LIVES OF THE WOMEN

An SCMSophia student publication • Edited by Jerry Pinto

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

Lives of the Women

Volume IV

An SCMSophia Student Publication

Edited by Jerry Pinto

Published by the Social Communications Media Department,
Sophia–Smt. Manorama Devi Somani College,
Sophia Polytechnic, Bhulabhai Desai Road, Mumbai – 400 026.

Printed by Aniruddh Arts, Mumbai

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Preface

We celebrate the golden anniversary of the Sophia Shri B K Somani Polytechnic, and by extension, that of SCM, the Social Communications Media department, this year. Fifty years of an institute that was set up to empower women—so it has been empowering the first generation of women born in Independent India. There are many stories amongst us, stories of success against all odds, of perseverance, hard work and progress…

At SCM, we have begun a process of documenting these stories through our series, 'Lives of the Women'. Documenting lives of women who have done interesting things. Stories that will inspire our students who go out and write them, to be more. We challenge them to do more than they imagine they could do and thus become more themselves. We challenge them to aspire rather than to settle.

As a part of the special edition, we have documented the lives of women who have been integral parts of the institute:

three students, a faculty member and the current head of the institute, through Lives of the Women – Celebrating 50 Years of Changemakers.

Sr Anila Verghese is currently the Director of the Sophia Polytechnic. She is a woman who wears many hats; not only is she a committed nun and an experienced administrator but also an internationally known academic on the Vijayanagara Empire.

Jeroo Mulla is the former head of department of the Social Communications Media department and still inspires new generations of students with a love of cinema and photography. She is also the architect of its intellectual space.

Elsie Nanji created the path-breaking advertising agency Ambience, styling inventive and innovative advertising for decades before she made a shift to interior decoration with clients as varied as bars, restaurants and art-collecting industrialists.

Krishna Mehta who studied at the Dress Designing Department and often works with it reinvented men's clothing taking them out of sweaty polyester and introducing them to block-printed, hand-washed linen and cotton.

Pinky Chandan-Dixit has reinvented the experience of vegetarian fine dining in South Mumbai, crafting out of Soam a space that is both stylish and intimate, giving Gujarati-Marwari cuisine a touch of bell metal styling.

Our students tell me that they have enjoyed interacting with these fine women. We hope you will enjoy reading about them.

Nirmita Gupta
Head
Social Communications Media Department,
Sophia-Smt. Manorama Devi Somani College,
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Mumbai

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the wonderful women who shared their lives with us and gave unstintingly of their time. To Dr Sr Anila Verghese, Jeroo Mulla, Elsie Nanji, Krishna Mehta and Pinky Chandan Dixit, our heartfelt thanks. To Nirmita Gupta, Shyma Rajagopal, Neeta Shah, Gracy Vaz, Nilesh Correia and Dinkar Sutar of the Social Communications Media Department of Sophia Polytechnic, we could not have done this without your help and support. And finally, our deepest gratitude to our mentor and visiting faculty Jerry Pinto who conceived the idea, supervised the project and enriched the book with his valuable inputs throughout.

We would like to thank all the friends and family members of our five stars who also helped us create these 'lives':

For Sr Anila Verghese: Sr Vimala, Tessie George, Paul Parambi, Anna Dallapiccola, Dr Vidita Rakshit, Dr Lata Pujari, Meenal Joshi, Preetika Soni

For Jeroo Mulla: Mahendra Sinh, Homi Mulla, Jerry Pinto, Smruti Koppikar, Shirin Vajifdar, Leena Yadav, Deepa Bhatia, Priyanka Kakodkar, Anjalika Sharma, Nirmita Gupta, Dr Sunitha Chitrapu, Dr Vidita Rakshit, Gracy Vaz, Nilesh Correia, Dinkar Sutar

For Elsie Nanji: Hossi Nanji, Aria Nanji, Ashok Kurien, Harsh Goenka, Savio D'Souza, Meenal Joshi, Kainaz Messman Harchandrai

For Krishna Mehta: Rahul Mehta, Natasha Mehta, Riddhi Mehta, Tejal Kothari, Rachana Ved, Dr Jignasa Shah

For Pinky Chandan-Dixit: Aseem Dixit, Ariana Dixit, Rita Chandan, Irfan Pabaney, Dopati Banerjee

And our deepest gratitude is to Anna Dallapiccola of the Laura and Luigi Dallapiccola Foundation who supported the publication of this work and helped us take this step in documenting the professional lives of women.

Students of SCMSophia

Sr Anila Verghese
Photo credit: Sakshi Sharma

Chapter 1

The many hats Sister Anila Verghese wears

Karen Dsouza, Sakshi Sharma, Shreya Khare,

Susanna Cherian

When we started this exercise, we asked Doctor (Sister) Anila Verghese for her biodata. We received by return mail, a forty-three page document. It was a summation of an amazing career as an art historian, a social scientist studying the operation of religion in mediaeval India, and an academician who has balanced the religious life with the life of a scholar and of an administrator.

The story began 69 years ago when a girl was born to Rosy and P R Verghese. "My mother, Rosy Verghese, was a homemaker; she never went to work. That generation of women hardly ever did. She was a loving and caring person, kind and concerned about the poor. These are the two qualities that I think I gained from her. My father was stricter than my mother, though he was also kind. He was a fair and just person. This showed in his dealings with people; he retired as the Chief Engineer of Western Railway. This meant that he had to deal with the unions at a time when the unions were very powerful. In 1974, there was an All-India Railway strike. It was historic, the only all-India strike ever in the history of the railways. The railways stopped working for an entire month. Even today, with so much air traffic and increased road traffic, if a railway strike were to happen, it would cause a major upheaval in the lives

of the ordinary person. But in those days, when air traffic was scanty, it threatened to bring the nation's life to a halt.

"This was in the month of May. He was the Divisional Manager of Kota Division, Rajasthan. He was on leave and was called back. Kota was of strategic importance because it was a junction between Delhi and Bombay. A union leader said: 'If you want the trains to run, you should call Mr. Verghese back. He will be able to manage'. The union men knew that the strike had been called but they also knew that some of the lines had to be kept running at all costs and he would be the one to do it. That was his relationship with his workers. So perhaps this is something that I internalised. How do you deal with people? How do you keep the human touch? Even if you must sometimes be firm or strict, how can you be fair and make sure that everyone feels part of the system, an important part?"

A railway job is notoriously transferable and so the family was always on the move. "When I was born my father was posted in Assam, I spent my early childhood there. Then we moved to Muzaffarpur in Bihar and then to Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh and later to Lucknow and then back to Gorakhpur. I went to boarding school for a short time and then we moved to Mumbai. By that time, I had been to five

different schools. I did my higher education in Mumbai, she says."

These were formative years and they had their effect on the young Annie. "Travelling throughout India has influenced me because I have lived in different parts of the country, not just in my native state. We have lived in different states, heard different languages, interacted with people of different religions, castes, creeds and linguistic backgrounds. However, one constant was the summer vacation with my grandparents in Kerala. Today, there is a direct train from Assam to Kerala, the longest journey you can make by train in India. In those days, it was a four- or five-day journey, with three changes of train. They were not the days of air-conditioned travel and so the windows were always wide open and we saw the whole of the country pass by us; now you don't see anything because if you're in an air-conditioned compartment the country passes by outside, ignored. I think of this as a formative experience, because it drew me closer to my country. I did not see myself as a part of one place or one region and that was because of the varied experiences of my childhood."

The Vergheses had five children. The first born is Elizabeth (Lizzie, now Sr Vimala) Verghese, then three-and-a-half years later came our protagonist, who was christened

Annie. (Anila is the name she took after she joined the Order of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to us, the Sophia nuns.) Then came Raphael (Sunny) Parambi who was three years and nine months younger. Then came Tessie (Teresa) George who is five years and nine months younger and her youngest brother Paul Parambi.

Tessie George says, "Even though Annie was six years elder to me, she was the sister to whom I felt closest. Throughout our childhood, we played together. But she was the quietest in the family. We didn't have any secrets between us. We were always close and still are. Her becoming a nun hasn't changed anything between us. Though after she became a nun, our family turned to her for wisdom, calmness and advice. I think she made me a calmer person. She advised me when I needed it and she was always right. Also she has a very good sense of humour and she enjoys our company as much as we enjoy hers. Mostly it is the wisdom and calmness that she gives off which makes a huge impact on me."

Paul Parambi, who works with Kotak Mahindra, is fourteen years younger than Sr Anila. He was born in Mumbai and Tessie remembers how young Annie would take her brother in her arms and dance from room to room, telling him stories. "She would say, 'I'm telling you

'histrionics', which was her word for stories from history. I think she loved her brother and she loved history so she put all this together and out of it came this image that I have of her, with him in her arms, telling him stories and laughing."

