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HERO
DEVITHE SUNDAY STANDARD
NEW DELHI ♦ SUNDAY 17-23 JANUARY 2016**Namita Gautam***Managing Trustee, Sleepwell Foundation***For Championing Social Causes**

Corporate Social Responsibility is often confused with charity. "The giving away of excess wealth is not the best way to bring about economic equality, empowering through quality education is," says Namita Gautam. She is the managing trustee of Sleepwell Foundation, the CSR wing of South East Asia and Oceania's largest PU foam manufacturer and owner of the Sleepwell bedding brand.

Gautam's leadership and organisational skills may have been key drivers in the introduction and success of many Sleepwell products but the company's CSR wing is where her heart lies. Since its inception in 2001, the foundation has been active in four areas: education of the girl child, skill development, cleanliness, and preventive health, through innovative initiatives. The activities taken up independently as well as in association with like-minded organisations include awareness, advocacy



and action, and focus on quality and quantity for beneficiaries.

In the past, Gautam has been the national president of FLO, or Fici Ladies Organisation, which focuses on the empowerment of women. During her tenure, she formed Young Flo, for women under 40. She also got two surveys conducted -- one on the aspirations of girl students in colleges in Delhi-NCR, and the other a comparative study of women working in the service industry in the five metros of Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Hyderabad. Currently, she is the chairperson of the Institute Management Committee of the Jijabai ITI for Women, which was adopted by her company under a private-public-partnership with the Government of India in 2009. She is also a member of a special task force on skills and education created by CII, Northern Region.

**Patricia Narayan***Founder, Sandeepha Restaurants***For Stirring a Soulful Curry**

When Patricia Narayan's marriage failed and her family refused to take her in, she could have either killed herself and her two small kids or she could have fought it out for their sake. Narayan, all of 18 at the time, chose to do the latter. So, she started making pickles, jams and squashes at home. Her humble endeavour was successful and made her economically independent. She took baby steps towards entrepreneurship when she decided to sell coffee, juice and samosas on Marina beach in Chennai. On the first day, Narayan sold a single cup of coffee for 50 paise. The journey hit a halt with the death of her newlywed daughter Sandeepha. Two years later, she returned to the business even more determined, to earn back what she had lost in spirit. Soon after, she opened her first

restaurant after her deceased daughter's name. In her 30-year-long struggle, Narayan took up several catering contracts in cafeterias, like that of the Slum Clearance Board, Bank of Madras and the National Institute of Port Management after which she forged a partnership with a restaurant in a leading hotel chain in Chennai.

This restaurateur says crisis makes a person sensitive enough to do his or her best to ensure that nobody else goes through what they did. The sight of her daughter's body lying in the boot of a car is something she can never forget. She now operates an ambulance service in Chennai from Acharakkalam, the spot of her daughter's accident to Chengalpet. Narayan was FICCI's 'Woman Entrepreneur of the Year' 2013 and her life story is an inspiration to many.

Thinlas Chorol*Founder, Ladakhi Women's Travel Company***For Showing the Way to Ladakhi Women**

Thinlas Chorol was born in the Takmachik village of Ladakh. She grew up looking after the animals, taking them to the nearby mountains for grazing. As a teenager, she joined the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh's (Secmol). Here, she realised that trekking drew thousands of tourists to Ladakh every year. Knowing the mountains like the back of her hand, she decided to join the party—as a trekking guide. But most of the travel agencies that she approached for work didn't want a female trekking guide. However, when she did get hired on a freelance basis by a small agency, she noticed that female clients were most comfortable in the company of a lady guide. In 2009, she founded the Ladakhi Women's Travel Company, the region's first travel agency to be fully owned and run by women that takes bookings from the world over.

Chorol has gained recognition for her writing, primarily on social issues, and her status as an ice hockey player. In 2006, she was part of the team that won the bronze medal in the National Ice Hockey Championship. The following year, she was awarded the 'Sanjoy Ghose Ladakh Women Writers' Award' by the Charkha Development Communication Network. The ever-smiling Chorol wants women to feel the freedom that the mountains have to offer.

Anyone listening?

