

#LS EDITOR'S NOTE

In conversation with Indian Supermodel Nayanika Chatterjee

She has been under the limelight, on the ramps, and in the media as an Indian supermodel for some 30 odd years. Nayanika Chatterjee is the ideal person to talk to about the changes our society has gone through in regards to portraying women in mass media.

The road to progress has not been an easy one, from objectifying women to acknowledging them for who she is, is a long journey. The obstacle-laid path has not been trouble-free, nor will it ever be undemanding but surely and steadily the road has been walked by women from all strata of the society and a lot of progress has been made. It does not end here.

"If your families do not mind your going beyond the kitchen and support your choice, then the situation automatically changes in favour of you and for the betterment of your future. Because it is from your family that you draw the confidence and education, the strength and willpower to go and pursue your dreams and to have the ability to face the obstacles you meet in pursuing dreams. Otherwise, your fight would become ten times fierce," says Nayanika Chatterjee.

"Treat knowledge intelligently," she said, while explaining what is more important to her as a feminist.

As you aware that wearing a swimsuit to a mall or a mini skirt to a bazaar is inappropriate; similarly, you must be aware that the taxi driver, the bus helper or rickshaw puller is not educated enough to rise to your level of intelligence and not be bothered about how you are dressed, and not see you as an object of desire.

To make them understand to not regard a woman as a thing to exploit, to respect her for who she is, is acquired through learning and education.

Parents of both girls and boys must train their wards of cultural etiquette, social manners, and educate them from early on. This socio-cultural education begins at home from a tender age.

Heinous crimes like rape, molestation, violence against women, domestic violence or even 'eve teasing' — none of these situations are in isolation, the underlying issue here is lack of education and proper knowledge in respecting or regarding women and it starts from home; where you see your fathers disrespecting your mother or your sisters living a second-hand life.

"I am a feminist and I just want to be allowed to do what I want to do; and I always want to be the best version of myself. I must use my senses to make sure I am not in any peril. This of course comes from my parenting and education," she says.



"When technology is in the hands of the not-so-educated people, they will use it wrongly, even for children, we have net nannies and when adolescents from not so literate strata get to see and download whatever they want, the situation goes out of hands. They must know how to use it well, where to use it; their unsupervised usage gives birth to wrongdoings at various levels.

"It is your right to wear everything but you will have to choose correctly. This is where I believe from my experience that you have to use your knowledge intelligently. You cannot change their upbringing, but you can use your mind. I am all for women's liberation, but I strongly suggest that you do not put yourself in

peril. What is more important — to wear a short skirt and be ragged on, or to be regarded as a strong voice?" asks Chatterjee.

"I think feminism, for me, is you can work with freedom and live to make the right choices. Clothes are a small part in this fight for freedom to-be, we need to weigh what is really important. I want to be heard and not be put off because of my gender. There are injustices at various levels," Chatterjee added very passionately.

It's easier to fight a battle when you have not done anything wrong. If you are a professional and strong-willed regarding what you stand for, you are bound to be heard.

"In my professional life, I was always aware of shutting up loose comments, I put

up a no-nonsense attitude so that people do not get or give you the wrong signals. Ours is a tough world, you have to be mentally strong to survive in it. Because you are constantly judged; too thin, too dark, too short, bad hair, not good posture — you have to accept these judgements. It is indeed a difficult line to cross and maintain sanity.

"Everyone has a story and my story initially affected me a lot. I had to fight society's prejudice about my skin tone and hair and later, it actually gave me the strength to rise from that situation and I am glad it happened. My training and grooming helped me rise above my turmoil. I made a place and a name for myself in big shows, I made a place for myself by being myself. I cannot look like others so I am my best version," explains an inspiring Chatterjee.

She tries to incorporate this value into her daughter as well, who is also a model. Chatterjee maintains a friendly relation with her daughter and tries to give her a stable home and a secured life because home is where she can truly express herself and face her fears and work on them.

"We are the post-independence generation, when we were all evolving along with the society, we have not seen or gotten things easily on a platter like our children do today. We understood poverty, understood the reality of dying of starvation, we had to share a bedroom with our siblings. Internet was not there.

"But now, you have to work towards being close to our families, children do not know the family value system. It was different for us and this generation is spoiled for choices, which has made things terrible. I have seen this with every generation of models I worked with. I have seen how the values, morale, ethics change with every generation," said Nayanika Chatterjee.

"My tips to my students are to maintain discipline both on and off the show, I don't enjoy modelling so much now, for which I teach. For me, my work was a good experience I would like to cherish. My daughter and me, we have been on the ramps together and separately for couple of times and I more tensed for her," she says laughingly.

It is doubly exciting to hear a supermodel talk about women's issue and societal values; it only makes us believe that women under the limelight and on the screen are as real as the one walking down the street. We fight the same war.

Nayanika Chatterjee was in town to choreograph a fashion show for House of Ahmed along with our own supermodel Bibi Russell.

— RBR

**Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel
Model: Nayanika Chatterjee**