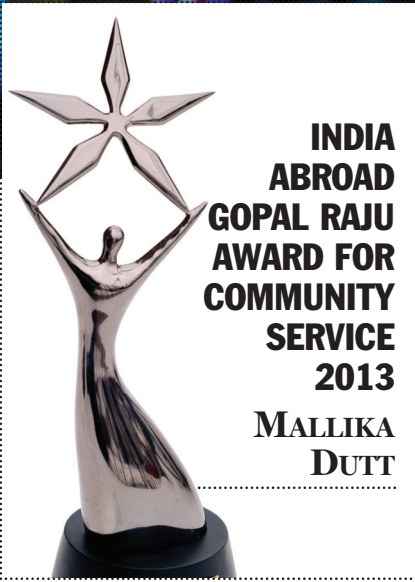




CLINTON GLOBAL INITIATIVE



BREAKING THROUGH



One woman's path to transforming human rights

From bringing the issue of women's abuse into the common man's living room to making a protector out of the common man and bringing him to the woman's doorstep, **Mallika Dutt** has always packed a punch. **Chaya Babu** meets the winner of the **India Abroad Gopal Raju Award for Community Service 2013**.

Breakthrough believes that the only way culture change around this issue can happen is if everybody understands that it's *their* issue, that it's *their* problem. Violence against women and girls is not a women's issue; it's *everybody's* issue," Mallika Dutt says. "The social, political, and economic costs to all of us, our families, our communities, our workplaces, our entire nations — the costs of gender-based violence are enormous. And until and unless we understand the consequences of what happens to us when we treat women in this way, we're not really going to be able to get to the other side."

Dutt is the founder, president, and chief executive officer of Breakthrough, an international human rights organization which aims to make violence against women and girls unacceptable around the world.

Her commitment to finding innovative ways to disrupt deeply embedded cultural attitudes of the status quo that keep women and girls suffering, to get to the real root of the problem defines the work she does. But this role is one in a long series of personal and professional ventures devoted to 'getting to the other side,' a desire that was budding in her since her Kolkata childhood.

Her globally renowned media campaign, Bell Bajao, invited men and boys into the conversation on gender-based violence, asking for accountability, solidarity, and a genuine vow to work toward social change. At the time, and even now, the concept that men and boys have a place in the fight for women's rights was largely considered a new or unconventional perspective, but Dutt jumped at the chance to fill a void in the movement, using popular culture to talk to masses of the typical disengaged. It's just one way that she's been a leader and a revolutionary in her space.

Between India and the US, her path over the last 30-some years has traversed through legal and policy work, research, direct service,



COURTESY: MALLIKA DUTT

Mallika Dutt, left, at a protest during her college days. As she says, she was rabble rousing even then.

experiences and constant reminders of what it meant to be not only a girl, but a *good* girl — which of course comes with its many responsibilities in India. She played and roughhoused like the boys but was told nonstop that she needed to learn how to cook and knit, essential skills to be a *good* wife once she unquestioningly joined the home of her future husband.

She wondered, 'Isn't *this* my home?'

Dutt recalled the irritation and resentment she harbored about the distinctions made between what her brothers were expected to do and have versus the expectations placed on her, a girl.

"One thing that really used to upset me was that there was this expectation that all the boys were going to join the family business and that I was going to get married and go off and do god-knows-what," she said. "So I think by the time I was 11 or 12 years old, I was pretty determined that I was going to have my own home — *my* home — not my husband's home, not my father's home, not my grandmother's home, and that I was going to carve a path and a life for myself that was something that I was going to choose to do."

This was all before the '90s liberalization of India, which led to an increase in the exchange of ideas and attitudes between the East and the West, before the dramatic increase in the number of young women — even men — who had big professional ambitions abroad. But Dutt, who had been pushing at the 'good girl' bounds all her life, had the will to transgress the boundaries set for her and would continue to do so in unexpected ways.

The first step was her decision to attend university at an all women's school in the United States, Mount Holyoke College, on a

media, and more, all with the end goal of ensuring that women and girls — and all individuals and communities — are ensured their basic human rights.

With the Breakthrough logo emblazoned on a wall behind her, Dutt spoke of the steps that brought her to where she is now and how her intensely personal mission of eliminating the denigration of society's less privileged groups has shaped the arc of her life.

Mallika Dutt

For being at the forefront of the human rights movement; for challenging deep-rooted inequalities towards women; for starting a breakthrough global campaign against domestic violence.

"You can't, because you are a girl"

"I think I've been a feminist and a human rights advocate my entire life, since I was very little," she said of her upbringing in a joint family in India.

Growing up with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and two male cousins in addition to her immediate family of her parents and brother, not surprisingly, came with a slew of



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full scholarship.

The-Middle-of-Nowhere, Massachusetts

Mount Holyoke College, in quaint South Hadley, MA, was a place of huge growth for Dutt, who was already personally invested in women's rights but still impressionable and ripe for change. Both her academic life and her social and cultural setting further heightened her drive to understand the need for change. But there was also the matter of her being new and alone in the US after a lifetime of being sheltered as a little girl in her big family in India. She rode out the kinks of culture shock well though, finding in the hardships small joys of learning a new life.

"I had grown up in an affluent middle class family and had never entered the kitchen despite my grandmother's attempts to teach me how to cook," she said. "At Mount Holyoke, I had to wash dishes to earn money for my personal expenses. It was a challenging experience because you washed the dishes of and served your peers, your friends, the same women that you sat in class with. It was an excellent lesson in class privilege and humility and I'm glad I had to do that."

Dutt also faced more dire difficulties of moving away from home to a college campus. American university life is known for being a breeding ground for rape culture, an issue that's receiving more and more attention of late. She observed with dismay the numerous rapes and assaults that were reported after fraternities from nearby male or coed colleges came over for parties

"Starting to connect the dots between my irritation about what boys and girls were and weren't allowed to do and how the systemic nature of discrimination actually led to violence against women, that allowed men to abuse, violate, kick, kill, punch women and girls with impunity, that somehow there was this idea that male identity and a notion of masculinity entitled you to treat women and girls and women's bodies in a particular way was really something that started to emerge for me while I was at Mount Holyoke."

She said that the American education system, which pushes a liberal arts agenda and involvement in extra-curriculars, gave her a landscape to walk a path that she might not have had she stayed in India. She did one year of college in Kolkata and the system of picking a subject early on and sticking to it was something she still feels wouldn't have worked for her.

"At 18, we don't always know what's going to put that fire in our belly," she said.

Still, Dutt believes that the drive to be in a feminist space that worked toward gender equality was such an inherent part of her that she would have found her way eventually,



Mount Holyoke College graduation — class of 1983. This college was a huge place of growth for Mallika Dutt, above third from left.

Below, years later, she returned to Mount Holyoke for an honorary doctorate in humane letters.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY: MALLIKA DUTT

regardless of any detours and wrong turns. The circle she became a part of at Mount Holyoke, in which she engaged in an ongoing and passionate dialog about social justice and human rights, has its sister community in India, and through Breakthrough, she has found a global community in joining together these two worlds.

Dutt stated explicitly that Mount Holyoke was one of the best things that ever happened to her, but when she spoke of her time there, an energy and radiance burst from her that makes such a statement unnecessary.

It was obviously transformative; it was then that she discovered that the anger bubbling inside her for years was part of an ongoing global struggle. "Suddenly I had a language and a vocabulary around all kinds of things, around things like 'the Third World' and 'the global north,' around imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, feminism, US foreign policy, and I think my natural instincts around being an advocate just blossomed in this little community where I just really emerged more fully into owning a human rights agenda: An agenda that went beyond just equality between men and women to really believing that equality and opportunity and justice and dignity really should belong to everybody," she said.

