

A TOAST TO PUNE'S LIFESTYLE

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# REVIEW

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CELEBRATING  
THE SPIRIT OF  
WOMANHOOD

FEEL  
GOLD  
&  
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# NERVES OF STEEL & HEARTS OF GOLD



Two women who need no introduction. They are a force to reckon with in the corporate world and their zealous work in making Thermax a globally recognised, multi-crore company speaks volumes for themselves. Yet, **Anu Aga** and **Meher Pudumjee** defy the usual image of powerful corporate executives through their extraordinarily down-to-earth attitude and extensive social work. More of best friends than mother and daughter, the dynamic duo talks to **Sanika Diwanji** about life, their corporate and philanthropic work and what it takes to break free of stereotypes and to practice what is preached



We have been given half an hour to complete the photo shoot along with the interview. As we set up the equipment at the crisp Thermax office, both Anu Aga and Meher Pundumjee are busy with their respective work on hand. They have given themselves precisely three minutes to get ready before the shoot and at sharp 11:30 am, we are greeted with wide smiles and a very warm welcome by both. All the nervousness I was feeling earlier disappears in a moment as I look into their kind eyes. With an absolutely unassuming air, both instantly make us feel at ease. And after a quick photo shoot, we sit down for the interview. It feels more like a chat as they both candidly answer my questions and talk freely about their lives and thoughts. But the moment I ask about their social work, their faces light up and the half an hour time limit they have is happily ignored as there is so much to talk about!

#### Where did your interest in social work stem from?

**Anu Aga (AA):** By training I'm a social worker as I studied medical and psychiatric social work from the Tata Institute of Social Studies. But destiny took me to the corporate world and I got to be involved in Thermax when the company needed help the most. My son died at the age of 25 in a car accident and he was always very keen that a substantial amount of our personal wealth should go towards social causes. After his death I was looking for a credible NGO to work with and many people suggested that I meet this young lady called Shaheen Mistri who had started an NGO called 'Akanksha'. I went to meet her and we spoke in-depth about her work. I instantly liked what she was doing in the field of education for the underprivileged and we both got along really well. Eventually, after a few years of working together, she also invited me to be a part of the board of directors at 'Akanksha'.

I must say, my daughter has been my greatest supporter in terms of her time and for agreeing to spend money for various causes. She has a good acumen for looking at the financial side and asking the right questions. Sometimes she even has to keep me in check if I am being overly impulsive and want to do things without due diligence. (Laughs) So I think we complement each other really well. And without her support, I don't know how I could have done any of this.

**Meher Pudumjee (MP):** I am not a social worker by training but I have grown up seeing my mum's passion towards it. There are so many moments that have made a strong impression on me and guided me to follow her footsteps. When we were young she brought two little boys begging on the streets to stay with us. My brother and I were shocked of course as we were quite young to understand the big heart it takes to do something like that. But they unfortunately stayed with us only for a week. Twelve years ago, we had about 25 Akanksha kids stay with us over a weekend. So you see, I've seen mum do these things with such love and authenticity, that it was quite infectious.

I remember, as we were growing up, every year my brother and I along with two of our closest friends used to put up a play and invite our parents and a few more people to come and see us. And we would sell tickets for the show along with brownies and lemonade that we used to make. And then we would give all the money that we made out of this to 'Ishaprema-Niketan' or 'Mother Teresa's Home' or such other places that needed help. Seeing our parents working for the underprivileged had implanted the idea of doing our bit for the people in our minds too.

