



LIFE

# The wind chaser

Mumbai girl **PRIYA DARSHINI** was 24 when she became the first Indian woman to finish the 100-mile Himalayan Ultramarathon. Six years later, in New York, she reflects on its impact on her music, acting and, more than anything, her mind

About six years ago, on a flight from New Delhi to Darjeeling, a voice on the loudspeaker directed my attention to an ethereal mountain peak wreathed in fog. It was majestic, overwhelming—a view I would see more intimately in the days to come. Soon, I'd join 65 elite runners from all over the globe on an ultramarathon that featured rare glimpses of the world's highest points: Everest, Lhotse, Makalu and Kanchenjunga. All provided I could hack the 160km run.

I had trained in Bangalore for five months with my family friend Ram Sethu, a 47-year-old US-based tech entrepreneur who first convinced me to embark on the adventure. We regularly jogged through Bangalore's many parks, tackled the slopes of Nandi Hills and bulked up on protein, shunning white rice and alcohol. Ram was a persistent cheerleader whose impressive resume included a 250km endurance competition, backpack in tow, across the Gobi Desert. The last race I had run? A 200m dash in second grade.

As a school girl in Mumbai, I was a state-level swimmer until an inflamed vertebra brought my aquatic ambitions to a screeching halt. As a result, I dove headfirst into a dizzying array of pursuits, sometimes interpreted as a lack of focus: I was 15 when I started a copywriting stint at McCann-Erickson alongside a singing career (mostly advertising jingles, with the occasional Bollywood track thrown in), while also helping my mother, a social worker, who aided under-



## GAME FOR ONE

At a self-organised triathlon (a 3.9km swim, 50km biking stretch and 21km run) in Mumbai in December 2011—a birthday gift to herself

privileged cancer patients. By 20, I felt burnt out. It was strange, then, to embark on a seemingly impossible challenge just a few months shy of my 24th birthday. Friends laughed in disbelief, claiming they'd streak through the streets of Mumbai should I finish. Despite the ultramarathon's staggering physical demands, I entered for my mind—to become better acquainted with myself.

## THE RACE

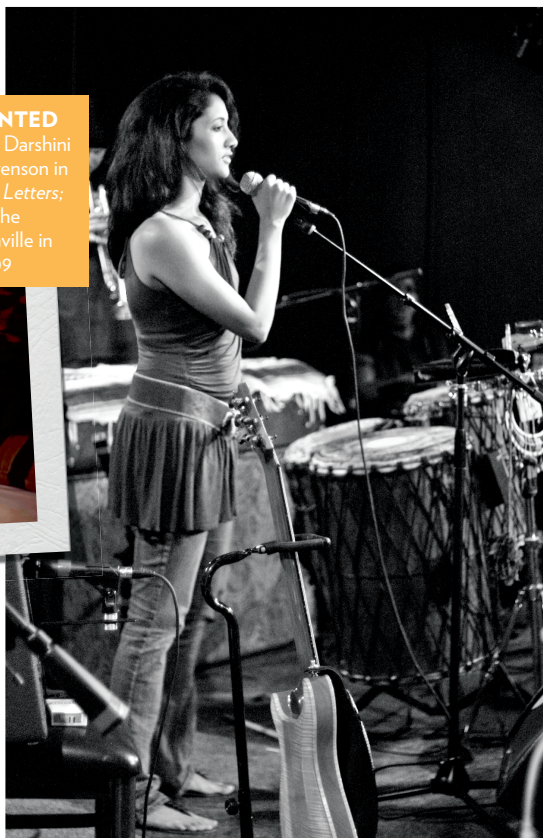
The five-day ordeal began at 6,600ft. An ultramarathon, by definition, is an organised foot-race that extends beyond 42 km. It's run on roads, tracks or trails. When it comes to distances, there is no limit.

As I took my place on the starting line, I recalled the race director's words: just a few kilometres short of a full marathon, the first day—one that would also involve ascending an additional 6,000ft—would be the most trying. Completing the race, I was told, would make me the very first Indian woman to finish.

