



HEADING

Climbing women of the world

Sharing the stories of women who climb from around the globe, Rachel Briggs founder of United We Climb interviews Indian climber Nutan.



Meet Nutan a psyched climber from Pune, India, whose passion for the outdoors has enveloped her whole life. Born and bred in Pune, the educational and now IT hub of India, and the most studious and obedient child of the family, Nutan was destined to become an engineer. She gained a Bachelors of Information Technology in 2014 and immediately started work. That's that, thought Nutan's mother – her daughter had found a successful career path and was set for life. However, a year later, Nutan's path took a long detour and she discovered the beauty of her local mountains.

Rachel commented on how she came to interview Nutan in the first place.

Myself and Nutan connected via social media. I came across one of her Instagram posts that captured a special moment, where a mother and daughter became Climber and Coach.

The video clip was not about hard moves or amazing cinematography, yet it still reflected one of the most treasured elements of climbing that we can all relate to. That incredible sense of pride, when we, or someone we care about, pushes outside of their comfort zone and discovers they can achieve something they did not believe was possible.

After chatting with Nutan, she kindly agreed to share her fascinating journey into climbing.

Watch the video on Nutan's IG @nutaneer or the United We Climb IG @unitedweclimb.

Nutan, how did you get into climbing?

After working in the IT industry for around a year I discovered trekking and then mountaineering. I stumbled upon rock climbing because I wanted to pursue Mixed Climbing/Mountaineering and had

enrolled for a Basic Mountaineering Course (BMC) in 2017. In India, to become a Mountain Guide or to climb big peaks, the BMC is compulsory. It is a 28-day course in the Himalayas where all the skills are taught, including rock climbing. I had just one month before the course to prepare so I joined a Lead Climbing gym and soon became hooked, going climbing after the office every day and on the weekends.

My husband, Deepak, was the coach at the climbing gym. Occasionally he would help me and that is how we got to know each other. Once I got to know more about Deepak, I started loving climbing. In Feb-March 2018 I did a lot of climbing. I was improving. I climbed three long and difficult multi-pitch routes with my husband. I was really scared of the exposure, especially as all the routes in our area are on loose Basalt rock. From March my parents wanted Deepak and I to get married immediately. After our wedding on 2 July 2018 I lost touch with climbing. I was travelling a lot for a trekking company, who I started working for after leaving my IT job. They were all long trekking trips. I just couldn't get the time to climb. During my trekking trips I gained enough experience to go on expedition to climb a 6,000m



or 7,000m peak, but something always seemed to go wrong. Either it snowed a lot, rained a lot, there weren't enough team members, or there were money problems or leave problems. Although I was doing a lot of long treks I just couldn't summit a big mountain. I became really frustrated.

In late 2019 I became fed up with relying on the weather for my projects. I made up my mind to take control and aim for goals that would not be affected by external conditions. My husband also encouraged me to climb. He suggested that first I should become a good climber because then we could go for big Alpine Climbing projects in the Himalayas. I found this idea enlightening. I had lower body strength but little upper body strength, so it made sense. I started enjoying lead climbing. I knew what had gone wrong in the early multi-pitch climbs. I took small steps and made simple goals. It was like "this weekend only climb top rope 5-6 times, know the route, moves". The following weekend, "I will do clipping, but with no pressure". Then the next step is to try a more difficult route. This worked like a charm and after three weekends I led a route graded 5c. I was really happy and motivated by this progress.

Four weekends later I took a long trip to Badami (the lead climbing centre of India). Being competitive by nature, Deepak had prepped me advising "don't get stressed". He said to just go and see what happens. Learn about your body, find a good 6b+ route that motivates you then come back and train for that. Our plan was to take a lot of falls to get rid of the fear of falling. But while lead climbing the easiest route. I slipped and banged my left knee. Unlike previous climbing trips, I was not demotivated this time. I took a rest day and climbed again for two days. Of course, there was fear that I might hit my knee again, but I continued and I was happy. Even after I returned home, I took a week off and started climbing again with more enthusiasm. I found two routes graded 6c. Both were different styles. I could do the moves, but I needed more finger strength. Then in March lockdown was announced.

I am still motivated to get back to climbing despite the situation. In fact, I think I made great use of the lockdown. I read "THE PUSH" by Tommy Caldwell and that made me super motivated. I learned a lot about training for climbing. In lockdown itself, I have lost weight and gained a lot of upper and lower body strength.

What is the climbing scene like where you live?