When Paul was three, their father was posted to Jaipur and they moved there. "Sr Anila was then in Sophia College so she did not come with us," says Paul. By the time the family returned to Mumbai, she had joined the convent. Like many a younger brother, Parambionly thought of Sr Anila as his elder sister. "For many years I viewed her solely through the lens of being my elder sister and a member of the family. My appreciation of her as a very accomplished historian and an acknowledged expert on the Vijayanagara Empire has come over the last twenty years or so. Her grasp on aspects of history in areas well beyond her domain of known expertise is truly incredible and I always wonder how she remembers and knows all that she does. More recently, maybe in the last ten years, I have seen a new dimension to her personality, as an institution builder and leader. While she is relatively quiet and reserved, she has a strong personality and I have observed this more recently. I am proud of all her achievements."

Of the five Verghese children, Elizabeth and Annie entered religious life becoming Sr Vimala and Sr Anila respectively.

"As a Catholic family, we were regular churchgoers on Sunday," says Sr Anila. "This may sound like we were quite religious but it is not unusual. There are many families who will attend service every day, for instance. I don't think I went for any reason, other than that the family was going and it was what one did on Sunday. I think it was in college, here at Sophia, that I began to forge a connection with the faith into which I had been born. I found the Sisters in this college so different. My principal was the late Sr Mary Braganza, she was the visionary behind the Polytechnic. I have never seen a principal like that. Sr Braganza would interact with every person she came across. It is said that she knew each and every student by name, all 1,800 of us, though I never tested this. I do remember that I did not want to come to Sophia College as all my friends were going to Elphinstone College. But my elder sister Vimala insisted that I come and visit her college before making a decision. While I was taking a tour of the college with her, it so happened that we met Sr Braganza. Vimala introduced us. Sr Braganza chatted with us and she was informal throughout the conversation. This was new to me. For me, a principal was

someone who sat behind closed doors in an office and you could only meet her if you had done something awful or if you needed permission to do something.

"Then there was Sr Gool Mary Dhalla, later known as Vandana Mataji, who went off to an ashram; she was really revolutionary. She always talked about India, Indian culture, Indian patriotism even though she was supposed to be teaching us history. She could go on and on about the glory of India and that was inspirational.

"And I met Sr Anita Horsey, who worked with the tribals. She did her PhD on the Warli tribes and then later on, when I was a young religious, she went and lived in a hut amongst the tribal people. Today, that may not seem like something extraordinary but in that time, she was a pioneer.

"Through all this, I never thought I would become a nun. I was in my final year BA, when this idea kept coming to my mind: the idea of a vocation. I just kept putting off this idea because I had made other plans and was dreaming other dreams. I wanted to study; I wanted to join the Indian Administrative Service; I wanted to become an academic. Then I did my MA and even as I was studying, I tried to ignore it but the idea kept coming back. Then I took a year to go and work in a school that the order ran for the children of the poor. Finally, four years after the idea first took shape,

I decided to give it a try. That was 1973, and here I am today. I had plans, yes, but God had other plans."

Sr Anila's parents had to be told. "My parents were traditional people. When I was graduating, they asked me, 'Shall we arrange a match? Should we look?' Because in those days girls of my community got married soon after graduation. But when I said I didn't want to marry, they didn't object. When I said, I wanted one more year, they didn't object. Then I think they were getting anxious. But when I told them that I wanted to become a religious, my mother said immediately, 'My desire for all of my children is that they should do what they want to do. So if that is what you want to do, go ahead and do it.' My father found my decision difficult to accept, but over time, he accepted it too. He was not terribly excited about it; after all, my elder sister was already a nun. He must have thought: 'One for the church is enough'. While I was in the novitiate and even later, during the years before I took final vows, he kept saying, 'If you want to come back, don't worry, don't hesitate.' But I think both my parents respected my choice. I appreciated this. They made that space for all five of us, to find what we wanted to do and then to do it. I am grateful to them for the freedom they gave me. It was based on trust, the belief they had that each one of us knew our minds and

wanted something different."

Sr Anila's sister, Tessie George speaks about the family's reactions when they got to know that Annie was also going to be a nun. She says, "Our eldest sister Vimala (Elizabeth) was already a nun and she was the naughtiest amongst us all. It was a surprise when she told us that she wanted to become a nun. So when Annie, who was the quietest, said it, it wasn't a surprise. But I was disappointed that one more sister of mine was becoming a nun. My entire extended family was extremely happy that one more daughter was becoming a nun. But they did not want me to become a nun at all because that might have been a little much. Luckily for them, at the age of nineteen, I got married and this made my parents happy. No doubt they thought it was time they had some grandchildren."

When your elder sister is a nun already, perhaps that might be part of the reason for wanting to become one. Sr Anila doesn't think so. "I don't think her decision had anything to do with mine. She didn't influence me either positively or negatively. She didn't say, 'Why don't you try this?' or anything."

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Sr Anila's other vocation is history.

"I think I might have always had an interest in history. It may also be something I inherited from my mother. Because of my father's job, we could travel and see places. Everywhere we went my mother would take us to see the monuments. As a girl, I went with my mother to the monuments at Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Delhi, all that. (My father was not interested.) When I was in college I really enjoyed my history classes. I had very good teachers, and particularly the then head of department, Mrs Griselda Dias. She had a powerful speaking voice and you never forgot what she said. I still remember her teaching me world history. She covered the history of the world from the prehistoric age until the end of World War II in a single academic year but you did not get the feeling that you were being hurried along. I also enjoyed English Literature and it was a toss-up whether I would take literature or history but finally I decided that I liked history more. I was in the library the whole time. The library used to be open till 7 pm. And so after tea, I would go to the library to read, to do reference work, because I enjoyed it. I came first in the university in history at both the BA and MA level."

It was but a short step from there to a PhD on 'Religious Traditions in the City of Vijayanagara Prior to 1565 AD'.

"I was always interested in Indian art and archaeology. As a very young sister, I taught as a visiting faculty in the Travel and Tourism department of the Sophia Polytechnic for six years. I gave lectures on Indian art history because it was assumed that if you were going to join the tourism industry, you should know a little about the nation's monuments so that you could guide your potential clients about what they might be likely to see and enjoy. I think I really created an interest; some of them even now come back and tell me that they remember those lectures, just as they do about my teaching of history at junior and senior college. If history was a passion, then art history and archaeology were especially interesting because from 1978 to 1994, we had the privilege of taking students on archaeological field trips. And so as a young sister, I had gone with some students to Fatehpur Sikri where we engaged in excavation with the Archaeological Survey of India. We went to a megalithic burial site near Nagpur. We went to a Chalcolithic site near Pune called Inamgaon with the Deccan College. Then for many years we went to Hampi. I have to say here that my initial interest was not in Hampi but in the Buddhist cave temples, because that was also something that had fascinated me. I always wanted to do historical research using monuments and archaeological data. But after reading

up on them, I realised that all the major caves have already been written about and the minor caves would be too remote. Well, I had the good fortune of going to Hampi in 1983 and that too with a group of students and I must say I fell in love with the site. It's a magical site. I think it's the largest mediaeval city area that we have anywhere in India.

"Fatehpur Sikri is also splendid but it is a restricted area. Hampiis enormous: the core area of the city stretches over 26 sq km. And when we happened to reach there at dawn, we were driving through the morning light with all these huge boulders and monuments scattered here and there. I still have a vivid visual memory of it. I was very fortunate because at that time the site was just opening up. It was difficult to access. We had to go by train to Guntakal and change to a metre-gauge train there. It was an overnight journey, you arrived in the early morning at Hospet and then you had to make your way there. There were no decent places to stay. But in 1975, the Archaeological Survey of India was under the Ministry of Education (which now you call Human Resource Development). The then Minister of Education was Nurul Hasan, a famous historian. He was an archaeologist from Aligarh Muslim University, he was a historian and a professor. He declared three medieval sites to be of national importance; Fatehpur Sikri, Champaner

and Hampi. Our students had gone to Champaner and Fatehpur Sikri, so our Head of Department said we should go to Hampi.

"Fortunately, I think she had written to both the Archaeological Survey of India and the State Department of Archaeology. The Director of the Karnataka State Department of Archaeology said the students could come and stay in their camp. They had a tent camp for their own excavation work. We stayed there and we continued going to that site. My first visit was in 1983 and right up to 1994 we would stay in the camp of the State Department of Archaeology. The first time I went we had to pay twenty rupees per head per day, for food and stay and everything. It seemed quite a lot then. The students had to pay too but we kept the budget tight and travelled by second class with student concessions.

