degree in Aerospace Engineering from the University of Texas at Arlington in 1984.

Her first space mission began on 19 November 1997, as part of the six-astronaut crew that flew the Space Shuttle Columbia flight STS-87. Chawla was the first Indian woman to go into space. She spoke the following words while travelling in the weightlessness of space, "You are just your intelligence."

During STS-87, she was responsible for deploying the Spartan Satellite which malfunctioned, necessitating a spacewalk by Winston Scott and Takao Doi to capture the satellite. Her performance was recognized by a special award from her peers.

In 2001, Chawla was selected for her second flight as part of the crew of STS-107. The crew performed nearly 80 experiments studying Earth and space science, advanced technology development, and astronaut health and safety. During the launch of STS-107, Columbia's 28th mission, a piece of foam insulation broke off from the Space Shuttle external tank and struck the left-

wing of the orbiter. When Columbia re-entered the earth's atmosphere in the duration of a return flight, the spacecraft became unstable and most tragically broke apart. All the astronauts in the spacecraft gave life.

On 5 February 2003, the Prime Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced that the meteorological series of satellites, MetSat, was to be renamed "Kalpana". The first satellite of the series, "MetSat-1", launched by India on 12 September 2002 was renamed "Kalpana-1". The Kalpana Chawla ISU Scholarship fund was founded by alumni of the International Space University (ISU) in 2010 to support Indian women's participation in international space education programs.

She said, "We gazed dreamily at the Milky Way and once in a while caught some shooting stars. Times like those gave me the opportunity to wonder and ask all those very basic questions. That sense of awe for the heavens started there."

Kalpana was bright, intelligent, hard-working, and resilient. Her strengths and her ambitions made the nation proud and earned a name for Haryana. Her story inspired girls to take up engineering, science, or train to be astronauts. Kalpana Chawla will be remembered for years to come.

Last Word

It is hard to imagine that only less than 200 years ago women were fighting for justice and rights which are now common in the present. Perhaps, years from now, they will say the same for the justice and rights that we are fighting for now.

It is important for us to understand, now more than ever, that we will progress when all sections of society are appointed equal opportunities and rights. And women who have lit the lamps of awareness on dark roads of ignorance are symbols of inspiration and dedication. They showed courage when their words fell on deaf ears and did what was once considered impossible.