



# ■ GREW UP

**W**in an India with  
**I**limited resources, and  
**S**dreamt of joining the foreign  
service. However, she went on to  
become the **1**st woman manager to join Cadbury, the  
**1**st woman on the boards of Cadbury Nigeria and  
South Africa, the **1**st woman Division President for Coca-Cola in  
Latin America, and the **1**st woman to head a publicly listed food  
company in India. During her decade-long tenure at Britannia, the company's revenue quadrupled  
and Britannia was recognized globally for micro-nutrient fortification of its key brands, in  
addition to establishing public-private partnerships to address malnutrition among schoolgoing  
children. She completed her economics degree from University of Delhi, pursued MBA at  
Jamnalal Bajaj Institute of Management Studies and post-graduate studies at Michigan State  
University. Her first job was at Voltas where she worked on brand Rasna. She has **37** years of  
experience, has worked in **6** countries across **5** continents, and is comfortable with ambiguity  
and uncertainty. She is currently on the boards of several organizations in Europe and the US,  
and divides her time between India and overseas, and between corporate and development  
sectors and education. She believes the biggest barrier that all of us need to break is the barrier  
in our own mind. She loves theatre, classical dance, and music, and believes people make  
too much of work-life balance. ■

# ANY DEBATE ONLY ABOUT GENDER IS MYOPIC



*“Some of my views are contrarian and may even seem irreverent,”* midway during my interview, Bali qualified one of her views with this rider. Reading up on her before the interaction, I realized maybe my choice of the topic—women in workforce and leadership—was not a clever one, given her views on it. She believes that most conversations on this subject border on being banal. She says we need to look beyond just numbers, which are pathetically low anyway. And in line with her thoughts, she did not quote any numbers to support her argument. But I am going to quote a few. According to World Bank, if the workforce participation rate for women in India was the same as for men, roughly 217 million women would join the labor force. At 53 percentage points, India has one of the worst gender gaps in the world when it comes to labor force participation. So what needs to be done to move ahead? “Translate talk into action,” she says.

*She also surprises me when she says, “I am talking of equity and not parity.” The simple point is to recognize gender differences, and to constructively determine how to leverage them so that individuals and society benefits. As Geraldine Ferraro said, we need to understand, “some leaders are born, women.”*

*A global business leader, Vinita Bali has been on the board of Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) since 2010, a Swiss Foundation based in Geneva, and was recently appointed Chair of its Board of Directors. She is also among 27 global leaders appointed by the UN Secretary General to the Lead Group of the Scaling Up Nutrition movement. Passionate about her work in this area, in a ‘Walk the Talk’ with Shekar Gupta, she had said, “If you look at it, nutrition is one of those agendas or priorities that finds its place nowhere – it sits on the cusp of several initiatives like access to food and potable water, hygiene and sanitation, etc., but is at the center of none.” The conversation here again has to move ahead, in her view. This agenda though is quite a change—she has spent 37 years in global marketing and general management roles in Cadbury, Coca-Cola, and Britannia!*

*In this free-wheeling conversation, she shares her view on a range of topics—from branding to segmentation, to CSR, to gender diversity. As someone who is known as a seasoned marketer, I asked how leaders should nurture their personal brands. She said, “You have to do what you do with authenticity and the brand gets nurtured on its own.” And that is the crux that most leaders fail to get. Edited excerpts from the conversation:*

**Unless the conversation moves from gender to competence, one cannot achieve equality...**

It is simple. When I go to work, I take my skills, knowledge, experience, attitude, etc. to my role, not my gender! Therefore, my gender, ethnicity, religion, or accent is not a determinant of my competency. What does determine my ability to contribute meaningfully are my functional and leadership skills, my track record, and my potential.

Unfortunately, as the corporate world is highly gender-skewed, there are a lot of conversations around gender diversity and yet, there is a big gap between professed intent and ground reality. Frankly, the whole narrative is stuck at a peripheral level. We have to move beyond just gender; we need to look for and value diversity of exposure, diversity of experience, diversity of thought, and diversity of contribution.