"What was very interesting was that while the Archaeological Survey at the State Department had begun working in Hampi, there was an international team led by Dr George Michell, a well-known art historian and Dr John Fritz, an archaeologist. They had started the Vijayanagara Research Project, their private venture. They involved many scholars, national and international, and had linked up with the State Department of Archaeology. There were these

great scholars and we could interact with them while we were working at the site and so on. I got talking with them. And then I began to see the site had not been worked on. Today there's a lot of literature on the site, many books both scholarly and popular, but at that time there was hardly anything written on it. It was a new area for research opening up. They were also looking for people to join.

"I could see the opportunity: a new research area, a campsite, other scholars to work with and bounce ideas off. When I visited it in 1984, I had begun to think of a topic. And then I think it was George Michell who said, 'See you have a background in religion. I know this is a Hindu capital, but would you be interested in working on religion in the city?' I thought that would be a very interesting topic. I began my research for my PhD in 1985 and finished it in 1989. And since then, I have kept up with the work and the research, first going with students and then on my own. I visited the site every year up to 2001."

By this time, Sr Anila had published her first book *Religious Traditions at Vijayanagara: As Revealed through its Monuments* (Manohar Publications, 1995).It is now seen as the standard work on the subject. With the scholar Anna Dallapiccola who is also a friend, she worked on a book called *Sculpture at Vijayanagara: Iconography and Style*;

next came another book by Sr Anila: *Archaeology, Art and Religion: New Perspectives on Vijayanagara* (Oxford University Press, 2000). *Book Jacket* has described this book as 'Illustrated, with a wide selection of line drawings, maps, and photographs, this volume will be of immense value to students of mediaeval Indian history, archaeology, and scholars of art, architecture, religion, and culture.'

Over email, Anna Dallapiccola told us that the two had been corresponding for a while before they met "personally in Hampi in 1987. We were both involved in historical and art historical research at the site. At that time, Sr Anila was working on her PhD thesis. I was documenting the sculptures in the Ramachandra Temple focusing on the *Ramayana* narratives. We had plenty in common and we spent hours walking together through the ruins, studying the monuments and discussing history, religion, art, among many other subjects."

Theirs was a friendship cemented through travel: "We had a great time travelling together through southern India, visiting monuments not once, but repeatedly, something which bores our occasional travel companions. Both of us are of the opinion that a single visit to, let's say, a South Indian temple is not enough to understand its complexity, let alone get into the details of its architecture, sculpture

and rituals. This lingering about was noted by the security guards when we went to the Ellora Caves two years ago. We went there early in the morning and we were among the last to leave in the evening. Seemingly, at the end of the day we were known as 'the ladies who spent a whole day looking at the caves'. At least, this was the rumour."

Theirs has been a productive friendship and Dallapiccola puts it down to the commonalities between them: "We became friends because we share the same set of values and of course, the same professional interests."

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Sr Anila takes up the story of her publications again. "In 2000, I was invited by the Oxford University Press to write the guidebook on Hampi. I made a trip to the site to look at Hampi from the perspective of a tourist. By that time, I said, 'I've done so much work on Hampi. Now, I should look at the wider area of the Vijayanagara Empire looking at the art, the iconography, the sculpture, etc.' Another question that interested me was what happened after the Vijayanagara Empire collapsed. That is what I have been working on up to now."

For most people this would have been achievement enough. But there was also a huge amount of administrative work to be done. Sr Anila became the Head of the

Department of History at the Sophia College for Women. Within three years, she was appointed Vice Principal of the college and in 2001, she became the Principal. When she retired from Sophia College in 2012, she took over as the Director of Sophia Polytechnic on November 18, 2013.

It was Dr Vidita Rakshit who urged her to take over as Director. “Dr Rakshit was very persuasive. She said, ‘You are just what is needed right now in the Polytechnic. And it will be good for you too. You will have more time to pursue your research.’ So I've done it side by side as much as possible and published these books, either as a writer, editor or co-editor.”

We thought to ask Dr Vidita Rakshit what qualities of head and heart Sr Anila would bring to bear on this new post. Dr Rakshit harks back to a relationship that has lasted decades.

“I have been working in Sophia College for over 30 years, Sister has also been there for many years. She was the principal and I was teaching. Then I was vice-principal with her as Principal for a couple of years. When I came to the Polytechnic as the directress, I really didn’t have that much administrative experience**.** Being the head involves first of all dealing with the whole accounts office which I knew nothing of. I found Sr Anila was a huge help at this point in

my career. At every step of the way, I would be going to her. I found her extremely approachable and willing to help me in settling into this new position. Sr Anila has a lot of experience with government offices because Sophia College is a government-aided college and here at the Polytechnic also we have many courses which are with the government, including your Social Communications Media (SCM) department. At one time, SCM was affiliated to the Maharashtra State Board of Technical Education. So I had to deal with the government, with the technical board, with the Mumbai University, with the Directorate of Art because different courses have different affiliations here. I needed a lot of help and I got a good amount of support from Sister. Because she has been working with the government for many years so she knew her way around those different ecosystems."

Dr Rakshit agreed that she did have a hand in bringing Sr Anila to the Polytechnic.

"I persuaded Sr Anila to be the Director of the Polytechnic because I could see that she would be able to give it clear direction. She was very confident and courageous and can take a stand. She does not flinch from making an unpopular decision. If she is convinced that her decision is correct, she will defend it and she will go to court if necessary. I went out

of my way to tell the Provincial that if anyone should come here it should be Sr Anila when she retires from Sophia College because this is where she is needed."

But it was also Sr Anila who had to be convinced. "As you may know, Sr Anila is very keen on her research but I said at the Polytechnic you will get your time for your research. She had handled Sophia College which was huge. The Polytechnic is smaller and has fewer departments and fewer students. And I must say that the departments here are much more independent and run on their own more or less smoothly with the support from the management."

Dr Rakshit feels that her hunch was right. Sr Anila has been instrumental in getting many things changed. "It was Sr Anila who after the SCM department moved from the Maharashtra State Board of Technical Education helped in getting it another affiliation. As you know, all courses should be affiliated to some university. Hence, Sister went all out looking for a university to affiliate your SCM department and finally hit upon the Garware Institute of Career Education and Development at the University of Mumbai."

Meenal Joshi, Officer-in-Charge of the Arts and Design Department has been with the Polytechnic since 1978. She encountered Sr Anila in 2013 as director. According to Ms Joshi, Sr Anila makes an excellent director. "First of all, she is

approachable. Her decision-making process is good and fast. She is also good at follow-up. Since she has had so much experience, we know that whatever problems we face in the department, she can help with them or guide us in our attempts to solve them. She knows all the rules, regulations, code of conduct and she places great importance on discipline. But she also gives due importance to the professional development of the teachers also."

Joshi feels that Sr Anila is not afraid of change, especially when there are coherent and logical reasons for the change "In textile designing, we had three different labs on three different floors. One was on the first floor, one was on the fifth floor and one was in the basement. She felt that if all these labs could be moved together it would help the students, it would help the teachers and it would help the Class IV staff too. And so she reorganised the space and brought all three labs tothe basement. Since then we have seen the change it has made. We can maintain control, we can get work done faster and the students don't have to spend time going from one place to another. She also had our Foundation Class renovated and new machines brought in."

Joshi says Sr Anila has also worked hard at finding scholarships that will help ease the financial burden on

students: “Our students have received scholarships from different organisations. Because of her 40 out of 250 of our students get scholarships from the Suman Ramesh Tulsiani Charitable Trust, the Geeta Israni Scholarships, Priyadarshini Academy, Devi R Mehta Charitable Trust among others. They are good scholarships of noteworthy amounts so that the students can do more, can experiment more.”

Joshi says it works for all of them that Sr Anila’s PhD is in history because she “knows quite a lot in art and because of that she really takes an interest. Whether it is student designs or our ‘Creative Keeda’ magazine or the invitation card we design for our show, she has a good eye and offers some very valuable input. She encourages the staff to go out and learn, to read papers and to attend conferences. She sees that development is not just about the students or the building but also about the staff. Because if you have staff that are growing and learning, then the students benefit and the institution benefits too.”

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Sr Anila Verghese is a woman who wears many hats. Since 2018, she has been the Provincial Superior of the Order and as such she is also the Chairperson of the Society for Higher Education of Women in India (SHEWI) Trust.

"Two major responsibilities means that I have had to put my research on the backburner, a little," says Sr Anila. "I don't get as much time for it as I would like to. I do write a paper now and then but I can't travel or take time off as I used to. I would like to get back to it when I can."

The secret of success, it has often been said, is time management. We were really keen to understand how an internationally renowned scholar manages her time and divides it between all the conflicting demands made on her.

