

One with nature

A 19-year-old athlete, social entrepreneur, explorer, environmentalist and filmmaker from Goa, Malaika Vaz was the youngest speaker at TEDxBITSGoa, India's oldest running TEDx event that was recently organised in Goa. She was also awarded the National Geographic 'Roar Talent Bursary'. Café speaks to the youngster about her experience at TEDxBITSGoa and her future projects

Young Inspiration: Malaika Vaz was the youngest speaker at TEDxBITSGoa

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The youngest person globally to go on an expedition to Antarctica and the Arctic, Malaika Vaz is a strong-headed youngster who has been campaigning for environmental protection through campaigns such as 'Leave No Trace' and the 'Protect the Poles' movement. The Goan teenager was recently awarded the National Geographic 'Roar Talent Bursary', which is a grant that is extended to promising emerging talent in the field of natural history storytelling. An intern student of Bengaluru-based Felis Creations, her short-film 'Waghoba' depicts the real life story of a newly protected forest in Maharashtra. The 17-minute film was shot within a period of two months in Umred-Kharandala near Nagpur and was critically acclaimed at the Windscreen Festival in Bristol, United Kingdom. She was invited as a speaker to share her experience at TEDxBITSGoa.

HERALD CAFE: Tell us about your experience at Ted talk.

MALAIKA VAZ: Speaking at TEDx was a great experience. TEDx is the biggest celebration of ideas in the world, and aims at encouraging the sharing of knowledge for social change. My speech was about 'Storytelling for social change'. I shared my experiences as an explorer, social entrepreneur and wildlife filmmaker with the audience and showcased some of my work. Through my talk, I outlined the need for telling stories to inspire action and spoke about the need for environmental protection.

HC: How did it feel to be the youngest speaker and how did you prepare for the talk?

MV: I was the youngest speaker that TEDx BITS Goa has ever had, and I was speaking along with noteworthy speakers from different fields including a prominent lyricist, an education reformist, a Harvard theoretical physicist and an anti-terrorism expert from Interpol; it was amazing to speak along with these inspiring people. I prepared for the talk by summarising my experiences and weaving them around the topic of storytelling, with the aim to inspire my audience.

HC: Can you tell us about your documentary film 'Waghoba'?

MV: I presented, wrote and directed this documentary and the cinematography and editing were done by my teammate Nitye Sood. This film was produced by Felis Creations. Indian forests, culture, religion and mythology have long been dominated by the tiger. The tiger plays the dual role of giver and destroyer across the Indian landscape, kindling a spectrum of emotions. This documentary focuses on the deep connection between man and tiger in India. In the film 'Waghoba', I travel to Central India to uncover this relationship, all the while in search of a mysterious, elusive male tiger. In my quest for this tiger, I unravel the stark contrast in human emotion towards the tiger, in one of India's newest tiger reserves. This film is a journey through a time when man and tiger coexist together in the same terrain - like never before. 'Waghoba' tells the story of the Modern Indian tiger in its ever-changing context through the lens of the communities that share a home with the tiger.

HC: As a young gamechanger, what were your recent achievements?

MV: I was recently awarded the National Geographic ROAR Talent bursary to attend the Wildscreen festival in Bristol - known as the Green Oscars. In recognition of my work in the field of environmental protection, I was awarded the State Youth Award.

HC: Tell us about your organisation, Kriya?

MV: I started an organisation called 'Kriya' that empowers women victims of domestic and sexual abuse, children from criminally labelled tribal communities and underprivileged youth through adventure sports and outdoor education. The mandate of this organisation is to use the power of expeditions in the outdoors to empower vulnerable communities. A personal highlight for me was when the earthquake in Nepal happened and the Kriya team climbed mountains at 6000+ metres in the Himalayas to raise funds for the reconstruction of homes of Nepali Sherpa communities. The women and team at the United

World College running Kriya make me proud every day through all of our work in adventure sports and community empowerment.

HC: How was it studying at the United World College in Pune?

MV: The United World College was a phenomenal high school that I am proud to be an alumni of. United World College uses education as a tool to bring people, nations and cultures together for peace and a sustainable future. The United World College's focus on project based and immersive learning has definitely prepared me for the field that I am currently starting my career in.

HC: What is keeping you busy at the moment?

MV: I am currently working as a wildlife researcher with India's best wildlife production house led by Sandesh Kadar, called Felis Creations. Felis aims to use compelling imagery to urge the protection of the natural world, and works with international broadcasters like the BBC, National Geographic, Discovery and Animal Planet. I have been able to learn different aspects of the art of wildlife filmmaking through this opportunity and worked with many inspiring people at the Felis team. I am immersing myself in this field and learning all that I can to be an effective wildlife presenter and filmmaker.

HC: What are some of your future projects?

MV: I will continue exploring my passion for adventure sports, wildlife conservation and social empowerment through my work. I am working on a documentary right now following the illegal trafficking of Manta and Mobula Rays from India's oceans. This is my passion project and I am dedicated to creating a compelling and impactful film. I will be researching and filming for this documentary for the next three months in three different countries. In 2017, I will be embarking on challenging expeditions in India and abroad to further my passion for exploration, and will communicate my passion for wildlife through more documentaries.

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