

DESTINATION INDIA

# Training India's next generation of female pilots

Kate Springer, CNN • Updated 22nd November 2018



**Investing in women:** A group of student pilots prepares for flight at Banasthali Vidyapith's School of Aviation. Since its establishment in 1962, the all-women flight school has produced more than 5,000 alumnae. Courtesy Banasthali Vidyapith

(CNN) — On a dusty, 3,600-foot-long airstrip in Rajasthan, [India](#), a two-seater white Cessna 152 pivots into position. A few moments later, it's soaring over the empty desert into a cloudless blue sky.

This is the private runway at 1,100-acre [Banasthali Vidyapith](#) -- one of India's premier women's universities.





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Photography is now an essential part of any holiday, so here's a creative guide to taking the best pictures in locations like tropical Sentosa island.

Since its establishment in 1962, the university's School of Aviation has produced more than 5,000 alumnae, with dozens more in the pipeline.

"In a country where many people don't want to invest in girls, which is the mentality of most traditional families, Banasthali Vidyapith creates a place where women are equally important," Captain Tarana Saxena, a recent graduate, tells CNN Travel.

"They give girls a chance to learn about aviation ... a chance to fly."

## **A big step for women**



In 2016, Indian Minister of Defence Manohar Parrikar congratulates the Indian Air Force's first three female fighter pilots: Bhawana Kanth (L), Avani Chaturvedi (C) and Mohana Singh.

NOAH SEELAM/AFP/AFP/Getty Images

The inspiration for Banasthali Vidyapith University sprung from tragedy.

Founder Hiralal Shastri, a politician who was born into a peasant family in Rajasthan, relocated to the village of Vanasthali in 1929 with his family.

In this rural outpost, about 50 miles south of Jaipur, he founded a social program to reconstruct the village and educate local farmers.

At a very young age, his daughter embraced his passion and began holding classes for village children.

Tragically, she fell ill at the age of 12 and passed away.

Encouraged by his wife, Shastri set out to educate and empower young women, a dream they had envisioned for their own daughter.

And so Banasthali Vidyapith opened in 1935 with seven students -- all girls -- and now offers more than 28 disciplines, including doctoral degrees.

"Having access to education was a big step for women in India," says Saxena.

"The idea was not to keep girls separate from boys, but to give girls a chance to evolve -- to excel in something, to learn, to evolve their minds."

## Taking off



The university introduced its Gliding & Flying Club in the 1960s. Pictured here, former student Chanda Agarwala (formerly Chanda More) sits in the pilot seat during a training session more than four decades ago.

Courtesy Banasthali Vidyapith

At Banasthali Vidyapith, the curriculum is based on the concept of "Panchmukhi Shiksha," which the university describes as the "harmonious development of personality."

The university offers a wide range of departments, including law, design, science, nanotechnology and literature.

It introduced its Gliding & Flying Club with a fleet of five aircraft in the 1960s, when only a handful of female pilots existed in the world.

At first, the aviation training was intended to help women build confidence as part of the schools holistic program.

It evolved into a School of Aviation, where women could later pursue a student's license, bachelor's degree or a commercial pilot's license.



# “They give girls a chance to learn about aviation ... a chance to fly.”

## **Captain Tarana Saxena**

Even for those who wish to acquire a student pilot's license, rather than pursue aviation as a career, Banasthali provides 5-10 hours of free flying lessons.

"At a time when it was considered unreal and absurd for women to drive cars in the country, we were teaching girls how to fly," Aditya Shastri, grandson of founder Pandit Hiralal Shastri, tells CNN Travel.

Over the years, the aviation school has since turned out many of India's top female pilots, including Avani Chaturvedi, whom the country celebrated as its first female fighter pilot in 2016.

Chaturvedi made history again in February, when the 24-year-old became India's first woman to fly a fighter aircraft solo.

## **A patch of turbulence**



Captain Tarana Saxena poses with beside a Cessna at Banasthali Vidyapith University.

Tarana Saxena

Growing up in the town of Bilari, in Uttar Pradesh, Saxena has had her eyes on the sky ever since her parents gave her a toy airplane when she was about five years old.

