

A New Passage to India: Breaking Barriers- One Woman at a Time

Host Intro:

In our continuing series *A New Passage to India*, we look at issues, emergent and existing, through conversations and through the experiences of women involved in them. Some of these women have been instrumental in bringing about socio-cultural and legal changes in India, and have broken through male bastions such as the police service and the judiciary to rise to the top. Some are activists and others are victims of sexual or domestic abuse now uniting on a common platform. And the young ones, they are watching, following in the wake of these change makers of India. These women have fought terrorism, tyranny and a closed cultural mindset against women's education and advancement. These are women rising.

For this story *Breaking Barriers: One Woman at a Time*, Charu Saxena begins the journey by paying a visit to Dr. Kiran Bedi, India's top woman law enforcement officer in New Delhi. Dr. Bedi is one of the most admired role models for women in India today, and her reforms have earned her many National and International Awards. Her NGO's run a prison crèche, provide family counseling, literacy and vocational training services for women and connect them to micro-credit institutions, run a drug treatment and de-addiction facility as well as gully schools for children in slum areas. Apart from being an Asian Women's Tennis champion, Bedi has served in various capacities during her career as well. She has been United Nations civilian Police advisor, and part of the peace keeping force in Liberia, and has fought terrorism in her own country. She is best known, however, for reforming the Tihar jail in Delhi, the largest maximum security prison in Asia, for which she won the *Raman Magsaysay*.

Saxena:

The courtyard of the white government bungalow that adjoins one of the larger parks of New Delhi is filled with birdsong and little kids belonging to the staff, zipping back and forth on their bicycles. Dr. Bedi's visiting room when I enter is filled with trophies, awards and honorary plaques. But what really fills the room with energy is her charged presence. The first woman to enter the elite Police Services Wing of the Union Public Services Commission, she firmly credits her parents and her co-educational sports background for her achievements.

Bedi:

I am a hundred percent product of the mindset of my mother and father. Imagine girls not even having 25 percent support in the family, mine was 200 percent. But my parents defied the grandparents. My grandparents were feudal and conservative in their outlook, so if it was left to them, we wouldn't be where we are.

Sky was the limit. So, at the age of 16, I won the national championship in girls, 22, I won the Asian tennis title, 22 I joined the Indian Police Service. For me, I had reached the top- as far as a girl was concerned.

Saxena:

When asked why she chose such a male bastion as the Police Service, Dr. Bedi counters that she had already broken through those bastions as a young girl playing tennis.

Bedi:

For me, nothing mattered, male or female- Playing amongst the boys, the biggest glass ceiling is broken. If you want to break barriers, make girls play with boys and sensitize boys to play with girls. That's the best sensitivity you can give. We go for gender sensitization programs later on in life. It begins with the co-ed education, but it isn't to fall in love, but to play together; To compete with each other on equal terms.

I never let any push down happen. If someone dared push me down, I held them by the scruff- who are you to tell me this? And competitive tennis was really a ground for training. I could take on so much of stress- I could take on so much of envy. I could take a bad call. I could take a defeat. Savor a victory, and get ready for tomorrow again. Do it all over again. So, I was in a fit mental state of mind, physical state of mind, to always start all over again. Never to take a bad call unsaid.

So what happened with me was- it wasn't overconfidence- but tremendous self-confidence of who I am, what I want to be, and what I want to do with my life. And what am I working hard for? What have my parents brought me up for? What is this education for? And what did I achieve all this for- is finally in the end, to work for my country.

Saxena:

Dr. Bedi has now worked for thirty five years in the Indian Police Force, and during this time she has handled many different kinds of postings. From fighting terrorism on India's North Eastern frontier to being part of the Indian Peace Keeping force in Liberia to the Inspector General of the largest, most notorious and corrupt prison in India, the Tihar, for which she won international acclaim. She says that the difference between what she did at Tihar and what happens in American Prisons is Reform.

Bedi:

I visited American prisons, and what I have really noted is that the American prison system is afraid of its own prisoners. Fear, and therefore their major priority is security. Every time you're spending higher and higher on security, whether it's electronic security, or physical security or architectural security- so it's security, with the result that by the time he comes out, he's coming out of a cage- and his animal instincts are heightened, and he's a bigger threat to society.

Indian prison system, when it changed, during my time, was not based on fear. It was based on: Give them trust, don't lower your guard, security is the priority, but reform is the biggest priority. We still had the towers. But we didn't tell them that the towers are watching you, or that I'm afraid of you and my guard is looking at you. I never worked in uniform. And when I was visiting American prisons, believe me, I looked around for mission statements outside the buildings. Not a single mission statement said, we're here

to reform. All said: Heightened security. Whereas at our time, during that time, we had called it Tihar Ashram.

