



The Devis Have Risen to Restore & Rebuild

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HEMWIT CHAWLA AND SHEKHAR YADAV



Devi awardees (left to right) Namita Gautam, Patricia Narayan, Pooja Sood, Thinlas Chorol, Durga Bai, Bhakti Sharma, Chandrima Shaha, Ritu Biyani, Mehvish Mushtaq, Archana Kapoor, Amla Ruia, Smriti Nagpal, Basanti Devi, Mamta Singh and Vidhi Singhania along with Union Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj and *The New Indian Express* Editorial Director Prabhu Chawla at the Devi awards function in ITC Maurya, New Delhi

Red is the colour of passion; white a symbol of purity and the power of their endeavours. The *Sunday Standard* began its Devi initiative in New Delhi in December 2014, when it honoured 20 women from across India with the awards. It then moved on to appreciate the efforts of women achievers from Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. On January 11, the fifth edition of the awards was unveiled in the capital by a super-Devi herself, Union Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj. In his introduction, the Editorial Director of *The New Indian Express* Group, Prabhu Chawla, took pride in the fact that a woman represents India in its external affairs and said there's no better way to showcase female em-

powerment to the world. About the awards initiative, he called it a humble effort to realise the great Ramnath Goenka's vision for women empowerment.

As the awardees came up on stage to collect their trophies from the minister, compere Richa Anirudh engaged them in conversation about their unique journeys. Swaraj addressed the audience only after all the awardees had spoken. To the audience's amazement and the Devis' sheer delight, she remembered every detail of each winner's achievements and touched upon them with grace and profundity. Likening herself to environmentalist Basanti Devi, who had declared herself a "woman of the grassroots" and delivered her acceptance address in Hindi, the minister

said she too liked to speak in Hindi, particularly at foreign conventions where representatives of other countries spoke in their mother tongue. She made an interesting link between water conservationist Amla Ruia, the saviour of the Kosi Basanti Devi and open water swimmer Bhakti Sharma, pointing out how one had saved a river, the second was saving water while the third was conquering the seas. She highlighted how Durga Bai's contribution to contemporary art through her innovative Gond paintings was as necessary to recognise as Pooja Sood's effort in developing interactive spaces, which allow artists to both thrive and fail.

"These women are not greedy for publicity or profit; they are silently and tirelessly working towards their noble goals. The Devi Awards initiative has discovered diamonds in the rough," she said. Pointing to textile revivalist Vidhi Singhania and social reformer Namita Gautam, who belong to privileged backgrounds, she said, "Charity isn't merely about sharing wealth, it's about sharing time and passion too."

The minister was also impressed by the way dental surgeon Ritu Biyani had fought cancer head on and how Chennai's Patricia Narayan had single-handedly taken her business from a tiny coffee stall to a restaurant chain called Sandeepha after her deceased daughter. Having learnt that Narayan set up an ambulance service on a highway so that "no other parent has to see their child's body left

unattended on the road", Swaraj said, "To be inspired by one's own hardships and ensure that nobody else faces them is indeed one of the noblest virtues." Swaraj lauded the awardees for following their heart, for making excellent use of the chances they had been provided, and fighting for those they had been denied. She closed her address by saying the awardees' stories of struggle and success had indeed re-energised her spirit.

Once off stage, the minister was seen obliging selfie requests from the audience that was left mesmerised by her words and by the moving tales of the Devis.

The function ended with a lucky draw with audience-members walking away with a Hero cycle, Nokia cameras, Canali ties, candles from Illu-

minati, and bottles of Chandon. But they weren't the only ones to go home happy. Beauty player VLCC gave away goodie bags of skincare to each 'Devi' who attended the event.

As the evening proceeded, Delhi's glitterati paired white and red wine with ITC's spicy-smoky offerings. Some were seen holding glasses of single malt and forking into the moving trays of kebabs. The hotel's signature *dal makhni* and saffron-fragrant *biryani* added flavour. Mutual admiration, happy tears and fresh waves of feminism transcended the hotel's air.

Along with great food in their belly and snazzy prizes in their kitty, the audience went home with the life lesson that what seems divine in a Devi is actually real and imitable.

VIGNETTES



Sushma Swaraj greets former Rajya Sabha MP and political commentator Balbir Punj



Member of Niti Aayog Bibek Debroy and wife Suparna in conversation with Amar Singh



Dressed mostly in Devi's official colours red, black and white, guests listen intently to the moving life stories of the awardees



Swaraj has an emotional moment with Devi awardees as Uma Gajapathi Raju and Richa Anirudh look on



Presenting partner PC Jeweller's president TM Lakshminathan with Sushma Swaraj



Sushma Swaraj, Hero Cycles' Rohit Sharma and BBC's Priyanka Dutt



Prabhu Chawla with the team of Gold partner Pravek (left); FDCI chief Sunil Sethi (right)



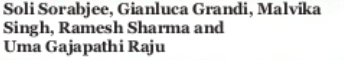
The team of gold partner VI-John at the after-party



Swaraj goes through the profiles of the Devi awardees



Uwe Kehm from the German Embassy



Soli Sorabjee, Gianluca Grandi, Malvika Singh, Ramesh Sharma and Uma Gajapathi Raju



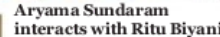
Pooja Sood wins an Illuminati candle



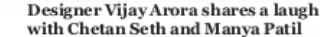
The *Sunday Standard* editor Ravi Shankar with Estonian ambassador Viljar Lubi



MD of Fortune Park Hotels Suresh Kumar with industrialist Ashish Saraf



Aryama Sundaram interacts with Ritu Biyani



Designer Vijay Arora shares a laugh with Chetan Seth and Manya Patil



EventXpress managing editor Shampa Dhar-Kamath with compere Richa Anirudh (left)



Designer Leena Singh with Dr Ashwini Chopra (right)