"Even though the toy couldn't actually fly, I remember playing with it, and wondering how these things stayed in the sky," says Saxena.

She lived in a town where there was no airport, not many people spoke English and it was a big deal if a girl rode a bike.

"Luckily, I grew up with parents who supported me," says Saxena. "One day my father saw an ad for the flying club in the newspaper and he applied for me, when I was still in boarding school [high school]."

But pursuing aviation isn't easy. For starters, it's expensive. At least 200 flight hours are required to achieve a commercial pilot's license and each hour costs Rs10,000 (\$135).

In total, the license will cost roughly 20-35 lakh Indian Rupees, or about US\$28-47,000, though the university provides scholarship programs.

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"Banasthali is trying to nurture more women leaders in aviation," Professor Seema Verma, dean of the School of Aviation, tells CNN Travel.

"A lot of Indian parents don't want to spend so much on training for their daughters. There are exceptions, of course. Some parents have dreams (for their daughters) in sync with our mission."

Saxena says her parents -- her mom, a doctor who works with unprivileged people; her father, a professor -- endured an onslaught of judgment from neighbors, who questioned their investment in a girl.

"We live in a society where people judge -- why are you spending so much on your daughter? Why are you letting your daughter to that? Girls can't drive. How can they fly?"

Saxena's parents encouraged her to ignore the noise and follow her dream.

"No one in my family was ever in the aviation industry. But my parents wanted us to be whatever we wanted to be -- my sister wanted to be a doctor, she is a doctor. I wanted to be a pilot, I am a pilot."

**“At a time when it was considered unreal and absurd for women to drive cars in the country, we were teaching girls how to fly.”**

**Aditya Shastri**

## **Living the dream**

When Saxena moved to Banasthali in 2012, she couldn't wait to take her first flight.

In December 2013, the day finally arrived. An instructor accompanied her as she settled into the cockpit of a Cessna 152A, a common training aircraft.

"I remember my instructor warned me that I might feel dizzy or a little nauseous, but I didn't feel anything but excitement," says Saxena.

"I couldn't believe how amazing it felt to be in the air. I wanted five more minutes, 10 more minutes...I wanted it to last forever."

She says flying felt exactly the way she imagined it.

"It's rare to dream about something, then have it come true."

She earned her Bachelor's degree in Aviation Science followed by a commercial pilot license, which required a series of eight exams, in about five years.

After graduation, Saxena says she fielded job offers from Spicejet, Air Asia & Vistara and, this year, secured her dream job at IndiGo.

"I chose IndiGo because it has the Airbus 320, which I prefer to fly, and it has the female factor -- Indigo employs the highest number of female pilots in India (with 14%). Everything at the company is based on merit.

"I do not represent a phenomena of any kind. I just hope that having more women pilots in India can change perceptions (about gender). How does gender determine one's abilities?"

It was unusual to see a woman in a cockpit in India when the university started its on-campus aviation school in the 1960s.

Today, roughly 5% of commercial pilots worldwide are women, according to the [Centre for Aviation](#).



In India, 12% of the country's pilots are women -- the highest percentage in the world. That's roughly three times the proportion in the US, where just 4% are women.

Harsh Vardhan, founder of Starair Consulting and an expert on India's aviation industry, says the momentum started after post-independence from Britain in the 1950s.

"In the past, we come from traditional mindset, so not many women were really coming out for jobs," says Vardhan.

"They weren't pursuing aviation as a career -- they were more housewives and preferred to work in sectors like education and in a secured environment."

He says former prime ministers like Indira Gandhi -- India's first female prime minister -- played a major role in encouraging women to come forward, as did her son, Rajiv Gandhi.

"It's the role models that create the success stories and then others start following," says Vardhan. "Women like Kalpana Chawla, the first female astronaut from India, are a great inspiration."

Today, Vardhan estimates there are more than 2,600 women flying for private airlines, as navy and helicopter pilots, and in other aviation related capacities across India.

"Now women can learn in all flying institutes across the country, but Banasthali Vidyapith is one of the prime institutions that has been in the forefront of women's education in India," says Vardhan.

"In another five or 10 years, you are going to be looking at this ratio up to 20% or more. It will take time, but it will grow when we choose pilots based on merit."

