

Ishita Malaviya

One in a billion:
sowing surf culture
with India's first
recognized female
surfer

"I have always been drawn to the ocean," Ishita Malaviya says, her dark eyes scanning the horizon. "I don't know why, but I always wanted to surf. Ever since I caught my first wave, I knew I was going to be surfing for the rest of my life. Suddenly, everything made sense."

In 2007, longing for a "more peaceful place," Ishita uprooted herself from her bustling hometown Mumbai to study journalism at university in the state of Karnataka in India's southwest. "Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I would start surfing there!" Between classes, she happened upon an American ex-pat who taught her and her boyfriend Tushar how to surf. The pair quickly pawned belongings to get a secondhand board, which they took turns on that first year.

Ishita's long, lanky frame folds in giggling enthusiasm as she recalls her first waves. Her bright smile and effervescence overflow. She is the personification of the perpetually stoked *surfer girl*. However, her playful nature makes it tempting to overlook the social, religious, and cultural boundaries she has danced to make a life and livelihood as a surfer in India.

Just a few years after catching her first wave, the surf industry snatched her up, with eyes fixed on an emerging action sports market in India. Roxy sent her to Europe on her first modeling gig. Ishita was expected to pose in swimwear, despite the fact that she had never before worn a bikini in public. She was being used as the face of a campaign to sell a lifestyle that she hadn't fully experienced for herself, yet.

The bikini is still considered too overtly sexual for more religious or conservative Indians. Many hold mythic fears about the ocean, but those women who dare are expected to swim fully covered. Ishita now wears bikinis all the time, but always

