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## BOUTIQUE QUEEN

Nawaz Modi-Singhania's studios have knitted families for 25 years

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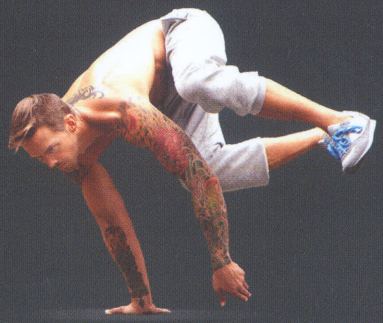

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# Boutique studios far **ahead of the herd**

**Over the past 25 years, Nawaz Modi Singhania's concepts and philosophy have made Body Art into more than just a fitness studio in South Mumbai. Be it working out in the gyms or attending nutrition workshops, Zumba classes or gyrotonics, Pilates or anti-ageing programmes, thousands of its members – some of them spanning three generations of a family – get to mingle with each other, learn more about health, and just have fun!**

Nawaz was born into the Modi family of prominent lawyers in Mumbai. After graduating in the arts, she went on to complete a post-graduate law degree that opened up a promising career avenue; but her heart and passion lay elsewhere.

A fan and practitioner of aerobics, it was in fitness that she decided to chart her own course. Just out of college in the early 1990s, she found little by way of a satisfying learning or working experience in the existing fitness centres in the metropolis.

So off it was to the United States, where she trained, taught and earned her certifications with the American Council on Exercise (ACE) and the International Dance Exercise Association (IDEA). Back home, she attempted to work with a couple of fitness centres; but her experiences in Mumbai forced her to part ways and operate independently.

She started with organising aerobics classes on her own. The initial trickle of clients soon turned into a flow, and later a flood! Starting out at age 21, she offered a couple of aerobics routines, but now has more than 30 of them, to cater to her vast clientele.

### Organic Growth

"My classes grew as I did; and as I was able to do more, there was more to do," she recalls. However, there was one impediment, some people would not take her seriously because she was not running a "gym". So it was that Body Art was born in 1992, with the latest equipment, programmes, trainers and workouts. She had now truly arrived!

Not one to rest with a run-on-the-treadmill gym, Nawaz then introduced Pilates (mat and equipment-based), indoor cycling, functional fitness, pre- and post-natal programmes and aqua aerobics to her clients. She followed it up with Zumba, Boxercise, Hi-Low Fusion, dance aerobics, body sculpting, Swiss ball training, circuit training, trampoline workouts, stress management workshops and muscle ballet.

Body Art now runs from two premises – one off Marine Drive and the other off Hughes Road – in South Mumbai. They are both fully air-conditioned, with the whole range of strength training and cardio equipment, and have attached showers, changing rooms and lockers – and valet parking!

Each Body Art studio is divided into "units": the gym (strength and cardio), the aerobics workshop, Pilates and gyrotonics hub, and the aqua aerobics section. They are operated 365 days a year by a team of trained fitness professionals, and each studio sees a footfall of 300 members on any given day. And many of them are third-generation Body Art members!

Next came specialised programmes for special needs, in the form of gyrotonics (equipment-based) and gyrokinesis. So what is the latest? Body Art has also introduced anti-ageing "facial fitness" and anti-gravity (hammock-based) training in its repertoire – undoubtedly a first in the Indian fitness and wellness industry.

### Service & Empathy

All this hasn't come about the easy way. She has had to break mental barriers and penetrate clouds of misinformation to make people, as well as her staff, aware about various aspects of fitness and the nuances of the business. 'Education', both for the layman and her staff, is her daily mantra and constant endeavour.

Nawaz has an uncanny eye for detail and ability to connect with her studio members, and that stands her in good stead. She knows each member by name, and lays great stress on empathy. "All my trainers and the sales force are attuned to being sensitive to each client, to the smallest thing in the gym," she says.

She is against belling all members like cows. "Operating gyms is part of the service industry. The 'Hey-there-you-in-the-red-shirt' approach will never work," she says. She has her staff record and understand each member's medical history, their goals (weight loss/gain, strength, rehabilitation, etc.) and programmes (cardio, diet, weights, aerobics, etc.), their likes and dislikes, and progress reports.