Saxena:

However, as soon as Bedi won the *Raman Magsaysay* for her reforms at the jail, with two years left to her stint, her superiors removed her, to a posting in which she says, she was given nothing to do, no responsibilities.

Bedi:

They let me go because it was too envious- Just to build so much envy and insecurity that in two years she got a Raman Magsasay, in three years she may not be vying for a Nobel. This is the terrible agony of this country that the moment somebody starts contributing to even raise the status, they say, finish the individual. There is sometimes in our culture- that inhibits- that's why I was hunted out of the prison. You're never sent out of a prison posting. You ask for release.

Saxena:

Bedi took leave and used that time to earn a doctorate. She says that over the years what police has lost out on is sensitive and courageous leadership from within its own ranks, because the politician would move him or her instantly. The cancerous combination of Political use, political abuse, and corruption has seeped in. She readily admits that politics is above the law in India.

Bedi:

It's only getting caught red-handed bits and pieces. By and large, its above the law, with the result that since politics as a profession became above the law, they took along with them those they wanted to use, and they also became above the law. How do you take them along? By these patronages: promotions, transfers and postings. These three key things, and saving them when they do something illegal, and protecting them wrongly. Wrong protection, wrong promotion, wrong posting. And today you don't know where to begin to correct the service. But even whenever we did begin, whoever began started with himself: by showing courage, by showing neutrality, and by giving integrity. These three things brought in those islands of changes wherever you saw them

Saxena:

Dr. Bedi has survived the cancer, she says, by staying focused entirely on her task. When she was posted to combat the insurgency in the North Easternmost state of Mizoram, incidentally the only state bombed by its own country, she along with her Mizo boss developed a strategy that was economic and developmental in which policing played a role.

Bedi:

I was always forging developmental strategies though that was not my role as a Police officer. But say, if you don't have a road, if you don't have work, if you don't have schools, if you don't have economic development- what will my security do?

*So, in two years time, by the time I was leaving that state, they had signed a peace agreement with the government, because we had an edge over them, not by killing them, but by gradually integrating them. Humanizing them, but also having the edge of fire-power. If security is good quality, terrorism becomes more difficult. But if security has gaps and vacuums, then terrorism can thrive- will make its inroads, and achieve its limited goals. The message never was that we are all out to murder and kill for rewards, but we are here to do our duty with integrity.
I think terrorists also understand the way we fight- Why we fight.*

Saxena:

Dr. Bedi was United Nations Civilian Police Advisor also at the time of Iraq. She says if there was a police mission in Iraq, she would have stepped in as at the time of Liberia when United Nations Peace Keeping force went there after Charles Taylor left the country burning. It should be the United Nations, she insists, not America who should be in Iraq.

Bedi:

Look at Liberia- it goes to the credit of the United Nations. We went when Liberia was burning- I was part of that whole mission plan. Liberia today is a safe democratic country with a woman as head of the state. And we trained Liberian force. It's a neutral force. It's a gender sensitive force. We created them. Trained them. Whenever it's an international community that trains a police force, that force becomes neutral.

Saxena:

Iraq was a tremendous mis-assessment, she says. One of the greatest, for which the United Nations will always be held responsible for failure to have acted and let the United States have a free hand in that country. The costs to the world are tremendous.

Bedi:

And all of us are paying for it. Sinking in the cost of security which has gone up. Huge security bills, because of Iraq. It's such a Frankenstein monster- Monsters- how do you bring them back into the bottle? I think that's one act of history which would never ever be forgiven, when our children sit down and analyze history.

Saxena:

And history is what Kiran Bedi herself, is creating. Even as she gets controversially sidelined for the top job in the country, and hands in voluntary resignation two days after this conversation, she stands staunchly by the force, calling it one of the finest services in the country, even though it is politically inclined. But Bedi is not one to lament or waste time. She now plans to give her full attention to her NGOs, and to writing and teaching at the universities. Because she believes that only a woman can change this country, a woman who doesn't act like a man. And she wants every woman to believe it as well.

Bedi:

Let no woman in this country think herself less than anybody else. On the contrary she probably has greater energy within, if she understands it. She can change the face of this

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country provided she believes in herself. Today, if there can be a remarkable powerful change agent for this country, towards larger justice, it has to be the woman. Because she is a victim. So she has to stop being a victim and start becoming energy herself to say- I will lead my life in a manner which is not victimized. So I want this kind of a movement to start in this country where a woman says: I'm blessed that I'm a woman.

Saxena:

Bedi has started this movement already through her foundations as they conduct programs within rural and urban slum settlements for children's literacy and rural women's empowerment. These women who are emerging from behind the doors of traditional conservative India, say that Madam Kiran Bedi has shown them the light.

I'm Charu Saxena from New Delhi, India.