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**Poorvi Chothani began a law firm called LawQuest that specializes in**

**immigration services battling a number of personal constraints**

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By **Bindi Shah**

Poorvi Chothani has many stories to share. Born in Calicut in Kerala, Chothani was raised on a tea estate in Coonoor near Ooty in Tamil Nadu where the first seeds of enterprise were sown into her young mind during the early years of her childhood. Her father ran the tea estate business while her mother grew cabbages and strawberries on the farm and sold the produce.

Chothani, however, turned an entrepreneur very late in her life. The second daughter in a family of three, she admits that she could have grown her business better and bigger had she started her own firm earlier.

Strongly inclined toward the legal profession, Chothani was raised in an era when daughters were not so welcome. Yet, her father strived to give all three girls a good education and went to the extent of opening a new girls college in Ooty so that his daughters could study in a decent environment. This venture gave Chothani a chance to emerge a multi-faceted leader rather than a mere student and that experience, of course, came in handy when she set up her own law firm in December 2003.

**The early years**

Chothani, aged 41, was the eldest in her class and a mother of two when she entered the University of Pennsylvania Law School in the US in 2002 to pursue an LL.M. program. "It was a dream that came true after many years. My husband funded my education and I knew I owed it to the family to earn some money when I got back. I was extremely keen always to have an engaging legal career. I finally saw it happening," says Chothani, Founder and Managing Partner, LawQuest, a full-service law firm specializing in immigration services.

The LawQuest formula

120 years of psychoanalysis: On Freud's footsteps in Vienna

Builders of a better India on the entrepreneurs

In 1982, after graduating in English literature, Chothani moved to Mumbai to pursue her Bachelor's degree in law (LL.B.) and stayed with an aunt, who financed her partly. She took up a secretarial program immediately and started earning part-time. She got married soon after and finished her law degree two years after marriage. Meanwhile, she had already started her civil litigation practice. Chothani kept taking breaks intermittently from work in the years that followed to raise a family and ended up with varied legal experience in her bouquet. "Most of my classmates headed to the US (Harvard) immediately after finishing the LL.B. program. However, my personal circumstances and the prohibitive cost of such an education made it impossible for me to go," she says. Throughout the 80s and 90s, she never lost touch with the legal profession. "I kept taking small assignments and updating my knowledge even when I was at home."

### Setting up shop

Surprisingly, Chothani turned social entrepreneur before turning into a legal one during one of her breaks. She opened two day care centers and pre-schools (in Navi Mumbai and Kanjurmarg) in the 90s as she felt a strong need to help working women. "Profit was not the objective at that point but I learnt business skills for the first time on the job. I learnt sales and marketing and how to spread a word about my ventures. It was on-the-job learning that came in handy later," she says.

Chothani had carefully evaluated the market and ways to optimize her legal career before going to the US in 2002 for her Masters program. She had resolved to start her independent firm if market opportunities were not good enough. While in the US she decided to specialize in immigration law as a subject as she was keen to build a law firm with international capabilities and reach. With her LL.M., she also enrolled for various entrepreneurial courses at Wharton to understand the business side of things. "It was a lot of fun," she says.

On completion of her program, she took training with a US immigration firm which later made her their correspondent attorney in India for \$500 (Rs.25,000) a month. "Upon my return to India, I evaluated three job offers from different firms ranging from big to small. I wanted to test the market before starting LawQuest. I came to the conclusion it was best to be on my own," says Chothani. In the early years, business was uncertain and slow. LawQuest started with immigration services and approached corporate clients to help them secure US work visas for their employees and also those foreign nationals keen to come to India and work. Meanwhile, Chothani took the New York Bar Exam in January 2004 and got admitted to the New York Bar in the same year.

Within a short span of starting out, Chothani increased the firm's range of services to include practices in intellectual property, real estate, corporate and commercial law, transaction law, family law, global migration and Indian employment law. She also took her UK exam in 2005-'06 and is now Solicitor, Registered and Practising, England and Wales. Today, LawQuest has a presence in more than 30 countries globally through local tie-ups and boasts of an all-women staff of 12 people. "It's not that I consciously looked for women associates or staff. It just so happens that our working environment is conducive to women and offers them the flexibility they wish for," she says.