So, the priority has to be equality of opportunities in education, healthcare, nutrition, etc. and then it has to

be about the right competencies for the role, irrespective of gender. Of course, some roles may naturally be better suited to men or women—and that is just fine. But we need to move the dialog ahead, with intelligence, responsibility, and the right actions. And, we need some renaissance men as well to lead the change.

**Sometimes, given how skewed the proportion is, repeatedly talking about increasing the numbers may help create more opportunities...**

Of course, we need to talk about numbers. We need to confront facts. But then we have to translate talk into action to move from where we are to where we want to be.

**Gender parity as far as top positions are considered**

The facts are clear and hugely skewed, whether we look at CEOs, the top leadership team, board composition, etc. I do not want to talk only about the number of men and women CEOs. The thrust, going forward, must be on parity in terms of opportunities, in terms of selecting the best candidate for the role, in terms of creating a culture and environment where a diverse talent pool feels included and engaged and gives its best to the organization and where diversity is really diverse, in terms of education, experience, exposure, thinking, and gender. We need to look at equality of opportunities—it is about equity and not parity.

**The glass cliff phenomenon**

I have not experienced it, as is evident from the many roles I have played. The glass cliff is another thing we have to stop talking about and demonstrate intent through actions that will be catalysts for change. When you say there is a 'glass ceiling' or 'glass cliff,' it is a conclusion. And what I am urging us to think about is what needs to happen for this conclusion and/or perception to change. My conviction is that unless we invest time in creating environments that value meritocracy above all else and demonstrate that through our actions and results, nothing will change significantly. We have to at least have the ability to envision a world of equal opportunities. The enlightened

organizations will get there faster and hopefully inspire others to emulate.

**Role of innovation**

... is simple. I think of it as anything that an organization does that creates new value. So, it is not only about a new product or service. It is about looking

at a business end to end, about doing anything in any part of the value chain that adds new value. It could be a technology, a manufacturing process, a new way of going to market, logistics, distribution, etc. If the purpose of business is to create and capture value, then the role of innovation is to help identify new sources of value creation and capture.

**Need for segmentation of brand portfolio**

Segmentation is about identifying purchase and usage occasions. Irrespective of the product or service, we have to understand who the consumer is, what the consumption/usage occasion is, and how to make our brand relevant and differentiated in that context. So, a packet of biscuit or chocolate meant for 'on-the-go' consumption cannot be a large pack; it has to be small and single-serve. On the other hand, if we are selling the same product for consuming at home or as a grocery purchase, then large packs become relevant. Similarly, if a product is meant for industrial use, it has to be relevant for an institutional segment in terms of its performance, price, service levels, etc. So, in every category you have to segment the market based on the context of use and the consumer. It is important that each brand is viewed in the framework of how and where it fits in the consumer's life; not how the consumer's life fits into the brand.





Intuition and judgment begin where data ends and require a certain level of alertness and proficiency.

### All brands are not equal

Of course, all brands are not equal. All successful brands have a proposition that is relevant and differentiated which is what enables them to attract and retain consumers and generate value for the company. They are different also because all consumer needs are not the same. And we create brands to meet consumer needs or anxieties—if I am diabetic, I need a snack with a low glycemic index.

### Relevance of market research in a fragmented market like India

Market research is a radar—it can tell you where you can or cannot fly and who else is in your flying zone; it cannot fly for you. However, successful businesses are about a lot more than market research. They have the ability and capability to identify marketplace opportunities and create a business model that commercializes them, profitably. Market research is not the definitive answer but it certainly shows you a good direction, a space within which to explore pathways, and is one of the many inputs to which you have to add imagination, inspiration, and hard work.

### Balancing data and intuition

Intuition is something that you develop over a period of time working with data and information. So, Einstein figured the theory of relativity intuitively, before he got to it mathematically. But you had to be an Einstein to work that intuition into math. So intuition is not something that suddenly happens. People are intuitive because with years of experience they are able to recognize patterns and are able to project these in different situations. So intuition and judgment are not substitutes for data. Intuition and judgment begin where data ends and require a certain level of alertness and proficiency.

