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— the female gaze —

January 2020
Vol 4 Issue 1
₹1.50

Meghna Ghai Puri

The president of
India's leading
film school is
empowering a
new generation
of filmmakers



ART WITH HEART

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Sharma and Rohini
Devasher blaze a trail

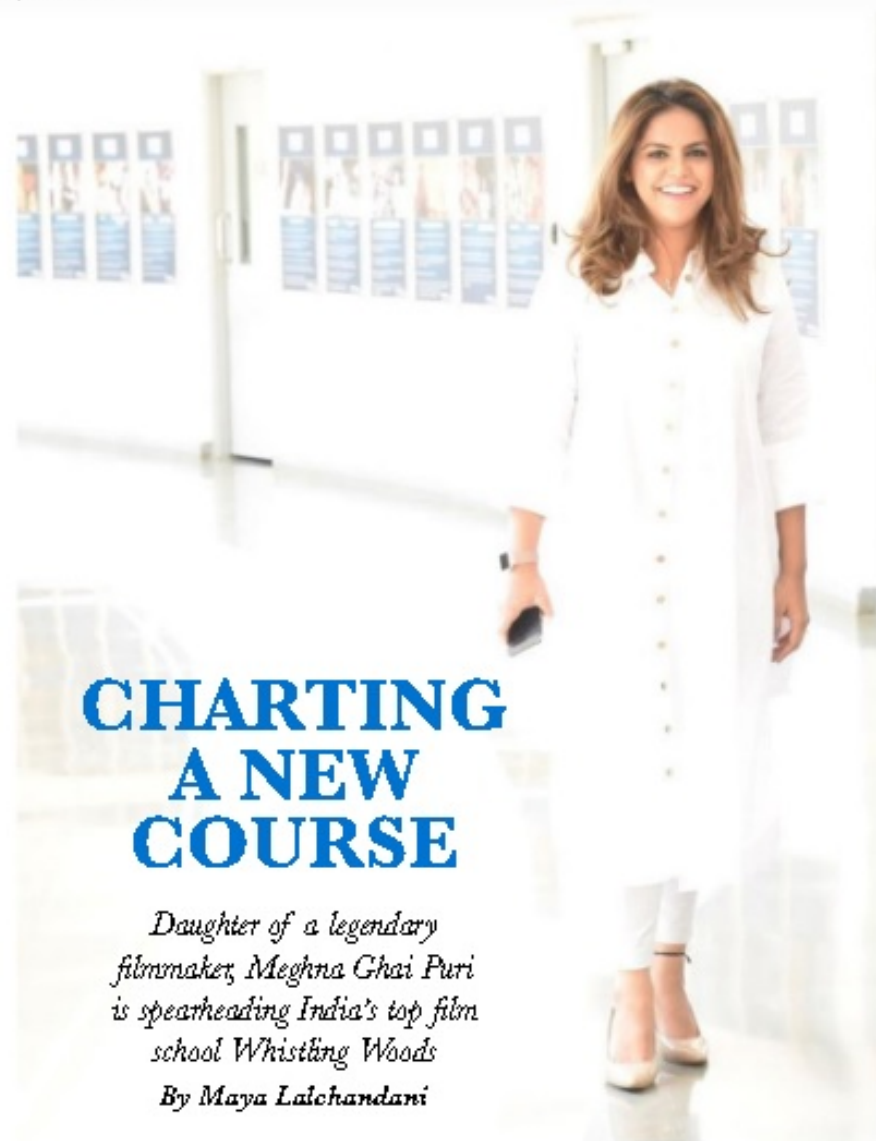
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CHARTING A NEW COURSE

Daughter of a legendary filmmaker, Meghna Ghai Puri is spearheading India's top film school Whistling Woods

By Maya Lalchandani

Following in the footsteps of a legend can be daunting, but Meghna Ghai Puri has worn her mantle with dignity and re-

sponsibility. Daughter of Bollywood director, producer and screenwriter Subhash Ghai, Meghna has charted her own path as a change catalyst,

bringing together her immersion in the world of films with her passion for skilling and education.

