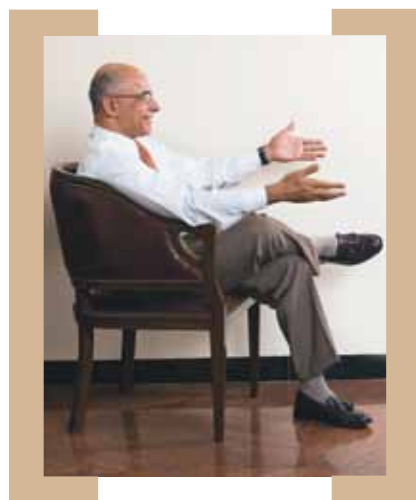


# KIRAN MAZUMDAR SHAW

This bio-tech entrepreneur learnt the importance of self-reliance and personal re-invention at an early age. That philosophy has held her in good stead through her life



ZEN GARDEN

## SUBROTO BAGCHI

Co-founder & Gardener,  
MindTree Ltd., best-selling author

### FORBES INDIA BRIEF

Every fortnight, exchange tales of the road with successful entrepreneurs

“It is about bottoming out, Subroto. Every time I had the feeling that I was at the bottom, I have risen to fulfil a larger design. I remember the first time I felt that way. I was a little girl in school. I knew that my father was a ‘brewer.’ I knew somewhere deep down that my father worked for the liquor industry. It brought me deep embarrassment. I felt he belonged to a tainted profession. One day, I spoke to him about my sense of shame. He looked me in the eyes and told me that brewing was a science; it was not about getting drunk. He did not stop there. He said: ‘Do not make judgment on things, people, and issues with half information.’ He said there is truth in everything you see around. So, look for everything in its entirety. That was a game-changing moment for me. I started growing out of the low I felt. It may have been a juvenile moment but it became basic to my life’s philosophy.”

Kiran Mazumdar Shaw is Chairman and Managing Director of Biocon but, more importantly, she is India’s bio-tech queen. I am sitting in her tastefully appointed office, which reflects reasoned self-confidence, genetic engineering and works from painter and sculptor Yusuf Arakkal in equal doses.

“And was that how you turned to brewing, Kiran?” I ask.

“No. I did not feel that I would ever cross over to his profession. I wanted to study medicine. So, it was medicine I focussed on. But that was not going to hap-

pen. I was a little short of the qualifying marks for a ‘merit seat’ in the medical colleges. So, I went back to my father, I asked him to pay the capitation fees. He said, no. ‘Kiran,’ he said, ‘you must learn about meritocracy.’ I threw a fit.”

I have been transported to another time. I am witness to a father-daughter face-off over a resolute man’s unwillingness to give his only daughter that wee bit of a lift so she can pursue her dream. It is a study in leadership. And I want to know what happens next.

“‘If I were a son,’ I told him, ‘you would cough up the fees.’

“He would not react to my accusation.

“‘Do not save for my wedding,’ I said. ‘Give me the money.’

“He remained steadfast.

“His *no* was *no*.

“I felt I was at the bottom of the pit. I went to study zoology. At college, I stayed ahead of the other students. I got my confidence back. After graduating, I could get into a Ph.D in genetics in London University or continue with zoology but I wanted to study something that had an industrial application. So I said, why not brewing? It was the beginning a long process of self-discovery. That is how I went off to Australia to study. Once there, I started absorbing knowledge ahead of others. I got the respect of my colleagues in an all-male programme in Australia and, after learning about brewing, I returned home and started applying for jobs.

“Nothing. No jobs, not for a woman, in

brewing. Some were sympathetic but they would rather see me in a function like quality. Not brewing, no.

“I felt let down. It seemed to me that the success at Australia was just a veneer. Below it, the bottom was meant to fall. That was the reality.

“It is then that Biocon happened. A chance meeting with an Irish gentleman led to the beginning in a garage with all of Rs. 10,000. I told myself, I have nothing

to lose this time and chugged along making enzymes. We did well. For sometime it was just that. My largest customer, Unilever, asked me to stay focused on that. But I said, I must do something more, I was not going to be content making enzymes all my life. And that is how we went in to pharmaceuticals. We did well there. Then many other avenues opened up in research, in drug discovery, and in all this, I was listening to the little drummer in me

who kept saying break free, become large, build something memorable.”

“Why memorability?” I ask her.

“Subroto, you and I grew up being apologetic about India. Whenever thinking people in my generation had a conversation with an outsider, we were apologetic. About this and that and everything. It was a feeling of shame in some sense. The same kind of shame I felt at school about what people thought of my father’s profession. So, I felt a strong urge in me to create something that would be a piece of the new India. I did not want the next generation to feel apologetic.”

“Kiran,” I ask, “tell me about yourself now. Who is Kiran Mazumdar Shaw?”

“I am a people person. I inspire confidence. I have respect for other people. I have honesty of purpose. I am a very good friend. I care deeply about friends. Sometimes people form opinion of others with partial information. They see them as good and bad, heroes and villains. Likeable and otherwise. Through my father, I have learnt to see issues, things, people and their being in their totality.”

“What about your relationship with John?” I want Kiran to talk about John Shaw, the man she loves, the man she married and who is now sharing her burden of dreams to bring a cancer drug from India one day. The man is himself dealing with a kidney cancer that was, mercifully, diagnosed well in time last year.

“It was devastating; it was such a matter of fact thing, the way the doctors told me. Then of course was the surgery and now he is in remission and we have had all the six-monthly scans clear. But through it all, I learnt so much about psycho-oncology and what a critical role it plays in helping people deal with the killer. It is so acutely absent in therapy in this country. There is such great need for it. That is why I am even more interested in the disease and its prevention. That is why I started a joint venture with [Narayana Hrudayalaya’s] Dr. Devi Shetty in cancer research. I felt bottomed out when John was diagnosed.”

There is a pause. She looks me in the eye. “I think, now, I am rising from it.” ■

## KIRAN MAZUMDAR SHAW

Chairman and Managing Director, Biocon

### PRINCIPLES IN LIFE

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- Listen to the little drummer in you who keeps saying break free, become large, build something memorable.



Malikarjun Katakoti