

# Poker-faced, These Women Raise the Ante

Women poker players of India are playing their cards well, fighting for their place in a game dominated by men

Rajiv Singh

Muskan Sethi held her cards close to her chest. Her roving eye, fixated on the face of her rival sitting across the table, was trying to gauge every flicker, even twitch of the forehead to gather some clues. Finally, after hours of intense battle, Sethi—the only Indian woman participating in UK's televised poker game show Shark Cage—lost her chance to win \$1 million in 2014.

"I might have finished second, but the experience was priceless," recalls 27-year-old, who happens to be India's first woman professional poker player. "Who says women can't play cards," thunders Sethi, who fought back 'go back to kitchen' jibe with her determination to make a mark as a professional poker player. "We can achieve anything we want to if we follow our dreams," she adds.

Delhi-born Sethi is not the only one living her dream. There are many who are silently playing their cards well, fighting for their place in a game and society dominated by men. Take, for instance, Suchi Chamaria Agarwal.

The 27-year-old started playing the game just a year back and last year participated in World Series of Poker at Las Vegas. Married to a professional poker player, Agarwal had a tough time convincing her dad about her decision to tie knots with somebody who played poker for a living. "It sounded bizarre to him," she recalls, adding that as awareness about the game spreads and all misconceptions equating poker with gambling melts, people will be more open to embrace the card game.

Luckily for Niharika Bindra, it didn't take much of persuasion to get her parents' nod for taking up poker as a profession. Our society, she reckons, is changing, and people are accepting non-conventional professions by getting rid of the doctor, lawyer, and engineer syndrome.

"The reactions of people have changed," she grins. From the early days of 'you are gambling' shocker to 'please teach me how to play' requests, the going could not have been better



Muskan Sethi, India's first woman professional poker player

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for the 31-year-old. Though it's definitely not easy being a woman poker player in India, Sethi avers there's a silver lining. A male-dominated table, she lets on, will always consider the girl to be the weakling. While the guys mostly take it upon themselves to try and bluff the girls on the table, they soon realise that's not gonna fly with me, says a beaming Bindra.

What has probably also aided women in taking poker as a profession is the age-agnostic nature of the game. Maria Kirloskar, known as 'DragonLady' in the poker circle, took to the game after 25 years of her corporate life. Though she began playing poker about eight years ago, it was only two years back that she started focusing more on honing her skills.

Ask her how does she tackle the dual stigma of card game and women playing card game in India, and Dragon Lady breathes fire: there seems to be a stigma for nearly everything women do in India. "Keeping track of all the things where there is a stigma would take up most of my day, every day," she grins.

Roland Landers, CEO of All India Gaming Federation, maintains that it's high time for the country to stop paying lip service to women empowerment. "Women empowerment should not remain a fancy phrase," he says, adding that India needs more parents and families supporting their girl child to follow career of their choice.