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Chennai's own rapper grabs eyeballs

Sofia Ashraf's got the country inspired with 'Kodaikanal Won't'

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CHENNAI: It is a mystery how something goes viral. Armed with the omnipotence of someone who has been in advertising, Sofia Ashraf still quite can't believe how viral *Kodaikanal Won't* went, literally overnight.

Born and brought up, as they say, in Chennai, her first hint that her rap composition might do well was when her little nephew seemed to love it. But it did beyond well, as we all know now. "There is no formula for 'viral', how much ever you think you have cracked it. We've tried, many times in advertising, but it did not work. If you ask me to make another video and ensure that it goes viral, I wouldn't know what to do," she says, full of beans on a late night chat with *The Hindu*.

With about 1.5 million hits at last count, the video targets the multinational Unilever for mercury poisoning in Kodaikanal. "Kodaikanal won't step down until you make amends now," she raps, set to Nicky Minaj's *Anaconda*. "It's certainly not my best song. It was shot on nearly a zero budget, and all the people in it were volunteers, activists and college students. But what is heartening is that the conver-



Sofia Ashraf says the video has restored her faith in humanity —

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sation now is about the message, not the song, or the singer."

"It has restored my faith in humanity. And, I guess the response has been because it's about, what we ad guys call, 'real work.' It is a real campaign, the damage is real, these people really care," Sofia adds. The earnestness of the whole campaign is palpable in the video, as they chant, pumping their fists, "Kodaikanal Won't Step Down."

Sofia only recently quit her

job with O&M, but has long been involved in campaigns on social issues, dabbling in many things before that in her home town. A resident of Anna Nagar, she went to Jessie Moses, and then for college to SIET, before going on to complete a course in graphic design at Stella Maris. "I've done all kinds of stuff, from giving voice overs, to designing greeting cards, when I was in Chennai."

In 2008, she got involved with the Vetiver Collective, a Chennai-based voluntary organisation committed to whipping up public debate on social and environmental rules. "I loved the 'Justice Rocks' concert series, where each concert was 'un-sponsored' by a company or agency. In 2008, we did the Bhopal theme, and Dow Chemicals was the 'unsponsor.' We've done more since, power deficit, moral policing — a range of issues," Sofia says, excitedly.

The entire Kodaikanal Won't video was shot in a day in Chennai, after a spot of research for the lyrics, and recording took another day. Very little money, a whole lot of serious activists, affected workers and nice people were behind the video — basically, everyone believed in the

message, and wanted to do something about it. Her buddy Suren Vikash did the recording, because "he wanted to help, and did not even want credit". Sofia thinks sharing the video on the microblogging platform Reddit was like a launch pad to eternal fame, but tying up with Jhatkaa, an organisation that aims at building grassroots citizen power across India primarily on a digital platform, helped in good measure.

A little help goes a long way, but will it go the whole hog? Will Unilever clean up the earth it polluted with mercury, as Sofia asks in the song? After all, if the song is a means to an end, then, will the land be clean of mercury, or is fair compensation for the workers within grasp? "Frankly, we are excited, but not really happy. We need a resolution. If we don't have a resolution, how can we any more put faith in social media?" Being viral is key, but it is also a key for change.

And thus, no one is going to step down. If Unilever won't, then Kodaikanal won't either. Or, the people who have been inspired by the video, now, standing behind that princess of hill stations.

To sign the petition, head to www.jhatkaa.org/unilever