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## FIRST PERSON-Vandana Shah

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### 'I was physically thrown out of the house'

Having survived a marriage that was a living hell and a divorce that took 10 years, author and activist Vandana Shah tells Vinodini Rao how there's no room for bitterness in her life anymore...

### Dad Said Girls Are Princesses Who Rule The World

My dad Wing Commander Sanwal Shah was a pilot in the Indian Air Force, so as kids we travelled across the length and breadth of India. Dad fought many sea wars and was rated among the top five pilots of his time.

Mum was a housewife, and I have two elder sisters. We lived in Ambala, a simple carefree life, where we'd come home from school, fling our bags across and demand food from mum. The only pressure was from dad, who made sure we read the newspaper every day, learnt five new words, made sentences out of them and showed them to him every evening. Dad always told us, 'Do what you want in life but first educate yourself.'

I am actually a mix between a Sardarni and Punjabi and we also have Gujarati blood from somewhere (that explains the Shah connection). Mum's family was pretty conservative but dad's was quite progressive. Dad always said girls are important; they are the princesses who rule the world. But it was only later in life I realized that it was not to be so...

#### The First Big Shock Of Losing Dad

We were a happy family till tragedy struck us, and I lost dad to cancer. I was in the 11th standard studying Science as I wanted to be a doctor. We didn't know what hit us, and it was heartbreaking for all of us. Mum, who was a housewife all her life, now moved from the traditional to the non-traditional role of taking charge of things.

And that was when I realized how strong she was. She didn't know a thing about finance; she didn't even know what dad's salary was. She was in her 50s, and to start afresh at that age wasn't easy. But mum had a deadly sense of humour; maybe she used humour as a defence mechanism.

She could laugh about anything without being hurtful. Since my two older sisters were married by then, she wrapped up everything there and took the courageous step of moving to Mumbai as her sisters were here.

#### And Then Mum Passed Away Too...

Once in Mumbai, I joined St Xavier's College and took up Arts. I was in my TYBA studying psychology honours, and life again took a sudden turn when mum fell sick. She first had a bypass surgery and then she was detected with cancer. But mum being mum, she was such a positive person throughout her illness... I remember 25th September was my birthday and she was in the hospital just out of the ICU. On the 24th night, at 12 a.m she organized, along with my friends, a celebration for me in the hospital and gave me a card saying, 'To the world's most wonderful daughter'. I still have that card in my office. She passed away soon after, leaving the biggest void in my life. Looking back, today when I think about her and what she went through, I feel my pain in comparison is nothing... That's why, till date, I get my strength from her.

#### I Was On My Own...

I decided then I just had to face everything in a positive way. That was the turning point in my life. My sisters were overseas, and somewhere at the back of mind, I thought it was unfair to impose myself on them. I had to move on... and on my own.

Dad always said, 'You must amount to something in life'. So from childhood, we were always taught to be part of the solution. I remember there was a dhaba in Ambala where we used to eat, and there used to be beggars sitting outside and as kids we felt bad for them. Dad would say, 'It's not enough to just say you are feeling bad. If you are feeling so bad, eat one roti less and give that to the beggar. Do something about it. Make a difference'.

So I decided to stay by myself. I felt if I didn't do that, I'd never develop my own personality. I finished my TYBA and did one year of advertising and marketing from Xavier's. I made a lot of friends there, friends who I continue to be close to. I also did a bit of modelling and RJ-ing (on Radio Mid-day) in college.

#### I Got Married With Dreams In My Eyes...

A couple of years later, in '98, I got married, not knowing that life would also give me a crash course in suffering... It was my aunt who got this proposal; she knew this family and organized a meeting for me. She said, 'The family is good, don't let it go'. I said, 'Let's see, I'll meet the guy'. When I met him, I found him good. He was pretty wealthy and educated too. He was from a business family, but was working on his own, so he was progressive in some ways and that appealed to me. The family though was very conservative, especially where women were concerned. His mother was a doctor but not practicing. She was an MD and a gold medalist at that, but she was just a trophy wife. Despite that, I thought I would adapt and get married...

