

# Ordinary lives, inspiring lives

12 November 2018

Felicitated with the Young Woman Achiever Award in October 2018, the MTC Global Outstanding Corporate Award for Excellence in Human Resources during the 6th Annual Global Convention –SANKALP 2016, the Women Achievers Award by World HRD Congress & Institute of Public Enterprise in 2013, and HR Super Achiever Award by Star News at the 20th World HRD Congress 2012 among many others, **Aparna Sharma** is a passionate learner in her journey of over 22 years of intense and expansive HR work. In her diverse roles, she has successfully been a learning partner, mentor and coach to leaders, leadership teams and organisations to build competencies, learning abilities and nimbleness for achieving purposeful performance.

After completing her post-graduation in Personnel Management & Industrial Relations from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, she entered the corporate world through NOCIL and moved into different roles in the HR function in organisations like Monsanto, Novartis, UCB, Deutsche Bank, Lafarge and Greaves Cotton.

A wildlife enthusiast and an amateur photographer, Sharma spends most of her leisure time closer to nature. She also loves travelling as it gives her an opportunity to meet new people. Books are her favorite ally and she dedicates every day some time to read something new. An avid reader, she has a collection of some of the best books of the century.

She launched her maiden book, Reality Bytes-The Role of HR in Today's World, which has received wide acclaim across the globe. The book has also been translated in Hindi. Sharma has instituted "UDAAN" Scholarship- A tribute to her late aunt, Late Dr. Mohini D Vyas' at St Mary's Convent School in Ujjain where she studied for a couple of all-rounder girl students entering Class X. She also spends time in guiding and coaching students as part of the school's career guidance efforts. She is also actively involved in adult education through various forums & dedicates time at a couple of old age homes & orphanages in Mumbai.

In this interview with **Swetha Amit**, she talks about the inspiration behind her book, the challenges that she overcame and how to deal with brickbats in the corporate world.



**Between U & Me is a compilation of extraordinary stories of ordinary people. So, what really inspired this book?**

I had always wanted to write this book. In fact, I wanted to do so after I hang my boots and retire from active work life. The reason I wrote it earlier was when I realised that the world only recognised the rich and famous as their source of inspiration. I kept thinking about the unsung heroes or the ordinary people who touch our lives in different ways. There have been many people who have touched my life and inspired me, both personally and professionally. I wanted to spread the learnings that I have gained from such people to the world and I did not want to delay it any further. I selected around 20 people but a few of them weren't comfortable with their stories going public and hence I finally narrowed it down to 14.

I know there are many such books on inspiring stories available in the market. However, they are again inspirational stories of celebrities and famous people. There was also a lot of debate around the title as Between U & Me sounded romantic. The tag line 'Ordinary People – Extraordinary Lessons' clarified the subject. I also wanted to ensure that the book wasn't too long as people tend to lose interest easily. It took me six years to pen this book down and I am glad that its finally out in the market for the readers.

**Those six years must have come with their share of challenges. How did you overcome them?**

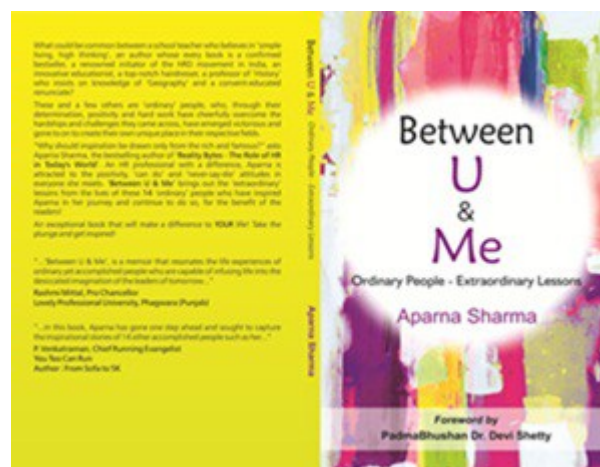
Yes, there were quite a few challenges. Firstly, I don't think anyone would have wanted to publish this especially when I wasn't a recognised author. However, I managed to channelise my thoughts in a manner where the timing had to be right.

I also had to ensure that it wasn't a run of the mill kind of a book. It had to be unique. I had to have numerous discussions with the publisher who wanted to change the title. Each one has a different perspective and according to the publisher, this title sounded intimate.

I also faced some challenges with regards to the time frame. Some elderly people like Vimla Patil was quite unwell. I already had their drafts and during the interim, some people whom I had earlier chosen to be a part of the book wanted to drop out. So, I had to spend a lot of time finding other inspiring people who were willing to share their stories for my book.

Another challenge was the ability to compress an entire person's life in just 10-15 pages. From a commercial point of view, a book needs to be of a certain length and I had to adhere to this. When I showed some of the people the first few drafts of their stories, they felt that I had left out some important aspects of their life. In fact, some of them even insisted on deciding the format. So, I had to convince them saying that the format had already been determined by the publisher.

The last was getting the Foreword for my book. While my publisher was insistent that it had to be done by a celebrity, I had other ideas. However, I did promise that I would try my best and tried to reach out through various sources. After 45 chains of communications over six months, I finally managed to reach Padma Bhushan, Padma Shree Dr Devi Prasad Shetty, the well-known cardiac surgeon who willingly wrote a one-page foreword for me. His life and work are so very inspiring, that he was the best person to endorse this book.



