WOMEN OF INDIA
India Insights unfolds India’s sociocultural, political and economic facets, which have significantly shaped its interactions with the world. It gives a glimpse into India’s success and its journey from a civilization to a modern-day nation-state. As the largest democracy and sixth largest economy in the world, India has made a mark in all domains - be it scientific advancements, polity, and governance, sports and culture or economic sphere.

An endeavour to bring forth India’s stories in the aforementioned domain and many more through a series of publications, India Insights is an attempt to present India to the world from an Indian lens developed in the most organic manner – by providing insights into its philosophy, its cultural diversity and its worldview.

A very apt case of this is the significant role of women in Indian society, as evident in the following examples. First, and unlike many other western nations where voting rights were confined to men for several years, the Constitution of Independent India, enshrined the rights of universal adult suffrage to all its citizens - men and women alike. India not only upheld its democratic values within its borders but also advocated for them at the global stage when Hansa Mehta pushed for the inclusion of all genders in the UN Human Rights Manifesto by replacing the word “All Men” to “All Humans”.

Undeniably, women leadership in India continues to be an inspiration for generations to come. With this belief, the first edition of India Insights is dedicated to Women Pioneers of India, providing a glimpse of the significant role women have played in India’s growth story. This is not recent or as commonly understood as a “post-independent” phenomenon but rather, one of the strongest aspects of India or Bharat as a civilizational continuum. It is this civilization which attributes wisdom and creativity to goddess Saraswati; prosperity and success to goddess Lakshmi, and, strength and justice to goddess Durga.

Bharat, as the land of wisdom, has produced some of the finest scholars such as Maitrey and Gargi and saints such as Meerabai who contributed immensely to the Bhakti traditions and literature. Bharat as the land of righteousness has given birth to the bravest daughters - Ahilyabai Holkar of present-day Indore, Jijabai of Maharashtra and Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi. These women-leaders trained themselves in diplomacy and warfare, led their empires against invaders and fought enemies for their motherland. Today, the two most important government portfolios - external affairs and defence - are led by women ministers Smt. Sushma Swaraj and Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman respectively. Bharat as a land of prosperity has also seen accomplishments of dynamic business women like Naina Lal Kidwai and Gita Gopinath, leading not just Indian but international institutions.

India has witnessed women leadership in every dimension and is by no means confined to the aforementioned, be it in terms of the field of leadership, the time or space. This edition is a gateway for the readers to unfold many such success stories spanning across the length of history and breadth of India, where Indian women have made their mark.

Owing to the nature of the book, each theme can incorporate only a few pioneers, leaders and case studies. This may not be taken as exceptions, but rather, open new vistas of understanding India and its sociocultural, political and economic fabric. It is an attempt to inspire our readers to visit India and immerse themselves in the true experience of what defines “Incredible India”.

preface
Gargi Vachaknavi was an ancient Indian philosopher who is mentioned in the Vedas as Brahmanvadini or a person possessing the highest knowledge of the universe.

She was an exemplary intellectual, cited and referred to in the study of the status of women in the Vedic era. Gargi engaged in various philosophical discussions finding mention in the Upanishads as a ‘great natural philosopher’.

Her debate with Yajnavalkya over the meaning and essence of the soul is remembered amongst the most insightful and stimulating learnings in the ancient times.
The Queen of Jhansi, Rani Laxmibai was a gallant warrior and an icon for the nationalists in the freedom struggle against the British.

Refusing to cede Jhansi to the British after the death of her husband, she joined the Revolt of 1857, organising her troops, and took charge of the rebels in the Bundelkhand region.

She valiantly fought against the British until she succumbed to her wounds in the battlefield. Rani Laxmibai remains present in the popular imagination as a young woman in combat with her son tied to her back.

An inspiration, the valiant queen of India has rendered her name to several academic institutions. Furthermore, the Indian National Army, named its women unit as the Rani Jhansi Regiment in her honour.
LAXMI SEHGAL

Captain Lakshmi Sahgal led India's first all-women regiment, the Rani Jhansi regiment, as a part of the Indian National Army.

A doctor by profession, she was deeply influenced by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and led the regiment in the fight against the British rule in the jungles of Burma.