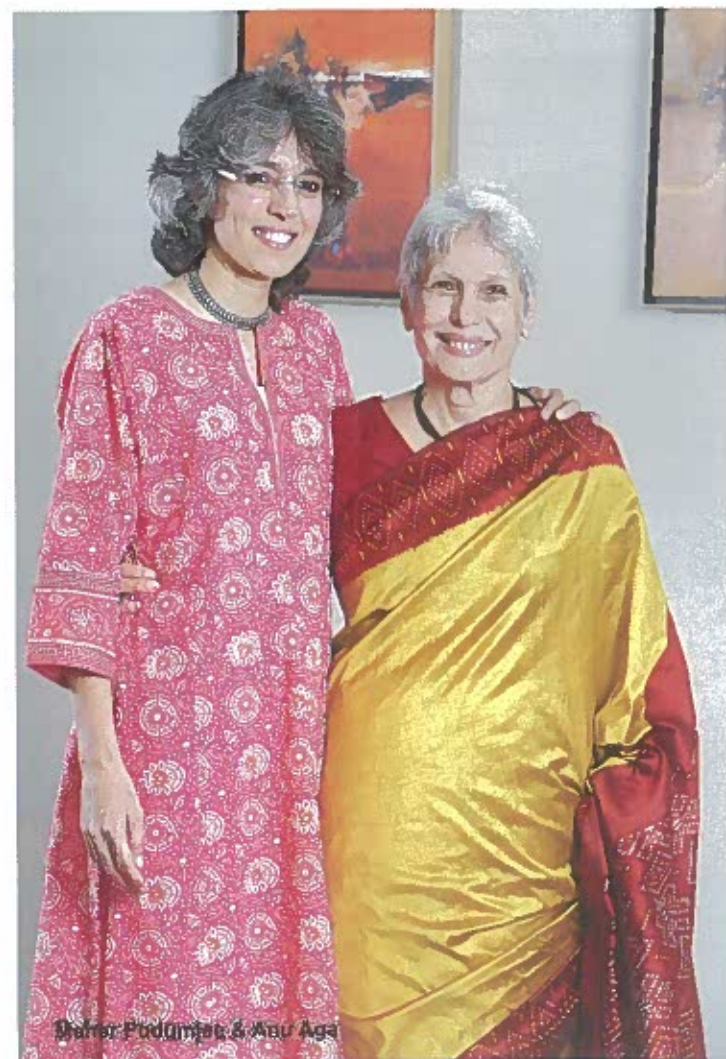
#### (To Meher Pudumjee) Tell us about your love for music, playing the piano and choir singing.

Our house had music (mainly western classical), all the time as I was growing up. Every night I had to have a record playing before I went to sleep. And my favourite piece of music was "The Moldau" by Smetana. I learnt how to play the piano at the age of eight, sang at school, but choir singing came much after it. Now, I look forward to singing with my choir group and the piano has taken a backseat. My music is just my hobby but it is almost like meditation for me. I sing for myself and enjoy it completely. Singing is my getaway to a different place. It's something I do for myself, not for anybody else.

#### Up until now all your social work has largely focussed only on the field of education. Is there a particular reason for that?

**AA:** I think if you are all over the place, you cannot really focus and concentrate on one thing. And we don't believe in only writing cheques and forgetting about it. If I do something, I will get totally involved in it. And one can't get involved in too many things at once. Shaheen Mistri has been an influence to stick to educating children. But I have always regarded education as extremely important in life. Without it one can't get a proper job or get on in life - a person will remain poor.

**MP:** Education allows you opportunity. And it also gives you choices



Meher Pudumjee & Anu Aga



Anu Aga with the children from the Akanksha Foundation

in life. Whether you make something of it is your choice. So I think we are giving every child that we touch a choice regarding what they want to do in life.

And you know, when you say we are in the field of education it is not only up to the tenth class where our schools end. It is about tracking the child till they get a job and come out of poverty.

In India, unfortunately, people become a teacher only when there is no other option left. But a teacher's role is so crucial. They influence a child's life so much! So I think it is not enough to only keep a track till the tenth standard. We have to see that they get on well in life and whether the values taught by their teachers remain intact so that they can become good citizens of the world.