Climbing in India is not as big as in other Asian countries like China, Japan, Korea or Singapore. There are hardly any big climbing gyms here. There are four major developing cities of India; Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai and Pune. All of these are developing due to IT hubs. These cities have most of the climbing gyms and they are either Bouldering or Lead, but not both. Other cities have climbing walls, but they don't have many climbers.

Outdoors there are some really strong climbers. Of course, at the moment, there are men climbing harder grades than women. Men in India have climbed 8b+ lead and 8a boulder grades. All of the hardest climbs in India are almost all opened by Indian climbers. There is a lot more motivation for outdoor climbing than for competitions. In 2018, an 8a was climbed for the first time by an Indian woman. There are many new climbers getting into climbing. There are Bouldering Festivals being organised. Of course the popular climbing sites of Hampi, Suru, Badami and Sethan have a lot of foreign climbers visiting every season. Most of the climbing sites in India have been developed by overseas climbers like Chris Sharma and Phil Lockett, amongst many others.

Climbing participation is definitely increasing in India as people have more disposable income and spare time. With the Olympics, there will be even more interest. Parents want their kids to excel beyond the boundaries of academia.

Are there many climbing competitions?

Mountaineering continues to be more popular than rock climbing likely due to the lack of climbing courses and such. Climbing Competitions are all organised by a sub-division of the Indian Mountaineering Federation. There are fewer funds for organising competitions or setting up good training facilities, which has led to a lack of good training facilities or guidance for strong climbers. There are no big walls, volumes or bouldering walls available for aspiring climbers as per the International Standard. This also deprives routesetters of being able to practice setting world-class routes and problems that would train the climbers. There has definitely been some progress in competition climbing over the last 20 years, but we are still a long way behind other climbers internationally.

One thing I feel is that the young competition climbers are climbing primarily to get medals and the benefit of the Sports Quota for their Education. They have no ambition to, for example, get to a level where they could compete internationally at World Cups or in the Olympic Games.

Being a climber in India, you mentioned some barriers you have either experienced yourself getting into the sport, or you have witnessed in others. Could you tell us about this?

Before diving in, I should explain more about Indian culture. In India, arranged marriage is very important. Love marriages are frowned upon.

Inter-caste marriages lead to huge repercussions. Girls get married early at the age of 22-26 and boys 26-29. Older than that and you lose status in society. If the girl earns more than the boy, it is most likely that the boy won't marry the girl or the girl will be asked to leave her job after marriage. The girl is expected to be 'innocent', no smoking, no drinking, no outdoors and to look after the house, husband, kids. Within a couple of years of marriage, the girl is expected to get pregnant. In our Caste, the Dowry is still practised (but in disguise). The boy must have financial stability and own a house. He must be 'established' if he wants to get married through an arranged marriage.

My struggle is the same as the struggle of every girl in India who graduates. Suddenly their parents see their daughter grown up and want her to get married. So, immediately after graduation, my parents started setting me up with potential boys (without asking me). Boys wouldn't consider me because I was earning more than them working in IT.

Once I started trekking I knew that I wanted to marry someone who would allow me to continue hiking and mountaineering. I was straightforward with the guys. I would ask them if they would allow me to travel. They would just say 'no'. All of these boys were well-educated. Then my parents called a rich family boy whose salary was obviously more than mine. He was a cyclist and a hiker and we were on the same wavelength. I thought I had found my husband. But at the last minute his parents asked for a Dowry. The guy was acting oblivious. I immediately broke things off as I didn't want to be that girl who would accept this sinful tradition for her well-being and let other girls suffer due to that. My parents didn't have that much money, but I knew if I said 'yes' my father would go to any lengths to collect enough money.

My parents were worried that no sane guy would marry a girl who

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travels and climbs. I was the first person in the family to travel by flight. Whilst they were proud of this, they continued to worry that I would never be married.

I knew I wanted to marry a person who would not force me to be bound in the walls of the house. Whether I wanted to be a dancer or a rock star, I wanted my husband to support me.

Deepak was the first person I got really involved with. He was not well educated, nor financially stable. He was a Karate Champion and had never really studied or taken a serious job. He worked as a climbing coach. When I was interviewing one of India's pioneering female climbers, Deepak came along to help out. We were looking at her trophies and he said: "Someday your name will be written on these awards and somebody else will come to interview you!" It was the most amazing thing anyone had ever said to me. I knew at that moment I am marrying this person!