Post-independence she became a member of the Parliament, representing the Communist Party of India (Marxist). She played an instrumental role in providing relief to the Bhopal Gas Tragedy victims and in maintaining peace during the 1984 anti-Sikh riots.

In 1998, she was awarded the Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian honor. In 2002, Lakshmi Sahgal ran for Presidential elections of the country.
SAROJINI NAIDU

The Nightingale of India, Sarojini Naidu, was a political activist, feminist, poet, the first Indian woman president of the Indian National Congress, and an Indian state governor.

As an accomplished poetess, she was elected as a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1914. In her capacity a freedom fighter, she was at the forefront of the anti-British activities and also served jail time for the same.

She was among the first people to join the Non-cooperation movement against the Rowlatt act and a prominent leader of India’s freedom struggle. She was a major proponent of the need to include women in the freedom struggle.

The British government also awarded her the Kaisar-i-Hind medal for her work during the plague epidemic in India.
Rani Gaidinliu was a Naga spiritual leader and a freedom fighter. Along with leading a religious movement in her community, she assumed the leadership of the rebellion against the British at the tender age of 13.

She was particularly opposed to the forced labor imposed by the British on local communities. She earned the title of ‘Rani’ or ‘Queen’ by India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

She is a recipient of the Tamrapatra Freedom Fighter Award (1972), Padma Bhushan (1982), Vivekananda Seva Award (1983).

The Government of India has instituted the Stree Shakti Puruskar in honour of 5 prominent Indians, one of them being Rani Gaidinliu.
Amrit Kaur was the first Minister of Health of independent India and also served as the first Asian President of the World Health Organization’s governing body.

Influenced by Gopal Krishna Gokhale, she joined the Indian national movement against the British. She was a staunch advocate of women’s rights and strived to ensure extensive participation of women in the freedom struggle.

She formed the All India Women’s Conference and worked ardently for the abolition of practices such as purdah and child marriage. She served as India’s official delegate to UNESCO conferences in London, and in 1950, was elected as the President of the WHO.

Having been successful in raising funds from various countries, she laid the foundation of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in 1957. Being a sports enthusiast, she was also instrumental in setting up the National Institute of Sports in Patiala.
HANSA MEHTA

Smt. Hansa Mehta, a prolific writer, social worker and educator is regarded as a stalwart of human rights and justice.

She represented India at the UN Commission on Human Rights from 1947 to 1948. Her historic contribution was to advocate for the inclusion of “all humans” in place of “all men” in the charter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

She also served as a member of the Constituent Assembly responsible for drafting the Indian Constitution after independence.

As an educator, she was a member of the All India Secondary Board of Education, President of Inter-University Board of India and the Vice Chancellor of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Gujarat. In 1959, Smt. Hansa Mehta was conferred with the Padma Bhushan.
INDRA GANDHI

Born on November 19, 1917, Smt. Indira Gandhi was the daughter of India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Involved in the freedom struggle from an early age, she founded the ‘Bal Charkha Sangh’ and in 1930, the ‘Vanar Sena’ of children to help during the Non-Cooperation Movement.

She was imprisoned in September 1942 and worked in riot-affected areas of Delhi in 1947 under Gandhi’s guidance.

She held the highest office as the Prime Minister of India and played a decisive role in the liberation of Bangladesh and quelling of secessionist Khalistan movement. She was assassinated on 31st Oct 1984.
SUSHMA SWARAJ

A lawyer by profession, Sushma Swaraj is a veteran Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader and is currently serving as the External Affairs Minister in the Union Cabinet.

Her political journey began when she was appointed as the youngest cabinet minister in the Haryana government at the age of 25. She holds the distinction of serving as the first woman Chief Minister of Delhi in 1998.

She has had a highly successful political career, being elected as a Member of the Parliament 7 times, and as a Member of Legislative Assembly 3 times. In 2004, she became the first woman MP to win the Outstanding Parliamentarian Award.
Nirmala Sitharaman is India’s Minister of Defence and is the second woman to hold this post, and the first woman to do so full time.

In her political career since joining the Bhartiya Janta Party in 2008, she has served as the Party’s national spokesperson and the member of the Cabinet Committee on Security, being the second women leader in both the portfolios.