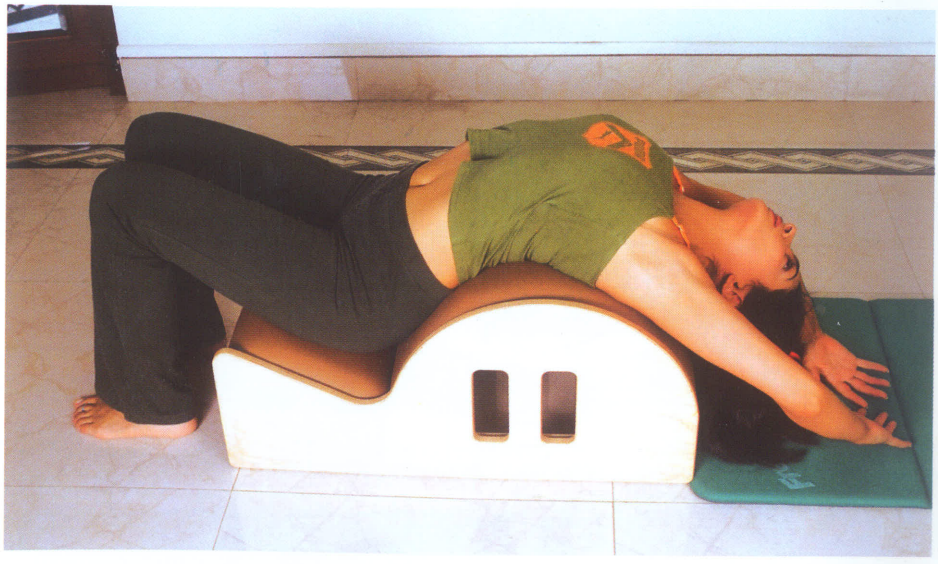
> "My clients come back to the gym regularly, and when they see their (not-so-perfect) trainers get better, it boosts their morale and gets them motivated.

"Many would hate to work out with music blaring in the gym; others might simply react better to and enjoy dance-based workouts; while still others might prefer high-intensity training," she notes. Because "without our members there is no gym, no business", her staff is trained to make each visit to Body Art a pleasant and fulfilling experience.

### Gymming Gyaan

How does she see the fitness industry in India? It is still in its infancy, she says, adding that there is tremendous scope for expansion, diversification and specialisation. But she is alarmed at half-baked knowledge and is strictly opposed to cutting corners.

"Many studio owners and trainers don't look at it holistically – health and fitness together. Quite often ▶



fitness is achieved at the cost of health," she remarks, pointing to physical and mental repercussions on members on account of improper facilities and training methods. These would manifest themselves by way of exhaustion, pain and injury, demotivation, boredom and laxity towards the fitness regimen.

"If India had regulations in place for safety and accountability for the fitness industry, we would not come out with flying colours," she says. "All business has to focus on the bottom line, and this is equally true of fitness and wellness centres. But it should not come at the cost of ethics and professional integrity."

If there are pressures from clients about achieving goals, or from the accounts people about profits, it would be the responsibility of experts within the industry to educate the public, not succumb to them. "We have to develop and nurture our own markets. Creating awareness and spreading knowledge are the only ways, as I see it," Nawaz says.

She knows what she is talking about – she sits on the board of directors of the textile and apparel giant, Raymond Limited, and is married to its Chairman and Managing Director, Gautam Singhania.

### Education, Education

Nawaz continues to participate in several fitness conferences, workshops and conventions, including those held in America, Australia, the UK and Singapore. She constantly keeps upgrading her certifications and skills. Their benefits are also passed on to her trainers and other studio staff, who she recruits and trains personally.

> "Cancer can be attributed to our negativity, to our long-festering hatred, bitterness, dislikes and frustrations in life. This negativity maps down to our body cells. Exercising releases our 'happy hormones', which in turn help drive away negativity.

The inevitable question: how does she choose her trainers? She rues the fact that most people fresh out of certification courses fail to make the grade. "Many don't know anything from anything. They come with little or no idea of anatomy or kinesiology, form or movement; the importance of warming up or cooling down; they have no idea of processes," she says.