#### But I Realized There Were Thorns All Over...

From day one, I was expected to fit into a particular mould. But life didn't come with a mould... You see, in India, you are never married to just the guy, you marry into the family. And everybody has an opinion in the family and there's a constant tug of war. Yes, my in-laws were mean to me because the men in the family expected their wives to be like their mothers, which could never

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**MallikaLA** 19 MINUTES AGO How much:)? @sam9149: @MallikaLA Hey Mallika, thanks for following me ma'am thank you very much. You wont believe how much I love you!!!



**MallikaLA** 19 MINUTES AGO Good 2 know I am being missed:) @VivavRock?? @MallikaLA Hi

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res, my in-laws were mean to me because the men in the family expected their wives to be like their mothers, which could never happen. Because you are anyways 30 years younger than the mother who belongs to a completely different generation.

Such men should marry women from backward areas because Mumbai is anyways 50 years ahead of the rest of India. How can you expect someone from an educated family, who has studied in Mumbai and lived here on her own, to go back in time? It can never happen...

#### **I Was Abused...**

Well, people talk about physical abuse but even emotional abuse can be bad... Okay, I might not cook a meal well but that doesn't mean you actually sit at the dining table and dissect my cooking skills. I mean, don't you have something better to do in life? I remember this incident where my in-laws wanted me to start something – they said open a child care centre, go and enroll in the university to learn about child education etc. Though I was not interested in the child care thing, I was pro-education, so I said why not? That day they told me to take the car and go to the university. I remember there was some music playing in the car and I told the driver, 'Volume badha do', and I started humming along... In the evening, my father-in-law asked me, 'Why were you talking to the driver?'

You were just supposed to go to the university. In our family, singing in the car is not allowed. Didn't you know that? And they were living in posh Pali Hill. I was like, give me a break, what day and age are we living in?

So yes, there were constant fireworks because you can't expect an instant bahu. There was no period of adjustment, no time given to adapt. It was like telling a new-born baby - get up, start eating and go to school. A new marriage is like a new-born baby, you have to give it time to grow...

#### **Marriage Was A Living Hell...**

So more than the physical abuse, the kind of verbal abuse I was put through was unbelievable. Whether it was bad cooking or listening to music in the car – everything became a huge issue. And the worst part was, after a point, you actually start feeling you are wrong. And when you talk to any relative about it, they say you are wrong too. So though there were problems, to the outside world, I still had to present a positive picture.

I kept telling myself, I'll stick it out in the marriage... Besides, how could I have just walked away? This was 10 years ago when divorce was not so rampant. I was only 24, and without any direction in life. My friends would joke and say, 'Qaid main hain bulbul'. It was so claustrophobic that when things reached such an extreme that they actually physically threw me out of the house, in a way I was happy and relieved...

#### **Yes, I Was Thrown Out By My In-Laws...**

Like I said, it had been building up for quite some time... Everything about me was wrong, and finally, one day, I was literally told by my in-laws, 'Till you learn to behave yourself, you have to just sit in that room'. I was being punished for no crime of mine, and I kept asking what have I done? My brother-in-law actually twisted my arm and said, 'You are not fit to stay in the house', and there was so much screaming and shouting. My husband too joined in, and the two of them started pushing me out of the door. I was literally kicked out of the house in the middle of the night. They said, 'Just get out' and I just could not figure out what was going on in their minds.

My mother-in-law, I learnt later, was seeing a psychiatrist. She was in an abusive marriage herself, so maybe it ran in the family. If you ask me if I was physically abused, I'll answer it by saying, let's just say he was a boxer. He'd use his strength on me and I'd wear full sleeves to hide the bruise marks.

#### **My Maid Came To My Rescue...**

That night, when I was thrown out of the house, I blanked out completely. I still don't know how I reached my parental home from there, and I wish no one is put through the torture I went through... I didn't even have the house keys; I remember sitting all alone on the steps of my house. I then went to my maid Bobby's house.