'Good Girls' Don't Say 'Prostitute'

In 1982, Dutt's second year of her undergraduate career, she got an internship at the International Women's Tribune Center in New York. She was assigned to work on an initiative focused on sex trafficking and prostitution; according to Dutt, though this is an issue that receives tons of attention and resources now, then it was a conversation that was simply not happening.

People did not see sex workers as women who need and deserve protection — they are still a stigmatized group, but this was the case even more then. And the fact that Dutt readily took on this area of work speaks of her guts and courage.

Colleagues and superiors who knew Dutt at this stage recalled vividly her eagerness, curiosity, and vigorous pursuit of the intellectual and political threads of the work being done.

Joanne Sandler, who was on the staff at the organization at the time, called her the "intern not to be ignored."



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At the Tribune Center, Dutt's assignment was to develop an international network of women's organizations to address the issue of trafficking.

Through this internship, as a 19 year old, she found herself in the middle of an important debate in the women's movement about how to handle the question of prostitution and sex work, and on a personal level, she began to see more clearly how female bodies are commodities in a global economy that buys and sells women and girls for the purposes of sex.

In getting to know this topic, she engaged with individuals doing the work themselves, and she grasped more clearly the threads that connect the lives of women whose lived realities may be worlds apart.

Dutt described learning from them through their perspective: "(They said), 'Look, whether it's being forced into marriage and having our bodies commodified into that institution or whether it's selling sex, what we're dealing with here is how a male-dominated social structure creates these systems where women are denied their human rights, so we also want rights for sex workers. We also want to make sure that for women who are in that space or industry or work, there are laws around wages or protection from violence.'"

After graduating from Mount Holyoke, where she did her senior thesis on prostitution in India, Dutt spent a year in her first job continuing to work in this space and even helped to organize the first ever global conference on trafficking in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

With her tiny stature and high heels the force with which she speaks of the scope of all she was discovering at this young age and the purpose it very clearly brought to her life seems as if it would come off as jarring. But it's not.

She is lucid and articulate, seamless in her telling of her trajectory, how deeply she cared for the principles that shaped it, and all the ways these impacted her personally. She packs a lot of punch. And it's clear that her bold and spirited nature coupled with an underlying focus and grounded-ness was likely the balance that propelled her and kept her going forward in spite of any bumps she encountered.

"When I was doing the research on trafficking and prostitution in India, I was trying to gather data and talk to people who had this information, and at that point in time, 'good girls' — girls from 'good families' — did not use the word prostitute," she recalled.

"You know, this was not a conversation that anybody thought that this young woman who studied in the United States should be having with anybody. I remember if a friend's parents would ask me, 'So, beta, what are you doing these days?' and I would launch into this whole description of trying to understand how prostitution and the industry works in India, where the women and girls are trafficked from, how rates are set, what the role is of the police, and people would just get really embarrassed and red faced and be like, 'Beta, why are you doing these things? What is this that you're engaged in? Did you go all the way to the United



COURTESY: MALLIKA DUTT

States to come back and talk about prostitution and trafficking and women?"

Her involvement in the issue extended beyond her first job and through her post-graduate studies — striving for more education, she decided to pursue her master's in International Affairs at Columbia University and later her law degree at New York University.

A Global Women's Leader

It was living in New York City at this time that represented another huge milestone for Dutt: In the vibrance, diversity, and life that makes New York what it is, she found what she called an electric women-of-color community.

While she had come from an academic background of immersing herself in human rights and feminism on a broader scale, meeting women with whom she shared certain experiences and identity markers but not others — Latina women, black women, East Asian women, Native American women, and more — helped Dutt dig deeper into her exploration of how gender impacts different people in different ways.

"It was this renaissance moment when there was all this writing and poetry and art and drama and a real conversation around how the women's movement needed to understand that the issue of gender intersected with race, with immigration status, with class, with sexuality, with geography, with religion, so that this idea that human rights were simply about getting women and men equal had to be much, much more nuanced," Dutt said. "And then learning about the history of the United States and migration and slavery and all of the ways in which different communities had entered into the melting pot that was this country, and particularly New York City, was for me just another big moment that really grounded my understanding of human

rights in what I call an intersectional perspective." From her senior thesis in college to work, Mallika Dutt returned to India several times to work for human rights. Even today her work straddles India and the US.

rights in what I call an intersectional perspective."

At the same time as this was happening, and Dutt's involvement in the work around trafficking continued, her curiosity about how law, policy, crime, and punishment shaped women's circumstances drove her to law school.

It was now, while at NYU, that Dutt connected with more women like herself after reveling in the newness of America's diversity: Women of Indian origin who were also studying law, as well as others from around the city who came to identify her as an important figure in the women's movement.

In being thrust into this position, she suddenly began to receive calls from South Asian women in need of help, requesting support or a way out of violent or abusive partnerships. But she was at a loss about what to do because providing such help was outside her area of expertise.

After graduating and while studying for the BAR exam in 1989 and then joining the prestigious Debevoise & Plimpton, Dutt teamed up with class-

mates she had met in her final year at NYU to start Sakhi for South Asian Women. As a fledgling non-profit, the women volunteered their time to run a hotline — a phone number from an apartment — that gave vulnerable women of South Asian origin who were in dangerous situations an outlet to at least voice their pain. Not everyone found this positive.

"I remember in those years — '89, '90, '91 — when we would talk about domestic violence in the South Asian community, when we would raise the issue of men abusing women, husbands abusing their wives, I remember the Indian community looking at us and saying, 'Why are you airing our dirty laundry in public? This doesn't happen in our community. These women are just making it all up. Why are you stirring the waters? We're new immigrants here — you're giving us a bad name!' she recalled. "I remember walking in Jackson Heights, leafleting and giving out pamphlets about Sakhi and the phone number that people could call, and men coming up to me and spitting at me."

"We would get death threats," she added. "We had to keep the office address a secret because we had all of these men who were furious that we were helping the women they were abusing."

They had to deal with not just orders of protection and helping the women get out of their homes and providing them with a police escort because of the level of violence they were facing, but there were often immigration-related issues because some of the women were reliant on abusive partners for their green cards.

Sometimes there were child custody

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issues and even cross-jurisdiction complications, where the father of the child had run off with the kid. Dutt and others were called upon to cater to culturally specific aspects of the community that often keep South Asian women tied to dangerous situations.

“Sakhi was an attempt on our part to create a place where women of South Asian origin, not just Indian, but women of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Nepali, Afghani, Sri Lankan, Caribbean women of South Asian origin, could call for help when they were facing violence and abuse at the hands of their husbands or partners or other family members in the city,” Dutt said.

Of course this didn't stop them. Dutt and her classmates Ananya Bhattacharjee, Tula Goenka, Geetanjali Misra, Megha Bhuraskar and Romita Shetty, who had branched out into diverse professional paths by then, continued volunteering their time despite their strenuous full-time jobs.

They might have been functioning in the early days without many of the physical resources, including an actual brick and mortar space, but they used what resources they had at hand. Primary among them was their connections.

Dutt used her connections at Debevoise & Plimpton to create a network of pro-bono lawyers to represent the women who were calling in. From a legal perspective, there was a lot more required in the mission of Sakhi than was initially understood.

The organization developed, growing with a physical presence, taking on more employees, and truly filling a void in New York City — though similar organizations existed serving South Asian women in other geographic regions.

Sakhi continues its efforts to eradicate domestic violence and is now an essential part of New York's feminist space and an active participant in broader movements for social justice in the city. “Today Sakhi is 25 years old,” Dutt said. “I'm very proud of what all of these women came together and created. At the same time I'm thinking, ‘25 years later, we shouldn't NEED Sakhi to exist.’”