Assaulted by the altitude, I threw up after hitting the first hill. My lungs screamed and, despite a fleeting desire to quit, I continued, rewarded by the breathtaking rhododendron forests that dotted Singalila National Park. But the weather took a ferocious turn, pelting us with freezing rain, turning even our sweat into ice. My toenails, badgered from the rough terrain, were soon dislodged and bleeding (eventually, I would pull them out). >



**GOAL-ORIENTED**  
From left: Priya Darshini with Juliet Stevenson in a still from *The Letters*; performing at the Lighthouse Nashville in November 2009



Ram and I shared a single headlamp, crucial as we ran through the dark. I'm almost certain I hallucinated: I saw a man in a bright orange jumpsuit carrying a flask of tea. I don't recall much else, except a cluster of army jawaans who seemed to appear from the mist as they chanted words of encouragement, accompanying me on the final kilometre.

I tore a few fibres on my knee the next day, taking a tumble as I ran downhill. Our daily runs, sometimes stretching for nearly nine hours, began between 6am and 8am. When the hills became especially steep, we walked, picking up pace on hitting flat ground. Though Ram and I ran next to each other, we barely spoke, worried it would take away from our already dwindling energy supply.

The remainder of the race is still a blur. What I do remember is the view from my hut each dawn—a golden, glistening Kanchenjunga—telling me I was capable of finishing.

## THE LESSONS

When I returned home to Mumbai, I worried about sharing my experience, scared that it would take away from the race's true intensity. I knew, though, that it brought me the clarity and focus I'd so eagerly craved. Indebted to running, Ram and I co-founded The WindChasers (*Thewindchasers.com*), an adventure racing company, about three years later. We've trained everyone from a recovering cancer patient to a man with polio, watching jubilantly as they finished a race. We're a business venture but we try to keep our participant costs extremely low by relying on sponsors (typical ultramarathons cost runners anywhere from USD 3,000 to 5,000). I want more people to experience the togetherness and the divinity I encountered in the Himalayas. When I see my runners in action, I'm frequently reminded of a documentary I watched on the region, on a community of snow leopards. They're solitary

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creatures but hunt in packs. It says something about the importance of a solid support system in extreme conditions.

I realised over time that the ultramarathon had tempered my mind, rid me of my ego and enabled me to take serious risks, especially when it came to my music career. In 2008, I joined forces with the Grammy-winning American artist Future Man (or Roy Wooten), as he toured India, giving up a deal with a major commercial label in the process. I picked the opportunity to be around passionate musicians over the steady promise of 150 gigs a year, a chance I'm sure I wouldn't have taken had it not been for the ultramarathon. And I realised I didn't have to choose

between the Carnatic sensibilities I was exposed to as a child and electronica that I adored as an adult, fusing both as I charged ahead.

## THE FUTURE

It's music that brought me to New York City last year. I'm putting together a band, composing a series of yoga soundtracks and working on performing live. I'm also in the US to explore a newer love—acting. My debut film, *The Letters*, directed by William Riead, hits theatres later this year. It's a biopic on Mother Teresa and I play her first disciple, Shubashini Das. We shot the film on location in Goa, which stood in for 1940s Calcutta. The lead actor, Juliet Stevenson (of *Bend It Like Beckham* fame), was particularly inspiring. We were shooting a scene where Mother Teresa was addressing a crowd in a slum. When the director called 'cut', a man made his way through the throngs just to touch Juliet's feet—he thought she was actually Mother Teresa. She had no idea what it meant while I stood there in tears. It was a moment.

In my daily life, running continues to fuel all my creative ambitions. It's triggered many musical compositions and helped me get into character. It strips me to my core, which is essential when you're an actor or musician; it's the only way you can truly connect with your audience.

In moments of doubt, I'll still listen to a series of disheartened voice-notes, recorded from the Himalayan hut where I collapsed after the race's first day. "I want to quit, I can't do this," I hear myself cry. Yet since that ultramarathon in 2007, I've run five more. None, however, was as intensely personal—or euphoric—as the first. ■ —As told to Aarti Virani