

INTERVIEW Ananya Birla

A singer, a songwriter and an entrepreneur! There are multiple ways to define Ananya Birla, who is efficiently donning innumerable hats and achieving heightened dimensions of glory, with each one of her passionate endeavours in varied spheres – Music, Mental Health & Microfinance! Read on to know more about the dynamo as she shares her views with Richa Sang

*A Sea of
Myriad*

A full-body photograph of a woman with long, wavy brown hair. She is wearing a dark denim jacket with green sequined sleeves, an olive green top, and a silver sequined skirt with a wide, ornate silver belt. She has her right index finger pressed against her lips in a 'shh' gesture. The word 'Streams' is written in a large, pink, cursive font across the middle of the image.

Streams



Q & A

True to your name 'Ananya' – you are a truly unique personality. How do you so efficiently juggle between the multifarious roles of a singer, songwriter and entrepreneur?

Because I am so passionate about each of the things that I do, whether it be my businesses, Mpower or my music, none really feel like 'work'. Each is more like an extension of my inner self, and they feed and fulfil my soul equally.

There are times when it can be really demanding to be as invested in each project as I would like, but I really love the diversity of my days. I am also blessed to have amazing teams in place who help everything tick along.

You started your venture at a nascent age of 17. From where did you receive the motivation to don the hat of an entrepreneur when most of the youngsters of your age are not even clear about their career goals?

I felt old for my age at 17, and maybe a bit impatient. I wanted to channel that into doing something positive so I set up Svatanttra which provides loans to low-income, rural women to help them grow their businesses and become financially independent.

From a young age, I wanted to build a vehicle to address the massive gap that exists between rich and poor in India. I also wanted to develop something which could give back to society but in a sustainable way that encouraged social progress and self-sufficiency. I believe it's far more valuable to give people the tools to do something for themselves rather than do it for them.

Your venture 'SvatanttraMicrofin' is based on a very noble concept of providing microfinance to women in rural India. How did the idea of starting such a venture struck to you?

As a female entrepreneur, I wanted to build a platform which encourages other women in India to fulfil their potential. Svatanttra, which means freedom in Hindi, is working hard to eliminate the outdated views that are still prevalent across much of India that the only place for a woman is in the home, taking care of the family. Women should be able to fulfil their potential as individuals and not be limited by archaic restrictions imposed on their gender.

Equal opportunity across genders is so important for everyone's growth and progress: Svatanttra is showing that when women work, not only do their lives improve, so do the lives of their families and communities.

You are doing exceptionally well in two diverse spheres of Music and Entrepreneurship. Which one of these is close to your heart and why?

Every day I wake up feeling incredibly fortunate and driven because I am following my passions, and hopefully making a positive difference. I find everything I do to be hugely fulfilling for different reasons and I am delighted that I do not have to choose.

There is also a symbiotic relationship between my business and artistic endeavours. I know that in order to build something truly successful, creativity and business need to go hand-in-hand.

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Ananya Birla

You are also the Co-Founder of Mpower, which is based on the concept of mental health. Tell us about your role in this organization.

I battled anxiety and panic attacks during my time at university and found it difficult to reach out for help. It became very clear to me that it was not easy for most people with mental health issues to get support because of the stigma and the lack of education and assistance available.

Especially in India, mental health is a topic that is rarely discussed. It's surrounded by silence and shame. As a result, depression and suicide rates are on the rise and people are scared to reach out for help.

My mother and I felt a huge responsibility to do something about the lack of support for those with mental health problems, so we co-founded MPower. I think it's really important that people like me who have a public platform use it to benefit others; to set an example and lead the way.

We want to help shape a future in which everyone receives the help they need, without facing discrimination along the way. We work to create awareness, prevent discrimination, educate, and provide treatment and support services. In the last year we have also put together big events like a cyclathon and a live music concert which have got so many more people involved and educated. Our treatment centre in Mumbai is also making a dent in the massive lack of options for support in India, where there are only around 4000 psychiatrists for the 1.5 billion people who live here.

How do you strike work-life balance?

It has not always been easy, and I used to be terrible at it. However now, through thoughtful delegation and setting priorities and reasonable goals, I am much better.

I am also lucky to be able to work with some of my best friends, they help me feel grounded. They have been with me since day one and they really help me to remember the light side of life if I ever get weighed down.

My favourite way to relax is sitting with my guitar and getting lost in the music – it's work and play all wrapped-up in one moment.

Having achieved glory at a young age, you are an inspiration for umpteen fans and entrepreneurs who look up to you for inspiration. Which personality has inspired you the most?

I'm so interested in people's stories, the situations that shape us and move us, so a lot of my inspiration comes from the people that I meet every day, particularly when my work takes me to new and exciting places around the world. Recently I was speaking at One Young World in The Hague, and met some of the most fascinating and inspirational young leaders from all types of industries everywhere in the world. It was such an amazing experience. There is something you can learn from every person you come in to contact with, and I believe that each interaction shapes you a little bit.

I am also so often incredibly moved by the women we work with at Svatantra. Life can be very tough for these individuals, but the strength, intelligence and perseverance I see is

truly inspirational.

Your song 'Circles' is ruling the popularity charts. Congrats! What are your upcoming singing ventures?

Thank you, Circles is a song which is incredibly close to my heart because I wrote it to celebrate my best friend and also friendship in general. I am truly delighted that that people are responding so well to it.

Right now I'm working on a lot of new material, experimenting with some different styles, adding more Indian sounds into my music. I just released a remixed version of my last track Circles, and am working hard on an EP which I expect to put out at the beginning of 2019.

Please share with us your moments of triumphs both at the personal and professional fronts.

Being the first artist to go platinum in India with English songs, 'Meant to Be' and 'Hold On' and recently 'Circles' was a personal and professional triumph. It felt like a breakthrough on a bigger scale. For a long time, the music industry in India has been heavily influenced by Bollywood and

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sometimes other genres feel squeezed-out. But I think the response to my music shows that India is becoming more open-minded and willing to embrace international styles and unfamiliar musical influences.

I hope that the positive response to my music encourages other young musicians across Asia to be less afraid of taking chances, and other fans to experiment with what they listen to. There is so much undiscovered talent that deserves to be heard.

Through music, I've been able to connect with audiences all across the world. Beyond anything else, there is nothing which makes me happier than when I get a message from a fan who says that they related to something in my music and that it made something that they are going through a little bit easier.

What are your views on Corporate Social Responsibility?

I welcome the trend towards individuals and corporations increasingly setting out to have a more positive impact on the world. It makes a lot of sense to me. I don't think that being a successful and sustainable business necessarily requires that you act in an unethical or unfair way. I am a big believer that a business should have a heart.

Despite having achieved fame at a strikingly young age, do you nurture any unfulfilled wish or ambition?

I just performed a surprise set at Oktoberfest in Goa and it was amazing. I want to play more live music, and eventually tour around the world, and prove that India can produce a successful, global musician.

Please tell our readers about the ways in which you unwind yourself.

I exercise at least three times per week. It benefits your physical and mental health. It always makes me feel stronger and calmer. I play football, dance, do a yoga class, surf or just hit the gym. Whatever I can fit into my day. Whenever I have time off, nothing makes me happier than spending quality time with family and friends.