For Dutt, the experience of working directly with victims and survivors of violence, witnessing the forces that both drove and hindered them, helped her grasp more intimately the concept of fear as an integral part of patriarchy and masculinity, ingrained social structures that make gender-based violence possible. This understanding laid the foundation for her later groundbreaking work to address the root of the problem: Culture.

Dutt left Debevoise & Plimpton, where she had worked on asylum laws, reproductive rights, abortion, and more, to join the Norman Foundation in 1992, where, as director of the small family foundation, she supported civil rights, economic justice, and environmental justice programs across the US. She traveled to places like Arkansas, South Carolina, Montana, Hawaii, New Mexico, and more, working with organizations focused on worker rights, pollution in marginalized communities, criminal justice and abolishing the death penalty, gaining a more holistic view of transformative justice.

After this, as Associate Director of Center for Global Women's Leadership at Rutgers University, she was at the frontier of pushing for women's rights to be recognized as



COURTESY: FACEBOOK.COM/SAKHINI

Mallika Dutt, second from left, and her fellow Sakhi for South Asian Women founders — from right, Prema Vora, Anannya Bhattacharjee, Geetanjali Misra, Tula Goenka and a friend — during the early days of the organization, which turned 25 this year.

This was a time of some personal trials, as Dutt's own life was the brunt of criticism stemming from the exact kind of gender attitudes she works to stop. Her then husband, in full support of her career move overseas to India, came along with her — as life partners often do — though he himself didn't have a job there.

“Working for the Ford Foundation between 1996 and 2000, it was the hardest time my marriage had ever seen,” she told *Rediff.com* in 2009. “He left his job in NYU to be with me. And in India, the question, ‘What do you do?’ is always asked of the man. And the answer, ‘Well, I'm not working because I decided to come to India with my wife’ isn't exactly the most well-received response. That took a real toll on our marriage...”

It's like, you're here on this expat job with the Ford Foundation — you're hot sh**! And your husband, who has made this major decision to come with you, has to struggle to find his identity.”

Additionally, despite the scope of her work through the Ford Foundation, the nagging sense began to creep up on her that the very important dialog she was fostering was always within the same insular circle — that she was effectively preaching to the choir. This realization inspired her to brainstorm ways to take the conversation out of the workshops and UN forums she had grown accustomed to and bring it into average people's living rooms. This is when media, technology, and arts became a part of her human rights resume, paving the way for the launch of Breakthrough.

Pop culture as activism

In her final year at the Ford Foundation, Dutt started to explore music as a vehicle for serious messages. She had zero experience in or knowledge about the entertainment industry, but her curiosity led her to Mumbai, where she just started knocking on doors, showing up at the offices of MTV, Virgin, BMG, and Sony. She ultimately met people who were on board with her idea, and they produced an internationally known album and video *Mann ke Manjeere*, which means rhythm of the mind.

“People had said, ‘Don't be ridiculous. You can't make an album about women's issues; no one is going to buy it,’ and ‘Social issues are not going to work in this space,’” Dutt said.

But she chose to not listen to these deter-

human rights.

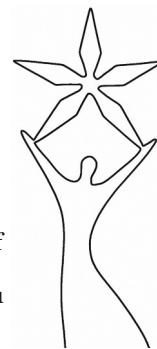
Until this point, gender-based discrimination was simply not on the human rights agenda. She became a part of a movement that organized high-profile global conferences: The World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and others were opportunities for Dutt and her contemporaries to make their message known.

This same position led Dutt to once again broaden her horizons through learning about the experiences of women all over the world, in The Philippines, Brazil, South Africa, Egypt, Russia, parts of Europe, and more.

This was the moment that brought her full circle and back to India.

“I feel like there were all of these moments throughout my life where I've been blessed with these work opportunities that have really created expansion and nuanced learning to my intrinsic commitment to human rights,” she said.

So in 1996, 18 years after she left to attend college in the US, Dutt joined the Ford Foundation as a Program Officer in the New Delhi office. There, she initiated the Foundation's work on police reform and forged unique partnerships among police, NGOs, and civil society groups. The organization had its hands in a range of issues, contributing to the vast social justice initiatives that were taking place in India: It was working to end the many injustices and oppressions faced by Adivasi communities, Dalit communities, women's groups, and ethnic and religious minorities. It was also supporting the creation of law schools that made public interest law a big part of their programs.

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ring voices.

The video depicted the true story of a woman, played by actress Mita Vasisht, who leaves an abusive marriage and becomes a truck driver to support herself and her daughter. It hit the charts in August of 2000 and burst into the spotlight, reaching 50 million people worldwide, spending six months in the Top 10, winning the 2001 National Screen Award in India for best music video, and getting nominated for numerous other global awards.

More important than these metrics of success, however, was the fact that a widespread conversation was generated about domestic violence in the Indian mass media, and suddenly lots of pop culture icons and figures — including, for the first time, men — were talking about violence against women.

“The journey was amazing for me, because I came from a law and NGO background and suddenly found myself in the middle of these intensely creative and intelligent people. The experience was just amazing. I think for that one year I was on the biggest high of my life.”

The explosion this sparked gave Dutt the sign that she was ready to do something on her own, something born of her Indian-American identity and which combined her policy expertise, the on-the-ground human rights work, and pop culture and media. She ended her contract with the Ford Foundation a year early to move back to New York and launch Breakthrough. She hoped to create a new type of transnational organization, one with dual headquarters and the capacity to work with people and issues around the world. The idea behind Breakthrough was of course to address women’s issues globally, but immediately 9/11 happened, and it shaped the agenda of the organization on the US side.

“The work here then ended up focusing on immigration and racial justice — the South Asian community, the Muslim community were under severe attack,” Dutt explained. “There was a huge backlash, a curtailing of human rights issues here, and so Breakthrough then started to work on violence against women in India, and immigrant rights and racial justice in the United States. And that’s kind of how the work went forward. And now we’ve made a decision to align all of our work around making violence against women and girls unacceptable.”

Breakthrough took no time to gain its reputation for fresh and provocative campaigns about gender norms and injustices. The most notable and longest-running, ‘Bell Bajao,’ meaning ‘Ring the Bell,’ launched in India and then went global, calling on men and boys to challenge violence against women. Others have included ‘What Kind of Man Are You?’, rallying men and families to prevent HIV/AIDS transmission within marriage; ‘Is This Justice?’, inspiring communities to end the stigma and discrimination faced by women living with HIV/AIDS; ‘America 2049,’ a transmedia Facebook game encouraging players to take action for human rights in the US; ‘Restore Fairness,’ a video initiative sparking action for humane immigration policy and racial justice; and ‘I Am This Land,’ a youth-focused online space incubating creative activism.

Today, though some of the work in India has a regional bent, all of it has national impact because of the way media, arts, and technology are used in tandem with community-based initiatives. Breakthrough is working to challenge early marriage in the states of Bihar and Jharkhand, to

One woman’s path to transforming human rights



COURTESY: MALLIKA DUTT

Mallika Dutt has been at the frontier of pushing for women’s rights to be recognized as human rights.

eliminate son preference and sex selection in Haryana and Punjab, where sex ratios are severely skewed, and on intimate partner violence and public violence against women in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, and Delhi.

The mass messaging is what pushes cultural change and the transformation of accepted societal beliefs that support gender bias, Dutt said, but sometimes getting people on board for these projects is difficult.

“We’ve had a big challenge in the past getting partnerships, particularly corporate partnerships, because who wants to be dealing with violence against women?” she said. “People will tell us, ‘We’ll work with you to send girls to school. We’ll help all the girls and young women get jobs. Let’s work on livelihoods. Let’s work on education.’ And we believe that that’s very important work as well, but if we don’t get underneath the social norms that lead to the problems women are experiencing in the first place, we can send all the girls to school and that’s not going to stop the violence.”

