

Heiress of Water

The perfect combination of brains and beauty, this young entrepreneur has proven to the world that degrees and diplomas come secondary to passion, and will. Jayanti Chauhan unveils the secrets behind her success, her relationship with her father, and her fashionista-driven plans for Bisleri.

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“As my father says, the only competition we have is our own incompetence. So if you’re the leader, you set the trends...”

The petite, vivacious, Valentino-shod 20-something could be mistaken for yet another immaculately attired denizen of fashion weeks around the world. In reality, the School of African and Oriental Studies, London-educated Jayanti Chauhan wears her laurels lightly as the sole inheritor to her father Ramesh Chauhan’s multithousand crore Bisleri empire. Although never officially groomed for her future role at the helm of the bottled water empire at Bisleri International Pvt Ltd (“My father let me run wild, and told me it’s totally up to you,” says Chauhan), her sights were set on a career in fashion. So she picked up qualifications from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandizing, Los Angeles, the Institute Marangoni, Milan, and the London College of Fashion, doing short courses in design, styling, makeup, and even fashion photography, before moving to Dubai to work in fashion.

“Then the economic crisis happened around 2008, and I moved back to India,” says Chauhan. She didn’t have a job, so she started visiting her father’s New Delhi factory (they have 11 all over India), and recalls her first 2-3 weeks there as rather “daunting”. “I would go to the director’s cabin and just chit-chat with him,” she says. She slowly got interested in production – “These big machines, they do so much; I thought it was cool how from a small plastic thing an actual product came out.” After hiring new people, and streamlining the management in the Delhi factories, she moved to Mumbai. The fact that she has no business management degree to back her, has worked in her favour, feels Chauhan.

“That’s what my dad likes about me,” she admits. “He says I have no preconceived idea of how something ought to be done. ‘You are raw, and we can mould you any way you want,’ he told me.” She’s been quoted in the press as describing her father’s managerial style and hers, as the indomitable duo of Batman and Robin. “Sure, there is a big generation gap, but now that we’ve worked together for a while, we’re in sync with each other,” says Chauhan. “Maybe I’ve become older, and he’s gotten younger!” She describes her father as more laid-back, whereas she’s impatient. “If I want something, I want it done yesterday!” Chauhan follows an open-door policy at work: “Anyone can walk into my office. Most times, you’ll find me loafing around the factory downstairs, and going to the shipping area, going to where we get our recycling done, and asking

people for suggestions,” she says, as someone who loves to get information at the grassroots level, to know the real story. Though her father’s approachable, she says employees get intimidated by him, since he’s such a legend. “People are comfortable with me because I don’t have that kind of label on me right now,” she says. And it’s precisely this fresh-faced approach that has worked in her favour, as she’s gone on to introduce changes – in the label’s design, a new advertising campaign, and even a massive ‘fan’ following on Facebook, as the head of her company’s sales and marketing teams. Bisleri’s most recent ad campaign, done by ad agency Soho Square, whom Chauhan describes as “brilliant” is funny, youth-oriented, and has catch phrases like ‘Shabaash’. She says her company had a World Shabaash day on Twitter earlier in the year, which became a trending topic nationally. “We’ve never been on social media and always stuck to the more traditional ways of marketing, so that is another change. Now we’ve got a Facebook fan page, thanks to digital ad agency Flying Cursor, and have 1.5 lakh fans.”

Chauhan was also instrumental in tying up her company’s premium water brand, Vedica, a natural mountain spring water launched last year, with her first love, fashion. Vedica has been associated with Delhi Couture Week, and the Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week at Pragati Maidan, as water sponsor. She says she wants to build Vedica as a fashionable brand, just as Evian and San Pellegrino have done abroad. “They’re looked upon as stylish to walk around with. It’s just a bottle of water, but it’s the statement you’re making. We want to do that with Vedica,” she says. Taste-wise, she finds Vedica less chalky than an Evian or a Himalaya, as it’s got lesser calcium, but a higher pH value, which is important for the body – it keeps it alkaline.

Asked about any direct competition to the main brand, Bisleri, Chauhan is quick to reply: “Qua and Himalaya are both `40 a litre, whereas Bisleri is `15 a litre, so it’s not the same product,” she says. As my father says, the only competition we have is our own incompetence. So if you’re the leader, you set the trends.” For Vedica, the plan is to go international, while for Bisleri, 100 per cent market share is what Chauhan would like to see her company capture. A pretty ambitious statement for a young young lady, who, by is, her own admission a “global nomad” when she’s not working. “Every three months I itch to travel. Italy, by far, is my favourite country. It’s mindblowing – the people, the wine, the food.” She’s also travelled through Turkey on her own, without knowing anyone there. “Turkish people are wonderful. The moment they looked at me, they said, ‘Hindustan! Namaste!’ I felt safe just travelling by myself,” she says. She cites the Hermitage in Monaco and Blake’s in London as her favourite hotels.

The trendy Chauhan, who has a fondness for Armani jackets, Pucci dresses, Giuseppe Zanotti shoes, and Indianwear by Muzaffar Ali and Kavita Bhartia, keeps trim by working out on the treadmill, combined with weight training and boxing. “I’ve been a diabetic since I was nine, so that has taught me what good food is and what is junk,” she admits. She’s also been playing tennis for a decade, and even now, hits the court with her father. She’s proud of the recently published coffee-table book written by Patricia Sethi on her father, Thunder Unbottled, on his 50 years as the head of Parle. “You can’t look at the past and have regrets. For my father, it was an emotional time, but once you’ve reached a peak, you say why not.”

Though she’s not happy with the way the brands (Limca, Thums Up) are being handled today (“they don’t understand India’s mentality”), she says her company’s got plans for a slew of new products she can’t disclose. And on being an heiress, “It’s a huge responsibility – my loyalty obviously lies with the brand, and to my heritage, and also to my employees, I don’t want to let them down. I also want to be a good leader to them, and be fair in my judgements.