

IN CONVERSATION: PRAVEEN BHATIA

## ‘When you have a baby you don’t stop being you or dumb down’

Music Week’s entrepreneur of the year tells Catherine Baksi she had to start her own law firm to be taken seriously after becoming a mother



Praveen Bhatia: “It shouldn’t be the hours you work that define you”  
COURTESY OF PRAVEEN BHATIA

Catherine Baksi

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**W**hen the specialist music solicitor Praveen Bhatia had her first child, male colleagues said there was no place for her in the law now that she was a mother.

Prompted by that experience, in 2019 Bhatia founded Tan Ward, a specialist practice that uses flexible working arrangements to enable women who, despite their expertise, often face professional setbacks from limitations imposed by the traditional law firm structure, to excel without compromising personal lives or client service.

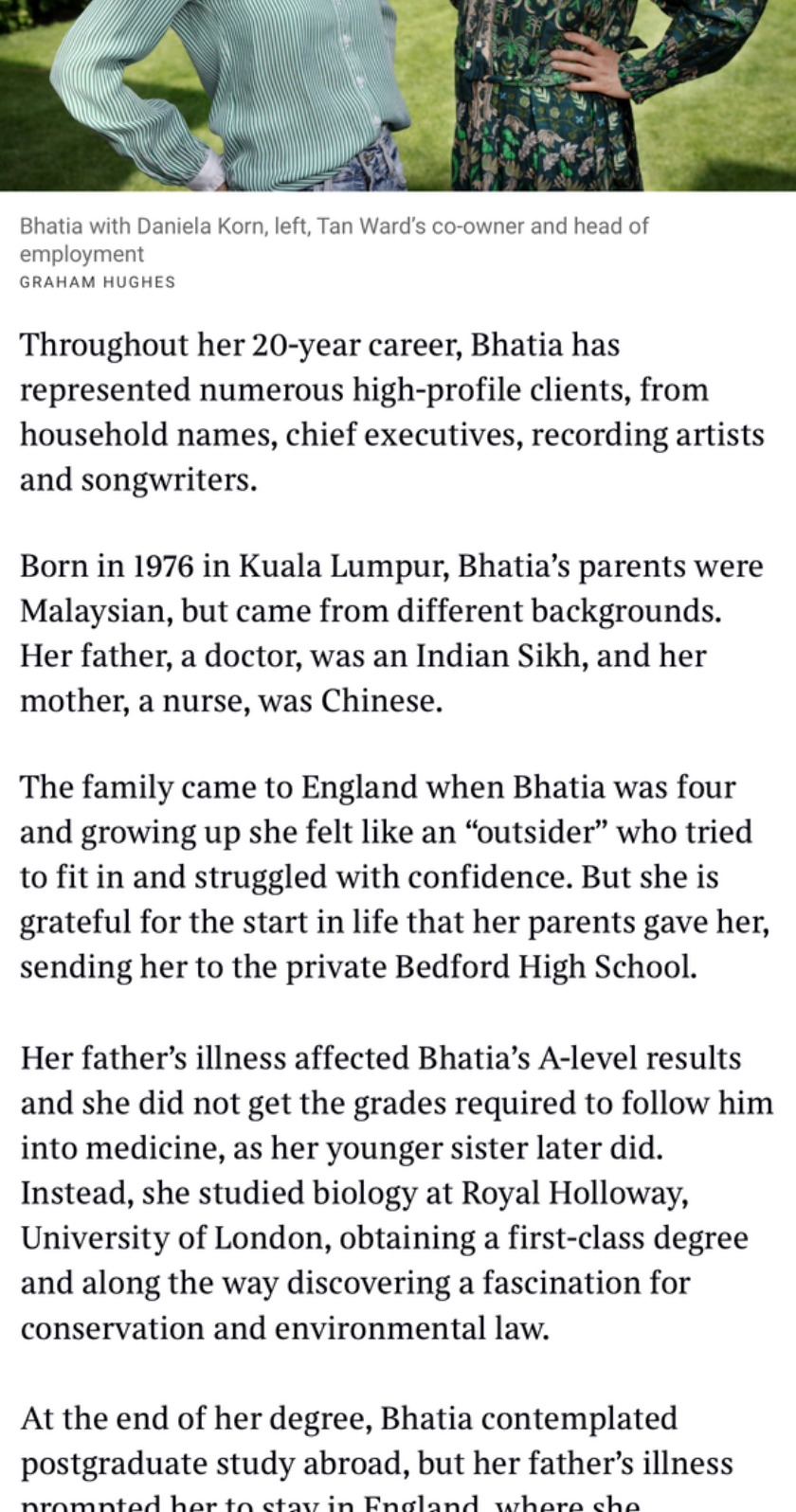
She has been doing something right as Bhatia has just won Music Week’s Entrepreneur of 2023 award.