**Considering the world is quite crazy over celebrities, how did you manage to convince your publishers about the subject of your book initially?**

My publisher has actually grown with me. He was a new one when he approached me initially and because my first book became a bestseller, he has seen how I have put my heart and soul into it. He also knows that I am not likely to waste time on an idea that's not feasible. Over time, there has been a lot of trust established. I also told him that a lot of people were approaching me but being a stable person, I wouldn't want to keep shifting from one publisher to another.

At one stage, I requested him to publish such a book on inspirational stories to which he readily agreed. He read a few stories and was especially moved by those of Tanveer and Vandana Jadhav. At the end of it, I think it worked out quite well.

**You mentioned about how a few people whom you approached earlier for your book dropped out. So how did you finally narrow down the list to these 14 people?**

The list was not made six years ago. It kept evolving over time. To begin with, there were three-four people whom I had been speaking to. Over time, people whom I initially finalised suddenly dropped out as they were not comfortable sharing their life stories.

I had to then re-evaluate the list by finding new people to be a part of my book. That happened over a period of time. Now that the book is out, the people who dropped out say they regretted having done so. In fact, some of them are even asking whether I am likely to come out with a Part 2.

There are also other people who have come up to me and asked me why they haven't been selected to be a part of my book. You see there are a few aspects in everybody's life that inspire us. However, there are very few people whose entire lives inspire us and my book is about the entire lives of such people.

**One of your personalities Dr Faiqa mentions how she faced hostility and brickbats from her colleagues as they resented her success. Considering the fact this is bound to be faced by every successful working professional in the corporate world, how do you suggest one can handle this without letting it affect their morale?**

Faiqa is my best friend and I know her since college days. We are born in different cities and communities and yet there is so much in common. She has gone through a lot in her area which is education. Whether its education or the corporate world, it is not about being popular. You eventually have to learn to say no to people.

I have gone through a lot myself in my career. I grew along the corporate trajectory fairly fast as opposed to many fellow professionals at a fairly young age. Especially in a very male dominated kind of society, people wonder if you have a godfather behind your success or are you just plain lucky?

For both Faiqa and me, it's been about competence, knowledge and hard work. We both draw so much strength and inspiration from each other.

I would initially get hassled and flustered when that happened in early years of my career. I have also learnt not react to overtures. I have been around for 22 plus years which is long enough that any number of brickbats don't hassle or fluster me.

The tool to deal with this is that it requires one to have a lot of humility. If you let success get to your head, then it gives people more room to talk. You have to continue to be approachable and down to earth. The minute they see there is no difference in your attitude post success, all those brickbats eventually start to die down.

**Today a lot of working professionals are required to travel to different states and countries as a part of their work. Sometimes they face language difficulties and how do you think this can be handled?**

At one point in time as a little girl, I was very ashamed of the fact that being an Indian I couldn't speak in Hindi. I think I was a very confused child as I was moving a lot of places due to my father's frequent transfers. However, I made efforts to learn Hindi. People should make an effort to learn the local language. I learnt every language in whichever place I was in, including overseas. I have worked in the Philippines, so I learnt the local language. I also learnt French at one point. Learning foreign languages makes it easier to work with people in global headquarters. I wouldn't say that everybody can pick up languages but one must make efforts. It would be a good idea to learn at least a few phrases. I understand people may not be interested all the time. My advice would be to cultivate that interest.

**There exist a lot of stereotypes in workplaces with regards to gender and generation. Do you see that being overcome in the coming years?**

I don't think so. I faced that not long ago and I think it's probably going to take more than a decade. Though I would say we have begun to see change. We are talking about generational diversity in the workplace. While there is acknowledgment of different generations, not everyone is on the same page. The concept of reverse mentoring is there where younger people are mentoring older people.

Very soon, say by 2020-2025 more than 50 per cent of working professionals will become millennials. You will have a younger work force and the gap will get narrower. The demographics of the workforce will change. In order to deal with this change, one has to be more open minded, continue to be more respectful, not overemphasize on the superior-subordinate relationship.

**Penning down such books can be a wonderful experience. What were your learnings during this process?**

This book is like reading 15 different books. Each person's story is so unique and the best part is they have unabashedly shared their failures and rejections. Today, people only like to share their success stories. I have also learnt the concept of balance while writing this book. When you look at all their lives, nobody's life has gone according to any plan. They have all had their dark and gloomy patches. Yet there is a silver lining amidst this gloomy patch. My faith in the divine plan has only gotten deeper and each life is testimony to the saying 'Man proposes, God disposes.' I have learnt to never to give up come what may.

**As an author, what are books that have inspired you?**

I read autobiographies, management books and fiction. My favorite author is Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I love all his books. I particularly like this book titled Mister God this is Anna by Sydney Hopkins under the pseudonym "Fynn" describing the adventures of Anna, a mischievous yet wise four-year-old, and keep reading it over and over again. It's about a girl's conversation with God. The child in me comes out whenever I read this book. Off late, I have been reading a lot of self-help and inspirational books. I have also been reading a lot of Chanakya as well to understand things like how to develop political acumen to navigate in the corporate world. For someone like me who is straightforward, it becomes essential to understand some of these nuances for my professional life.

**Any more books in the pipeline?**

At present, my aim is to take this book around the world and exhibit that India is not just a land of snake charmers. I also want to ensure that it disseminates into the interior parts of our country so that ordinary people live their lives with more conviction.