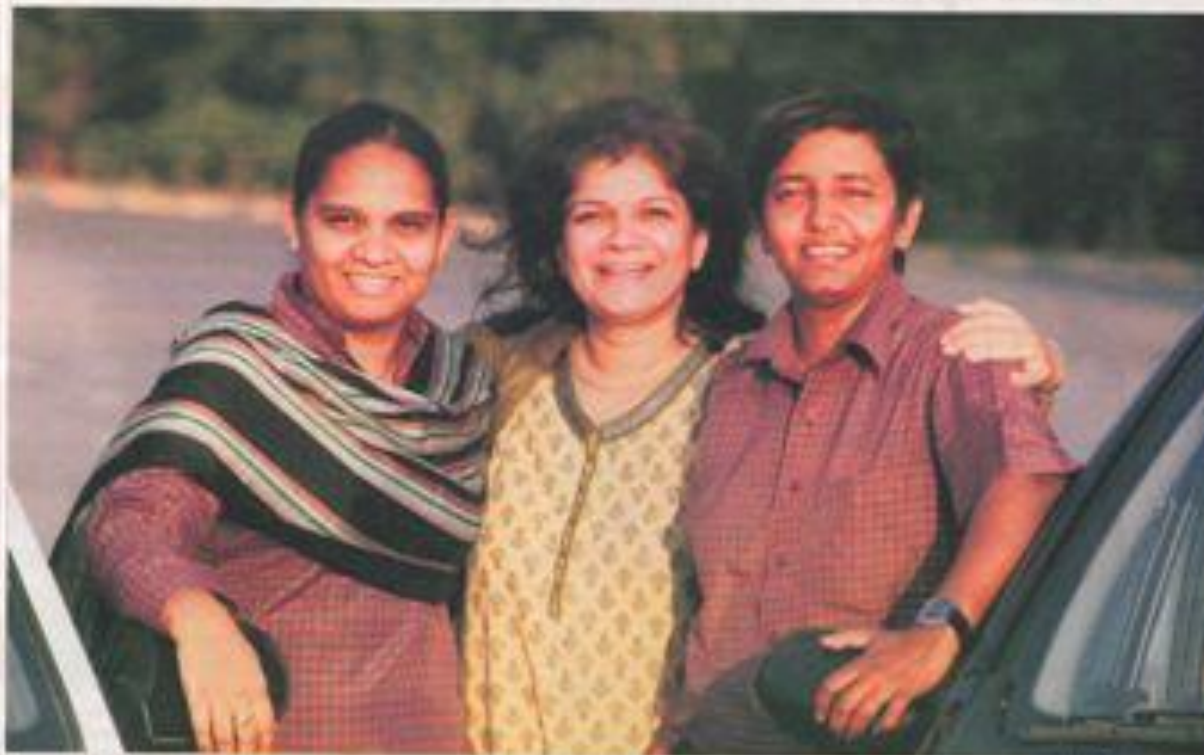


'The basic thought was to empower women economically'



Susilben Shah, founder of Prtyadarshini Taxi service, flanked by drivers Siddique (left) and Hivale

In this *Walk the Talk*, held on International Women's Day, *The Indian Express* Editor-in-Chief **Shekhar Gupta** spoke with those behind India's first taxi service run entirely by women >>>

I am in Mumbai's brand new Bandra-Kurla complex. And my guests today are two young women, who represent an idea as entrepreneurial and empowering as the spirit of Mumbai, Susilben Hivale and Hissna Siddique. Two leaders of India's first taxi service run entirely by women. Welcome to *Walk the Talk*, on what also happens to be International Women's Day. What did you do today?

HISSNA SIDDIQUE: A special service. The husband of one of my clients, who's from Kuwait, just underwent surgery at the Asian Heart Hospital here. She's booked my car for the last 4-5 days. So instead of celebrating Women's Day, I'm supporting a woman.

So when did you think of doing this? Be-

cause in our country, women never drive taxis.

SIDDIQUE: I had been driving for ten years before. Two years ago, I read in the newspaper that there was a requirement in the Prtyadarshini Taxi service for fully taxi drivers, so I gave a test. I needed some polishing in communication skills and general knowledge, I was trained for a month in self-defence also.

What did they teach you in self-defence?

SIDDIQUE: Karate. They teach you that, God forbid, if something were to happen, how to tackle it and get out.

Have you ever needed to use it?

HIVALE: No, Maharashtra is very safe.

You also carry pepper spray with you.

SIDDIQUE: Yes, we carry it, in case of an emergency. But we haven't had to use it in any car yet.

Hissna, you come from a Muslim, middle-class family. So didn't anyone say, why this profession?

SIDDIQUE: Yes, initially they were shocked. They said, get into a profession fit for women, what kind of customers will you get, etc. But my mother met Susilben ma'am (Susilben Shah, founder of Prtyadarshini Taxi service) and was very impressed by her. She was convinced that this is a very good profession, with a good future. So she gave me permission.

So why did you need to enter this line?

SIDDIQUE: Actually, sir, I am a single parent. I have two kids. So, to be able to bring them up, this is a good way. To pay for their education.

Sushma, how does it work? How much money do you give to the company, how much do you keep?

