



# MILLION-DOLLAR ANGELS

*Her husband, the famous Ronnie Screwvala, and she, Zarina, started the TV revolution in India, back in 1990, with their company UTV. Their investment of ₹37,500 grew to over a billion dollars by 2011, to merit Walt Disney buying out a huge stake in UTV Software for a phenomenal sum. Zarina, the wind beneath Ronnie's wings, tells us how easy it was to give up everything, about her NGO Swades, what empowerment stands for her, and how money is a means and not an end.*

BY ASMITA AGGARWAL

159

**How easy or tough was it to give up UTV, the company that Ronnie and you created and took to such great heights? And to leave it all to do social work?**

UTV was our baby, which we built over 27 years of hard work. We built a fabulous team of people, we created India's first independent production, its first daily soap—*Shanti*, its first game show—*Saapseedi*, its first local kids channel—*Hungama*, and its first home-grown youth channel—*Bindass*. It was exhilarating and lots of fun! I felt I had reached a point where my team was seriously better than me. I am proud to say that after we left, they have been working, creating and leading UTV as beautifully as they did while I was there.

By the time we left, I had joined a wonderful philosophy class called New Acropolis. I had read a quote by Lao Tzu, which had a serious impact on me: "When you let go of who you are, you become what you might be." I knew it was meant for me, and it was pretty much then and there that I decided I needed to do something new, to challenge myself afresh, to get out of my comfort zone. I don't feel I have left anything, I feel I have gained everything!

**You spent so many years in TV, making shows and, finally, the company sold a stake to Walt Disney.... Do you sometime miss the everyday challenges, deadlines and struggle?**

I can't say I miss anything. It was wonderful and I loved it, and now, I'm loving Swades Foundation. There is really nothing more fulfilling than what I do now and I feel blessed that I can do it. I also meet up with my UTV gang often and share a Whatsapp group, through which we are in touch almost every day.

**What has been your biggest challenge, till date?**

My biggest challenge is always working with mindsets, which, to me, is a critical success factor for anything and everything you do. I would rather hire a person with less expertise and the right mindset than the other way around. People laugh at me when I say that people with a huge smile

make the best people to work with... I have seriously hired some people based on their smiles, in the very, very early days of UTV, when no one knew anything, anyway. So all we hired on was attitude! Passionate, high-energy, positive people are the ones I look for—they are the ones who know they can, all you need to do is encourage them to fly! I believe, if you think you can, you can do almost anything (even fly, maybe!).

**How has your earlier experience helped in what you do now?**

I find the crucial factors in the social sector and in the media world are amazingly similar. The key lies in knowing your audience, your customer. At Swades, we believe our community is our partner and we work with them, to help them help themselves. The point is, unless you truly know your customer and consumer, you will never succeed. I will go a step further and say, know, respect and love your customer... that will help you gain the most important thing your customer can give you... their trust!

We want Swades to be a world class organisation, run like the best of corporates, with creativity, joy, accountability, quality and transparency, just like we did at UTV. Like UTV, we believe, the work we do at Swades is very innovative, and we feel the 360 model is the key to that—impossibly hard though it is!

**Tell us more about the Swades Foundation, where you are reaching out to 2,000 villages, to make them self-sufficient.**

At the Swades Foundation, we have a dream to empower one million rural Indians every five years, creating a permanent, irreversible change for good. Today, 240 full-time staff members and 1,500 village-level community volunteers are working towards this dream. We had been working, as Share—Society to Heal Aid Restore Educate—in a small way, to empower rural India, for more than ten years. But Ronnie and I wanted to devote not just our money, but also our time, to the endeavour. We believed the

360-degree approach was the only way to truly succeed in removing poverty. We work not only on infrastructure but also on training at the community level, in an attempt to create a model of development that is sustainable and replicable at scale, for transformational change. We believe in creating village-level leadership, inculcating pride and a 'can do' attitude amongst our communities.

As Share, we had provided 39,000 people with drinking water, over a 10-year period. But in the last two years, Swades has touched the lives of 4,71,000 people, with over 60 programmes being rolled



out across five verticals—community mobilisation, water and sanitation, agriculture and livelihood, education, health and nutrition.

**What does empowerment mean to you?**

The first thing we did when we decided to ramp up Swades and create a company that stood for something, was to ask certain fundamental questions. The first was, what is poverty? We asked lots and lots of people and were not very satisfied. Today, we have this for you: To us, poverty is the lack of power to choose your own life and to fulfill the dreams you have for those you love. It is a loss of control over your life; it is both mental as well as material.

Empowerment is to create joyful, positive-thinking people with a can do attitude. And we have so many examples in front of us. For instance, Vidya Vinayak Kule, who was widowed at a young age, but is now a health crusader and an icon of the Swades SwaRaksha Mitra (SRM). On completing the Swades Foundation's SRM programme, Vidya

learnt of the number of TB deaths in her village, and became an Anti-TB crusader. She identified Gulab Ghag, who had recently lost her husband to TB, and re-initiated a referral. Gulab was found to be seriously ill but, today, thanks to Vidya, she is well on her way to recovery. Vidya was indeed, a lifesaver for Gulab. That's the kind of empowerment we are talking of!

**You're an avid reader. Which books have stayed with you?**

Reading is one of my great passions in life! I have an enormous library and I carry my kindle everywhere. My favourites are *The Lord of the Rings* by JRR Tolkien, where good triumphs over evil and where a small ordinary person saves the world, when the great and mighty have failed. *The Wooden Book Series* on mathematics is another favourite—*Sacred Numbers*, *Sacred Geometry*... I love numbers, they hold more meaning and magic than most of us can dream of! Besides these, I love *Asterix* comics, and I read them whenever I'm stressed... they always are a joyful experience!

**Who did you look up to, while growing up, and why?**

My idols are those closest to me. My parents, who taught me never to lie, by never lying themselves... Honestly, I cannot remember a single time my parents lied. It's truly amazing when you reflect on it. My parents are still energetic, at 95 and 83, respectively, and my mum still takes orders for her amazing strawberry macaron torte. Bless them both!

My husband Ronnie taught me how to dream and to never let fear hold me down. And his daughter, Trishya, has taught me to follow my dreams. My brother is the most positive person I know—no matter what, he is always smiling, kind and happy. My best friend, who is unwell, reminds me to make each day count. My dog, Sprite, has taught me unconditional love, with no demands at all (other than playing ball with him, occasionally!). Vipassana and my philosophy class, New Acropolis, have given me knowledge and ways to live a better life, and I am deeply grateful to them all. ■