This became clear with the infamous Nirbhaya gang rape in New Delhi in 2012, which had ripple effects around the world in terms of raising awareness of women’s realities. But as horrific as the incident was, Dutt called it commonplace in India.

“It happens to women and girls *all* the time — the scale of it is enormous,” she continued. “It is *the* single largest human rights pandemic in India and around world. For some reason that incident in Delhi touched the national conscience and the national nerve in some very different

way from past incidents like that. I have no idea why, but as somebody who has spent a great deal of my life working to challenge violence against women and girls, I was deeply grateful to this woman, as tragic as her death was, I send her so much gratitude, because in her death she shed so much light into a space that was always in darkness.”

More often than not, these incidents and the work she does take a personal toll. “The rage and the pain are visceral,” she said. “I have had to find several coping mechanisms over the years because every single story has the power to still undo me... I now bring a lot of compassion and love to myself and to everyone in this work and in this world.”

Despite this constant emotional battering in a world where the Boko Haram kidnapping girl students in Nigeria is followed by a misogynistic mass shooting at University of California Santa Barbara to brutal gang rape and hanging of two girls in Uttar Pradesh, Dutt’s spirit, tenacity, and courage to do what she does, speak volumes about her commitment to safety, justice, and human rights for women the world over.

She said she believed there had been a shift in the kind of attention such crimes were receiving in the mainstream media, which used to shy away from the topic when it could, and this is of course a positive thing. But it doesn’t create a magical overnight solution; it creates an opportunity — one that Breakthrough is excited to take advantage of both in India and the US. And Dutt looks forward to inspiring more and more people to join the mission of making violence against women and girls unacceptable. ■

'We followed her every move with wonder'

A rebellious but loving child, a gritty teen and an adult who lived up to the promise of both — Adarsh and Raj Dutt introduce **Indrani Roy** to their daughter

Mallika Dutt's mother Adarsh, a teacher turned homemaker, and father Raj, a businessman, had just returned from their home in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, when we met in their south Kolkata apartment.

Both cities had been home to Mallika — and her brother Adhiraj — all her life. And as our conversation meandered through these cities and the formative years Mallika Dutt spent in them, the picture of the girl she was emerged clearly.

Tell us about Mallika, the daughter.

Adarsh Dutt: She is very caring, very emotional, sensitive and full of love.

Raj Dutt: The operative word to describe her should be caring. She has time for all — be it her parents, brother, nephews, sister-in-law or friends. She is emotionally involved with everyone and is always eager to look after their welfare.

RD: She has been away from home for so long.

AD: Since 1980, she has been out of home. But she is in deep love with her roots. She insists that we visit her every year. She comes and stays with us whenever she gets time.

When in India, Mallika makes sure to spend a lot of time with her friends.

She makes it a point to come to Kolkata as she thinks this city (apart from our ancestral town of Mirzapur) is her second home.

She is a thorough Indian at heart.

In an early interview with *India Abroad*, Mallika had spoken about resisting being treated differently from the boys as a child. Can you tell us something about those times?

AD: Discrimination between boys and girls in Indian families hurt Mallika a lot.

It's very natural in an Indian family that property goes to the boys and girls get married. It was more so in the '80s and '90s, when Mallika was growing up.

RD: During her visits to Mirzapur, Mallika would get widely exposed to such favoritism. She would often hear my mother say, 'Divide the property among the boys,' etc.

She couldn't take it well.

While in Mirzapur, Mallika met the village women. She would witness the ill treatment meted out to women in the slums. Her heart wept for them. That's when she decided to work for the protection of women's rights — her core area of interest being property rights for women.

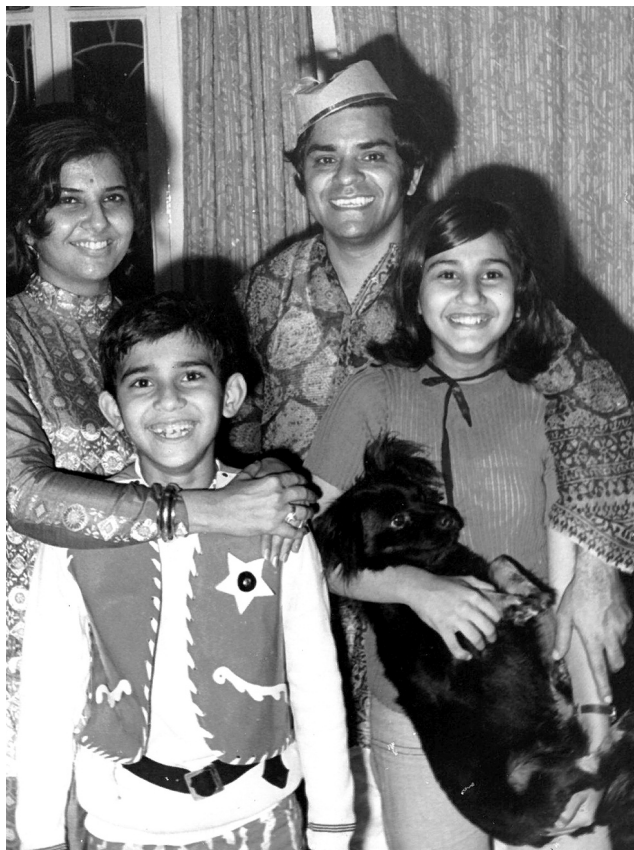
Mallika's scope of work expanded gradually and she started focusing on women who were victims of sexual and physical violence.

Inspired by a mission to set 'things' right, especially for women, Mallika chose law as her career.

She could have joined the United Nations. But she decided to work as a lawyer in India. She interned with eminent lawyer Indira Jaising here for some time.

But soon she discovered that the state of law was hopeless in her homeland and to get anything done here in India was next to impossible.

Therefore, Mallika decided to go back to the United States. She thought of serving her own country from foreign



COURTESY: MALLIKA DUTT

Mallika Dutt with her mother Adarsh, father Raj, and brother Adhiraj.

shores.

It is interesting that your family has split time between Kolkata and Mirzapur, when Mallika was a child. How was this unique experience of being rooted in two places, simultaneously almost, for your children?

RD: Their visits to Mirzapur were mostly for the holidays. Both my children studied in Dehra Dun boarding schools and they would spend their holidays partly in Mirzapur and in Kolkata.

They would visit the picnic spots in Mirzapur. And most of the times, their friends from Kolkata would visit them there. *(Laughs)* Going to Mirzapur for them, therefore, was like going to a resort.

We have a beautiful house there with dogs all around *(Mallika just adores dogs)*.

Though Mirzapur was fun for them, my children's attachment with Kolkata never died. Their hearts always panged for the City of Joy.

How would you describe Mallika as a child?

RD and AD: *(Laugh)* Mallika was a tomboy. She was really fond of swimming.

AD: Mallika was a genius. Be it painting, learning piano, ballet or music — she excelled in everything. She was an effortless topper.

Whoever came in touch with her said that Mallika had a spark within and that she would go a long way.

We knew that, too.

As you said, Mallika showed sparks of who she is today early on. Was it intrinsic or was there something that seemed to trigger it?

RD: It was very intrinsic.

My mother, in spite of her old-fashioned views, was a very dedicated social worker. She was the president of the Arya Samaj. She was committed to uplifting social messages like marriage without dowry. I got married on one rupee *(a token auspicious amount)*, my brother too.

AD: We followed the same tradition during our son's marriage.

RD: My aunt *(father's sister)* Subhadra Dutt aka Subhadra Joshi was a member of Parliament. But later because of differences with Sanjay Gandhi, she left the Congress party and adopted a vehement anti-Congress stance.

My father's brother was a minister in the Punjab government.

Passion for public service ran in our family.

As parents how did you guide her?