The president of Whistling Woods International (WWI), ranked as one of the top 10 film schools in the world by Hollywood Reporter, Meghna has changed the way the industry works, by producing edu-

was two years old when the Hindi blockbuster *Kare* was released and her father's company Mukta Arts was formed. "When I was growing up, the type of luxuries I can afford to impart to my two children today were just not available," the 41-year-old mother of two recalls. She was schooled "just down the



Meghna with parents Mukta and Subhash Ghai, husband Rahul, sister Muskaan, and kids Aanya and Ranveer

cated trained talent to take over the next generation of filmmaking.

WWI began as her father's dream, but it took Meghna many years of hard work to lead it to its formidable position. As a little girl, she had a protected middle-class childhood, far from media frenzy and the glamour of today's Bollywood. She

road at a convent," she smiles, adding that people looked down on the film industry in those days, and she would only talk about movies to the peons and watchmen in her school, sharing free tickets with them.

As her father's name and fame grew, she completed her schooling and went to study business at Kings



Meghna with her husband Rahul Puri; both launched and run Whistling Woods International together

College in London where she met her husband Rahul. When she returned, her father insisted she take over the helm of his dream film-school project. "They wanted me to be super-independent before I tied the knot," she says. Hesitantly, in 2001, she donned the mantle at WWI, afraid that it may just end up as the pipedream of a filmmaker. The couple got married in 2002.

In retrospect, Meghna says, "WWI was the best thing that happened to me at the time, because if I had come back and joined Mukta

Arts, which had already been running for 30 years with all the old timers, I would not have been able to add much value." Launched in

"THE YOUNGER GENERATION DON'T NEED MORE INFORMATION; WHAT THEY NEED IS MENTORSHIP"

2006 as a school run by the industry for the industry, WWI places a high emphasis on technical skilling. Built over 150,000 sq feet on five and half acres in Mumbai's Film City, it started out with 82 students and now boasts of over 1100 and is considered Asia's largest film, TV, animation and media arts institute

"When anyone in the industry



Meghna receiving the Economic Times Award for her contributions to the fields of film and creative arts

sees WWI mentioned on the resume of an entrant or job applicant, they immediately sign up that student because they know the background that he or she comes from," Meghna says with pride. The exposure kids get at WWI is unparalleled, as teachers and facilitators are often brought in from abroad. WWI offers programmes between one to four years in duration and, though it is not a University itself, it has partnered with the Tata Institute of the Sciences to ratify all its courses with BSc, BA and BBA degrees, and advanced and post-graduate diplomas.

"The younger generation is very difficult to impress, since everything is available on Google," says

Meghna. "They really don't need more information; what they need is mentorship. They need guidance more than facts." As the head of academics at WWI and the MD of Mukta Arts, Rahul has played an equally important role in building the film school, and the couple have together written every handbook and rulebook needed for the courses. "We have pronounced roles and have built strong teams around us, empowering them to do what they do best," avers Meghna, who is the recipient of various awards as a woman achiever.

It has not been smooth sailing. In their seventh year of operations, they were rocked with a lawsuit



L-R: Meghna Ghai Puri with her children Anya and Ranveer; with her filmmaker father, Subhash Ghai

from the Indian government, and faced a shutdown. This was a tough time for them, but they didn't give up. Instead, WWI diversified into media and communication, fashion, music, design, animation and so on. Luckily, they got a stay order and remained functional, though things are still being worked out.

"The whole idea behind an educational system like WWI is to give back to the industry and also in a way to society. We have students from all kinds of backgrounds and we cater to all without discrimination. We are not subsidised, and yet we offer a lot of scholarships as I believe one should never restrict a student's education because of lack

of money," says Meghna, who also supports street kids' education with scholarships through NGOs like Salaam Balak Trust and Vidhya.

A practising Buddhist, she believes that all WWI employees should be able to maintain a work-life balance, and staffers' children are welcome on campus. "Working parents have to be hands-on," she says.

Today, Meghna encourages her heads of department to make their own decisions, while remaining their sounding board and managing damage control. "I don't think one can ever get *everything* right but the key is to pour your heart into whatever you are involved in," says the change-maker. ■