



Varsha delivers freshly ironed clothes to a customer in Gurgaon.

Aditya Kapoor/Getty

Dreaming Big in the New India

India's economy has boomed in recent years, pulling millions out of poverty. *New York Times* reporter Somini Sengupta, who covered India for four years, profiles an ambitious young woman striving for a better life.

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By Somini Sengupta

Saturday night in the Indian suburb of Gurgaon. The sky turned from blue to black, the burnt-toast smell of fireworks blew across the [ravine](#), and a tall, broad-shouldered girl named Varsha, 17, hauled a heavy iron over the [shimmering](#) clothes of others.

Quietly, quickly, she pressed the wrinkles out of a flowing brushed-pink tunic, then another the color of lime juice, followed by three button-down white shirts. Her cellphone [trilled](#). A customer was calling, with a wedding to attend, maybe several, because it was wedding season, which explained the firecrackers. It was Varsha's job to make sure they didn't show up all rumpled.

Varsha* comes from a long line of dhobis—a community low on the Hindu caste** ladder whose ritual occupation for centuries had been to wash and press other people's clothes. The last thing Varsha wanted to do was grow up to be a dhobi, or worse, a dhobi's wife. She dreamt of going to college and then becoming a cop. She saw herself in a starched, pressed policewoman's uniform, gold stars on her shoulders, able to protect women and girls like her from the thugs on

the street. This [conviction](#) became all the more urgent after India was roiled by the violent attack on a young woman in the winter of 2012—a young woman a lot like Varsha, also a dreamer, trying to be somebody.

Varsha’s ambitions sometimes puzzled her father, Madan Mohan. At other times it made him sick with worry. There was no way he was going to let her grow up to be a cop. College too, he wasn’t so sure. He saw it as his responsibility to find her a good husband by the time she turned 20. A man from a good family, with the ability to protect and provide for his daughter.

Her father was her champion. But he was also the defender of the very values that [circumscribe](#) the life of a girl like Varsha. He too wanted her to break free of her past—but not too much. She kept pushing the bounds. And he kept having to figure out how far to let her go.

Varsha was like so many young Indians of her generation—born with one destiny, trying to write another.



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Today, this generation is changing their country in all kinds of important ways, and it will inevitably have a bearing on all our lives. Why? Because India is on its way to becoming the most populous country in the world: By 2022, its population will exceed China’s. More important, India is already home to the largest number of young people anywhere in the world, at any time in recorded human history. There are 365 million Indians between the ages of 10 and 24—more than the entire population of the United States.

Every month, 1 million Indians turn 18. The challenges are immense.

Modern India was born in 1947. At midnight on August 15 that year, it became independent from Britain, which had colonized it for decades.

Indians of that generation became known as midnight's children. My father was among them. When he first went to school, only half of all Indian kids were enrolled in class. The average Indian lived to the age of 32. The average Indian woman bore more than six children. Hunger stalked the land.

Much has changed. The average Indian now lives far longer, babies are far less likely to die, and all kids are enrolled in primary school. Thanks to the rise in women's education, fertility rates have sharply declined: The average Indian mom has just over two kids.

Some of the most dramatic changes kicked off in 1991. That's when the government began to open up its economy. Slowly, quietly, it unleashed lots of Indian entrepreneurs. New kinds of jobs sprang up. [Aspirations](#) swelled, especially among those who have come of age since then.

I call this generation noonday's children. They are impatient, hungry, burning with red-hot ambition, like Varsha. And their story is the story of aspiration, but also of aspiration [thwarted](#).

Consider these facts: Nearly a third of all Indian children remain clinically malnourished, which means that they struggle to learn and they get sick more easily.

Nearly all Indian children are enrolled in primary school—even girls, who for a long time were far less likely to go to school than boys—and yet, they often learn very little. One study by a national nonprofit called Pratham found that half of all fifth-graders could not read a second-grade textbook, nor subtract.

Not least, India has an imbalance between the number of boys and girls in the population. That's because many parents prefer a son over a daughter, and with ultrasound tests that make it possible to determine the sex of a fetus in the womb, they often abort females. The 2011 census found 17 million extra men and boys among Indians between age 10 and 24.

And so today, even though India is home to the largest number of young people anywhere, a lot stands in the way for India's young, especially its girls.

Varsha was a baby in 1998 when her father moved the family from the capital, New Delhi, to a new suburb coming up on the outskirts, called Gurgaon.

He set up an ironing stand. It had a tin roof held up by four bamboo poles, and a flat piece of marble on a cement platform to serve as an ironing board.