AD: *(Laughs)* We did not have to guide her. We just followed her every move with wonder. She was a bundle of pleasure and amazement. We indulged her in every possible way.

RD: She would often say, 'All my friends were so jealous — I got an LP player at such a young age'.

For us, our children were our world. We would buy them everything they wanted — be it music system, books or video games.

They were never in want of anything.

Mallika was determined to head to the US for higher education. Can you tell us about that time in her life? What were the options before her in India and what was she seeking in the quest to step out of India?

RD: Mallika was studying in Kolkata's St Xavier's College when she applied for American colleges. That time there were no faxes, no e-mails. She did everything on her own.

We came to know of her plans only when she started getting replies, mostly letter of acceptances from various colleges in the US.

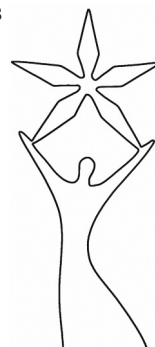
We had no idea that she was preparing to study in Mount Holyoke College. We hadn't even heard of that college. She made all the arrangements on her own.

AD: She is a self-made person. She took loans to fund her studies abroad. Be it money or other assistance, she did not bother us at all. She carved out a career graph all by herself.

From Mount Holyoke, Mallika went to Columbia University. There too she did really well, got grants.

RD: Once our export business faced a raid by the Enforcement Directorate and the latter was intrigued by a letter by Mallika in which she had written, 'I got \$500 from Columbia'.

"Who is Mr Columbia?" the Enforcement Directorate asked me.



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'We followed her every move with wonder'

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Thereafter, we asked Mallika not to write any such letter with a mention of money. Nothing came out of the raid, but the 'Mr Columbia' joke stayed with us.

AD and RD: After getting a law degree, Mallika got a prestigious job at Debevoise & Plimpton, a prominent international law firm in New York City. It was one of the highest-paying jobs an intern could ask for then.

Mallika paid off the education loans that she had taken. She wanted to embark on her career with a clean slate.

After a while, she did not like the world of corporate law much. 'I can't manipulate lies to make them look like truths,' she would often tell us.

Soon after, Mallika changed course and plunged into social work. She started working for the Norman Foundation. She also served as Program Officer for Human Rights at the Ford Foundation in New Delhi from 1996 to 2000. She enjoyed working for these organizations.

Did her determination surprise you?

AD: Mallika is an epitome of determination. Her grit is her identity. All our lives, we have seen her climbing the ladder of success.

And she is amply rewarded for her work.

RD: Today, we get to know her getting one award after another. We have lost count of prizes she has won.

Recently when she joined the Tolly Club, she had to submit a resume. The document ran into six, seven pages (*laughs*).

We proudly watch our daughter going places — at times she sends us her photographs with the monarchs of Sweden or Spain.

Our eyes well up to see our offspring mingling with crème de la crème of the world.

AD: What amazes me is the way she jells with the celebrities. She is so much at ease with all the big names.

She roams around with them, eats and laughs as if she belongs to their league. It seems she has known them for years.

Spontaneity is Mallika's way of life.

At Mount Holyoke Mallika found herself getting politically involved, taking part in social causes. She came back to India and observed red light areas for her senior year thesis. Her involvement deepened as she then went to Columbia. How did you as parents view this evolution?

AD: As a mother, I was worried stiff. I went through a lot of emotional upheavals. I was concerned about her visiting the red light areas.

I still go through the same kind of anxiety as she stays so far away.

RD: Sexual exploitation of women has always moved Mallika. Issues like girl trafficking bothered her. She often shared her experiences with us.

When she was writing her papers in America, we used to send her newspaper cuttings. We kept her informed about what was happening here.



COURTESY: MALLIKA DUTT

While working in red light areas, Mallika discovered that there still existed a slave fair in India wherein women were bought and sold and brought to the brothels. Such tales made her stomach turn. Mallika felt she really needed to do something.

She is too sensitive a person to turn indifferent to such moving experiences.

Her visits to brothels and the plight of the women there goaded her to do what she has been doing now.

What drew Mallika to law and then to social justice? Was there a triggering factor?

RD: While working under Jaising, Mallika was not happy with the way the law functioned in India. She thought it would be difficult to use law as an effective tool to defend women's rights in India. For, things were way too political here.

AD: Mallika felt that after doing her Masters she could make law more productive if she handled it her way.

Mallika's career has followed such an interesting trajectory. How did you view the changes and her decisions?

AD: We were very happy with whatever she was doing. We went along with her, always. We let her follow her passion and never pressured her to do something that she did not like. We never burdened her with our aspirations.

RD: Mallika started Sakhi from her apartment in New York. Complaints poured into her answering machine.

She gave up an amazing salary of the law firm and just listened to her heart. She always prioritized job satisfaction over money. And we lent her total support.

The song Mann Ke Manjeere, Breakthrough's award-winning album, became such a hit in India. The issue of domestic abuse reached people's television sets in an engaging, mainstream manner. Tell us about that time.

AD: Mallika decided to send out a social message through music. She thought music would have great reachability.

At that time, Mallika chose (*singer*) Shubha Mudgal, (*lyricist*) Prasoon Joshi, (*composer*) Shantanu Moitra for MKM. Those names were yet to hit the limelight. But

Mallika Dutt's parents learnt of her plans to study in the US only after she began getting acceptance letters. Since then they have proudly watched their daughter go places.

Mallika could see the potential in them so many years back.

RD: All the contributors of the MKM CD worked for free.

After *Mann Ke Manjeere* came the 'Bell Bajao' campaign against domestic violence.

The campaign targeted boys and men and called on them to intervene if they witnessed domestic violence in their neighborhood.

That campaign went viral across India.

How have people around you responded to Mallika's initiatives?

RD: When we are with her in New York, people get themselves introduced to us and express their admiration for our daughter.

People are of the opinion that many haven't still realized Mallika's true worth.

In India, highly placed government officials are all praise for her.

A former Delhi police commissioner, a very good friend of ours, thinks Mallika is an asset for the society.

Incidentally, our daughter once had worked for the reformation of the Delhi police — she had taken measures to make them more humane.

Mallika's friends adore her. She is their darling.

Which characteristics of hers impress you the most?

AD: She is a human being full of love. Mallika is extremely caring. She speaks to us with so much love and respect.

She is an exceptional human being. She belongs to a different level altogether.

To her, nothing else but love matters the most.

It's difficult for us to evaluate her. For, she belongs to a different plane.

RD: The way she reaches out to people is commendable. Apart from being intelligent and talented, she is someone with a golden heart.

The rebellious child has come a long way. She has become an inspiration who is seen on platforms like the World Economic Forum, TEDx, Clinton Global Initiative...

RD: Her success surprises us all the time. To see our own flesh and blood reach such heights is unbelievable.

AD: But I miss her so very much. She is a part of my soul. How can I live away from my soul?

Where do you see her going from here? What are your hopes for her?

AD: We want her to be happy.

RD: She wants to write a book on Karbala in Iraq as and when she gets time. Our family is very closely associated with the Shias. She wants to trace that link.

Being in the public 'domain' for so long, Mallika now wants some time for herself.

As parents, our heart reaches out to her.

May our *bacchi* taste success in whatever venture she undertakes. ■

‘It is difficult to resist somebody like Mallika’

Micky Bhatia one of Mallika Dutt’s closest friends since high school, tells **Monali Sarkar** about a friendship that spans decades and continents

Micky Bhatia, left, and Mallika Dutt, second from right, with friends.

The child who had rebelled against the differences between how boys and girls were treated at home had grown up to be a teenager grappling with her keenly developing sense of feminist identity and ways to give it voice.

It was at this time in Mallika Dutt’s life that Micky Bhatia first met her at Modern High School in Kolkata.