I told my parents about Deepak and as he is of my caste they agreed to meet him. Whilst they were not happy about his lack of education and salary, he won them over with his supportiveness towards my dreams. They allowed us to marry.

My life after marriage is completely different now. My In-laws are super supportive of my climbing and travelling and I'm climbing even more now. There is no pressure of wearing a sari, attending weddings, cooking or cleaning the house. My Mother-in-law is a wonderful person who never expects anything from me.

To my surprise my parents have changed their attitudes too. They are now supersupportive and they have accepted Deepak and his

family. I guess their major concern was that nobody would marry their rebellious daughter. They are now happy that I am happy.

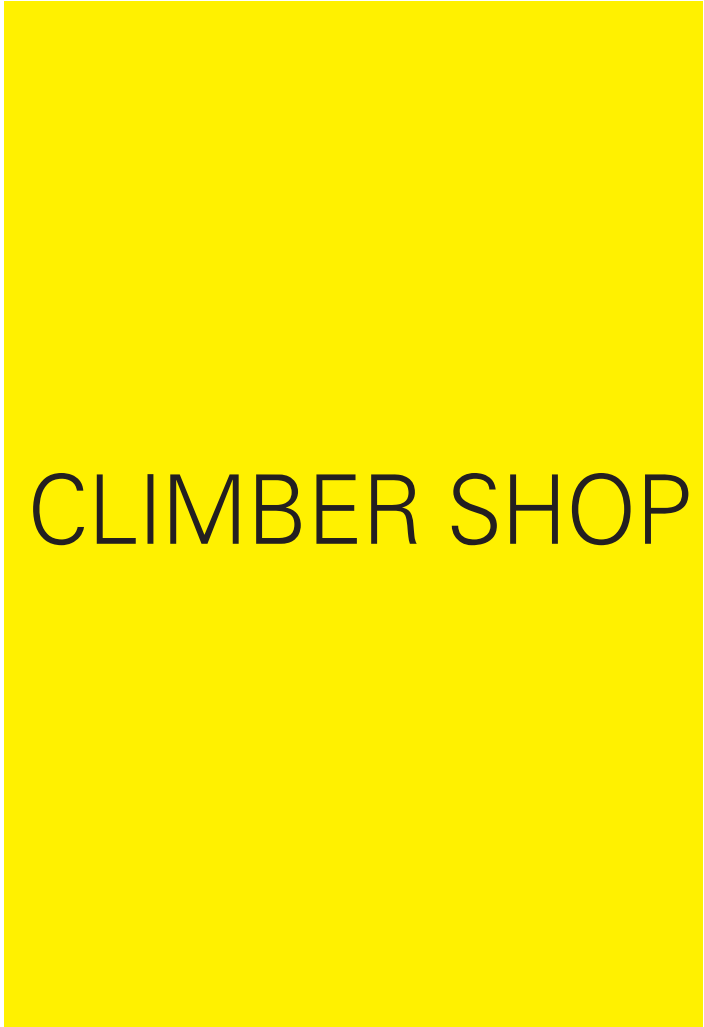
Every other girl I meet with conservative parents like mine has had the same experience as myself and most give up climbing after getting married. Climbing, travelling and working in the adventure travel industry is still considered a leisure activity and not a real job. People think that if a girl is travelling, she is drinking and partying and her husband may have an affair in her absence.

Within the climbing community I've noticed that males are respectful of female climbers and the males I have climbed with have all been very supportive. I think it's sad to see female climbers lying to their parents about going climbing. I appreciate that there are more stubborn parents than mine, who hit their daughters or mistreat them. All I can say is try to invent new ways of convincing them why going climbing is good for you. It is easy to fight against the world but the hardest is fighting with your parents. Seeing them depressed because of you is the most painful thing. Whenever I share my story, I never say I am lucky that I have a wonderful husband. Of course, some might say it is destiny. But, I feel that I fought for this freedom. I earned it by grappling for half a decade with my family and society. Most of the girls eventually cave to their family's wishes and then complain they don't get what they want. Had I given up and married some rich guy I would never have been happy. We all need to stand up for ourselves. 🙌

Nutan Shinde-Pawar is an engineer, a climber and mountaineer and a freelance writer living in Pune, South India. You can find her on Instagram @nutanaseer



UNITED WE CLIMB
 United We Climb is creating new experiences and opportunities designed specifically for, and with, people currently underrepresented and under-served in Climbing and the Outdoors.
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