As the dreaded fourth decade advances upon us, women are seeing that there are no ends—only new beginnings, deeper truths and a realisation of who they are and what they truly want. Shoba Narayan explores the trials and triumphs of twice-20.

Finding 40

When Priya Haji turned 40, the single serial entrepreneur decided to have a baby using sperm from an anonymous donor—and also launch a Silicon Valley start-up. When Kalpana Mehta Penfold turned 40, she decided to photograph herself in the nude. When Sonal Shah turned 40, she accepted an offer to be part of incoming American president Barack Obama’s transition team. When Urvashi Maiya Mani turned 40, she decided to make a career of her long-time passion for painting. And when Sofia Bapna turned 40, she chucked her lucrative job and became a PhD student.

What do we do—us women—when we turn 40? It’s a milestone for sure, but is it different from others? Yes and no. Turning 40, at the end of the day, is just another birthday. In the long march of time, it is a biological tick-mark, signifying a body that has aged ever so slightly from the previous year, month, day, hour and minute. It is the mind that makes much matter—and matter—over this number. It is our...