“When you have a baby you don’t stop being you or dumb down — you are still the person and lawyer that you were before,” says Bhatia. She continues, however: “It’s so frustrating that a lot of law firms treat women differently once they become mothers and senior male lawyers make assumptions about what they can do.”

Promotion in the traditional private practice law firm model remains wedded to billable hours and, says Bhatia, “there was a glass ceiling that I wasn’t going to get through” to become a partner.

Bhatia is adamant that becoming a mother and working flexibly should not be a barrier to career progression. “It shouldn’t be the hours you work that define you or the basis on which you are rewarded, but your skills and the work that you do,” she insists.

Explaining why she launched Tan Ward, Bhatia says: “It sounds cheesy, but I loved my job and wanted to be able to work without the politics and difficulties of a traditional, hierarchical practice.” She adds that her team work in various patterns around other commitments in their lives.



Bhatia with Daniela Korn, left, Tan Ward’s co-owner and head of employment  
GRAHAM HUGHES

Throughout her 20-year career, Bhatia has represented numerous high-profile clients, from household names, chief executives, recording artists and songwriters.

Born in 1976 in Kuala Lumpur, Bhatia’s parents were Malaysian, but came from different backgrounds. Her father, a doctor, was an Indian Sikh, and her mother, a nurse, was Chinese.

The family came to England when Bhatia was four and growing up she felt like an “outsider” who tried to fit in and struggled with confidence. But she is grateful for the start in life that her parents gave her, sending her to the private Bedford High School.

Her father’s illness affected Bhatia’s A-level results and she did not get the grades required to follow him into medicine, as her younger sister later did. Instead, she studied biology at Royal Holloway, University of London, obtaining a first-class degree and along the way discovering a fascination for conservation and environmental law.

At the end of her degree, Bhatia contemplated postgraduate study abroad, but her father’s illness prompted her to stay in England, where she completed the law conversion and legal practice courses at BPP in London. Unfamiliar with the legal career path, she found herself on the back foot because, unlike the rest of her tutor group, Bhatia had not secured or even applied for a training contract.

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She registered with a recruitment agency and landed a paralegal job in the patent litigation department at the City law firm that is now Hogan Lovells. Bhatia frantically applied for training contracts and eventually secured one at Sheridans, a London media practice.

She spent her first year doing human rights litigation and worked with a partner who represented Chagos islanders who had been removed from their homeland by the British government in the early 1970s to make way for a US military base on Diego Garcia.

While she enjoyed the experience, Bhatia knew that litigation was not for her. She found her niche in her six-month seat in the firm’s music team, which she qualified into in 2003.

When she had her first child, Bhatia was asked to move into the employment team, where she was told that it would be easier for her to combine work and motherhood because she would not have to attend so many events. Bhatia notes that employment lawyers go out just as much as their music counterparts, just to “less fun things — HR conferences instead of music gigs”.

After 13 years at Sheridans, she made the “jump from being an assistant at a big media firm” to become a partner at the smaller Collins Long, where she was able to work flexibly, with unlimited holidays, and where she set about building her client base.

Despite the more family-friendly atmosphere, Bhatia was conscious that she was not paid at the same rate as her male colleagues. So, with a male colleague who has since left, she set up Tan Ward.

The experience was tough and she admits to “spending many hours crying in the garden”, especially when it came to completing the documents required to get approval from the Law Society.

Months after the firm opened its doors, the pandemic hit, during which Bhatia spent more time in the garden of her southeast London home, where she lives with her psychiatrist husband and two children — this time more happily, as she developed a passion for gardening.