"I don't think I say, 'Okay, I'm going to give two hours a day to this and two hours a day to that.' I switch from one thing to the other. So even while I'm sitting in this office [We are in Sr Anila's office on the ground floor of the Polytechnic] I might be working on a paper or looking at something within the Order that needs my attention. I don't know whether it can be done any other way. For instance, if I decided I will only work on a paper for the next few hours, what would happen if someone needs a decision from the Provincial? Or if there was something in the Polytechnic that suddenly needed my attention? So I try to do what has to be done when it is needed to be done. And when I find some free time, perhaps on a Sunday or a holiday, I catch up with the research work. So it's a question of switching from one

to the other using time as economically and as well as possible."

Has there ever been a conflict between religious life and academic life? "No, because our Society believes in education. The main area of service of our Society is education. Our foundress, Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat said that she wanted the women in her order to be both holy and wise. She believed in education. My religious superiors gave me a lot of freedom for my research work and for my travel. I had to travel right through South India to understand where Vijayanagara art and culture came from and how it was disseminated. So as long as I've been doing the work required of me by the Order, they have no problem about my research. I'm not saying anybody has given me time off. No one has said, 'Now you can only do research.' But as long as I'm managing both, there has been no problem. I'm grateful to my Society. I do not know whether many other religious societies would have given such freedom to their members or if they would have trusted me in the way my order did. For in order to do research, one has to apply for grants. These grants are very specific; they cover travel costs or they cover specific things that you are doing. My research has been self-sustaining; let's put it like that. In the academic world, there are people who only know me

through my work. Many of them know that I am a religious. I don't know how this knowledge impacts them. I think in general the sisters know vaguely that I am an academic, and the academics and historians know that I am a nun; but both presume that the two coexist."

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Sr Anila has lived through one of the most interesting times in the history of the Catholic Church. In 1962, Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council which was to throw open the windows of the church, bringing in various changes that we take for granted today. Annie was twelve years old as the Church began to change, allowing Mass to be said in local languages, seeking reconciliation in the world's divided Christianity.

"I was in my early teens. Those were exciting times because there was a lot of change and dynamism and life in the church. Things were happening and a lot of creativity was released. I don't think it affected my relationship with God because I don't think earlier I had a personal relationship with Him as a child. It was there, a little subterranean perhaps, because we believed in God and we prayed and so on."

We ask Sr Anila to look back at Haregaon in Maharashtra where she was once a teacher for a year before she joined

the Order, teaching English at a Marathi-medium high school started by the Order. “I didn’t know any Marathi, but still it was a wonderful experience. The children were very warm, very loving. I must have managed to communicate somehow because even now I meet people who say ‘You know before you became a sister you taught us English or you taught me something or the other’. Even in the past, before I became Provincial, I visited Haregaon. I hadn’t visited it for thirty years, so when I did recently I was amazed at the transformation. The first time I visited Haregaon was when my elder sister Vimala was a postulant there, there was acute poverty. Women of all age groups wore nauvari (nine-yard) sarees, at times torn ones. Today you won’t see the nine-yard sarees nor will you see poverty in the same way; there is poverty of course, but there has also been a drastic transformation. Our Society founded the school there in 1961. It was the first all girls high school in the district of Ahmednagar and I believe it has been part of the transformation. Since the foundation of the school, three generations of women have passed through its doors. As they say, when you educate a woman, you educate a family and that means many educated families. Today the principal of the school is an ex-student of that very school. Seeing this makes me happy. As the Provincial, my relationship with the

school has changed. I am Chairperson of the Trust and responsible for that ministry. Since it's an aided school, there are a lot of difficulties in making ends meet, developing it and how to get funds, how to help it really give quality education when the government is not giving the non-salary grant and is not allowing us to fill the posts that are vacant."

But Sr Anila is no stranger to challenges. Each educational institution she has headed has offered a different set. "The challenges of running the Sophia College for Women and the Sophia Polytechnic are very different. I was the principal of Sophia College for Women for eleven-and-a-half years. The college is an academic institution with academic sections like Sophia Junior College and Degree College and seventeen departments. The whole atmosphere is different; the student population is very different. A lot of extra-curricular activities are possible because the students, especially the arts students, have more time. Sophia Polytechnic, on the other hand, is a highly professional institution with four departments, all of which are very different and diverse. The nature of the students of all the four departments is also very different. Actually, you can almost look at the students and say which department they are from, once you interact with them. I was directly involved in the academics of the

Sophia College whereas in the Sophia Polytechnic I am not directly involved in the departments as I am not trained in any one of them. The challenge is to help the department heads to fulfil their roles, to keep the four departments diverse as they need to be and yet maintain a sense of cohesion as one polytechnic. There are challenges to balance each and every department which is affiliated to a different organisation as one department is under the technical board and the All-India Council for Technical Education and other is under the Directorate of Art. Then there is one which is under the University of Mumbai and Social Communications Media is indirectly linked to the Mumbai University's Garware Institute of Career Education and Development."

There are some who might say that a women's college is an anachronism today. Sr Anila doesn't think so. "The role of a women's college is still quite important even in this day and age. It has been found even in the United States of America that girls somehow feel freer and flower better in situations in the absence of male students. Sometimes in a co-educational situation, boys tend to dominate and the girls have to struggle to make their place or to get heard in class. But in Sophia College, the girls seem to believe they have a free space. Some people claimed as they get near the college, they can almost hear the decibel levels increase because

there's so much noise. The girls feel this is their space and here they can do what they want to do. Nobody's going to look at them. They feel a total sense of freedom. At the orientation of the first year students, I would say to the students, 'It's your choice. You can drift through three years and have a nice time and sit in the canteen and make friends and maybe get a degree at the end. Or you can choose to participate and involve yourself and if that is your choice, you're going to be a transformed person at the end of three years.' I would say to the parents, 'You are giving me an adolescent girl. I would like to give her back to you as a confident young woman.' A parent came here to give me an invite for their daughter's wedding, a traditional Bengali invite. And he quoted that back to me. His daughter was in America. In student after student, I've seen that transformation. One of the good things about this office is that you can see the whole of the central lawn. During the pre-examination time, I was watching a student in a burkha, studying right through the day. Sometimes she would sit on a bench. Sometimes, she'd be lying on the grass. But she'd be there through the whole day and she'd be at it all day, although there were times when she would have a nap as well. It made me feel very happy. She had claimed the college as her space, she was comfortable here, comfortable

enough to study and secure enough to sleep. She could be herself and she could be secure that no one was going to come and look at her. That's just one example. I've seen girls really transformed."

Transformation is something good teachers specialise in. One of Sr Anila's many roles has been that of a teacher. We asked some of her students to recount their encounters with her as students.

Dr Lata Pujari, head of the Women's Centre in the Sophia College, remembers that she was guided to her PhD topic by Sr Anila. "I was going to work on something else but then Sr Anila gave me a reality check. She said, 'Lata, you will not be able to find enough sources to write an entire thesis.' She then helped me select and refine my thesis which was eventually on the 'Position of Women in the City of Vijayanagara'. She even helped me locate the sources I would need. I don't think many PhD guides would go that far."

Dr Pujari remembers a soft woman with a tough touch. "She is meticulous and methodical. I am a Marathi medium student. Throughout my schooling and college I have been in Marathi medium institutions, even for my Masters. So for me it was a very bold decision to do a PhD in English. Sister asked me, 'Lata, is language going to be a problem?' I said,

'Yes, Sister, but I am willing to try.' She said, 'No problem. If you are ready to take on the challenge, please go ahead. But it will take some time.' I said I was willing to wait. And that is how things fell into place and she became my mentor."

Dr Pujari registered in 2010 and started work in 2012. "At first, I was very hesitant to go and talk to her or to approach her because everyone in the field knows that she is an internationally acknowledged expert on Vijayanagara; she is a stalwart in the area. Each time I wanted to go and see her and ask her something, I would say to myself, 'What if she laughs at me? What if this is a stupid question?' I kept hesitating but eventually I found that she would never do something like that. She was always willing to listen and never suggested anything was stupid. My actual experience with her started with the writing of my PhD proposal. And I found her very, very helpful with that. She did a lot of hand-holding through the entire process."

Pujari was also worried that Sr Anila might lack a sense of humour. "I had worked with Sr Ananda Amritmahal at the Women's Centre. She knew me well as a mischievous person who can't sit at one place for too long. When I did decide to do my PhD under Sr Anila, I was wondering how we would get along. She seemed to be a very serious person. Perhaps she saw this so she would crack jokes simply to put me at

ease, to make me comfortable. She is an amazing person. And in my experience, she's very helpful. If she sees your flailing, that you're in trouble, she will do anything she can to help you."

Dr Pujari remembers that Sr Anila was "the one to write letters to foundations asking for funding for my PhD. I was not even aware of this. To do something like that, to do it quietly, to do it anonymously, that is so special. There were also other things that I would like to mention. Many other PhD students would tell me how unavailable their guides were, how they had to struggle to get some attention from them. I had no such problems with Sr Anila."

