



Fit & Famous

THE FIRST LADY OF FITNESS

She strides into the studio and immediately the air becomes electric with anticipation. Nawaz Modi Singhania is the wife of high flying business magnate Gautam Singhania. But it's pretty evident that her light has not been dimmed in the glare of her husband's flamboyance and fame.

Smart, stylish, intelligent, Nawaz is a celebrity in her own right with many facets to her personality. She's a successful business woman, an accomplished artist, a fitness trailblazer, a hands on Mom and much more.

She looks slim and petite, yet radiates dynamism and energy, a perfect ambassador for her brainchild – the Body Art Fitness Studio. And as our interview progresses I realize why this lady refuses to be put into the cookie-cutter mould of ribbon-cutting CEO wives. Here's Nawaz, up close and personal.

Photographs: Sanjit Sen, Make-Up: Satish Gaikwad,
Location: Body Art Fitness Studio, Hughes Road, Mumbai,
Coordination: Archana Iyer.



Q >> Tell us about your childhood.

A >> As a child I used to be this spindly little weakling. All through school I was the first or the second child in the assembly line height order. Even in PT class, I was so puny that when my turn came to, say, perform a cartwheel or a summersault, the teacher would wave me aside, saying "Please just go, forget it." So somehow the desire to develop myself physically was always there and that, later in life, translated into what I do for a living.

Q >> You graduated as a lawyer. So how did you end up in the fitness industry?

A >> I actually finished my BA honors and went on to pursue LLB around the same time as I started my Body Art Fitness Studio. I remember when I was doing my TYBA, I took up an aerobics class. This was around 27-28 years ago. Back then, apart from Talwalkar's there were no other places for exercise. The instructor in my class was absolutely awful. She used to be extremely rude and obnoxious to all the members. She would actually pick up the women's arms and say "You stink!" Then she'd spray their underarms with deodorant, right there, in front of everybody! When the aerobics class was in progress she would not even bother to stand in front and demonstrate the moves.

The lady left an indelible mark in my psyche. I determined never ever to be like her! All of us get impatient or bored or irritable in our jobs and may feel that people don't think or act fast enough, that they don't keep pace with you. But we don't have to show our feelings so negatively!

All those experiences came together in the creation of Body Art. I wanted to be my own boss. And I am very creative by

nature, so even in terms of fitness, I wanted to choreograph, I wanted to offer routines which were not available anywhere else. I wanted to do something different that wasn't done over and over. My father had some space in our building. So that's how the studio was born.

I was the first one to introduce many different types of workouts under one roof like equipment based Pilates, choreographed trampoline classes, Gyrotonics, an exercise form that's composed of spiral and circular movements using special equipments, and muscle ballet, a ballet inspired workout that uses small and isolated movements to build strength and flexibility.

Q >> What's your fitness regime like? How did you tackle post pregnancy weight?

A >> When I was carrying my first daughter my doctor advised me to put on only 9kg throughout the pregnancy. So I ended up putting on exactly 9kg. I never really lost shape, because I worked out throughout my pregnancy, I was exercising even the day before both my deliveries; I did both Pilates and also taught my classes.

But of course, the body is not the same, the stomach is not the same, you are not the same, post delivery. There is a vast difference; you lose a sizeable degree of fitness and tautness. And you are expanding sideways and drooping southwards and all of that. Even though others might say, 'Oh, you are fine, you look fine,' only you know the difference.

"After my first baby I realized it was going to get a lot harder to stay in shape"

Pregnancy affects the metabolic system as well as the circulatory, muscular and skeletal systems – which are also the same systems that exercise addresses. So you have to carefully weigh the needs of pregnancy when you work out. You can't go full steam ahead as you would otherwise. There are fixed formulas. And post delivery however vigorously you try to shake off the extra pounds, it is going to take you 9 months to lose what you put on over the period of 9 months.

I teach my class, that's my current fitness regime. The only machines I use for fitness are Pilates equipment. Pilates has made a world of a

difference, all for the good. It has a shrinking effect on the body. Muscle structures becomes long and lean. It's a wonderfully slender, slim, toned look that most of us so covet!

Q >> Describe your diet regime.

A >> I have a cup of hot water with a splash of lime juice as soon as I wake up. I believe it helps your system shift from an acidic state to alkaline.

After that I have half a cup of coffee, but instead of sugar my sweetener will be something like agave. Although agave has nearly as many calories as regular sugar, it doesn't spike your blood sugar levels. Or I may use stevia. Then I will have a fruit. In the morning I eat only fruits, 2 to 3 different kinds. Lunch at 1:30 could be something non-veg – chicken or fish or prawn, grilled or steamed mostly; *dal*, quinoa, a green salad and a vegetable side.

I need something sweet after every meal, say a couple of squares of sugar free chocolate, which may contain natural sweeteners like raisins or dates.

For tea I may have a sandwich. The multigrain bread is made of bajra and *nachni* that I bake at home. Mostly when we eat bread or toast, we automatically think, 'I need two or three slices.' We are not thinking of the volume; mentally that's how we are programmed. Baking my own bread allows me to decide how thick the slice should be.

Dinner is always a Parsi dish like *dhansak*, *pulao dal*, or *sansni macchi*, with quinoa instead of rice, plus there



With Husband Gautam At Her Art Exhibition

will be a salad with it.

