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Just how did blogs and bloggers get to be so big? “Everyone has an opinion. Before the Internet exploded, you had people giving and relying on verbal feedback. Later people started doing the same online,” says Harsh Agrawal, the 28-year-old founder of Shout Me Loud (considered the leading blog in India about blogging). Malini Agarwal (known more popularly as Miss Malini after her celebrity gossip/lifestyle blog of the same name) agrees, although she believes there are other factors too that played a role in increasing the prominence of blogs and bloggers. “The growth in Internet penetration in India led to a greater demand for digital content,” she points out. “People became accustomed to accessing digital information and there was a growth in the trust related to digital content. When social media (was added to the mix), what you have are natural distribution channels, that allow for ‘virality’. That has created increasing support from brands and sponsors.” But the greatest reason why the leading blogs in India have got to that position, Malini says, is due to the creators themselves.

“The bloggers who have become popular work very hard to create quality content consistently. They certainly deserve credit for building trust with their followers,” she says.

CAREER OPTION

After working in the corporate sector for six years, Gurgaon-based Swapna Thomas became a full-time mom. Two years later, she was “itching to create a new identity”. She’d always been passionate about writing, and had been following blogs written by moms in the US. Starting her own blog seemed like the most natural step. Today, Swapna’s blog — The Mom Views — is among the most popular blogs of its kind here, and won the Indiblogger Award for ‘Best Parenting Blog in India’ last year. Ask Swapna when she realised that The Mom Views was going to be a whole lot bigger than a platform to express her views, and she says, “When I started getting emails from readers telling me how helpful they found my posts... then the first time I made a five-figure income from my blog in a month. And of course, winning the Indiblogger Award.”

“Many women bloggers are approaching blogging as a career move, and not just as a fad,” Swapna says. “People have discovered the potential of blogging.”

I haven’t earned much from Traveller Stories, but I get freelance assignments and press trips out of it

RUCHIKA VYAS



BENEFITS

While reader feedback and appreciation is what most popular bloggers agree on as being the most fulfilling aspect of their work, there are several tangible benefits as well.

An analytic website that studies Indian blogs has placed Harsh Agrawal’s Shout Me Loud among the top earners in India (the figure mentioned is around \$8,000). While AdSense (Google’s advertising service) is one way blogs can generate an income, there are other ways to monetise as well. There is “affiliate marketing”, which Harsh explains in the following way: “If you want to buy a phone, you may go online to read a review and then you can click on a link and buy it from a site like Flipkart. We (bloggers) write about products all the time, and if the reader makes a purchase, then we get a commission on that.” Harsh asserts that for him, money is not the motivation to blog; the idea, instead, is to add value.

Indeed, bloggers do look beyond monetising, and at creating opportunities through their blogs. Ruchika Vyas, the author of the blog Traveller Stories, admits that monetising only happens when a blog is an established one. “In that respect, I haven’t managed to earn much from Traveller

Stories, but I do get freelance assignments and press trips out of it, which itself is pretty great,” she says.

Yet another influential travel blogger, Neelima Vallangi (of The Wandering Soul) says the challenge is in looking beyond generating direct revenue through ads or sponsored posts from your blog. “I use my blog as a platform to put my work out and earn through other sources, such as brand partnerships, travel writing opportunities, photography etc,” she says.

CELEB STATUS

Then there are those bloggers who become celebrities, with their work online considered synonymous with their identi-

ties. Pastry chef Shaheen Peerbhai, who writes the hugely popular food and baking blog Purple Foodie, recounts how people started addressing her as “Purple Foodie” when they’d run into her. “I hadn’t a clue that my blog would be so well read that when I’d be in a room with new people, they’d jump out of their seats when they realised I write Purple Foodie!” she says.

Malini Agarwal too reports how people she met at bars, restaurants and parties would immediately exclaim, “Oh, (Miss Malini) that’s you!” when she told them she wrote a blog. “It was an amazing feeling,” says Malini, whose TV show called *Miss Malini’s World*, airs on TLC channel.

Why popular bloggers connect with readers is because they are seen as someone you can relate to. Swapna says bloggers are viewed by readers as “one of us” while Shaheen feels it’s down to people wanting to hear “real, individual stories and opinions — not the kind that have been edited down”.

Then there is the aspect of “trust” that bloggers inspire. “I think it’s because we are honest; at least I am,” says Scherezade Shroff, a very popular Mumbai-based blogger who authors Fashionalized, a style and beauty blog. “My subscribers and followers trust me, unlike other celebrities who’re paid to endorse products.”

BLOGGING BOOM

Companies get in touch with these ‘influencers’ because they know they have a dedicated audience

Harsh Agrawal, founder of Shout Me Loud



PASTRY CHEF Shaheen Peerbhai writes the hugely popular food and baking blog Purple Foodie

What makes bloggers so popular with readers is precisely what makes them so attractive to brands as well. “Companies want to get in touch with these ‘influencers’ because they know they have a dedicated audience,” Harsh Agrawal says.

SUCCESS MANTRA

All successful bloggers agree that there’s no substitute for good content on a blog. Shaheen Peerbhai advises the use of a clean layout, correct grammar, regular posts and clear photos. Ruchika Vyas feels it’s all about making a connection with readers. Harsh Agrawal believes having the blog reflect your own voice is important, as is learning how to increase traffic to your posts. With those guidelines, these bloggers agree, the sky really is the limit for how much the blogging sector can grow, and offshoots like vlogging (video blogging) are the next big thing.

Scherezade Shroff says, “I love what I do and that really shows through in my work. And that’s what I advise other bloggers to do. Follow your passion and put out content that you love and not because it’s trending or you’re getting paid. Honesty, having a distinct style and a fun personality, integrity, confidence and a love for experimentation will always set your blog apart.”

Bloggers who’re popular work very hard to create quality content consistently

MALINI AGARWAL