What Dr Pujari wanted most of all was the chance to visit Hampi with a renowned scholar like Sr Anila. "In 2016, she gave me an opportunity to visit Hampi with her. Of course I was there with her for three days. But it was an amazing experience because there is one Sati stone and which was very difficult to find. And I was visiting the Virupaksha temple and she was the one who located it. I was not even aware that she walked almost one to one-and-a-half kilometres looking for that Sati stone on the first day. She came back around noon, very tired because of the heat. I was finding the walk difficult but she was really pushing herself, even at her age. And then she apologised to me: 'I'm

sorry,' she said. 'I couldn't find it.' But she was undaunted. The next day, she set out again, looking for the stone. And finally, she found it. She showed it to me and said, 'Lata, now you can incorporate this in your chapter.'"

Pujari points to a rare generosity of spirit in her mentor.

"You know, when I was planning my chapter, I did my literature review, of course, and I found that in her book, published by the Oxford University Press, there was a chapter on Sati. I thought: 'Now what can I say that she hasn't?' Yet, when she read my chapter, she called me up and said, 'Lata you know, you have three new points in this chapter which it's quite possible that I had overlooked.' To be able to say that speaks for her confidence and for her generosity. Very few scholars can be so nurturing. Of course, she would be equally pointed in her critique but she stood by me when I needed it."

One instance she offers is when she needed to meet the experts who were going to conduct her viva on September 29, 2018. "I had to go and receive the expert at 5 am. I live in Virar so that would have been very difficult so Sr Ananda and Sr Anila made the decision to accommodate me in the Sophia College Hostel. She also lent me her car and her driver so that I could pick up the expert. She arranged the room and when I had finished, when I was through, I think

she was almost as happy as I was. She said, 'Lata, what you have done is commendable. Your sources were in English, you wrote in English and all this despite it not being your first language.' She is that kind of person. She can take joy in your joy."

Preetika Soni has known Sr Anila as a teacher, a principal and a colleague and a mentor. "Sr Anila was the principal when I joined Sophia College in 2004. She taught me history in the second year. We interacted quite a bit because I was deeply involved with Kaleidoscope; I was on the Organising Committee. She was extremely approachable. We could go into her office whenever we needed, anything we needed. And she was always extremely patient with us and she would listen to us and tell us whether things could happen or not happen. But she would never say, 'No, you can't do that.' She would say, 'You can't do that because…' and tell you the reason. So you never felt like your ideas were being trampled or you were being disregarded simply because you were a student and she was the Principal.

"As a teacher, she was brilliant because she took history which everyone thinks of as a boring subject and she brings it alive. It's like a story that is happening right around you."

Preetika Soni remembers a moment of understanding and generosity. "It was during my third year in college,

during K-scope. It was a week away but it had been my 21st birthday the day before and I had gone out partying with my friends. We had really gone to town and I was out cold that morning. My friends got me up and out of bed and I went to meet her with a huge hangover. I could barely function and I was nodding my head at whatever she said. After a while, Sister Anila looked at me and said, 'Preetika, why don't you go home? We will discuss this tomorrow.' My friends took me back to the hostel at Marine Drive where I just crashed. I know she could have corrected me, she could have been mean to me, she could have said, 'How could you do this?' and she would have been within her rights. But she just understood the case and cut me some slack. I like to think that it was because on most other occasions I was present and correct."

The relationship continued when Soni joined the Social Communications Media department to teach Radio and Television (RTV). "She had just taken over as the director. Though she was my boss now, or even my colleague, it was still a student-principal relationship. But even as a senior colleague was really approachable. I could go up to her and talk to her. And she was always there with advice and mentorship. So it was quite a pleasure working with her also. Or working under her actually. And we worked quite a

bit because I think one year, we also had the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) coming around on inspection. So there was a lot of work for the department. But it was nice having her around. I was familiar with her working style, which I would describe as tough but fair. So it worked pretty well for me."

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We think of Sr Anila as a feminist. She seems like an empowered woman who embodies the ability to multitask. But does she think of herself as one?

"I do not call myself a feminist," says Sister Anila. "I don't think I would have been any happier as a male. I feel quite privileged being a woman. Unfortunately society makes it difficult for women. Women bond with women very well. Men bond with each other at a very different level. They bond over doing chores or activities or sports, but not at the level of emotional sharing. They can share their emotions more easily with a woman than with a man. Women bond with women comfortably. We think differently. And I'm happy to be with a women's congregation. In male congregations, they don't relate to each other in the same way."

In her clear-eyed way, Sr Anila says, "All religions are patriarchal. I don't think there's a single religion in the

world that's not patriarchal. I found my space in this congregation which allows me to do my thing. Since I don't have much to do with the hierarchy and so on, I've never found that anybody tried to take away my space. I have no particular desire to be a priest celebrating Mass. So as far as I'm concerned, I agree that church is patriarchal but we are also moving, women are pushing to make it less patriarchal and in all religions women are doing this. But I have not felt in any way controlled by the patriarchy."

Jeroo Mulla
Photo credit: Akansha Negi

Chapter 2

How Jeroo Mulla turned SCM from a course into an institution

Nirmiti Kamat, Susanna Cherian, Prateek Gautam, Akansha Negi

Jeroo Mulla, who retired as the Head of the Social Communications Media department of the Sophia Polytechnic in 2012, is a legend among the hundreds of students who studied film and photography under her in the thirty-plus years that she has been teaching here. She was head of the department but truly, she was also the architect of the space that has become SCM, a space for growth, a space for inclusion, a space for liberal thought that converts into a media praxis that reflects these beliefs.

Leena Yadav, director of films like *Parched*, *Teen Patti* and *Rajma Chawal* says, "The real impact of Jeroo began in my life when I began to work. Suddenly all that she spoke about started to make sense… slowly but surely. There on I think our relationship has blossomed into one of friendship. I have happily shared one of the most important moments of my life with her and I was touched to see the effort she put in when she came trudging across town to see my first film. Her analysis of that too was spot on! I have tremendous respect and love for Jeroo who has definitely thrown some light on my path that shines on in the darkest moments!"

Little wonder then that for her contribution to cinema studies, Jeroo Mulla received the 'Prof Bahadur Lifetime Achievement Award for Outstanding Contribution to cinema

studies' in South Asia at the Alpavirama Film Festival at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad.

These feelings are echoed by Deepa Bhatia, film editor (*Taare Zameen Par*) and director of films like *Stanley ka Dabba* and the documentary *Nero's Guests*: "When Taare Zameen Par released, she was exceedingly proud of the film and my work. In the car home, she however commented, 'Deepa, it was a very good film, but the women characters were too weak...Do make sure women are better represented…' I recall bursting out in laughter and leaping to hug her! It felt good to hear that. I know that she will not change, and will continue to be the voice of honesty in my life."

Born on 4th November 1953 in a privileged household on 43 New Marine Lines, Jeroo Mulla was the youngest of three siblings and says she was constantly surrounded by servants. She had an idyllic childhood, playing in the grounds of her house, sometimes in the Income Tax Garden, reading endless books and learning to dance. "I've really been brought up with a silver spoon in my mouth, as the saying goes. I would climb trees to sit in the branches and read books. I would take chalk and write on my mother's rosewood cupboard as I taught an imaginary class when I pretended to be a teacher. Only I knew that class would have

to end before my mother got home and shouted at me for disfiguring her cupboard."

Pirojbai Mulla, her mother, tried her best to bring her youngest child up as a propah young Parsi girl. Piloo, as Pirojbai was fondly called, got her daughter a doll. "I ignored it," Jeroo Mulla remembers. "My mother said, 'If you neglect the doll, how will you learn to take care of your babies when you have them?' I was much more interested in reading; I dreamed of being a novelist like Enid Blyton. Every two minutes my mother would call me to join the family, and I would walk out of my room with a book in my hand."

Piloo Mulla was an independent and fiery woman, dominating in her own way. Jeroo Mulla says, "My father didn't want me to learn dancing, so my mother said 'I'll pay'. My father didn't want me to learn how to drive, my mother said, 'I'll pay'. My father didn't want me to go abroad, my mother said, 'She will go!' All the major things that happened in my life were because my mother supported me. She used to force me to write cheques and put them in the bank when I was 17-18 years old. It was boring, but looking back I realise that it has helped me. I can look after my own finances, I know a little about stocks and shares. My father and I were very close, but it was my mother who made me what I am today."

Jeroo's father, Farrok Mulla, had a great influence on her life. He was an amateur photographer of some talent and also an artist. "Even though he was a public relations advisor to the Tatas, he loved painting, so he would have exhibitions in the garden, he would put up his paintings on bamboo easels. He sold his paintings but at moderate amounts. He used to love painting and photography. It was exposure to her father's aesthetic sense that she received probably sparked her interest in photography. He was very friendly with Cartier-Bresson. I have a print signed by Cartier-Bresson himself; on my father's death, Cartier-Bresson wrote me a beautiful letter but sadly, I misplaced it. When I was young, I had no idea that he was such a great photographer."