Varsha grew up here. As soon as she could find her way around the neighborhood, she began going house to house to pick up and deliver clothes. She learned to load coal into the heavy, old fashioned iron. She learned to smooth away wrinkles.

Juggling Clothes & Books

When Varsha was 6, her father found a school for her. It was free, run by a local charity. It borrowed space from a private school, and so it was blessed with the things that the local government-run schools lacked: tables and chairs, colorful posters, and teachers who showed up to teach. Classes were conducted in English, which gave its students the ability to communicate in the language of the modern, global economy.

Shubha, one of the first homeowners on the block, watched Varsha grow up. This was an unusually driven child, Shubha quickly realized. Varsha would come to deliver stacks of clothes and stay behind to read Shubha's books. Next, she was demanding Shubha's help with homework. Soon, she was using the family's computer. Shubha marveled at her [gumption](#).

"My own children," she said, "don't have the aspiration that she has."

Varsha inhaled everything school had to offer: math, volleyball, music—everything. And as she grew older, she juggled school with all her chores at home: making fresh bread every night for her family of seven, hanging laundry to dry, helping her brothers and sisters with their homework. Still, she was single-mindedly focused on doing well in her own studies. School was her refuge. It was also her exit ticket out of the ironing stand.

Varsha’s father was pleased to see what a devoted student she was. The last thing he wanted for her was to follow in his footsteps. “I have been pressing clothes all my life,” he said once. “The main thing I want for my children is that they do something better.”

But the more educated she became, the more assertive she became. She wanted to learn how to dance. He said no. She wanted to go on field trips. He said no.

“She is growing wings,” he once complained to the school principal, by which he meant that she was becoming too independent. “She’s talking back.”



Udit Kulshrestha/Bloomberg via Getty Images

One million Indians turn 18 every month; young people at a mall in New Delhi.

Still Plotting, Still Pushing

The idea of becoming a police officer first came when she went with her father to hear a talk by Gurgaon’s assistant commissioner of police—a woman who spoke of growing up in a poor family, in a mud hut. She said she had studied hard, aced the police exam, and risen up the ranks of the Gurgaon police department.

Varsha was moved. If she can do it, Varsha thought to herself, why can’t I?

Anyway, it suited her personality. “I’m like a boy at school,” she said. Unlike other girls, she never once asked boys to help her, say, lift a heavy chair in the classroom. “I’m independent. I can do my work. My nickname at school is ‘Proactive.’”

But when Varsha said she wanted to take the police service exam, her father shot it down immediately. No way, he said. How would he find a husband for her? No respectable family would allow a daughter-in-law to roam around arresting bad guys any time of day and night.

Varsha found it hard to let go of the idea, especially after a woman, just a few years older, was gang-raped as she returned home from a movie one night in December 2012. The woman died of her injuries, but only after telling her story to the police—and in turn, sparking protests by young people across the country.

Varsha was 16 at the time. It strengthened her resolve to try and be a cop. And anyway, since the attack, police departments were looking to hire more women. This too was an argument she made to her father.

His answer was still no.

It’s not that her father didn’t love her. He loved her fiercely. He wanted her to have a good life. But if she saw in the attack a call for her to serve her country, he saw in it a chilling confirmation of all that he feared. The attack seemed to make him all the more protective, to rein in his daughter even more.

In May 2013, Varsha aced her 10th grade exams, which in India is sort of like the end of American high school. Many kids stop going to school after 10th grade. But not Varsha. She earned the second-highest score in her class, forcing her father to let her continue her education.

In 11th grade, Varsha reluctantly signed up to take business classes because her father had it in his head that she could get a job at a bank, which he regarded as a suitable place for a young woman to work. A teacher said there were jobs in accounting, so Varsha signed up for an accounting class too. It was a breeze—and boring. She saw every hour spent on accounting homework as time away from her real goal: preparing for the police exam.

“Now I’ve changed my dreams. In my heart it’s still there: Can I become a police officer?” she told me then. “But when I see my family situation, my confidence gets down.”

Bright, [headstrong](#) Varsha. Her ambitions were repeatedly [doused](#). And yet, she kept cutting new paths for herself.

In May 2015, she nailed her 12th-grade exams, scoring so high that her father had to let her go to university.

She turns 20 this September. For now, she’s staved off marriage talk. She rides the metro every day to attend classes at Delhi University. She’s not sure she can ever persuade her father to let her be a cop, but she is still pushing him every step of the way.

U.S. & India

Population

321
million

1.3
billion

Per Capita GDP

\$55,800

\$6,200

Literacy Rate

99%

63%