NIWALE: We need to give Rs 500 daily. They never ask us how much we earn. The whole concept of Priyadarshini is to enable women to make maximum money. And, touch wood, all of us take home a significant amount. Even if we leave home empty-handed, and only go to the airport, by evening we've earned Rs 1,000-1,500.

When you drive your car into your neighbourhood, even your neighbours must be talking, "Wow, they have a car!"

NIWALE: Yes, sir. People do get jealous. **SIDDIQUE:** Nobody parks in our fixed spot. We have a reserved space for our car.

They must be jealous, but they must also feel proud?

NIWALE: Yes, they feel proud too. That we have done something different. When this concept was new, our interviews were telecast on a lot of channels.

Other women in your neighbourhood, what do they say?

SIDDIQUE: We are like their idols. **NIWALE:** Actually, they also want to join us and we tell them to come. We give free training here. We don't charge for anything.

And uniforms? You can wear trousers or salwar kameez?

SIDDIQUE: I am Muslim, so I wear salwar kameez. Sushma wears paid-shirt.

So what did you learn in your training?

SIDDIQUE: Firstly, we gained a lot of confidence. That we can be on the road any time, any day. We can be on the road for 24 hours.

At night? You're not afraid?

SIDDIQUE: No, there is no fear. We can leave home at three in the morning but we're not afraid of anything. And we don't even feel like there might be someone waiting who might stop us. We feel totally safe. **NIWALE:** The cars have GPS installed.

And you're saying your profit ends up being around Rs 1,000-1,500 per day?

BOTH: Yes.

Most officers in government jobs don't make this much.

NIWALE: When we were trained, we were also taught business development. They told us that if we put in 100 per cent effort, the result would also be 100 per cent. We put in so much hard work because the money goes to our homes. We are self-employed in a way. We work for our own families.

Did male taxi drivers or the police ever give you trouble?

NIWALE: We initially had problems with the taxi union. When we were new and used to go to the airport, in a day we'd end up going to the police station 4-5 times. But those days have passed.

What kind of problems did you face?

NIWALE: They were scared that now that women have entered this field, business will decrease for them. Even today we don't have public permits and that's a big problem. If we had them, we'd be able to pick up passengers from anywhere and earn more.

SIDDIQUE: We could park at the taxi stand near our house and pick up passengers.

"Once I had to pick up a passenger who was drunk. I said to myself, 'I will encounter this every day. I can't run away'"

So now you are veterans, dadas of Bombay roads. Tell me about one or two experiences, good and bad.

SIDDIQUE: Once, a couple at the airport was looking for a taxi, and they thought I was some kind of supervisor. The lady said, "Oh, you'll drive?" They got off immediately when I said yes, saying, "We don't trust that ladies can drive taxis confidently." I said, come for a little distance, if you don't feel comfortable, you're free to walk out. So they sat, and they were very impressed. I told them, you came by flight. If they had announced that the pilot was a woman, would you have gotten off the plane? They said, "No, how could we have done that?" So I said, then how could you do it with a car? They are now my personal clients.

Sushma, you tell me a story, too.

NIWALE: Once I had to pick up a passenger from Kalyan. When I got there, he came out of a beer bar with a friend, drunk. I said to myself, "This is something I'll encounter every day. I can't run away from it." He sat in the front, and tried to scare me, saying, "I've been drinking." I said, "Sir, if you have been drinking, why did you call a lady taxi?" He said, "I have some cash, my laptop. I was afraid that if I was drunk, someone could

lose me. So I called for a lady taxi." It was the first time I'd heard of a man who, after drinking, felt safer with a woman.

What's the most interesting thing a passenger has ever said to you?

NIWALE: An Australian lady had come from Goa, where someone had stolen her passport and money. She had to go to the Australian consulate. The taxi union wasn't taking her, maybe because she didn't have money. She said, "I will pay you, but not right now." I said it's okay. At the consulate, she called her parents. The consulate gave her some money. She had work all day, and then, she had an evening flight to Goa, where her luggage was. When I dropped her at the airport, she said that she felt like God had sent her an angel. I'll always remember that.

And Sushma, you?

SIDDIQUE: Our regulars, even if they don't need a cab, sometimes they call to tell us if something nice has happened. Today, I got 25-30 phone calls wishing me Happy Women's Day.

We also talked to the woman who made it all possible, Susheela Shah. (Susheela enters) Nice to meet you. So tell us a little bit about what made you think of this? How is it working?

SUSHEE: Very well. There is a lot of scope for increasing it. My basic thought was that I wanted to empower women economically, and the first step is that they should have money in their pockets.

And where?

SUSHEE: Yes. When a woman starts earning, there is more income in the family, better health, better education for the children.

I have not met all your employees, but having spoken to these two, one thing I can say is that they are not short of confidence, or, as they said, income. So it's worked out very well. Thank you very much.

SUSHEE: And you have really made your families proud.

Absolutely. All of you have made us really proud. So once again, Happy Women's Day. May you keep driving bigger cars. The next time we talk will be when you are both driving Mercedes and BMWs.

BOTH: Yes, sure. Thank you sir.

Transcribed by Anushka Kapoor. For full text, visit www.indianexpress.com