#### (To Anu Aga) You practice Vipassana regularly. Can you tell us about why you started it and how it helps you?

When my husband died and I was asked to become the executive chairperson of Thermax, I felt I was not ready and felt very inadequate. I kept comparing myself to my husband who was very talented and charismatic. He could attract the best of talent; he could speak very well and had grown the company multi-fold. So I felt that the board had selected me only because we held 62% of the company shares and I kept devaluing myself and felt small. I had heard of Vipassana earlier and wanted to experience it. But I was scared whether I would be able to keep quiet for ten days and follow the rigorous routine. My husband even used to joke that he would like to see me keep quiet for ten days and see if that was possible. When he died, I read a lot of books regarding death and healing. But reading is not healing because you use only your head. The real healing has to come from your heart. So I went to attend my first Vipassana programme and found that it was tough but extremely helpful. I've attended four Vipassana sessions till now and I also meditate

daily. Now it has almost become like a prop which I need to get on in life.

#### How do you unwind after an exhausting day and what are your favourite things to do apart from work?

**(AA)** Being with my family and spending time with my grandchildren is topmost priority. Till date, I have been on three long holidays with my grandchildren where it was just the three of us. I love to travel. I was in Goa recently and I learnt Zumba! It was fantastic and even though I was not very good at it, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I really like dancing. I don't do it very often but I like it. And yoga is another part of my life which cannot be missed out on.

And the thing is, because I truly love my work, I never feel that it is a burden or a task to get away from. I'm at my best when I'm at the school and with my people.

**(MP)** I have many ways to unwind. My music, my family, friends and the social work I do. And since I am in a non-executive role in the company now, I don't have to come here and put in eight hours of work daily. So I can do things at my own time and manage to do a lot of other activities which I enjoy doing.

#### (To Anu Aga) How easy or difficult has it been to simultaneously spearhead both Thermax and the various social work projects that you undertook back then? Were there any sacrifices you had to make in your personal life?

No, let me be honest. Earlier I did sporadic social work but I was not focussed in any one area. It was only after my son died and I got associated with Shaheen and 'Akanksha' that I began working in a very systematic and strategic way. Otherwise it was just a little work here and there which was not as satisfying as now. And back then I was so busy with the responsibility of turning around the company which was in loss that I never got any time for focussed social work. Eventually, keeping in mind my son's vision we started our family philanthropy in education and in 2007, we started the Thermax Social Initiative Foundation (TSIF), to give a formal structure to Thermax's CSR activities.

But without my daughter, my son-in-law and my senior executives, social work would never have been possible for me to this extent. I also believe that luck was on our side as I

have seen many people work really hard but still do not succeed. So yes, I was lucky to be blessed with the support I got.

#### (To Meher Pudumjee) Did you always know that you wanted to study in the technical field and join Thermax when you grew up?

Wanting to work in a technical field - yes. I really liked science and it was because of my teacher in school that the love for the subject developed in me. And in science, engineering was the only logical option to take back then. So I did chemical engineering. About joining Thermax, I never overtly said so, but subconsciously the thought was always there with me. I grew up watching the senior executives from Thermax coming over to our house and I used to hear some of the discussions that took place at home or the office. So I think Thermax was always in all of our blood. But my parents never pushed me or my brother into a particular career. In fact they always insisted that we do what we enjoy in life; they knew that we can do our best only if we enjoy our work.

It so happened that I had just finished my studies and was looking for an opportunity to come back to India as I was still dating my husband back then. That's when I joined Thermax as a trainee, along with a hundred other engineer trainees.

#### Tell us about your journey in Thermax from being a trainee to the Chairperson in a span of five years.

I was a trainee for the first year along with a hundred other new recruits wherein we went through a rigorous induction programme. And then, a year later, in 1992, there came an opportunity to go abroad and turn around a loss-making company that Thermax had in the UK. So my husband and I thought it was a great idea and we asked if we could take it up. It worked out and we went there for four years. What was great was that we had with us one of our Directors who headed the Research and Development department, as well as another engineering resource join us from India for a year. He taught us a lot, especially marketing and innovation and together, as a team, we managed to turn around the loss making unit. Four years literally flew past. They were some of the best days of my life - personally as well as professionally. When





you are challenged, thrown in the deep end of the water, you have no choice but to learn to swim. And it's thrilling! My father let us make mistakes and learn from them, he never interfered in our work unnecessarily. We had a meagre salary and had to make do in it, which taught us a lot.