But it was not just an aesthetic that she inherited. "Actually my father was a very kind man, he was constantly doing things for other people. He was on the board of the Tata Memorial Hospital and he changed it around totally. When he died I discovered how many people he'd helped. Hundreds of people would come and tell me what he had done for them. I don't think there was anyone like my father who had helped so many and the poorest of poorest to the richest. He got jobs for every one of my servants and their children."

Besides her family, Jeroo was also very close to her nanny, “I was very close to my ayah, Piedade Marquis, whom I loved very much. She was the person I was closest to, after my mother. I remember how she used to lovingly call me ‘majhi putta’ [my child]. Even though my mother tongue was Gujarati, the first language I learned was Konkani as she was the one constantly around me when I was growing up. Many years later, after my marriage, I went and visited her in Goa. It was a lovely visit, we cried, reminiscing about the old days.”

Her brother, Homi Mulla, 72, a Relationship Management Guru and consultant, says that even as a child Jeroo Mulla was bright and accomplished. “She did a lot of dancing even as a kid. She wasn’t just going to classes, you know. She took her dancing seriously. She was rather mature when she did her arangetram, the first on-stage Bharatanatyam performance a student gives after completing her training in classical dance. That shows you that she was very tenacious.”

Like many of South Bombay’s elite, Jeroo Mulla went to Cathedral and John Connon School and then to St Xavier’s College where her friends made ruthless fun of her because she was dropped to college in a car. That was when the penny dropped. The world around was unequal. Not

everyone lived surrounded by books and art and rosewood furniture.

"It was in college that I really began to learn about disparities. But I was also introduced to literature. I was blessed to have a teacher like Eunice de Souza[1], the literary critic and poet; she was an incredible woman. She brought her love of books into the class and later when I became a teacher, I think I was using her as a role model. Then there was Nisha Da Cunha[2], who also taught us literature. I loved her class because she was so full of drama, which built my interest in the subject. I still remember how she acted out excerpts from Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë in class."

It was in St Xavier's that Jeroo ventured beyond her comfort space and explored the lives of the underprivileged. "We were taken to a social service camp in Lanja, a taluka in Ratnagiri. That was a turning point in my life. That's when I really saw extreme poverty. We were building a well for the village, which meant physical labour, passing ghamelas of

[1] Eunice D'Souza (1940-2017) was one of the most influential poets of her time. Among her many books are *Dangerlok* (Penguin India, 2001), *A Necklace of Skulls* (Penguin India, 2009), *Learn from the Almond Leaf* (Poetrywala, 2016). She was also a fine anthologist and taught for many years at the English department of St Xavier's College.

[2] Nisha Da Cunha (1934-) is one of India's finest short story writers; Dom Moraes compared her writing to that of Katherine Mansfield. She is the author of *Old Cypress* (Penguin India, 1991), and *The Permanence of Grief* (Penguin India 1993) among others.

soil. At the same camp, I volunteered at a dispensary where a Gujarati doctor from Africa taught me to give injections. All day I was at the dispensary giving vitamin injections to the poor. My thinking began to change radically, it made me sensitive to people."

It was a time of change, it was a time of experiment, it was a time of choices. There was so much intellectual wealth available. For instance, when the young college going Jeroo Mulla started to act, it was with the legendary Pearl Padamsee[3] in Gieve Patel's *Princes*. She may have missed the palmy days of the legendary dramaturge Ebrahim Alkazi who had already left Mumbai to take over the National School of Drama in Delhi but she did work with his daughter.

Pearl Padamseeand Amal Allana. "Amal Allana was Ebrahim Alkazi's daughter. I was in Brecht's 'Good Woman of Setzuan'. I even got good reviews. The play went to Delhi and we all went to perform there. But I had to choose. I couldn't give up my evenings to rehearsals for theatre when I had to practise Bharatanatyam. So I chose dancing."

[3] Pearl Padamsee-(1931 – 24 April 2000) Indian theatre personality, director and producer of English language theatre. Her screen credits include Khatta Meetha (1978), Junoon (1978), Baaton Baaton Mein (1979) and more.

Around this time, when Jeroo was giving her BA exams, the family had to sell their old house at Marine Lines opposite Sir Dinshaw Mulla Lane and move to Walkeshwar. She says she was heartbroken. "I cried, I wrote many many poems on the selling of the house. My father was born there, I was born there, so it was a family house. We moved next to a very beautiful sea-facing house in Walkeshwar. We had the same view of the grandeur of the Arabian Sea as the Governor's Bungalow. Every day, I would get up and there would be rainbows and little doves floating on the sea. My father was very aesthetic and he had a very well-kept garden, with bougainvillea in arches. But I saw a lot of unhappiness in Walkeshwar, I lost my parents while we lived there. After that, the house didn't feel as warm anymore."

After studying a year of the Mass Media course at Xavier Institute of Communication (which, at that time, was called ICA or the Institute of Communication Arts), she worked on the Adult Education Project under Father Francis McFarland[4]. This changed her perspective on life completely and became the basis of what she did at the Sophia

[4] Father Francis McFarland sj [1919-2003]. For more details, consult the biography *One Beautiful LIfe* by Samit Ghosh (Samit Ghosh, 2004)

Polytechnic. Fr McFarland, she says, was thus one of the most influential persons in her life. “Fr McFarland, an American Jesuit of Irish origin, inculcated in us a sense of values and ethics and gave us the freedom to experiment. In 1974, as students, we initiated a project for adult literacy using the media, the first of its kind in India, pre-figuring the famous Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), although on a much smaller scale. We decided that the media could be put to beneficial use and began *Aisee Aksharein Melveen*, an adult education project for lower income groups--police constables’ wives, dockyard labourers, mill-workers, etc. Our institute collaborated with the government-run Bombay City Social Education Committee and the national television channel, Doordarshan (a government monopoly and at that time, India’s only television channel). The project involved audience research, a reworking of the existing syllabus, the developing of creative television scripts, the training of teachers, the production and telecast of programmes on Doordarshan’s local channel, Bombay Doordarshan, and an evaluation of the entire project.”

Thus armed, she went to America to do a Master’s degree in Educational Media at Fairfield University, Connecticut. “I chose some courses, one was ‘Making Film’ and the other

was a short course on Super 8 film. There was also a course called 'Romanticism on the American Screen', which I loved more than the main subjects. I had no idea then that cinema was going to become such a passion for me."

Jeroo Mulla's growing social concerns were a cause for concern for her father. "He thought I was going to work in the slums. So he tried to get me a job in advertising; he was on the board of Clarion-McCann, an advertising agency. I dutifully went for the interview and for a meeting, but I realised my calling was elsewhere."

She had returned to India in 1977 to work with Arun Khopkar, an award-winning documentary filmmaker. "He insisted that I do a film appreciation course at the Film and Television Institute of India. I went off and found that it was an immersion programme. You saw film after film, all day. But that was all it took; I was now totally sold on cinema."

However, the old dream of being a teacher was not dead. She taught at Xavier Institute of Communications for a year and at Nirmala Niketan for a few months. Even as Alyque Padamsee was offering her a job at Lintas, the Sophia Shri B K Somani Polytechnic asked her to join the Social Communications Media department, otherwise known as SCM.

Mulla smiles reminiscently as she says, “Of course, the monthly salary I was going to get at Lintas was equal to a year’s salary at SCM, but I chose SCM. I came from a privileged background so I could exercise that choice. I couldn’t bear advertising and didn't see myself there. I was working with Govind Nihalani who was doing the camera on a film that Arun Khopkar was making on family planning at the time. I told him that I had chosen teaching. He said I would waste my talent if I took up teaching. Perhaps it was this warning ringing in my ears that made me think of SCM as just another pit-stop. I thought I would give it a try, I would give it a year or two. But when I began, suddenly for the first time in my life, someone was appreciating what I did. I began to enjoy teaching, I enjoyed the students’ responses. I was quite blown away; it was such a good year that I stayed another. And then a third year went by and each time I thought, ‘One more year’. There was something that always held me back.”

But it wasn’t just the teaching that Jeroo did although generations of students will attest to the way she can communicate her passion for cinema and photography to them. Jeroo Mulla was also building a department.