“Even as a teen, there was just a way that she was with women — whether they were domestic workers, whether they were teachers, whether they were colleagues, whether they were friends,” recalls Bhatia. “She was just very cognizant of the fact that we could have the raw end of the stick and she tried to equalize the forces as much as possible.”

“My memory of her is of someone who was extremely kind, always available, and very respectful of others whether it was teachers, whether it was colleagues, whether it was friends. She was extremely, extremely bright, very quick on the uptake. Yes, she was quite the teacher’s pet (*too*).”

“I admired her completely. I admired her spirit. I admired her zest. I admired her commitment. I admired her principles. I always admired the way she spoke to other people. I LIKED her.”

They were 17 then and just beginning to explore a friendship that is still as strong, if not stronger.

Bhatia, now a psychoanalyst, is speaking to *India Abroad* from her office in south Mumbai. It’s a career accomplishment that she partly credits to Dutt’s friendship: “In fact, one of the reasons possibly that I became a psychoanalyst is thanks to her — because she really believed that I could do it. She always reaffirmed what I wanted to do. She always made me believe I could do what I wanted to do.”

What was even more important to Bhatia was that Dutt extended that same support and inspiration to everyone, always willing to share, willing to teach, willing to learn.

The time when Bhatia and Dutt became friends was also the time that Dutt had made up her mind to come to the US for higher education. In the months leading up to Dutt’s acceptance in several American institutes — amid “lots of leaves of paper, lots of applications” — she saw another side to her friend.

“I don’t think she faced a lot of resistance. It is difficult to resist somebody like Mallika; she has already made up her mind, which means she is going. But she certainly wasn’t getting any financial support. She did it on her own. I saw only grit and determination. I saw her just not giving up... And for what she wanted to do, US was the answer.”

What she wanted to do was work in the area of human rights. Her thoughts, her plans might not have evolved to the point of Breakthrough, but even then, as an 18 year old striking out in the US on her own, she was driven to do the work she is now doing.

Dutt earned a Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs at Mount Holyoke College, a Masters in International Affairs and South Asian Studies from Columbia University and a Juris Doctor from New York University Law School and landed a position at a New York City law firm that most JDs would give their eye teeth for. But that



COURTESY: MALLIKA DUTT

had never been her aspiration.

“Mallika needs or has always needed to feel happy with what she does, or to feel that she is contributing,” Bhatia says. “In the law firm — the lure of high salaries, social positions — had nothing to offer her. That’s not what she really wanted. The law firm and Sakhi happened kind of simultaneously. Sakhi was always the other arm of Mallika, which I think was very, very precious to her. That’s how everything really started for her.”

According to Bhatia, Sakhi sowed the seeds for Breakthrough: “The Ford Foundation (*which Dutt joined after she quit the law firm*) brought her a fair amount of joy, but she really again wanted to do her own outfit, wanted to drive it herself, wanted to set it up.”

“She had a dream, and she wanted to materialize it. Mallika didn’t give herself unlimited amount of time. Sometimes she felt like she wouldn’t be able to attain the goals in the time span that she had given herself.”

Dutt, she adds, has never been one to give up after she makes up her mind: “Mallika is driven by adrenaline. Pure adrenaline. She is driven by the tremendous love support and belief that so many people have in her. And she is driven by her desire to succeed, her desire to fulfill some innermost ambitions. To prove a point. To treat people like they need to be treated.”

Dutt launched Breakthrough in 2000 with Bhatia right by her side. In fact, the first Rs 50,000 (\$850 in today’s terms) that went into Breakthrough’s account was raised

in the verandah of the latter’s apartment.

“She had all the challenges of running an organization: People, colleagues, which issues to take — there are so many touching issues, at the same time stay in the field of human rights and not just women’s rights,” Bhatia says. “She works with women’s rights through treating them as human beings, as (*part of*) human rights.”

“Mallika’s strategy, the whole way she has put Breakthrough out there, just the use of popular culture is so amazing. It’s a USP that no one else has used. *Mann Ke Manjeere*, Bell Bajao... what a unique way to reach out. It’s not confrontational, it’s not lecture, it’s not classroom; it’s appealing to your senses. Driving the point home like that was fantastic. And look where she is now.”

Like they did when they were 17, Bhatia and Dutt continue to stand together. They talk to each other a lot. Even with Bhatia in Mumbai and Dutt in New York, they meet as often as they can. Bhatia constantly bounces ideas off Dutt for the NGO that she is deeply involved with; Dutt talks to Bhatia a fair amount about Breakthrough. But they no longer work on projects together.

“It’s a decision that we made, to keep our work life and our friendship apart,” Bhatia says, adding that she watches Dutt’s tireless work and accomplishment with amazement and pride.

But ask her to describe her iconic friend in one phrase or sentence and in the way of BFFs of a lifetime, she only says, “She means the world to me.” ■

‘She really wants to make it *happen*’

Charlotte Bunch, Mallika Dutt’s mentor, on what she admires most about her

Mallika first came to work for me as an intern at the International Women’s Tribune Center in New York. She was a student at Mount Holyoke, and she was so bright and eager that all the rest of the staff said, ‘You have to be the one to work with her.’

I think they were a little intimidated by her because she was so intelligent and quick and wanted to know why and what we were doing and how, and I was immediately attracted to that energy and her wanting to do something with us.

One of the funniest stories that she tells of that period is that we were preparing what became one of the first workshops on the problem of trafficking of women that was held in 1983 in Rotterdam in The Netherlands.

We were working on the mailing list, and, of course, this was all pre-email, so everything had a lot of detailed work involved, and she said, ‘I thought when I came to work with you that we’d be talking politics all the time.’ And I said, ‘Well if you want to make something happen politically, yes, you do talk about that, but you spend a lot of time on the details of the daily work.’

That’s one of the things that I really admire about her in terms of her character: She has the ability to talk the intellectual talk and to think through things, but she really wants to make it *happen*. And there’s a drive in her to figure out how to translate ideas into some kind of effective action.

She and I work together really well because we share that passion to really see something result from the conversation, not just talk. That characterizes the way she’s been about most of her career: Going to law school, but then wanting to do more with it than just being at a law firm and seeking out different channels until she ultimately arrived at the creation of Breakthrough.

It is important to see how she went through the legal field. She got involved in her passion for human rights and working with me again at the Center for Global Women’s Leadership, where we worked on the 1995 Beijing Women’s Conference and she was really involved in putting the work on what it meant to see women’s rights from a human rights perspective into practice through the tribunals that we held and the events.

She had a lot of grounding in how ideas translate into political action — and then she went and took that in a new direction with Breakthrough in trying to create something that would culturally reach out to wider numbers of people beyond just the political arena we were working in to really spread that message of what human rights meant in an every day way.

In many ways, Mallika was a bright young feminist eager to change the world when I first met her, and at that time, perhaps a little impatient also with processes of change and imagining that if you just said it, people would get it.

She evolved from that kind of impatient activist urge — which is still always present in any of us who want to make things happen — into an understanding that human rights was about a transformational perspective that would enable more people to grasp why these changes are necessary.

I watched this as a gradual evolution, but that was really, more than anything, driven by her sense that she wanted to be part of creating change, and she had the ability to see creatively how that could happen. But she also had to go through each of those experiences along the way to learn the tools of law and human rights, and then to see what’s the limit of those tools if you don’t bring them into the cultural realm.

Mallika’s passion and determination are, of course, integral in her ability to do what she does and to be so influential, but it’s also



From left, Mallika Dutt on her early conference trail — Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen, Beijing — with Charlotte Bunch and Roxanna Carrillo.

COURTESY: MALLIKA DUTT

that she has what I call a quick intellectual grasp of things, so when you are talking with her, she gets really quickly what the importance of the idea is, and she has a sense of how to translate all of that into daily life, which inspires people.