### Facing challenges

When LawQuest was young and new, Chothani developed the business through a lot of networking and consistency in service delivery. "I used to engage in one rainmaking activity every week. I met a lot of people, held seminars, organized round-table discussions and, most importantly, wrote articles in leading publications including a regular column in a leading business newspaper. The paper allowed me to introduce a special column called 'the Global Indian' where I answered questions relating to immigration. This helped me to build immense credibility among lawyers, CAs and other professionals and eventually resulted in more work for the firm," she says. Chothani also became a member of various legal associations, industry federations and Chambers of Commerce that she had earlier shied away from. This helped business growth too. Slowly and steadily, LawQuest emerged as a firm with international repute, a global network and capabilities.

The LawQuest team also helped various social organizations and NGOs formulate their HR policies free of cost. Chothani was always sure she wanted to give back in some way. The turning point for the firm came after the 2008 slowdown. Business dried on both sides (flow of people from India to abroad and those coming into the country) and Chothani almost reached a point when she thought of shutting down.

"The correspondence arrangement with the US firm, which was a stabilizer in our early days, also came to an end. They just called one day and said they wanted to end it. Times were bad. I asked them for a month's time," says Chothani. 2010 was a tough year for the firm. However, some good things had happened before the slowdown which helped them to tide through the tough times. The firm had secured some big MNC clients (in the BPO and outsourcing industry) that gave them regular and consistent work.

"It was the work that came from these globally-exposed companies that helped me to build a team. I have always put all the money I have earned back into the business in the form of training and development costs. Between 2005 and 2007, we did well and sent our staff for training abroad to countries like China and Japan. We also travelled, participated in conferences, and served business delegations. With our exposure, we became a pan-Asian and then a global firm. We had also moved into a bigger office and revamped our website and other infrastructure in those years," says Chothani.

She saw all those investments paying off in the tough years as business poured in from local recommendations when the world slowed down. Priti Ahuja, HR Manager, Parthenon Group, a US-headquartered consulting firm based in India, says, "Poorvi is dedicated and completely professional in her approach. The knowledge that she carries and the advice that she offers make her totally trustworthy. Her expertise is rare in the immigration market. Today, no one really belongs to any one country, everyone works across continents, hence firms like LawQuest are the need of the hour."

Ahuja recalls one instance when two US employees of the Parthenon Group needed simultaneous visas for India and China within a week's time. Chothani, with her effective communication and experience, made it possible to get them.

### The world's her stage

By 2011, things started looking better for LawQuest and movement increased on both sides. In retrospect, Chothani says, "Once you are an entrepreneur, you don't let go easily of what you have built. It's been quite a fruitful journey." For 2011-'12, the firm clocked revenue of approximately Rs. 1 crore and aims to cross that for 2012-'13. Talking about future strategy, Chothani says, "We started with immigration and then moved to other areas of practice. Now the time is ripe to re-focus on immigration as a specialty, and that will be our focus till end-2013. The markets we will be concentrating on will include Australia, the US, the UK, India and South Africa. There is a large volume of work waiting to be tapped in these countries. The aim is to make LawQuest a one-stop shop for all immigration-related services with a special focus on corporate immigration."

Matthew Amoils, Director, ASG Immigration, a woman-founded law firm in Australia, says, "Notwithstanding the general worldwide economic slowdown post the global financial crisis of 2008, immigration law is more relevant and important than ever. Well-established businesses and companies in the US and Europe all know that globalization is the new reality. In order to grow their market share (and even survive), many of these multinational corporations are now considering expanding into China, India, Brazil and other developing countries with potential new markets in South-East Asia, South America and Africa etc." Amoils, an English lawyer based in Australia, and Chothani's network partner for global immigration, further emphasizes, "Poorvi and LawQuest are always our first point of contact for anything to do with Indian immigration. She excels in this field and I could see no reason to go anywhere else."

Amoils believes that Chothani's main strength as a legal entrepreneur lies in "being up-to-date on the constant changes in legislation as well as responsive to client needs with an ability to navigate the bureaucracy on the ground to get things done quickly." In the next few years, LawQuest will also be strengthening its India-focussed IP work as that is another area of practice where the firm wants to build a niche. The other strong areas of practice will remain corporate law and HR policies, helping companies to set up new businesses, and securing of licenses. It is clear that there is no stopping Chothani from capturing new skies.


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