She asked me, 'Aap wapis aa gaye?'; and I said, 'Haan'. She came back with me and sat with me on the stairs all night. She said, 'I can't leave you alone'. She didn't ask me why I left my marital home or what happened that night... Obviously, she knew; but a maid showed more consideration than family.

In the morning, we called the locksmith, opened the door and went inside. I had nothing on me. I checked my bank balance and it showed only 750 bucks! This was one-and-a-half year after my marriage. Those days were really bad. My maid worked for free because she saw me in my worst condition; she was like, what to take money from her?! She helped me a lot. Friends started coming up and helping me too.

#### **He Wanted To 'Reconcile' But Actually Wanted Divorce...**

Then one fine day my husband came home and said he wanted to reconcile. He was basically a nice guy but spineless, and I took a magnanimous stand and said maybe we can work it out. He stayed in my house for six months... But later I got to know the motive behind his plan - he had come to see if he could get evidence against me to use in court. When he left, I found some documents missing. He had actually wanted a divorce. But mentally I was not prepared for any kind of separation as when he got back with me, I believed we had patched up...

#### **I Was Called A 'Slut'**

I realized then that in life your parents are your last line of defence. When they are gone, you have to be on the frontline... My journey had just started. How to survive? What to do? I was at sea... My sister asked me to stay with her but my brother-in-law said, 'Let's get her re-married'... So I was without any family support.

My in-laws basically wanted the divorce to get him re-married. My father-in-law told me, 'Whether you give the divorce or not, we'll take it in six months'. I had nothing, just a lot of bravado and replied, 'We'll see'. Legally, what they started doing to get the divorce was slapping cruelty cases on me. Cruelty is a very vague and generic term, and you can club everything under it – from one's sense of dressing, to lack of cooking skills, to lack of character. It comes under Section 11 C of the Hindu Marriage Act. They had a lot of money, and even got affidavits from taxi drivers saying that I talk loudly. I had literally hit the bottom of the barrel now, as my branding was that of a 'cheap woman', 'slut', 'valueless' and so on...

#### **I Decided To Fight Back – With Only ` 750 In My Bank**

I had no money but I went out, got a lawyer and convinced the lawyer to take my case without money. I then went for a couple of job interviews and got my first job with Concern India. My salary was ` 7,500. I was excited as from ` 750 to ` 7,500, it was a ten-fold jump. After this, I got a break with the UN for environment management – where I worked on the concept of city farming with recycled waste. This was an uphill task in India where the focus on environment as it is was minimal. So it was very challenging and kept me busy too. I studied about the environment, did my own research, gave presentations, travelled a lot, went to the Middle East and Europe.

My work with the UN gave me the kind of self-validation I was looking for. I knew I was on the right track. Slowly, I started getting covered by the press for the unique work I was doing in city farming. Ironically, where on the one hand, I was rebuilding my life; on the other, I was getting slapped with more and more cases. This was because they now started amending the petitions because their lawyer who drafted the first petition was actually a property lawyer, and ended up drafting a very sad petition. My lawyer had by now got me an interim maintenance, so at least I was getting some money.

My strategy at this point was to not counter every missile they shot. I said fine; let's see how many more frivolous petitions they keep filing. I had a good lawyer who believed in not wasting resources...

#### **I Rebuilt My Life...**

The divorce proceedings went on for 10 long years; it took so long because they didn't have very sound grounds for divorce. But

the lengthy process didn't matter much as I used those years to rebuild my life. I was reading Nelson Mandela's 'Long Road To Freedom' then and found it so inspiring that I read it non-stop. You need some inspiration from somewhere, and that book helped me a lot. Because I was going through so much of the legal stuff myself, I decided to learn law. I also started a support group called '360 Degrees Back To Life' with a few friends who came together for a common cause. The aim here was to provide non-judgmental support to those going through divorce. Our sole focus was on rebuilding one's life.

