

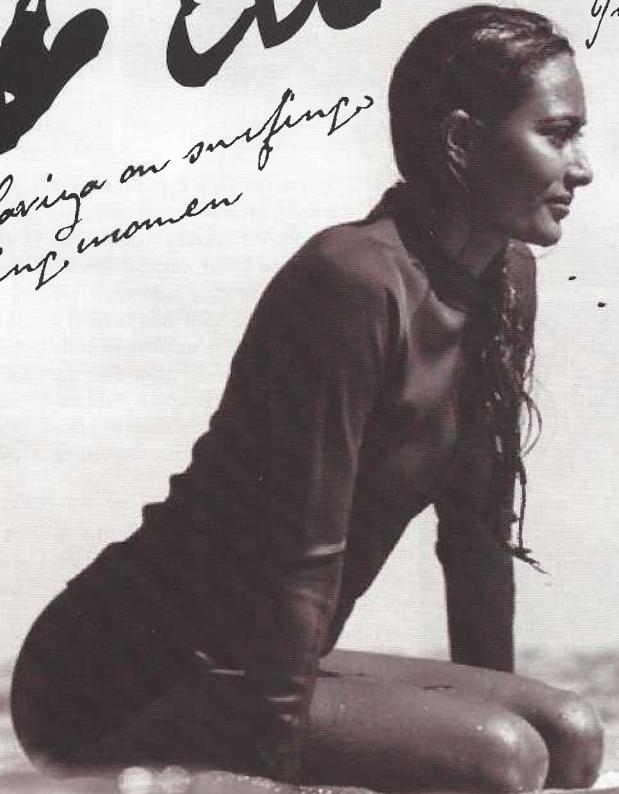
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*Ishita Malavoya on surfing
empowering women*

India, and



Words by // Michaela Garretson

With only nine years of hitting the waves, Ishita Malaviya has already been featured in multiple documentaries, co-founded a surf school, and been recognized as India's first female surfer.

In India where every day is an adventure, Ishita has slid past boundaries, entering surfing contests with men when there were no women's categories. Because of her, more women in India are grabbing boards and challenging the waves. From her humble beginnings as a child wishing to surf one day, to surfing coasts around the world in places like Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Hawaii, Ishita's story inspires Indian women and others alike.

Born in Bombay, Ishita assumed India had no waves. While studying journalism in the small town of Manipal, Ishita and her boyfriend Tushar met a surfboard-carrying German exchange student and some Californian surfers. After instructions from her new friends, Ishita caught her first wave and knew she would be surfing thereafter. The couple saved up to buy a \$150 used surfboard by selling sewing and ab exercise machines, and even buying shoes in Bombay to sell to their school friends. Once purchased, they wrapped the board in two sleeping bags, tied it with a rope and hopped on buses to a surf spot an hour away. They shared the board, one person cheering and offering pointers while the other surfed.

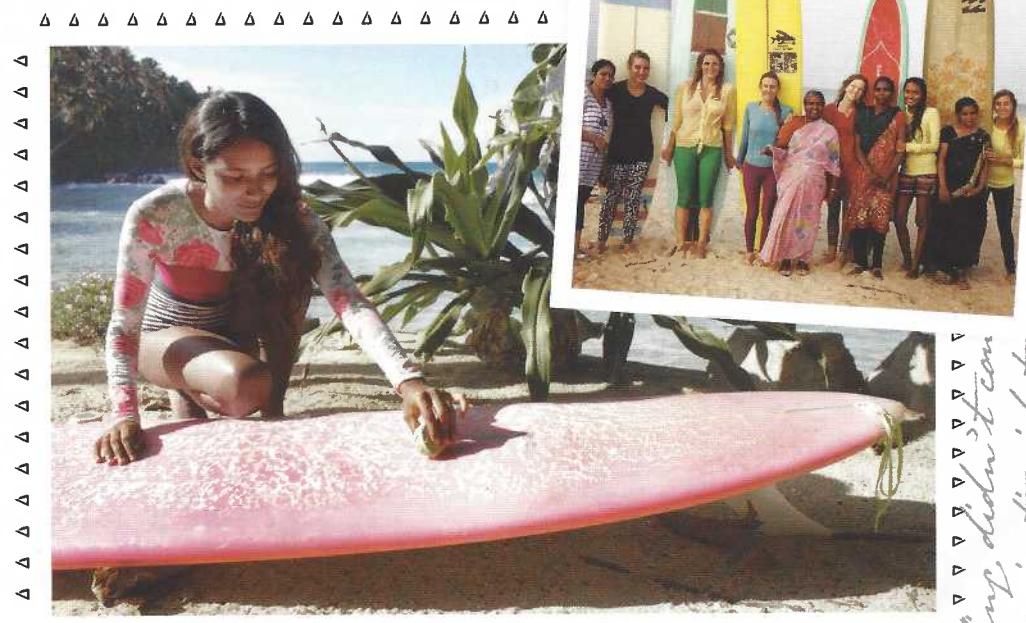
Surfing didn't come naturally to Ishita. Often intimidated by the males who paddled aggressively and had natural upper-body strength, Ishita began watching online surf videos and teaching herself. Without a coach or other female surfers to watch, she patiently practiced for many years. She explains her love for the sport saying, "The thing I love most about surfing is that it makes me feel like a child again. I feel like as a woman in India, you're sometimes forced to grow up too soon. Surfing brought back that element of play in my life and gave me a sense of freedom and liberation that I didn't know I was seeking but desperately needed."

Eventually, Ishita and Tushar began teaching their friends how to surf. This led them to found *The Shaka Surf Club*, described as one of the first surf schools in India. Located in Kodi Bengre, the school has grown organically, "transforming into a safe community space" where locals and visitors can interact. At Camp Namaloha (Namaste and Aloha), students receive accommodations and fresh homemade meals from four village families.

The school combines surfing lessons and water safety education to offer individuals the experience of connecting with the ocean, as Ishita aptly explains, "Our main goal is to get more people in the water and introduce them to the joy of surfing. There is practically no beach culture in India. Most people live in fear of the ocean and even if they go to the beach they don't get in the water as they are unsure how to interact with the ocean. Surfing is that missing link!"

Ishita mentions that surfing opened up a world of possibility for her offering the ability to create progressive change in her country. She explains, "More than anything surfing has given me a chance to give back to my community. I feel like I now have a responsibility to be a positive role model to other young girls in my country. To empower and strengthen women to not be inhibited by their fears and daringly chase their dreams. At the same time, setting up a surf school in a small fishing village gives me the opportunity to raise awareness about environmental concerns and contribute toward sustainable development in the area. I feel like I am personally able to make more of an impact by doing what I do [and] engaging with the community on a grassroots level."

India's first professional surfer serves as a powerful reminder of the quality of work a woman on a mission can achieve when she is intent on making her community a deep sea of freedom.



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