

In Focus: The Rise of the Corporate Talent

Are people's fates already pre-written? Or is it all about the powers of the unknown? It is perhaps the forces of karma that defines one's future path. It can be hard to reconcile when...

..... You are the eldest female from a traditional ethnic family

..... You are the eldest child who has no choice but to assume the role of a father figure to two younger siblings.

You choose to defy the odds, stuff the critics and define your destiny. That is what precisely international corporate investment banker Bijna Dasani is doing.

Bijna, who radiates elegance with her glaring brown eyes and distinct facial features, can grab anyone's attention by her gentle but assertive manner. Her slim figure further exudes her Indian identity with an elegant Indian outfit that flows comfortably on her.

But don't be fooled. The soft Indian female image can quickly morph into a hard-hitting, jet-setting businesswoman who can stand tall in the Board Room and make multi-million-pound deals. The swirl of the colourful shalwar converts into a city slickers business suit dallying through the powerhouse of London's finance district and the Big Apple's Wall Street. This is not the tittle-tattle of the high life corporate culture. Bijna has been described by Management Today as one of the top 35, under 35s influential businesswomen in the UK and by the local press, The Leicester Mercury as a banker who proves herself as a 'real asset.'

Her success is attracting lots of publicity, friends-in-waiting and even more questions in the chatrooms about who the Indian woman is behind the corporate veil making inroads into the challenging world of business.

Bijna is an enigma. She looks mysterious, and her life experiences lead to more mysteries. She has turned her disadvantaged background into a set of tools for success. Having to be a support arm to her family, she worked during daylight and burnt the midnight oil to get through university for her Business Studies degree.

She lived at home in Leicester to maintain proximity to and ensure her family's wellbeing, significantly to help nurture her brothers' futures. Many of her own negative experiences and obstacles have helped turn the milestones for her own personal challenges to build her future career. If you are committed... domestic responsibilities (cooking, cleaning and caring) can contribute to creating a job; you just have to figure it all out, Bijna stresses.

De Montfort University, where she studied for her undergraduate degree, has found a gem for their promos. Better known for its arts and humanities subjects, the university can boast on par with the Oxbridge and Ivy leagues of finance when it comes to their star student; who has been their Alumni Ambassador for almost a decade and is creating partnerships between their business school and the world of investment banking.

At University, Bijna was already making her mark. Her talent was being acknowledged through awards in entrepreneurship and innovation. She is one of only five students selected from the whole of Europe to speak at the Business Week's annual European Leadership Forum.

It is one thing to gain a degree but another challenge to rise on the career ladder. She had to pass eight interviews, three exams and a comprehensive application process to succeed. But with her story,

it is not surprising that she persuaded Goldman Sachs to take her on their Graduate Programme, which attracted more than 6,000 global applicants for 60 places.

"Just think, there is the Ivy League, and there is Bijna from De Montfort University," she explained with pride.

Bijna left Goldman Sachs for Deutsche Bank, where she became an Associate for a period. She then took a detour to State Street Global Advisors, where she felt she had the best manager and a mentor who would guide her before being head-hunted back to Deutsche Bank as Vice President, aged 26. It had become a decade to remember and very different from the decades before.

Bijna has been jetsetting the world. Trips from Deutsche Bank UK HQ on London Wall to Wall Street are routine and a far cry from the difficult journeys from home and school during dark winters nights. Not bad for someone fighting the odds continually on life's conveyor belt.

But while the career may have had uplifted her life, there is no getting away from the life lessons which disguise the blows of her struggles.

Nevertheless, Bijna is currently in a very positive place now. Her mother is proud of Bijna's accomplishments and even more proud of the strong family bond.

Bijna acknowledges that her faith has guided her. It has helped her deal with the conflict through the years and has helped her find peace within herself. A devout Hindu, Bijna sees her faith as the spiritual foundation to her overall wellbeing.

After University, she had partnered with the Founder of the City Hindus Network, which acts as a linking point for many career-minded Hindus, to network and host events for like-minded people. She thanks Lord Shiva for helping to turn her life around and for the challenges she views as learning curves that taught her the value of empathy, compassion and integrity.

"We all need a strong sense of identity. Mine comes from my faith in being a Hindu. It has guided me in my darkest hours," explains Bijna. "Now, when there is light too in my life, I will not forget my Shiva, she adds with a hint of tears in her eyes.

Her faith has given her strength throughout her life. During the economic crisis and banking collapse in 2008, she still focused on her fundamental values. People started perceiving the industry as untrustworthy. You have to rise above it and evidence with compassion that there is a real person with emotion, feelings, and pain for the people behind any crisis. "It is my faith that keeps me honest, hard-working and true to family values," she stresses.

She wants to continue making the best use of her talent, networks, and profile to help other people see past the notion of the glass ceiling. It can only be done with hard work and dedication. Quitting is not an option and being relentless is a prerequisite. There is always a way, she says forcefully – this is my advice to the youngsters – she has only hit 31 herself.

Success breeds more success. And the Management Today title has helped her to open more doors. She is now on the public circuit of interviews, awards and a brand in herself of a positive role model to women and, in particular, ethnic women. She has been nominated for several awards in her life, including the prestigious Asian Women of the Year Award. The Awards founder Pinki Lalani has been working for years to highlight the success of Asian women. There are many more Pinki's and Bijnas needed in the world. Much of Bijna's recognition has been linked to equality, diversity, and positive role models. However, the newfound fame is directly related to the mainstream career ladder, which shows that anyone can succeed.

It. Mentoring young people has now become a vocation for Bijna, especially with the help of her employers, whom she describes as benevolent to her constant flow of ideas. Encompassing diversity and equality are very close to her heart. She is actively involved in Deutsche Bank's corporate social responsibility, linking the company with diversity and citizenship projects. This includes working with De Montfort University in opening doors through mentoring for a new generation of graduates. She considers herself a social impact Innovator and is working on a global citizenship conference hosted by the University in 2016.

Bijna has worked with charitable causes linked to health, education, and social inclusion throughout her career. She was previously a non-executive director of the Prince's Trust and mentored several other organisations.

More importantly for her, like a father figure, she is determined to make sure that her brothers work hard and do well in their chosen fields. "I can perhaps guide them and help open doors, but they have to put in the effort and commitment to earn the success. It is not easy, but they have seen that a balance of working hard and working smart can change lives," she explained.

There is so much to do, she sighs. And it is sometimes a challenge to fit in daily. She works long hours, even when on holiday.

Bijna has achieved a great deal in a short space of time. Her mind is constantly craving for the next challenge. Let's see where it leads to. Wherever it may be, let's hope it is the success that she can share with her family, true friends, and soulmate in waiting.