**Pooja Sood***Director, Khoj International Artists' Association***For Making Art her Craft**

Let's create an ecosystem that allows artists to both thrive and fail," says Pooja Sood, who has recently been appointed Director General of Jaipur's multidisciplinary cultural space, Jawahar Kala Kendra. She feels art is inherently mad and hence it is all the more important to have a method in place, so it reaches where it has to. By envisioning interactive spaces, writing and editing books and guiding art foundations, Sood contributes her cause of choice.

She is the founding member and Director of Khoj International Artists' Association, an autonomous, not-for-profit society committed to experimentation and exchange in the visual arts space in India. Under her stewardship, Khoj plays a central role in the development of interdiscipli-

nary and contemporary art practice in India and South Asia.

As director of Khoj, Sood has worked actively to build a robust network of experimental spaces across South Asia, resulting in the South Asian Network for the Arts (SANA).

Since 2009, Sood has been the founding director of ArThinkSouthAsia, an arts management programme for young cultural leaders in south Asia. In its sixth year now, it is dedicated to building a cadre of cultural managers in the region. Sood has served on several international juries, most recently, on the IAPA award of the Institute of Public Art, Shanghai (2014), the Asia Pacific Breweries Signature prize hosted by the Singapore Art Museum (2014-15), and the Korean Art prize, Seoul (2013).

Ritu Biyani*Founder, HighWays Beyond Cancer***For her Determination to Defeat Disease**

Cancer is either the beginning of an ending or the beginning of a beginning. For survivor Ritu Biyani, it was the latter. She became the first woman from the Maheshwari marwari community to join the Indian Army in 1981 and first lady paratrooper from the Indian Army Dental Corps in 1984, where she served as a surgeon for 10 years, gaining a deeper insight into the landscape and lifescape of India. In 2000, at the age of 39, when she was detected with breast cancer, Biyani changed as a person. She accepted the disease like any other disease and fought it head on. "I used to like adventure and sports before I became a dental surgeon. Cancer reintroduced me to my old self," she says.

In 2004, Biyani, with her then 14-year-old daughter Tista, conceptualised and pioneered the Project Highways, a cancer awareness mission across the country. Biyani's drive of over 800 workshops across India has made her reach over 2.67 lakh people (women, men and youth). In total, she has driven over 1,57,000 km and interacted with over two lakh people. Her 777 cancer awareness and motivational workshops so far have earned her a mention in the Limca Book of Records. "I'd rather take the road less travelled," says Biyani.

**Smriti Nagpal***Founder, Atulyakala***For Empowering the Deaf**

Sometimes, words fail us. We then turn to art to find answers and tell our stories. The Smriti Nagpal's older siblings are hearing impaired and in a world that's busy finding new and interesting ways to communicate with each other, what are they to do? The 25-year-old, who calls sign language her mother tongue, started Atulyakala in 2013. This is a for-profit social enterprise that is creating opportunities for deaf artists to create and sell products. It makes profit from selling art pieces like bags, mugs, wallets and journals made by hearing-impaired art-

ists. It also undertakes design projects. "It has been estimated that there are between 0.9 million and 14 million hearing-impaired people in India. They need to be able to earn and live with dignity," she says. In 2013, during her college days in New Delhi, Nagpal was responsible for the hearing-impaired morning bulletin of the Doodarshan Network, where she also interpreted the Republic Day parade in the Indian sign language. This was the first broadcast of its kind in 64 years.

Those who cannot hear us are actually hearing everything, even our silence, she believes.

**Vidhi Singhania***Textile Revivalist***For Reviving an Old Art**

The story dates back to a time when Kota was just another town in Rajasthan and hadn't become the hotbed of engineering aspirants. All it had were Kotah sarees. "When I got married and moved there in 1995, I was excited thinking about all the fabulous sarees that I would be able to gift my family and friends," reminisces Vidhi Singhania. "But, I found that the craft was dying." Singhania then took it upon herself to bring the fabric back to life. "It was like reviving a forgotten art," she says. With persistence and passion, she slowly built a rapport with the weavers -- 3,000 of whom now work with her. She not only pulled a craft community out of abject poverty, but created a market for beautifully embroidered, hand-painted and gold-woven Kotah sarees.

— Compiled by Pallavi Rebbapragada