So she can take these issues of human rights, which can sound very dull and abstract, and translate that into the woman truck driver from the first Breakthrough video and what it meant for that woman to see herself with a person with rights, and in a way that doesn’t just sound politically rhetorical but actually motivates people.

When I first met her, in addition to her energy, which is also boundless and really important because she’s very vibrant, she had a good activist edge of impatience; she wanted to move into action.

She has learned to discipline that with solid background work, and that, to me, is a really important trait because many people either burn out or end up at a university just doing this as academic thought because they don’t know how to find that boundary between what’s possible and the ideas that you have and how to keep it moving and inspire people.

Lastly, she has a great sense of humor; she’s fun. She’s fun to be with, and I don’t underestimate that. Underlying all of this, of course, is a basically positive outlook that you *can* make a difference. Many people can have the analyses, but not the belief that they can do anything about it.

I feel very excited that Mallika is receiving this award, and I feel proud because I feel that I am a part of her life and her political evolution. And I believe it’s a really good sign that the kind of work on women’s rights and human rights that Mallika does has reached a more mainstream world when *India Abroad* is recognizing it.

That’s really exciting, and I think that’s part of her goal — to keep reaching to wider and wider communities. So the award feels right in line with who she is. ■

Charlotte Bunch founded the Center for Women’s Global Leadership at Douglass College, Rutgers University, of which she remains the Founding Director and Senior Scholar.

She spoke to Chaya Babu

Mallika came to me as an intern from a law school from the US.

Was this a homecoming? Perhaps she had never left home, so it was not.

Was it learning? But as the years go by I have learnt more from her than she has from me. She is inclusive in her thought and work. She leads. She is a role model. She is a citizen of the world.

Reinventing herself is her way of living.

Does she know where she is going to next? Wherever that is, she can only get better.

To say that she is contributing to the cause of women is to say too little. She is contributing to making the world a better place to live in.

— Indira Jaising

Former Additional Solicitor General of India and Director, Lawyers Collective

The dream that took shape in a small Mumbai apartment

Sonali Khan on Breakthrough's beginning, with like minds in cramped confines, and working with Mallika Dutt, who always leads from the front

'Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home — so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet, they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.'

Eleanor Roosevelt's words sum up Mallika Dutt's world vision.

Over the span of a decade, this vision has produced a generation of Breakthrough advocates who stand for human rights, including the rights of women and girls.

Today, Breakthrough, the organization that she founded in 2000 has emerged as a leader in successfully leveraging the appeal and power of media — mass, social, online and digital — to transform gender norms and demand equality.

Through our rise and growth, one thing that has remained steady has been Mallika's zeal to lead from the front and embrace change and challenge with the same zest.

Mallika's training as a human rights lawyer lies at the core of her staunch belief in human rights for all. Over her years of work with organizations like the Ford Foundation, she was inspired to explore avenues to conscientize and rally communities in India, the United States and around the world to challenge the disturbing prevalence of violence against women.

Breakthrough was a result of her strong resolve to bring the values of human rights into the daily lives and actions of lay people. In doing that, she has managed to bring human rights activism out of academic and literary circles into drawing room conversations.

When Breakthrough was founded over 14 years ago, the use of music videos and television to champion a cause as serious as women's rights was a concept unheard of. But Mallika's resolve and perseverance made light of failed attempts to amass backers. In fact, rejections have always egged her to try harder.

It was her belief in the cause she wanted to champion that resulted in *Mann Ke Manjeere*, the first music album



Mallika Dutt, left, with Sonali Khan.

'Kind of a Man Are You?' was a multimedia campaign that spoke about HIV/AIDS transmitted to an unsuspecting spouse. This was followed up with 'Is This Justice?' — a campaign that reflected the plight of women suffering stigma and discrimination due to HIV/AIDS. These campaigns set the base for our most lauded multi-media and community education campaign — Bell Bajao, which tackled the issue of domestic violence across Indian homes.

I still remember the first of these campaigns, 'What Kind of a Man Are You?' was conceptualized and executed out of my small apartment in Mumbai. My living room was Breakthrough's working space, with Mallika, the consultants we had roped in and I huddled together in the cramped confines. Few can imagine that the high profile, celebrity endorsed campaign that we pulled off across four cities — Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi and Bengaluru — was pulled off by a tiny team that was high on adrenaline and conviction.

From a crew of a converted handful, today the Breakthrough family spans two continents. Our India and US offices continue to produce inspiring campaigns that target our core constituencies in these countries. Our messages are however not restricted to the geographical confines we work within. Our Bell Bajao campaign now spans several countries, our open-sourced models adopted across several global campaigns that fight various forms of violence against women.

Over the past decade and more, Mallika and I have shared a strong bond of friendship and camaraderie. As colleagues, we have agreed and disagreed, stood together and bickered over organizational functions, but one thing that has remained

constant is our mutual respect and the shared commitment to be the change that brings about lasting change. Her tenacity and fearless attitude inspires our organization to continue to break new cultural frontiers.

In India today, we have four strong on-going programs — against domestic violence, early marriage, gender biased sex selection and sexual harassment. Our media campaigns are backed up by our community presence in states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Karnataka. We can proudly claim that we have touched millions of lives with our work and catalyzed a slow but sustained cultural transformation.

Those touched by Breakthrough's work are today Rights Advocates who work with us to bring the ideals of dignity, equality and justice into their own families and communities — even when doing so requires challenging deeply entrenched norms and attitudes.

Breakthrough has successfully reinvented the delivery of social and behavioral change through a potent mix of stirring multimedia campaigns, cutting-edge pop culture, smart social media and authentic on-the-ground community engagement.

Today we receive accolades not just from the global human rights community, the media and entertainment industry, and most recently, the technology community. And the roll of credits for this unique formula begins with Mallika. ■

Sonali Khan is the country director (India) of Breakthrough.

‘She puts her own reputation and security on the line for the movement’

Humanitarian **Darren Walker** on why he admires Mallika Dutt

I love Mallika. She's just the most extraordinary person. I have known *of* Mallika for many years, but I have come to know her personally in the last five years through my work at the Ford Foundation because she is one of our most effective grantees and a remarkable partner.

Breakthrough and some of the campaigns that they do are among the most powerful, potent, impactful and innovative initiatives that that we've supported. And much of this is as result of Mallika's very determined, brilliant, passionate leadership — she is a rare person and a most unusual leader.

I came to know of her work when she was making a presentation at the Ford Foundation on the conditions faced by women in much of the Global South, and I was just inspired. I was transfixed by her calm, very intelligent, and thoughtful description of the situation, but also there was a sense of passion and outrage. Rage was coming through, and you could feel it in the room.

So for me, even though I knew of her because she was a Program Officer at Ford before I came to the organization, when I was at Rockefeller, but it was only when I came to Ford and she had already left to start Breakthrough that I got to know her.

She had certainly already started to make a name for herself in the human rights space before that. I think when she was at Ford, she was known as a really outstanding Program Officer, working in some very difficult areas: Women, domestic violence, and a range of human rights abuses in India. And she did some pretty bold programming and really pushed the

envelope to reorient the program to have a real focus on the plight of vulnerable women and girls.

It was through her work at Ford that she created Breakthrough. She really distinguished herself and became well known for helping to organize these major campaigns that used culture as the lever for change. She made this album of women's dreams, and the idea for that came out of what she was doing at Ford, so it was really through storytelling, film, and music that she did a lot of her work.

It was a real breakthrough to do that kind of programming and not just fund legal organizations to do legal work — which is important and, of course, we need it, but that also needs to be complimented by other innovative interventions.