09 April, 2019

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## Banasthali & BITS, Pilani score big in NIRF ranking

TNN | Updated: Apr 9, 2019, 10:52 IST



JAIPUR: For the second year consecutively, Rajasthan University (RU) has failed to secure a position in the top 100 universities of the country. The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), 2019, India Rankings were released by president Ram Nath Kovind on Monday in New Delhi.

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## **Youth Money Olympiad 2019 award**

Our Bureau Chennai June 16 | Updated on June 16, 2019 Published on June 16, 2019

The sixth edition of the Youth Money Olympiad, conceptualised and rolled out by Money-Wizards, a senior IIM alumni venture, presented the Youth Money Olympiad 2019 award to Gaurav Arora from SRCC (Shriram College of Commerce), New Delhi. Anirudh Tumuluri from IIM Udaipur and Kuldeep Singla from IIM Rohtak secured the second and third prizes, respectively.

Prof Harsh Purohit from Banasthali University bagged the ‘Financial Literacy Thought’ leader award, while Raveena Goel from the same university won the ‘Campus Entrepreneur’ of the year award. The event that conducted with the theme ‘Personal Finance Knowledge at Young Age — The Need of the Hour’ saw participation of more than 30,000 students from 400 plus colleges across the country, according to a statement.

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# No river is bigger than the grit of this Kathak danseuse to clean it

Dancer-poet and eco warrior Arushi Nishank shares about her passion for depolluting rivers, and combining this cause with her training in Indian classical arts.

ART-AND-CULTURE Updated: Jul 11, 2019 17:09 IST



Henna Rakheja  
Hindustan Times



Kathak dancer Arushi Nishank has been working for the cause of cleaning rivers since 18 years.

Performing [artists](#) often take up social or environmental causes through their [art](#). And then there are some artists who go beyond the stage to devote themselves to these causes. Delhi-based Kathak danseuse Arushi Nishank is one such personality, who has been leading the cause of cleaning our rivers since 18 years.

“If we all come together, and clean whichever river is near us, then we will definitely achieve our goal. And, the government must impose a penalty on those who pollute the rivers.”

Nishank is an active promoter of Namami Gange Mission and Sparsh Ganga Campaign. These projects were conceived to clean river Ganga and raise awareness among people, towards the rising pollution in rivers. “When Hanuman had to go to Lanka to find Sita, he didn’t know what powers he had. The counseling he got then was like a wake-up call. We give such wake-up call

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movement of sorts that we have put together to save our rivers. I believe that no river is bigger than our grit... If we all come together and clean whichever river is near us, then we will definitely achieve our goal. And, the government must impose a penalty on those who pollute the rivers,” opines Nishank, who is also an entrepreneur and a poet with two published works.

Nishank, however, didn’t envision that she will multitask so much. In fact, even taking up classical dance wasn’t on her mind, but says that it all happened as she grew up. She recalls, “I used to be very fat and chubby in my school days, and was a student jisko dance group se bahar nikal diya jata tha. My dance teacher thought I couldn’t dance well because of my weight. After moving out from that school, I received training for about 10 years — including learning at Banasthali Vidyapith, and getting to know the integral facts of Kathak from Pt Birju Maharaj. In fact, it was after this that I thought why to perform the same old things, and introduced Sufiana Kathak, and even performed on compositions of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Once when I was touring for SPIC MACAY and happened to visit my school for a recital, my teacher came to tell me ‘You are performing well’. When I asked if I’m good enough now to be taken back in the school’s dance team, my teacher got teary-eyed.”

Nishank feels grateful to have a supporting family, which allows her to work for the larger cause. She has actually combined her passion for rivers and love of dance. “I have even performed a Kathak ballet titled Ganga Avataran, which narrates the story of how Ganga left her abode in heaven and came down to Earth. I’ve performed this in more than 15 countries. But, how we treat our river makes me think: Is this what Ganga came down to Earth for?”

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Sunday, Nov 10, 2019 | New Delhi 22°C

## Reaching for the sky: Meet India's women fighter pilots

It was a dream come true for Avani Chaturvedi, Bhawana Kanth and Mohana Singh, as they were inducted into the Indian Air Force (IAF) as the first women fighter pilots on Saturday.