A student of economics, Smt. Sitharaman has also also served as a member of the National Commission of Women from 2003-05.
LATA MANGESHKAR

Popularly known as the ‘Melody Queen’, Lata Mangeshkar is undoubtedly one of the most famous Indian playback singers across the world.

Starting her career at the tender age of 13, she has lent her voice to more than 25000 movies in 36 regional languages in a career that has now spanned over 7 decades.

Until 1991, the Guinness Book of World Records listed her the most recorded artist. To cap her stellar career, she is the recipient of highest civilian honours of India and France, the Bharat Ratna, and the Office of the Legion of Honor respectively.

The Lata Mangeshkar Award has also been instituted as a national level award to honour works in music.
Sudha Chandran is an accomplished Bharatnatyam dancer and an actress, and a source of inspiration for many.

Having lost a leg in an accident in 1982, her grit and dedication enabled her to continue dancing with the help of a prosthetic leg. She has performed nationally and internationally including in Canada, Europe and the Middle East.

A highly talented actor, Sudha Chandran has worked in the Indian film industry including movies in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. She has received the National Film Award - Special Jury award among others.

She is an example of perseverance and resilience, and a role model for women set back by adversaries.
Mahadevi Varma is a famous Hindi poetess, freedom fighter, a woman rights activist and an educationist. She is considered to be one of four pillars that laid the foundation of the Chhayavad movement or the era of neo-romanticism in Hindi Literature.

There is a strong feminist pitch in her works and this is underlined by the fact that she was a strong advocate of women's rights. She served as the first headmistress and later Vice-Chancellor of the Prayag Mahila Vidyapeeth in Allahabad.

She is also the first woman to be selected for the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship for lifetime achievement. For her contribution to literature and social reforms, Mahadevi Varma received the Padma Bhushan (1956), one of India's highest honours, and the Jnanpeeth Award for Indian literature in 1982.

In 2018, Google dedicated a doodle in her honour to celebrate her Jnanpeeth Award.
Appointed as the first female Chief Economist of the International Monetary Fund in 2018, Gita Gopinath has had a stellar career as an economist.

She is John Zwaanstra Professor of International Studies and of Economics at the Harvard University.

She has served as the Economic Advisor to the Chief Minister of Kerala in India, a visiting fellow at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, and member of the Eminent Persons Advisory Group on G-20 matters for India’s Ministry of Finance.

She was conferred with the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman, the highest honor for overseas Indians by the Government of India.

In 2014, she was named as one of the top 25 economists under 45, and was proclaimed the Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in 2011.
Country head and group general manager of HSBC India, Naina Lal Kidwai is the first Indian woman to head a foreign bank’s operations in India.

Prior to this, she was the first Indian woman to graduate from the Harvard Business School in 1982, and the first woman president of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), a premier business organization.

A corporate leader, she has held the posts of non-executive director on the board of Nestle, Chairwoman at the City of London’s Advisory Council for India, and Global Advisor at Harvard Business School.

She received the Padma Sri in 2007 and is also the recipient of ASSOCHAM Ladies’ League’s Delhi Women of the Decade Achievers award for Excellence in Banking.

Apart from being a seasoned banker, Naina Lal Kidwai is also a social entrepreneur to address issues of environment, sanitation, access to water and women’s empowerment. Furthering this, she co-founded the Indian Sanitation Coalition with her husband in 2015.
Coming from a village in Haryana, Geeta Phogat has successfully beaten all odds and won the first ever gold medal for India in women’s wrestling in the 2010 Commonwealth Games.

For this laurel and her journey preceding it, she is a source of inspiration for young girls, not just in her village, but in the entire country. She is the first Indian female wrestler to have qualified for the Summer Olympics.

She was honoured with the Arjuna Award for her outstanding achievements in wrestling in 2012.
Jhulan Goswami is the captain and a formidable all-round cricketer in the Indian women’s National Cricket team.

She was named ICC Women’s Player of the Year in 2007 and was awarded the Arjuna Award and the Padma Sri by the Government of India in 2010 and 2012 respectively.

She was at the top in ICC women’s ODI bowling rankings in 2016 and in 2018, becoming the first women’s ODI cricketer to have 200 wickets to her credit.