But, keeping her members in mind, she chooses from those with "likeability and approachability". She looks for those with a keen sense of observation, eagerness to learn, those having empathy (for the members) and some communication skills. As time goes by she personally teaches and nurtures the interns in not only fitness training, but also good etiquette, communication and responsiveness.

Perfect bodies are good in any gym, she agrees, but says their perfection can be demotivating and intimidating to many "unfit" clients. Some trainers at Nawaz's studios are "bigger", or overweight, or not fully fit. "But I watch their journeys. From being overweight and unfit they are improving each month, and inspiring my members. 'If s/he (trainer) can do it, so can I'." That is what Nawaz wants her members to sense and feel motivated with!

How about children being administered formal workouts? "That is a sure way of removing all the fun from their lives, make them hate fitness!" she declares. "Don't we see them happily running, hopping, dancing and prancing around all day long? How many children really walk? They climb trees, jump, skip, skate and play football – that is enough exercise for the tots."

Yes, some overweight children might need a light fitness programme – preferably fun-filled activities – combined with the correct nutrition under expert supervision. "But for god's sake, don't scar them for life, don't crush their self-esteem by calling them fat or sloppy!" Nawaz stresses.

Into their teens children's workouts can progress towards adult programmes, but only if they are capable of and are training and conditioning for competitive sports.

### Workouts For All

The impressive thing about Body Art is its vast repertoire of fitness programmes for all types of members.

Pilates and aqua aerobics are especially recommended for those with arthritis, lumbar and cervical injuries, postural problems and post-surgical rehabilitation and recovery. "Since water bears 90% of human body weight, it helps these people train very easily," she notes.

Then there are pre- and post-natal classes and fitness regimes. "Women these days are better educated and aware about themselves. Nobody wants to become fat and ugly and remain that way after childbirth," Nawaz beams, and goes on to say that the fitter the mother, the fitter will be the baby.

These classes specifically cater to leg cramps and urinary incontinence, Lordosis (pressure on neck and back as the pregnant woman leans to balance her growing foetus), and nutrition and weight control. "Only as much (food and weight) as the mother and child require," is Nawaz's diktat!

Body Art also conducts programmes in gyrokinesis (free-hand) and gyrotonics (equipment-based), where a four-dimensional workout helps the body move in all directions. It is more than functional fitness and Pilates, Nawaz says, adding: "It helps you become super-mobile, along with power and agility. It is best suited for trainers, dancers and competitive athletes."

What Mother Nature gives, Father Time takes away. As the human body ages, it ceases to function at optimal levels, starting with little aches, limping (problems with joint lubrication), blood pressure abnormalities, muscle degeneration and the accompanying debility. There are special packages for senior citizens too.

"People should realise that they need a fitness regimen, more so in old age than when they were young. Aches and pains, the onset of blood pressure problems and arthritis make fitness centres even more relevant to them," Nawaz notes, adding that modern medicine practice focuses more on cure than prevention.

There is a compulsory medical check-up, followed by customisation of fitness programmes that depend on a member's fitness levels and needs, enthusiasm and attitude. "We make them understand that if they have physical problems, we are there to help them. Much of the pain and physical problems can be prevented, corrected and even reversed," she adds.

## Face Value

As age catches up with the human body, the "laugh lines", double chin, drooping eyelids, crow's feet, furrows on the forehead and heavy jowls make their appearance. But it does not have to always be that way! "It is these signs, more than greying hair or baldness, that give away one's age," says Nawaz.

Body Art has its USP: anti-ageing programmes that lift facial muscles and reshape them! Facial Fitness and Callanetics check and reverse the damage wrought by age by working out deep tissues, says Nawaz. She talks about Facial Fitness in an ongoing daily television programme – Active Fitness on TataSky – and is among experts roped in by actor Suniel Shetty's company, Brilliant Fitness.

From the slew of programmes designed for all body types, ages and sexes, one would think of Body Art as being a prohibitively costly studio to enrol in; but that is not the case. What of the cut-throat competition among gyms to undercut each other's membership fees? "My mission is more about giving value to my members," Nawaz insists. "Why fit in when we were made to stand out? If you go with the herd, you only get as far as the herd," she notes.