

A Business of Her Own



Fifty Women in Enterprise in India

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A Contribution to Self-confidence

— *Threety Irani*

One of six children, Threety Irani was born into a family of Parsis settled in Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then called) for six generations. Her lawyer father rose to be the first Queen's Counsel of Indian extraction in Ceylon and, later, a judge of the Supreme Court. Growing up in Colombo, Threety had just finished school when the University was shifted from the city. At that time (late Forties/early Fifties) the logistics of sending a girl away for a college education were rather involved. Instead, she stayed at home and did a number of courses: in cooking, baking, dressmaking and block printing. She also got a secretarial certificate, learnt ballet and the piano. "If the university had remained in Colombo I would have gone to college. But I have never regretted not having a degree. It hasn't hurt me in any way."

In 1956, Threety got married and moved to Calcutta. Within two years, she had three daughters — the second time, they were identical twins. During their childhood, she dabbled in several things: some social work through a family planning clinic, giving English lessons, making hand-painted porcelain to sell through a Park Street shop. But she never seriously considered working outside the house. "The children came first," she says, "and I felt I had to be

home for them. Also, I enjoy housework, especially cooking. We have never had a cook because I get so much pleasure out of it." Even when she started her own business, Threety was to continue doing the cooking, hiring help in the kitchen rather than a cook.

Her eldest daughter went to college in Bombay, but when the twins finished school, they declared they were not interested in further formal education. What they wanted was to enter the beautycare business. "Our daughters have always had the freedom to choose what they wanted to do. After all, my mother let us follow our instincts. She didn't try to fit us into a mould. Not going to college was never a handicap for me, so I didn't see why I should insist on it if my girls did not want to."

Having agreed to what her daughters wanted to do, it was up to Threety to find the best means of getting them trained. She had heard of Shahnaz Husain and so she took her daughters to Delhi for a few months, met Shahnaz and got her to teach the girls something about beautycare.

The outcome, strangely enough, was that the serious careerist in the beauty business turned out to be neither of Threety's daughters, but herself. Because she accompanied her daughters regularly, she herself got interested in what Shahnaz had to say. Observing her interest, Shahnaz persuaded her to join the course herself and also proposed that Threety should start an outlet in Calcutta to market her creams. Coming at a time when her children did not need as much of her time as before, Threety gave the idea serious consideration. This, she said, was during the Emergency, against which her journalist husband had taken a stand; the result, for them, was a sense of insecurity, an uncertainty whether he would be able to continue in his job. It seemed to Threety that she should take the opportunity offered to contribute to the family's finances. More than anything else, she says, "it was Shahnaz who truly motivated me, actually mesmerised me into going into

business". And so, at forty plus, she launched herself on a career for the first time.

Determined to do the job properly, Threety went to England for six months and underwent rigorous training in various aspects of beauty therapy. In June 1977, she set up what was the first beauty salon in Calcutta. Her staff consisted of her three daughters and two sisters-in-law.

To start with, she took an interest-free loan of Rs 100,000 from a friend, rented a place and sent out 500 invitation cards. Over the first two days, most of the invitees came out of curiosity, but many became regular customers. Her clientele has since then grown by word of mouth and she has never felt the need to advertise. The original loan was repaid in two years and the business has been self-supporting ever since, its current annual turnover being approximately Rs 2 million.

Threety originally called her parlour 'Woman's World'. Later, she changed the name to Shahnaz Herbals, but most people in Calcutta still refer to it by its earlier name. Her daughters moved out of Calcutta after marriage, and her sisters-in-law left after a while. She now employs 24 girls. The only male employees are two bearers and an accountant who comes in once a week. In more spacious premises, she has installed all the equipment required for the various therapies she offers, including seven beds. "It is very expensive running what is regarded as a luxury business," she says. "Everything has to be perfect, the atmosphere has to be attractive and comfortable. And I pay 24 good salaries. But I am not for squeezing income out of the business in every possible way. It is running at a reasonable profit and that is enough."

From the beginning, Threety has avoided the "get ready for the party tonight" approach. She offers serious consultancy and spends time with her clients to pinpoint their problem and its causes. Then, apart from the treatment she gives,

she gets them to work with themselves, by regulating their diet and exercise. A lot of clients come to her with serious skin problems: facial scars, pigmentation, loss of hair on the head, etc. She treats them in anything from ten to twenty sittings and gives them a 'prescription' of home routine to follow. As the condition improves, she asks them to check back with her once a month.

"I give them a realistic idea of the extent to which the problem can be cured. I never say there'll be a 100 per cent cure, you'll be perfect. It is important to be honest and maintain the respect due to one's profession." For some cases, she refers the client to specialists in the medical profession. There are also, she says, clients whose basic problem is emotional (like those who are anorexic) and she sends these to a psychiatrist friend.

Many girls, she says, are brought to her to be "made prettier" because the parents are trying to arrange their marriage. "They say, do anything you can in two days. It is pathetic, this dependence on getting married and the indignities to which girls are subjected by the boy's family in the formal, visiting-to-see system. We do our best, but I would like to persuade parents to break out of that system, and make their daughters independent and self-confident before considering marriage."

Threety does not charge for consultation but only for any treatment that follows. She trains her girls not only in the techniques of beautycare but also in their attitudes. "No beauty therapist should be just a doll giving a facial to another doll. We interact as one human being to another, establishing trust."

Training the girls who work for her having become as important as treating clients, Threety now runs a school for beauticians on a floor above her parlour. Many salons in Calcutta are run by her students, she says. She has served on a West Bengal Government committee for vocational

training and has, for many years, been a UPSC member helping to choose instructors for polytechnics. The Government, she says, is now slowly becoming aware of the need for training beauticians. Threety waxes indignant on the lack of regulation of her profession. "It comes under the Shops and Establishments Act and all you have to do is pay Rs 250/- for a trade licence. Now there is professional tax also." The result, she says, is that so many with very superficial training set up as beauticians. "It is a serious business dealing with people's bodies and proper qualifications should be insisted on."

Threety writes regularly on beauty therapy for both English and Bengali papers, has published books and done TV programmes as well. She finds great satisfaction in doing articles and programmes which reach working women, women in the mofussil areas, those who would not normally come to a beauty parlour but would like to try to do something for themselves at home. And she shows them how, with simple home ingredients like tomato and cucumber. She sees it as a way of contributing to the dignity and self-confidence of women.

Her great interest outside of her profession is baking. She is on the food sub-committee of the Bengal Club and has passed on her passion for baking to her daughters. One of them, now settled in Delhi, runs a growing baking service based largely on Threety's recipes.

Threety has never thought of starting more parlours because she does not want to kill herself with work. She would like time for her other interests and also be able to travel with her husband whenever possible. At present, she goes to the parlour four or five days in the week. She also spends a few hours there on Saturdays, to be available for consultations sought by working women. She continues to use and sell only Shahnaz Husain's cosmetic products. "Shahnaz has always been my role model and inspiration," she says. Her other source of constant support and encouragement

has been her husband, who is Editor-in-Chief of *The Statesman*, one of the country's leading English newspapers.

Recently, one of her daughters has moved back to Calcutta and is planning to join her mother. When that happens, says Threety, she will expand her services, start a health club and a health food counter. She makes her own breakfast cereal and may start selling it soon. But she will let her daughter take care of the new areas; "I would like to stay in counselling myself."