It was hugely pioneering at the time because to use storytelling and media is a relatively new phenomenon in social justice work. That's not to say that there haven't always been artist and creative production and poetry and literature — I mean we've always had that in our movements — but the specific use of music videos and creating apps and leveraging YouTube and using all of these media platforms comprehensively at once was a very fresh concept.

I think her reputation is one of bold, daring, pushing-the-boundaries leadership, and she takes no prisoners.

People admire her because she is so bold and because she is such a risk-taker, and she puts her own reputation and sometimes her own security on the line for the movement and for what is right.

That's why people admire her. That's why



YURI GRIPAS/REUTERS

Mallika Dutt and actress Nicole Kidman prepare to testify on international violence against women before the House Foreign Affairs committee in Washington, DC in 2009.

I admire her.

Being in philanthropy, doing human rights work is a way for her to realize the world that she wants to exist in and the world that she wants to contribute to building it personally.

I like the fact that she's light though. She doesn't take herself so seriously. She makes fun of the establishment, but her own ego and her own sense of herself is that she has to work hard and have fun.

I appreciate that for her work *is* fun; she laughs a lot, she's a great jokester, and she can laugh at herself. To me that's the ultimate sign of a person I want to be

around. And I love being around her.

We had dinner a few months ago after I was made president (*Ford Foundation*), and she was just so honest about how to address power dynamics — she's one of those friends who will tell you the real story, and that's so refreshing because it's hard to get frank, honest feedback.

I get that from her, and that's why I trust her so much and she's such a valued friend. ■

Darren Walker is President of the Ford Foundation, 'the second largest philanthropy in the United States.'

He spoke to Chaya Babu.

‘She challenged anything that smacked of injustice’

I know Mallika in many different capacities. Currently I'm a board member of the organization she founded, Breakthrough, and I've known her as a colleague — I was the deputy director of UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) and Breakthrough was a strong partner, particularly in our work on ending violence against women, and also a leader in the field in really putting out new strategies to making violence against women unacceptable. That has been

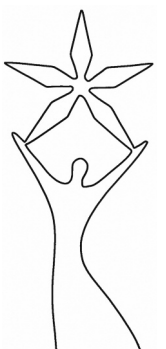
Joanne Sandler on seeing Mallika Dutt blossom from an intern to a leader

Breakthrough's founding achievement in the ways that it demonstrates and models a completely different approach.

I met Mallika in 1981 or 1982 when I was the

Special Projects Coordinator at the International Women's Tribune Center and Mallika was an intern from Mount Holyoke College. I think she was about 18. And Mallika was, of course, an intern not to be ignored.

The first adjective that I'd use to describe her is 'challenging,' but I don't mean in the sense that she was challenging for me as a colleague and staff person; she challenged ideas, she challenged assumptions, she challenged anything that smacked of



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‘Mallika has a very soft side to her which cries over a stranger’s story’

Megha Bhouraskar on Mallika Dutt’s magnetism

It seems like just yesterday that I met Mallika. But in fact, it was in 1989; I had just returned to New York City after living for two years in Boston, and I heard of a group of South Asian Women who were meeting in an elementary school building on the Upper West Side to address issues on domestic violence in the South Asian community in and around New York.

I went to the meeting because I thought that they may need a lawyer, and also because I was curious. At the end of the meeting, still unsure of whether I wanted to return, Mallika Dutt, all of 5 feet tall, ran over to me, leapt on to her toes, gave me a big hug, and said, “I’m so glad that you’ve decided to join!”

After that, I had no choice but to get involved. This was and continues to be, Mallika’s magnetism and presence. That small group eventually developed to be what is Sakhi for South Asian Women today.

From the moment I first met her, and continuing relentlessly, I have known Mallika to speak, argue, push, fight, beg, plead, with respect, love, and laughter, in her determination to improve the lives of those who need her vision



Mallika Dutt, left, with Megha Bhouraskar.

COURTESY: MALLIKA DUTT

and strength; whether it be women, men, children, immigrants, if Mallika can find a way to address their concerns, she will.

And while determined and passionate, Mallika has a very soft side to her which cries over a stranger’s story; and also, a child-like interest in stories about unicorns, animals and flying children on brooms that can engross her through a Sunday afternoon curled up in her books.

Personally, we have been close and shared our ups and downs over the last 25 years. Mallika has been there for me, with warmth and honesty, and has included me in some of her deeper moments.

When I started my own law firm and left my prior partnership of 12 years, Mallika brought a Ganesha and a mug with faces of Indian women to my office *pooja*, and dragged a huge framed painting of Laxmi from India to hang on my office walls. And she listened to me when I most needed someone’s ear and support.

What do I enjoy to do most with Mallika? Of course, talking until all hours of the night, but also dancing in synco-pated rhythm to great music after a few wines — when all that needs to be said can be done through shared smiles of sheer pleasure and love! ■

Megha Bhouraskar is a New York-based lawyer.

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‘She challenged anything that smacked of injustice’

discrimination or injustice. And I think she did that both in the workplace as well as outside of it — she used our work to make sure that that was challenged everywhere.

When she came to the Tribune Center, she was working with Charlotte Bunch and Kathleen Barry on the Ending Female Sexual Slavery Project, which was a political tightrope.

Mallika is really extraordinary at being able to navigate that political tightrope without compromising her principles or her voice. I think there are three things about her that create this ability. She has extraordinary clarity in her own moral barometer. She thinks very strategically and deeply about what she believes and what she sees as possible, and I think it’s also her clarity that allows her to communicate that vision in a very compelling and actionable way.

I also think that Mallika has an amazing capacity to vibe into what’s happening in a space, whether it’s a room or a country or an organization or an issue, and to connect

with people individually in a very visceral way. I’ve seen her do that time and time again in meetings and conferences and forums — I’ve seen Mallika tear up her prepared speech because she understands what is required at that moment.

Still, I definitely think she had her own personal difficult times in her career. Probably the first 10 or 15 years, the point at which Mallika went from doing social justice work to going back to graduate school and then becoming a lawyer and taking different jobs along that path, were probably not the easiest moments.

And there are times when we all go through that space of trying to figure out how to have a purpose-driven life but also be able to support ourselves and make a difference in the world. So in my long friendship with Mallika, certainly I am mindful that she went through that process of trying to find the place where she could be most effective.

I think being a lawyer was particularly challenging because she was working in a corporate environment and I don’t think it

resonated with her sense of purpose in the world. It’s been a real thrill to see her step up in the leadership of her own organization.

Of course there are many ways I’ve seen Mallika grow and evolve since I’ve known her. Primarily, I think she’s seen the benefit of developing the confidence to follow her own instincts. And she has excellent instincts, so learning that she can actually trust them and go with them and use them is certainly one way I’ve watched Mallika blossom.

The other is really about a healthy dose of patience. By that I mean I think it’s partly Mallika’s impatience that fuels her passion and her impact on the world, but she has paid a price for that impatience. I think anybody who knows Mallika would mention this trait, which is part of what makes her so right for what she does. But I think she has learned to inject at least a dose of patience into her drive to make change.

It’s extremely gratifying to see Mallika win this award, personally in the sense of

seeing a friend get recognition for a lifetime of work because this phase is a huge culminating step in everything she’s done.

She has deserved to be awarded all along the way, but it’s very gratifying. That’s also because of what she’s being recognized for because the issue is huge and universal — as we just saw with what happened in Santa Barbara (*the University of California, Santa Barbara mass shooting May 23*) and what happens every day around the world — so that recognition shines more light on the issue, which is fundamentally the most important thing...

The acknowledgment that Mallika’s getting is a validation of how important this work is for so many millions of people. ■

Joanne Sandler is an independent consultant focused on women’s human rights and a Senior Associate of Gender@Work, an international collaborative that strengthens organizations to build cultures of equality and social justice.

She spoke to Chaya Babu.