

Nandita's more than just a pretty face

Miss Universe Singapore hopes to use her position to push racial harmony agenda

by SAMUEL DEVARAJ

Winning a pageant takes more than surface-level beauty, and the newly crowned winner of Miss Universe Singapore (MUS) 2021 is testament to that.

Miss Nandita Banna backs up her victory with strong education credentials, high career ambitions and a deep sense of social justice.

She attended Raffles Girls' School and Raffles Institution and is currently a third-year double degree student at Singapore Management University, majoring in business management and information systems (business analytics).

The 21-year-old undergrad told The New Paper that it is important not to pigeonhole women, saying: "Just because someone is beautiful does not mean she is not going to be smart, or if she goes to a good school that she will not focus on interests outside of it."

She added: "Most women nowadays are well-rounded individuals, and we are interested in our education and furthering our careers, but we also have creative outlets.

"For me, it is modelling and dance. For others, it could be music or painting. We are



Undergrad Nandita Banna, who is 1.76m tall and has been modelling professionally, was crowned Miss Universe Singapore 2021 on Sept 17. PHOTOS: RICHARD CHEN, HANS GOH

multi-faceted individuals and we shouldn't be judged on only the one or two things we are seen doing."

Miss Nandita, who is 1.76m tall and has been modelling professionally since 2017, never harboured any ambitions on joining a pageant but did so at the urging

of her modelling agent.

"The typical image of a pageant girl – great smile, beautiful hair – I didn't think I had any of that," she said.

"But I signed up to push myself, try something new and build my confidence."

She juggled preparing for



MUS with school and an internship with a data analytics firm. Her efforts culminated in her crowning moment on Sept 17.

Miss Nandita, who hopes to have a career in a field that combines data analytics and urban planning, said she felt honoured to be bestowed the MUS title.

"It is easy to assume a pageant is just about beautiful girls in swimsuits and to write it off. But Miss Universe has come a long way from that, and it now embraces people of various colours and body shapes and also transgender women.

"It gives the platform for participants to change the perception of what beauty can be and an opportunity for us to stand up for causes we believe in."

One of those causes for Miss Nandita is racial harmony in Singapore.

Miss Nandita, whose parents came to Singapore from India before she was born, was deeply affected when a slew of race-related incidents made the news

earlier this year, including the one involving a lecturer who accosted an interracial couple in public.

Though she has never been a victim of any outright and egregious acts of racism, she has experienced casual racism before, including comments that she looked "beautiful for an Indian", being teased about her accent and being asked if she really was a Singaporean.

Miss Nandita said: "I hope I can use my position to remind people to embrace diversity, and that we wouldn't be here if not for the contribution of the different communities."

Ensuring racist incidents are highlighted and organising community events to bring people of different backgrounds together are some of the ways she hopes to use her title to further the cause.

For now, she is gearing up to represent Singapore at the 70th Miss Universe competition in Eilat, Israel, in December.

She said: "I am a bit nervous going up against women from countries that have strong pageant cultures, and many of them are much more experienced than me. But I have faith in myself that I will be well prepared to at least give them good competition.

"Also, it has been so long since I travelled, and I am looking forward to visiting a place I have never been before."

samuelsd@sph.com.sg