“Every year I would try to get intelligent people as faculty, I always believed that it was not the syllabus but the

people who mattered, so I would try to get the best, I got Sidharth Bhatia[5], P Sainath[6], T C Ajit[7], Rabindra Hazari[8], Sunayana Sadrangani[9], Geeta Rao[10] on board. Then I got Jerry Pinto. I am very proud of the core faculty that I built up. But through it all, my one driving force was to expose the students to social issues. One or two years after I took over, there were hordes of applications. I would try and take less privileged students in whom I saw potential. I stressed social issues and feminism and I tried to show my students how this worked when they were making aesthetic choices. Every time the students chose a male protagonist for the documentary, or short film, I would ask, 'Why is the male

[5] Sidharth Bhatia is the co-founder of thewire.in and the author of *Navketan* (Harper Collins, 2011), *Amar Akbar Anthony* (Harper Collins, 2013), *India Psychedelic: The Story of Rocking Generation* (Harper Collins, 2014), and *The Patels of Filmindia: Pioneers of Indian Film Journalism* (Indus Source Books, 2015).

[6] P Sainath is the author of the multiple award-winning study of India's poorest districts, *Everyone Loves a Good Drought* (Penguin India, 1996) and the founder of the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI). He has taught at SCM for more than three decades.

[7] T C Ajit is the former head of Public Relations for South and Southeast Asia for Ogilvy & Mather.

[8] Rabindra Hazari is an eminent corporate lawyer, he has been lecturing on Press and Media Laws at SCM for the last two decades. He is currently a partner in the law firm, Rabindra Hazari Associates.

[9] Sunayana Sadrangani has worked in broadcast journalism for 20 plus years, with Doordarshan, NDTV, Zee TV and India Today. She has been teaching broadcast journalism at SCM for more than a decade now.

[10] Geeta Rao is a senior advertising professional, she has worked for Ogilvy, DY&R, DDBMudra, Saatchi and Saatchi, and continues to be a contributing editor at *Vogue*. She teaches advertising at SCM.

the hero, why not the woman?' I always tried to make students think beyond the patriarchy.'

Alongside Jeroo also wrote on cinema for *Himmat*, Rajmohan Gandhi's magazine, when Kalpana Sharma was the editor. She wrote for *Vidura* on documentaries, and did an article on John Berger for the *Indian Express*. She did a photo feature on Banganga for the *Indian Post* among many others. If these were places where she could air her aesthetic concerns, SCM was the place where she could give voice to her social concerns. "You cannot live a privileged life in a country like India and not wonder, 'How is this fair? How can I live like this while they live like that?' So, I began to teach a course I called 'Fundamental Concepts' and brought in the issues I thought my students needed to be aware of whether it was feminism, socialism or media control. Then I would supervise all the students' audio-visuals to see whether they had internalised what we had discussed. I would insist that they always chose topics of social concern."

Jeroo's choices of colleagues were also determined by these causes. "I was very happy when I got Sainath on board. I used to attend all his classes. So, every time I got people on board who had worked on real issues, I was happy. Jerry Pinto does wonderful work with NGOs, I brought him in,

then Smruti Kopikkar is my own student, she has worked extensively in journalism."

Sanskriti award-winning journalist and commentator, Smruti Koppikar has had the advantage of knowing Jeroo, as a student and as a colleague. "Jeroo is this powerful force of change. She is a catalyst in hundreds of people's lives, a catalyst for change. I've seen her for about 30-plus years now in different capacities. And our relationship has existed at different intensities. And I think if there are any two-am friends, then we would be that for each other. We've been through various phases and various aspects of our relationship. But the one thing that I am convinced about is that for Jeroo the personal is the professional is the political. She's never made any bones about the fact that she likes the good life. But that does not mean that she isn't concerned about the world. To take a very recent example. Once she retired as head of the department at SCM, she could have done lots of things with her time. But one of the things she was committed to doing was to go to a remand home in Dongri for children to teach them the basics of meditation and the 'anapana' breathing technique and the Vipassana meditation.

"A bit about our relationship. Obviously, it started off as a teacher-student relationship. I was enamoured with her the

moment I walked into that SCM interview in June that year. There's something about her. I felt some sort of a connection, something that told me that this woman is different than all the teachers I've had before. In those days, Jeroo used to be far more aggressive and temperamental. But I think I figured that I wanted to keep in touch with this one person, never mind her temper.

"We know now for the last many years that come hell or high water I will be there for her and she will be there for me at all levels. Hers is a shoulder I can weep on. And I'm sure she believes that she can come weep on my shoulder any time, and we can share things about ourselves, about people in our lives and share with one another what we might not share with many others. So, it's a very deep personal connection."

Smruti wasn't the only student who then became a close friend to Jeroo in later years, Bollywood film editor, producer and director-Deepa Bhatia, too was just a student, until she became close friends with Jeroo.

"A good teacher reforms the students and Jeroo had that impact, so even though she has retired and is not teaching full time, SCM for me is Jeroo. As an HOD she was just the way she was as a teacher. Unsparing, unforgiving, very strict, about everything right from punctuality to quality of

work. But what people often don't realise is her soft spot. She's of course an extremely emotional person, like there were students who were either not coping well or going through some personal stress or tragedies and she never let the rest of us know but yet she successfully insulated them. She's like a coconut, all hard outside but inside there's a really caring person inside and you really get the understanding of that when you leave the course. Now I consider her amongst my dearest friends, of course with the same reverence and respect because a teacher is always a teacher. She's a warm, soft person, concerned about all her students."

Deepa continues, "All that I am today, I am because of Jeroo." She shares how Jeroo influenced her to take up films, "I remember that the earliest film that she screened for our batch was István Szabó's short film, *You*, a very abstract film, which is just Szabó's impression of his girlfriend. It was a totally eye-opening experience and it suddenly made me feel that cinema can be like that and it's not Bollywood, Bollywood is just the tip of the iceberg. Her classes opened up the doors of my mind, those deep analyses of *Pather Panchali*, *Rules of the Game*, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, I can still recall them, I cannot forget the impact those lectures made on me, you may not get everything she is referring to

at that point of time but she made me realise how much art is there in that process. She helped us sort the good from the bad, but even more challenging, the quite good from the excellent. She cultivated our taste; she cultivated our aesthetics.

"And that's enormous. I just feel like the better things you see, the better choices you make as a viewer and as a creator. She made sure that those exemplary standards were ingrained in us. She tried to instil the desire for creative excellence in us and how that kind of art happens. So tomorrow you at least have a goal, I don't mean you want to be the next. But at least you have the commitment and the process in front of you."

What matters the most to Jeroo is to see that all of her students are doing their part for the society. She says, "Look at Priyanka Kakodkar, every day she reports on farmer suicides in the *Times of India*. Even Malishka Mendonsa, i.e RJ Malishka, she's a radio jockey but she takes up social issues very seriously. Rohini Ramnathan, she is another radio jockey who takes up issues such as the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual- Transsexual-Transgender-Queer-Intersex-Asexual (LGBTQIA) and works actively on the Kashish Film Festival."

Priyanka Kakodkar, journalist with the Times of India, remembers Jeroo Mulla fondly. "My first impression of Jeroo

was that she seemed very strict and forbidding. However I found out that she has a heart of gold and is very kind and humane. She is a genuine liberal, always on the side of the underdog. She was so generous with her knowledge and passion for film. I was influenced most by what she stood for. The class was really like an introductory course in women's rights. I felt that we as women needed to stand up for ourselves and achieve something on our own. I was so touched by her many acts of kindness. We had a girl in our batch who was a victim of domestic violence and Jeroo had taken her into the course despite perhaps knowing she would not be able to cope with or finish it. Just to give her a chance." For a teacher, it is what the students do outside that counts. "Many of my students take up meaningful issues and seek to bring about social change. Namita Premkumar teaches the poor. Rana Ayyub has been pursuing the cause of justice; she has gone to Kashmir, she has worked undercover. Smruti Koppikar got death threats when she was reporting against right-wing forces in Maharashtra. Sunu Sukumaran went to Afghanistan to cover the Taliban. Her office wanted to send her but they also wanted permission from her parents to send their daughter there. Her parents were unwilling to give any permission, so she lied to both sides and went anyway. Others have risen to the

absolute top of their professions. It's a very good feeling, you see, they are not only at the top but also doing good things for others and that is what is important."

Jeroo's impact is so strong that many students keep in touch through calls and letters to update her on their careers and lives, in one such letter, Anjalika Sharma (Batch of 1995) wrote, "...I was asked to make a film on hunger in Vermont, USA for a local organization called the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger. I volunteered and started driving around the state, interviewing teachers and food service workers. The reason was a film called, *Hidden Hunger* which they are currently showing across the state. Last month they floored me by presenting me the Humanitarian of the Year Award from their organization. The only reason I was able to do anything here was because I used the first lesson you taught us at SCM, to use the Media for Social Communications, to use the media to build awareness and sow the seeds for social change. You taught us not to worry about money but to try and do good work. I still have a long way to go Jeroo, but thank you for showing me the path. I hope to do many more projects that will be true to the lessons you taught us."

