



From Box Office to Boxed Chicken: In Conversation with Perizaad Zorabian



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She is a familiar face in Bollywood and **Mumbai** theatre, well-known for her forays into parallel cinema, the most popular among them being Morning Raaga and Jogger's Park. But of late, there is only one thing on her mind - chicken! Get acquainted with actor-turned-entrepreneur Perizaad Zorabian in her new avatar as the gorgeous, exotic new face of Zorabian chicken.

"From acting, I have now gone to the other end of the spectrum - poultry," she says with a laugh. The actress recently took over the advertising, marketing and PR of her father's 30-year-old business, Zorabian Chicken. So after nearly a decade in Bollywood and a life revolving around shoots, sets, theatre, runway and the box office, Perizaad now does name-dropping of a different kind - pre-packed, pre-cut, no weight gainers, no antibiotics, immunity, disease resistance, bio-security levels - jargon that would be baffling to vegetarians and many non-vegetarians too. In short - Chicken.

"I think my father conned me into it," quips Perizaad. "Three years ago, he was about to launch this ready-to-cook product which was packaged in this ugly bag! When I pointed this out to him, he suggested that I design the bag rather than give him feedback. Next thing I knew, we were holding photoshoots for the bag and my father, very cleverly, arranged for product tastings at my house. Pretty soon, I was completely involved in the entire business!"

"On a serious note though, I have always nursed this dream of developing a niche chicken brand in India, like Perdue in the US. In fact, for my MBA case studies in New York, I referenced chicken businesses, Tyson and Perdue. But when I returned to India, acting happened and as my dad is fond of saying, he lost me to Bollywood."



Three years ago, after Bollywood, marriage, pregnancy and being a new mum, Perizaad got into the family business, when they decided to launch retail. "There were so many changes to deal with," she says. "From dropping 100 kilos of chicken wholesale we were now doing deliveries on a smaller scale too, like dropping off ten frozen packs to a neighbourhood store. While my brother, Shahzaad, ran the farm and hatchery operations, I handled the distribution and all the infrastructural and marketing changes that came with going retail, like expanding delivery services. We had to drive distribution, especially in the morning, when everybody purchases eggs, milk and chicken. I was like this school teacher, this Hitler with a *chabook* while my brother was this nice agriculturist, living on a farm, raising chickens (laughs). We built Zorabian up as a brand to where it is today, clean, pre-cut trays, not an iota of fat, niche products yet reasonably priced. We have expanded across other metro and tier two cities too, like Chandigarh, Surat, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, but we are still a small outfit, looking to expand."

But it wasn't easy initially given her Bollywood background. Many people even had trouble putting the two images together, glamorous Bollywood actress and chicken marketer. "It's a mental battle to win first. I had to let go of any hang-ups before I began," she said. "But even with the store owners whom I approached to stock our products, whether it be big departmental stores in malls or local stores, they couldn't initially get over the fact that I, Perizaad Zorabian, had come into the store... to sell chicken! This was also an issue when it came to deciding margins because some store owners were like, 'No Perizaad, give me this much' because Perizaad has lots of money. Now they are used to it though."

There were other issues too, like handling a team who had been working under her father for a long time. "To them, here I was, the owner's daughter with all these new ideas and they took time getting used to my style of running things. My manager used to tell me, 'Don't speak to drivers directly'. But if I did not, how would they understand the product and its demands? In wholesale, all they had to do was go in at the back end of the store and dump in bulk. But here they had to stock in the shelves, in a manner that got us good visibility. And who would tell them that but me? Initially, it was like, '*Nahin ho sakta hai*' (not possible), this woman is asking for the world. But I had to win their **love** and respect. Today, no matter what the directive, they say, '*Haan didi*'."

It's not a woman's business, agrees Perizaad, especially dealing with the wholesale and live trade. "But I started from scratch with Zorabian, buying *makka* and *soya* for my dad. Media, corporate communications and PR are still very women-oriented. Poultry is not. But I am bull-headed and hell bent on getting this right. I have even hired 6 to 7 women staffers, bizarre as that sounds, in the poultry business. The men are all very good, undoubtedly, but women are so detail-oriented and hard working. I handpick the staff myself."

Perizaad's own attention to detail has obviously paid off because now when people approach her in public, it's not about her movies, she says. "Instead they tell me, 'We **love** Zorabian chicken'. As satisfying as that is, I keep telling my dad that he ruined my reputation," she quips.

Given the demands of a full-time business and a full-time mother, acting had a temporary backseat for Perizaad in the last three years, except for the occasional theatre projects, a play or two here and there. But the actress is planning to revive that too. "I recently did a play with a friend and it felt so good. Getting in touch with my craft again, being on stage, no chicken, no children on my mind for those few hours. I really want to pursue that. A film this year perhaps, if something really good comes my way. I hope to get that balance, because Zaha, my daughter says, 'Maa, I don't want you to be a *murgiwali*, I want you to also be an actress," she says, bursting into laughter. "Besides this sense of indignation at being told that, being in touch with showbiz helps me take care of myself. I just finished sitting in as a judge for a talent show for business schools by MTV. It was good fun, we all laughed a lot, but it also primarily gives me a motive to keep myself healthy and groomed. After all, I **love** chicken, but this can't be the be-all and end-all for me."

But until the chicken business grows to her satisfaction, it will continue to be chicken talk for Perizaad as she outlines her plans for Zorabian chicken. "I have always wanted to run a quick service restaurant (QSR) given that we already supply frozen burgers, sheekh kebabs, tandoori chicken, nuggets et al," she says. "I may be considering that this year. We are also getting a lot of export enquiries. So we may take that up this year too."

Perizaad has sure juggled her many roles with panache - her creativity as an actor and her business acumen as an entrepreneur. The future only looks brighter for as she forges ahead!