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This is the most optimistic time for women entrepreneurs in the history of our planet, says Silicon Valley angel investor

- > Silicon Valley-based serial angel investor and philanthropist Asha Jadeja Motwani has an eye out for social enterprises, especially those headed by women.
- > One of the reasons for her bias is that women face greater challenges both within the home and outside it.



AEKTA KAPOOR

When Asha Jadeja Motwani speaks, throngs of entrepreneurs gather around and listen. The US-based serial angel investor was in India recently to launch a one-of-a-kind think tank that will promote disruptive technology out of India. "The idea is to foster tighter bonds between Silicon

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One of the reasons for her bias is that women face greater challenges both within the home and outside it. "Of course, challenges are everywhere, not just for women," she tells us. "That said, 2018 has been a pivotal year for women. The #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns have put the spotlight not just on sexual harassment at workplaces but also on how skewed the gender balance is in most industries. People have started becoming very conscious of the fact that in these big tech companies there are, like, three women in a whole department full of men."



Asha, who completed her Ph.D in political science from University of California at Berkeley after doing her Masters and undergraduate studies in urban planning and

civil engineering from the University of Southern California, is "delighted" that the #MeToo movement has caught on in India, and that concrete action has been taken against sexual predators.

"Here, the level of sexual harassment is worse. So I'm glad women are speaking up. This movement is also opening the door to the fact that women *should* have equal access to jobs, they are equal citizens, and should have an equal voice at the workplace. This is the most optimistic time for women entrepreneurs in the history of our planet," she affirms.

A celebrated entrepreneur, philanthropist and founder of 'MakerFest' in India, Brazil, Pakistan and Africa, Asha was also greatly exposed to Silicon Valley culture and mindset through her late husband Rajeev Motwani, who was a Stanford Professor, an internationally acclaimed computer scientist, theoretician and angel investor. He was the architect of Google's algorithmic architecture that powers the world's leading search engine today. He also mentored Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the co-founders of Google Inc, in 1998 at Stanford University.

Following in his thought philosophy, Asha's new non-profit think tank, christened MITLI (Motwani Institute of Thought Leadership in Innovation), would facilitate exchanges in key academic fields such as computer science, material science, education, health-tech, policy design and political science to give wings to aspirations of emerging entrepreneurs. She also plans to recruit



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“MITLI will be a permanent organisation designed to more systematically address the challenges through our entrepreneurial empowerment programmes,” Asha said during the Delhi launch packed by mediapersons and entrepreneurs.

“My vision is to catalyze innovation and entrepreneurship in India at the grassroots level. Student exchanges between Stanford and South Asia will fuel key new vectors in our own research and teaching agenda,” said Asha, who has invested in more than a hundred Internet and high social impact startups in the Bay Area, Boston, New York, Africa and India, some of which have become public companies.

Asha has also launched the annual Rajeev Circle Fellowship, with the objective of developing a dynamic corridor of entrepreneurship, collaboration and community between Silicon Valley and South Asia. In particular, it helps Indian entrepreneurs connect with mentors and angel investors in Silicon Valley. “We had 60 Fellows this year, of which 40 are women,” says Asha, as an example of affirmative action to increase women’s participation in the world of tech.

She cites the example of Kalyani Khona, founder of INCLOV, a unique dating app for people with disabilities, who was a Rajeev Fellow and whose app has broken ground both in the world of dating and technology. Asha is also looking at mentoring another woman-led startup that works as a peer-to-peer support system for those with mental illness.

We need to have more conferences centred on women in tech, Asha goes on. “It will give more women confidence to come up. There are a few women here and there on certain forums, but the critical mass is missing. We need more badass women on stage,” she says, with a straight face.

“When that happens, we will see a tipping point. When women are unafraid to voice their opinions and are unafraid of being judged (and if you’re judged, so be it, it doesn’t matter), then we’ll see true change.”

Asha ends on an optimistic note: “These are good times for women. They must ride the change.”

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