When my dad passed away in 1996, we had to suddenly come back to India and I was put on the Board to support my mother, even before I could think about it. So I went away as a trainee and came back as a board member. It was a difficult transition that took me a while to adjust to.

**What are the forthcoming projects that you are undertaking through the various foundations you lead?**

(AA) We have embarked on a very exciting journey. Through our schools, Teach for India and other foundations, we are impacting the quality of education- but in English medium municipal and private schools. Fortunately, even the Pune commissioner wants to undertake three initiatives that coincide with our vision. First is making digital literacy a common aspect in all schools, second is to promote the 'Swachh Pune' campaign and thirdly, improving the quality of education. So we have undertaken an audacious task to improve the quality of education in every municipal school under the Pune Municipal Corporation. That's over 350 schools. One thing is for sure that this is not something we can do individually. Many people and other organisations will be partnering with us to make it happen.

Also, through our foundation, we have

undertaken an in-service training programme for municipal school teachers. Ideally there should be on the job training, but no such training is provided and hence the teachers are not fully equipped to do the job. We have had two batches of around 70 teachers each and have tried to help them change their attitude, manage the classroom and make learning fun and interesting for children, so that they look forward to attending school. And what a difference it has made in just 18 – 20 days of training imparted in each year.

**Is there any particular incident that left a mark on you while working with the underprivileged children?**

(AA) (With a big smile) Oh there are so many incidents like that. Although I never directly worked with the children in our schools, I have interacted with many of them on various occasions. In 'Akanksha', we used to put up shows done by our children. There was one such show organised at Bombay which we had brought to Pune and there were around 175 people including the students and teachers who were taking part in it. As we were wondering how to make arrangements of accommodation for so many people, I thought they can stay with me at my house. When the children saw my house, the first thing they asked was how many people stay in the huge house. When I stated that it was just me, they were shocked and said "but this is almost like a 'Bhootkhana'." (Laughs) I had spread mattresses for all children in different rooms. But I later saw that they had all huddled in one room and were sleeping happily there. Even my grand-daughter was staying with me then and she too enjoyed it. Seeing the honesty and frankness of these children is really refreshing.

Recently, Teach For India put up a musical show called 'Maya' in different cities. Two girls had come to perform for it and stayed with me in Delhi. That experience too, was really amazing. Just seeing the world from the perspective of these children is great.

**On occasion of the International Women's Day in March, what is the one message that you would like to give the readers?**

(AA) To the men I would say, women are not your property. Respect them, treat them as equal; and you will see the benefit of having a companion and a friend and not just a wife who is like a servant to you. And to women, I want to say that in no way are you less than

men. Invest in yourself and dare to be the kind of woman you want to be. There is a price for it as it doesn't come easily but be willing to face up to it.

(MP) I would urge the women to be confident. Have faith in yourself and don't let somebody else define who you are. You should be able to hold your own and do what you want. Actually I would tell this to both men and women. Every person should be able to live their life without fear.

Also, one of the most important things that women should do is to pass on the right message to their kids. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts should treat children equally and show them the right values to emulate. Very often, a mother gives totally different messages to the boy and the girl, and simply proves through her actions and words that men are better or that the women are supposed to live in a certain restricted way. I think if that stops, it will go a long way in making our society a better place.

(AA) This is absolutely true. Just to give an example, we had a family business and while growing up, my brothers were constantly told that they had to join the business. But not once was I even hinted that I could do the same. So I grew up thinking that women are not capable of handling such responsibilities. It was my husband who taught me to believe in myself and supported me in all my decisions. So it is very important to believe in yourself and that the men too believe in their sisters, wives and daughters.

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