For instance, lawyers don't tell women they are entitled to interim maintenance. So apart from giving legal help, as part of my counselling, I wanted to reach out to people like me and tell them to shift the focus from the opposite party to themselves. Because that is what I did. As humans, we have the tendency to say we will defeat them. The crux of all divorce cases is: I must teach him a lesson.

But that doesn't help; the focus must be on you and how you can rebuild your life. Today, the Family Court in Mumbai has 50 cases put up every day. There's no place to stand in the court and it's so sad to see people stand outside and discuss divorce cases... Incidentally, we now have a franchisee in Chennai, so our support group is expanding... And because I re-started my life with just ` 750 in my bank, I charge only ` 750 as my counselling fee.

Based on the personal experience of the members of my group and my own, I then wrote a book called '360 Degrees Back To Life - A litigant's humorous perspective on divorce'. This was a 'How to...' for divorce - how to handle, go through, get over and emerge a stronger person in divorce. The book was a bestseller on the Crossword list and that was one of the happiest moments of my life. American feminist Gloria Steinem endorsed my book, and no, I didn't have any money to pay her. I had met her once in India, kept in touch with her, and asked if she could endorse my book and she gladly agreed.

#### I Got My Divorce After 10 Years...

After 10 years, in 2009, when my divorce finally came through, I was happy because principally I got what I wanted. The six months that I was threatened with took a decade and I told my ex-husband, 'Tell your dad, it took more than a decade'. I was satisfied with the path I made for myself. Till the end, I didn't give in, and finally they had to tell me, 'Let's sit down and talk'. I stood for what I believed in, and they took back their cases. And that was what was most important to me. They even attached an apology letter in their final settlement. I got some amount of alimony but at that point, it was insignificant.

When I decided to fight for justice, the mountain (route) ahead of me was too big. So I decided to take another mountain and carve my path there. My stature became so big that they had to now come to the table and talk to me...

#### I Threw A Divorce Party...

When they withdrew all the cases and the divorce finally happened, I was the most excited person on earth. I remember hugging and kissing the lawyers. I was so happy that I actually threw a divorce party. I burnt all the petitions and kept only the final decree; it was a complete release. But I am not cynical today. I tell people not to lose faith in marriage. I hope our Government talks about divorce laws openly. If they are talking of division of property for women, they should also calculate the hidden financial contribution that women make in a marriage.

#### I Launched X-Files

After this, I launched 'X-Files', a divorce newsmagazine on September 25th, which happens to be the day of my birthday. Every year on my birthday, I go to Mother Teresa's ashram and party with the kids there. So two years ago, I said let's start something new... 'X-Files' takes a humorous approach towards divorce. My endeavour here is to bring some cheer in people's lives when they are going through the dark phase of divorce.

I approached the Dabbawala's Association and told the head there, 'Please help me. Will you deliver my magazine with your dabbas?' He said, 'We never do this but we'll make an exception for you'. And the response was so overwhelming; people started calling and e-mailing. My aim is not to make money through this but to be able to make some difference in people's lives.

#### My Cause – My Life

Ironically, today two more women from my ex-in-laws' family have got out of their 'façade marriages' and one of them even came to me for counseling, not knowing I was from the same family. Talk about life coming a full circle...

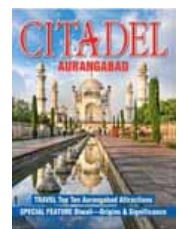
Currently, I am writing a book for Penguin on the breakdown of relationships in contemporary India. I am really passionate about my cause – whether it's the books I write on divorce, the support group I founded or my newsmagazine. Maybe you need to suffer to be passionate about something. I don't come from a family that's got writers or social activists. But I'm happy I am doing my bit for a cause I'm passionate about. But having gone through the ordeal of a bad marriage and divorce, I want to re-emphasize that divorce is all about rebuilding your life. It is about you, and not what they did to you. They were important because they gave you a kick to literally 'kick-start your life'. But that's about it; you have to close that window. Increase your stature.

There will be anger and resentment, but you have to channelize your energy to increase your stature so that the other person's stature is automatically reduced.

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