‘WORK ON YOURSELF TO BE HAPPY’

Entrepreneur and philanthropist Zarina Screwvala believes the sure-fire way to be happy is to work on yourself and be a better person. She talks to Femina about her success mantra, inspiring journey, and how she’s empowering rural India.

Zarina Screwvala is on a mission—to lift rural India out of poverty, one village at a time. Her Swades Foundation, co-founded with husband Ronnie Screwvala, works across the Raigad district of Maharashtra, enabling villagers to live a better life. But it was an extensive journey that brought Screwvala to where she is today. From being the co-founder of UTV (now Walt Disney India) to being a full-time philanthropist with a love for philosophy, Screwvala’s life has been nothing short of fascinating. Over to the trailblazer who tells us how it all started.

What’s the best part of being a boss lady?
There isn’t one. Being a boss is a huge responsibility. It’s something I’ve grown into and learnt after several years of working. I used to be extremely aggressive and bossy, but I have realised it’s not the way one should be. If you want the best out of people, then they need to work in an atmosphere without fear hanging in the air. As a boss lady, you need to motivate and inspire. If you are hard-working, you can ask people to work hard. A leader has to lead by example.

Over the years, you have inspired women across all spheres of life. What has the journey been like?
Did a 17-year-old Zarina know that she would be here today?
Not at all. But there are no accidents or coincidences in life. The UTV journey began when I was still studying in college and I got a call from Deven (Khote). We were in a theatre group with Pearl and Alyque Padamsee, and Ronnie (Screwvala). He called me and asked me if I would like to go for an edit the next morning for a show called Mashaar Mahal, which was being directed by Ronnie. I agreed. There was just one man at the studio, called Ramzan, who told me that he would teach me editing. At that time, Mashaar Mahal’s host would start each sentence with an audible wheeze. My job on the first day...
"HE (RONNIE) TOLD ME JUST ONE THING: ‘WHY DON'T WE DO SOMETHING TOGETHER. WHY DON'T WE LIFT A MILLION PEOPLE OUT OF POVERTY?’"

was to edit out the host's breath. I was so excited and I started editing the footage, not realising that by the time I was done, it was 7 am the next morning. The show was not renewed further, and we didn't know what to do with ourselves. One day, at the studio, I was calling Alyque for a job, when I saw Ronnie waving at me. I went over to talk to him, and he told me that he was starting a company, asking me to join. Of course, I agreed! That's how UTV began in 1990, with Ronnie, Dev, and me. And what a journey it has been! One fine day, in 2006, I realised that I had mixed out in television. It didn't provide any more impetus to me to wake up every morning. So, much to everyone's surprise, I decided to take a year-long sabbatical. On the first day of my sabbatical, I went for Vipassana, and I came back after 11 days. They had just launched Hungama TV and it was not doing well. Ronnie suggested I join Hungama. Somehow, he persuaded me, and on the 12th day of my sabbatical, on a Monday morning, I was in the Hungama TV office.

So how did the Swades Foundation come into existence?

Soon after Hungama TV beat even Cartoon Network's numbers, Disney made us an offer to buy it. We agreed, and they also bought into UTV at that point. Again, effectively, I was without a job. That's when I dreamt up Budass and started working on it. Finally, in 2012, we divested all our stakes in UTV. In a way, I was heartbroken. I decided to join a philosophy class called New Acropolis. On the first day when I walked into the classroom, I saw a tiny note pinned on a wall that said, "When you let go of who you are, you become what you might be." Something clicked in my mind. I was miserable, and I realised that the only thing holding me back from leaving UTV and the media was the fear of letting go. That day, I went home and told Ronnie that I needed to leave the media. Thereafter, I met Shaheen Mistry of Teach for India (TFI). There was something about education that had always attracted me. I went to Pune for two weeks to join their Fellows programme. It was so exhausting; I told Shaheen I couldn't do it. She suggested I help her run TFI. So I came home and told Ronnie that I had joined TFI, and he was taken aback. He told me just one thing: 'Why don't we do something together. Why don't we lift a million people out of poverty?' Those were probably the most inspiring words I'd ever heard, and I was instantly onboard. That's how Swades was born.

What did you learn when you started Swades?

We learnt that there's no one thing that can alleviate poverty. The first thing we did was work on the villagers' mindset. While we knew we wanted to lift a million
people out of poverty, what did we know about it? So for a year, we travelled, met philanthropists, NGOs, and communities, built a strong team, and then started working. We knew how to build trust with the rural community, to love and respect the community, and we knew how to talk to people. We learnt to collaborate; we didn’t do everything on our own. And we demanded excellence from everybody, without exception.

Can you share the story of a woman whose life changed for the better because of Swades?
It has to be Vidya Kule. When she lost her husband, we approached her and suggested she join a self-help group. Soon, she became the leader of that group. We had just started the Swades SwaRaksha Mitra programme, where we train local ladies on how to take care of the health of their communities. As part of it, Vidya came in touch with a lady whose husband had died of TB. Vidya suspected that the lady had TB too. Vidya went to the local doctor with her, who told them that she didn’t have TB. Not convinced, Vidya kept pestering us about it until we took the lady to a doctor in Mumbai, who confirmed that not only did she have TB, she was going to die of it. Vidya went to her house every single day to help her with the medicines, and today, the lady is not only well, but also happy and thriving.

What is it like working with the millennials at Swades?
I love it. One thing I would tell millennials is to set your goal to something that inspires and motivates you. The only thing in your control is yourself, so work on yourself and you will be happy.

On days when you’re feeling terribly down, what is that one thing that’s your instant pick-me-up?
I just try to remember why I’m doing what I’m doing. If you can remind yourself of this, it will rejuvenate you. In the short term, sitting by myself for five minutes with a good cup of coffee also helps me.

Women have experienced it time and again—we can’t have it all. So how do you and Ronnie strike that balance?
It’s not always easy. Ronnie and I are very different people. He’s a visionary. I, on the other hand, love to see how I can fulfill a vision. Swades is his vision, I have imbibed it and made it my own. At home, we try not to fight about work. At work, we fight like crazy—we have totally opposing viewpoints. But, I think, the synthesis of these two viewpoints is what has made both UTV and Swades great.

There are several hard-pressing issues that affect working women today. One being that many of them step back from their careers at some point to start a family. What are your views on something like maternity leave and how it affects a woman’s career?
I think we should do everything to encourage women to work if they want to. The easiest way to do this is to have a long maternity leave, and to figure out with great enthusiasm how she can fit into a role when she returns. It doesn’t have to be the exact same role; it’s understandable that a function may get filled in her absence. But we must work to bring her back to a role that’s on-par with her previous one.

What is that one piece of career advice you’d give all women?
Believe in yourself. As women, we have a tendency to feel insecure. If you trust yourself, you can do anything.