All my food is cooked in canola oil which offers many health benefits.

Q >> Over the years how has your diet changed?

A >> I used to overeat constantly. And I got away with it for really long, because I was genetically hardwired to be petite and slim.

However, after my first baby I realized it was going to get a lot harder to stay that way if I didn't learn to control my eating habits. And that is how I improved. But my current level of dietary control came after my second daughter, when it got even harder to stay slim; because as age catches up, your metabolism slows down even more.

Q >> Do you take any supplements?

A >> I recently started taking supplements after reading *What Your Doctor Doesn't Know About Nutritional Medicine May Be Killing You*. It's based on the broad principal that doctors always focus on the curative aspect and never the preventive part. There is a history of heart disease and cancer in my family, so I wanted to make sure I cover all the angles and do my best to protect myself. So I do take supplements like Vitamin C, a great antioxidant that is said to help the immune system and prevent brain degeneration, and, of course, calcium.

Q >> You and Gautam come from different cultural backgrounds. How did you adjust?

A >> I took my time to get married to Gautam for a few reasons. Firstly, my father was very orthodox. He didn't want his children to get married out of the Parsi community; nobody in my family had ever married out of the



community. Also most of the men in my family were in the different degrees of priesthood. So I didn't want to upset him or disappoint him.

The other hurdle was that Gautam, at that point in time, had this image of a guy who partied a lot, drank a lot and smoked a lot (which now he has quit). He was not a person I seriously considered for a lifetime partner. That's why I took my time to agree to the marriage.

When the proposal came, the lawyer in me came to the fore. I grilled him with a whole lot of questions – how will we cope when I am a non-vegetarian, and you are a vegetarian; will I be able follow my passion for fitness or is there any orthodoxy like 'Oh, we don't want our *bahu* dressing in gym gear.' I told him – 'let me know now, and accordingly I will decide.' Only when all these things were cleared did we go ahead, and thank God it worked. I still enjoy my Parsi food. On the other hand, Gautam has very simple tastes when it comes to food. Spice-less and bland stuff are the only things he likes. Unlike me he is not much of a foodie.

Q >> Have you influenced Gautam in terms of fitness?

A >> Yes, I think he has absorbed quite a lot of stuff related to health and fitness from me via osmosis, which he very sweetly and diligently follows.

Q >> What are the things about him that you found interesting earlier, but now maddens you?

A >> His racing! It makes me nervous. As his wife I worry about his safety. Gautam keeps trying to explain to me how high tech all his safety gear is. But I have to say, I remain unconvinced.

Q >> How do you keep your marriage fresh?

A >> Marriage changes things; children change things.

Gautam is very romantic but I am not. To him all the birthday dinners and Valentine's Day dinners are extremely important. I don't see anyone else in our age group going out on Valentine's Day. And these dates are fiercely guarded. God forbid if I have any other plans or we are travelling or something, the house would come down on my head! He is very sweet that way, and very kind and generous. As the age increases, I guess both partners always change. I used to be a lot more hot-



headed, impetuous; I have changed in that sense.

I think you just treat your spouse the way you want to be treated.

Q >> How did you embark on the journey of becoming an artist?

A >> I have always been creatively inclined, be it arts, crafts or stitching. After I delivered my first baby, I was house-bound. That's when I became serious about art and slowly my canvases got larger.

My most recent collection featured portraits of international celebrities like Lady Diana, Oprah Winfrey, David Beckham. It was extremely challenging and frustrating at times but hugely gratifying and empowering. I learnt a lot and grew tremendously as an artist in the process. It took me about 2 years to put the collection together. Looking back I realize it was indeed fun.

Q >> What are the unique challenges of bringing up kids in privileged circumstances?

A >> All parents want their children to be intelligent and hardworking. But I'm also very determined to see my kids grow up to be kind, caring and sensitive individuals. Though my children have access to all the luxuries, I make them earn some of the things they want, so that they're deserving of the same. I engage them in everyday activities, such as cleaning up their room, sorting out their clothes, picking up after themselves, spring cleaning, etc. I got them to learn to stitch, crochet and knit.

At our Alibagh farmhouse I involve them in gardening. They fertilize the soil, sow seeds, water the plants, pick fruits and vegetables, take care of the farm animals, and feed them.

I'm constantly talking to them and impressing upon them good values. I believe in being an available parent.

Q >> How do you influence your children to take up healthy habits?

A >> Kids love Lays chips, popcorn, etc. So I try this strategy with my daughter. I tell her she can have the chips but to be honest and face up to the facts. So you know – take one chip, put it in your mouth and say, 'This is going to make me fat.' Take the second one; put it in your mouth and say, 'This is going to make me ugly.' Next chip – 'It's going to ruin my skin', next one – 'It's going to make me stupid'. Next one, 'This has no nutrition; I am just going to be dumb'. So on and so forth, keep going. And soon she will look at me and tell me 'Mamma, I hate these chips, I don't need them.' And it actually helps.

Even with healthy foods, things you didn't like, you really start liking them if you know what they are doing for you and how good they are for you.

But that doesn't mean I don't give the girls all the yummy things; I make *dosas*, chicken *biryani*s and *pav bhajis*, but they are all made in a very healthy way, like substituting rice with quinoa in *biryani*. These are tricks I have come up with on my own; there are no classes where you can learn these things.

ARCHANA IYER