### Definition of CSR

CSR is simply CR, which is corporate responsibility and if we must use the S-word, we should think of it as ‘corporate sustainable responsibility’. The irony, however, is that in the normal course of business, all companies are not doing enough for society and our environment, and therefore social responsibility has had to be mandated in the Companies Bill 2013. If businesses were to embed social issues into their business model, we would not have to design a standalone concept called CSR. Because it is a separate mandate, companies are scrambling to find CSR projects. This is upside-down thinking in my view. We must focus our energies on running responsible businesses, which address social issues as part of our business value chain and not as something we do outside of our business. I think these are lazy notions. We have to increase the accountability of business, hold higher standards of excellence and governance, and encourage philanthropy to address other social and developmental issues in partnership with governments and civil society.

**Addressing the needs of the bottom of the pyramid has been a huge challenge. Further, with the advent of the internet and ecommerce, there seems to have been a change in consumer preferences—for instance, they are more aspirational. How does this change affect a marketer’s strategy?**

We have to first understand who constitutes this bottom of the pyramid. The fact is that the people at the bottom of the pyramid are so poor, they cannot afford most of the products marketers want to sell to them. As per the latest world hunger report released by FAO, there are about 200 million people in India who sleep hungry every night.

What is their aspiration? Simply to get some food so they do not go hungry everyday. So marketers have to think differently and honestly ask themselves whether they are really interested in solving some of the concerns of the bottom of the pyramid to give those people a dignified existence. Therefore, you cannot start with your product. You have to start with their needs and make a commitment to address them systemically. Sadly, for the bottom of the pyramid we have not even addressed the basics of *roti, kapda, makaan!*

The opportunity for any business in India is that almost every category is under-penetrated and therefore the market is underserved. Additionally, there is enough critical mass at virtually any price point. So that is definitely a market that is aspirational.

We need to move away from thinking—I am selling shampoo in a sachet, so I am meeting the needs of people at the bottom or the base of the pyramid. Yes, they may consume shampoo once in a while, but no, we are not addressing their core needs. Largely, the present way of thinking about the bottom of the pyramid is unconnected to their reality.

**You have worked across different geographies. How is the Indian work culture different from that of others?**

I am going to make some generalizations here, and compare us to what is the best I have seen in the five

**Vinita Bali's views on:**

**execution vs strategy**

Obviously both, because strategy determines where effort and resource will be allocated and execution determines the effectiveness of that choice. A brilliant strategy poorly executed is worse than a mediocre strategy brilliantly executed.

**skill sets managers need to survive today**

The desire has to be for more than surviving! Adaptive and leadership skills in addition to functional skills are critical to pursue success based on excellence.

**three important leadership lessons**

Be authentic, take ownership, and adopt a strong work ethic.

continents I have lived and worked in. In an overall perspective, we are less detail and process oriented. We also have a greater bias for talk than for action. Collaborative skills, a work ethic of conscientious behavior and taking accountability and ownership for results are also other areas we need to work on. We are extremely creative in some areas, but we must channel that creativity in positive and constructive directions. We also do not have a mindset of excellence.

**“I have always gone for something unconventional.” What is the challenge that being unconventional brings in?**

For me, unconventional choices have meant great adventure and discoveries. And exposure not just to the world of business, but also art and culture and history. Most of all, a richness of experience that I value greatly.

**Your role in GAIN and some of the initiatives you are working on in India**

I took over as Chair of the Board in December 2015.

GAIN is unique in the nutrition domain as it is truly an alliance that works with the private sector, with governments and development agencies, and with civil society to influence nutrition-related decisions, policies, and practices.

In India, GAIN is working closely with state governments on large-scale food fortification which is a proven intervention in addressing micro-nutrient deficiencies. GAIN works in over thirty countries on different models and its goal is to eliminate malnutrition. ■



As told to Poornima Subramanian