INDIA Updated: Jun 19, 2016 09:33 IST

[ht](#) HT Correspondent  
Hindustan Times



Women fighter pilots Avani Chaturvedi, Bhawana Kanth and Mohana Singh pose for photograph during their Combined Graduation Parade at Air Force Academy in Hyderabad . (PTI Photo)

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soon fly to Bidar in Karnataka for their next round of training including flying of fighter jets like Hawk, Sukhoi and Tejas. They will complete the training by next year.

As the three pilots get their wings to fly, here is all you need to know about them

### Avani Chaturvedi, 25

Born at Satna in Madhya Pradesh, Avani did her schooling from Adarsh Higher Secondary School at Deolond near Rewaa and graduated in B Tech. (Computer Science) from Banasthali University, Jaipur. Fond of painting and playing violin, she chose to join the IAF after being inspired by the life of army officers in her family. She had a few hours of flying experience that she gained at her college flying club. "I got selected for flying stream and subsequently for fighter flying. I got the opportunity to fly two different aircraft, one very modern and advanced, and the other stalwart trainer with the best of the instructors. My dream is to become a good fighter pilot on whom my seniors can rely when it comes to flying for live operations. I want to fly the best fighter aircraft and learn each day," she said. On her scary experience on fighter jet, Avani said as she was preparing to take off for her second solo sortie, she heard the Canopy Warning Audio coming on. "At first, I got confused seeing the emerging situation. However, the training I had undergone helped me arrive at a decision quickly. I aborted the take-off and took all the actions to stop the aircraft safely on the runway," she said.

### Bhawana Kanth, 24

Hailing from Darbhanga in Bihar, Bhawana was born and brought up in Refinery Township, Begusarai, where her father was working as an engineer in IOCL. She did her schooling from Barauni Refinery DAV Public School and completed her Bachelor of Engineering in medical electronics from BMS College of Engineering, Bangalore. Bhawana loves playing badminton, volleyball and adventure sports besides having an interest in photography, cooking, swimming and travelling. It was her dream to fly like a free bird since childhood which inspired Bhawana to join Indian Air Force. After clearing Stage I training, she got the opportunity to opt for fighter stream. Recalling her first experience of spin solo on fighter aircraft Kiran, Bhawana said as she entered the aircraft into spin and recover it all by herself at 20,000 feet, doubt started creeping into her mind as to what if the aircraft didn't recover. "I told myself that if I don't do it now, I will always be afraid of it. I spun the aircraft and to my surprise, the spin was more vicious or so it seemed. But the fighter pilot in me took over and I told myself come what may I will recover. And the aircraft recovered from spin and so did my confidence," she said.

### Mohana Singh, 24

From Jhunjunu in Rajasthan, Mohana did her schooling from Air Force School in New Delhi as her father is currently serving in the IAF. She completed her B Tech (Electronics & Communications) from GIMET in Amritsar. Among her hobbies are singing, sketching abstracts and reading, travelling, photography and cooking. Born in a family of IAF officers, Mohana wanted to carry the legacy. "I always aspired to make my parents proud by becoming a fighter pilot and fly the best of the fighter aircraft in the IAF," she said. On her experience in night

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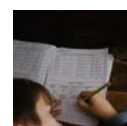
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beneath. Soon, I realised I was not able to maintain any connection between instruments and the visual indications of aircraft attitude. Then I remembered the words of my trainer and disregarded the visual indications and continued descent to a lower altitude relying totally on instruments. Once visual with the ground, I got oriented and recovered the aircraft safely.”

[In pics| Confident women IAF fighter pilots ready to conquer the sky](#)

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# PM Modi speaks to Mamata Banerjee, assures all possible help to deal with cyclone Bulbul

The severe cyclonic storm Bulbul weakened into a cyclonic storm on Sunday and lay centered over Bangladesh and adjoining coastal West Bengal, according to India Meteorological Department (IMD).

**INDIA** Updated: Nov 10, 2019 10:39 IST



HT Correspondent

Hindustan Times, New Delhi

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