Jeroo Mulla got married to Mahendra Sinh, a photographer, when she was 38. They had been dating for

ten years before that. She shares, “We were both independent and not ready for marriage but for some reason, we got married anyway. I don’t think marriage is necessary. But it helps in our conservative society if you are married.”

“I met Jeroo through some common friends,” says Mahendra Sinh, a photographer of international repute. “Her father, Farrok Mulla was truly a Renaissance man, and Jeroo imbibed many qualities from him. Like her father, she has the most genuine passion and appreciation for music and arts. Specially for Western classical and Hindustani classical music. Her appreciation of delicate and complex nuances in the musical passages specially in Hindustani classical music surprises me. She, like her father, also has an extraordinary eye and sensitivity for beauty, specially in nature. Many of these common qualities have brought us together. Her most dogged devotion to work in teaching is very well known. She is truly a fierce feminist. She has this most rare and remarkable humane quality of treating people equally may be it is some celebrated dignitary or a poor man from lowest strata of society.”

Many people get work done but often at the expense of the human touch. Jeroo Mulla was clear about the standards she expected but those who worked with her have only

good things to say. Dinkar Sutar, who has worked hard to keep SCM in good tick, joined SCM in 2006. Jeroo Mulla was already head of the department and a formidable presence. “Initially, I was scared of her but with time I realised that even though she appeared to be strict at work, she was soft on the inside.

“She was tough on everyone but she was also tough on herself. What I value most about Jeroo ma’am is that she treats everyone equally, there are no hierarchies. She is always smiling and will speak politely to everyone. When the department went on tour or even when she goes out of station, she makes sure that she gets something or the other for everyone, that’s what I love the most about her. She is very considerate and always thinking about others. She has done a lot for me. Whenever we meet, she always asks about my kids.

“I have seen Jeroo ma’am switch from being a HOD to visiting faculty after her retirement, but in these years, she’s still the same, she is still demanding and exacting and wants things just so. She’s really passionate about her work,” he adds.

When Nilesh Correia, technical staff at SCM, joined SCM in 2002, he was reluctant to speak to her, he was so scared of her. “I used to play the 16 mm film on the projector for her

classes, it was she who taught me how to load the film on the projector. She never compromised in her work, she used to show others their mistakes, because she was particular about the quality of work, but if she ever made a mistake, she would admit it humbly. I remember once, I had given all three projectors for servicing and she urgently needed a projector for the class, that day, as I was coming down the stairs, she scolded me midway, so loudly that her voice travelled right throughout the college, but the next day, she came to me apologised. Throughout her term as HOD, she never kept biases against anyone, and treated everyone as equal. She brought in a range of different people and because of her, I met Anju Venkat, who later helped my nephew overcome epilepsy. Jeroo Ma'am is very determined when it comes to work, besides that, she is the warmest at heart."

Gracy Vaz, administrative staff at SCM, remembers how Jeroo interviewed her for the post in 1998. She has had, since then, a ring-side view of the head of department. "When I joined, I had heard that Jeroo was strict, but when I came to know her as a person, I realized that there was a lot more to her than just a strict persona. She used to care for her staff, and used to fight for the rightful salary of her staff. If I was sick, she would look out for me, she used to say,

'Gracy, take hot water, take ginger, eat fruit, take care of yourself.' Though she would shout, she was genuine at heart, even if she ever shouted at me, I would still want to come to work and looked forward to it. Without us, she would feel that the department is empty, she used to say, 'Without Gracy and Nilesh, I am just handicapped.' She was particular about the film notes, I had to be on my toes, keep Xeroxes ready, keep all film rolls ready. With her, the department ran very smoothly."

In 2006, Jeroo Mulla was diagnosed with cancer, which was no surprise to her, she says, because both her parents and her sister had had brushes with the emperor of maladies as Siddhartha Mukherjee puts it. But it was the nutritionist and wellness expert Dr. Vijaya Venkat who told her that it was nothing to do with genetics, but more to do with diet and lifestyle. Her brother, Homi Mulla says, "After her bout with cancer, she went on Vijaya Venkat's diet; it is not easy since it focuses on eating raw. She did that for years. But maybe it worked for within a year or so, after recovering from cancer, she gave a dance recital at the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) which lasted an hour-and-a-half at least. But then she has that kind of courage and determination. Once we were having lunch at my place and she burst out with a terrible allergy. Her face

went red and she seemed to be developing hives. I told her I would give her an antihistamine. She said, 'No, no!" Instead she rang up Anju Venkat [Vijaya Venkat's daughter] who said she should have a glass of onion juice. A glass of onion juice, can you imagine? Jeroo just gulped it down as if it were a glass of water. And it worked, her face regained its ordinary colour. That's the tenacity she has. It's an amazing trait."

Over time Jeroo overcame her cancer with the help of Vipassana and Dr Vijaya Venkat's diet, "I feel had I not been doing Vipassana, I may have not been able to handle the crises. And then I wish I hadn't taken radiation but I did. I felt the one reason I had to get well was, out of cancer was to be able to dance again. And I wanted to do it, there was this beautiful padam[11] called '*Yen Palli'*, it was beautiful. I said I wanted to perform that. And was what kept me going. Dance is something that is very dear to me.

"I started dancing when I was four. We were Parsi and so we were not allowed to put our feet on the ground. We always had to wear chappals. I liked the feel of the bare ground and dance was the only thing that allowed me to remove my chappals and feel the ground. My father, Farrok Mulla, was very much into the arts and so he himself liked

[11] A musical composition in Bharatanatyam

dance. My mother was a kathak dancer who studied under Lachhu Maharaj. So I had a background already. In my early years, I learned from Shirin Vajifdar. When I was eight years old, I had tonsillitis and I had to stop dancing, I missed some classes and got very upset. This lady who was teaching us left, and she was replaced by a woman I did not like. I stopped going, then luckily my very close friend in school, Sunita Shivdasani, who's also a dancer told me 'You can come back now, because that woman has left.' It's all thanks to Sunita that I am still dancing."

"I learnt all my classical dance from my Guruji Acharya Parvati Kumar. He choreographed the Marathi compositions of Serfoji Maharaj. I kept on saying that I wanted to shoot a documentary on him. When I told Jerry that this is what I wanted to do. He said, "Get up, take the camera and go shoot." I was really lucky that I got footage, because two years later, he passed away. I approached the India Foundation for the Arts, they called me for an interview, but then my Guruji passed away, so they didn't go ahead with the documentary. Then many people suggested that I give it to the Films Division, Bangalore. But I didn't approach them because I didn't want anyone else to have the rights over Guruji's film. Only I wanted to have the rights. My Guruji meant everything to me. I feel happiest when I am dancing."

She has won encomia for her performances. The redoubtable dance critic, Sumitra Srinivasan, wrote a glowing review of Jeroo's arangetram at the Sophia Bhabha Hall: "While abhinaya is the hurdle of most dancers, it happens to be Jeroo's forte. Jeroo did her guru justice particularly in the abhinaya and lasya aspects of Bharata Natyam. The sensual aspects of shringara and madhura bhakti were well portrayed by her...Her perseverance and innate gift as a dancer should take her a long way."[12]

Shirin Vajifdar, herself an exponent and art critic for the *Indian Express,* wrote: "I admire her grit, her devotion, her patience. As a child she learnt Indian dance of all hues, both classical and folk, for nearly 10 years. As a self-conscious young energetic woman, she wanted to go deep into the mysteries of Bharatanatyam and know all about it!" She adds, "Her arangetram was not a routine affair, but a highly evolved presentation. Each item from alarippu to the final padam looked well-chiselled and thought out with minute detail."[13]

Dance and vipassana and diet brought her through. But Jeroo says it was stress that was the villain: "I was very stressed that year. Anupamaa Joshi, who had worked with

[12] MId-day, November 18, 1987
[13] Issue dated November 6, 1987

the department for many years, had left. I was very fond of her and I felt I had lost my right hand. After she left, I did everything on my own. I had no assistant, no support. It was really difficult. The stress began to build up. Then Nirmita Gupta came in and I could heave a sigh of relief, but the stress had already affected my health."

The current Head of Department at SCM, Nirmita Gupta's association with Jeroo is longer than Nirmita's tenure at SCM as faculty. "I met Jeroo as a student when I joined SCM in 1982. At that point of time Jeroo was just a lecturer. I was her fourth batch so she was learning her role, experimenting with teaching. SCM in its current avatar is very different from the SCM that we did, it was a progressive course even then, but it didn't have the kind of depth that we've given it. But Jeroo was the one who created that depth. "But even after all these years, her film classes play in my mind, I remember Pudovkin, I remember Eisenstein and montage sequences and I remember Renoir. I'm not even interested in filmmaking so for me to remember after 36 years is a testament to her teaching." Nirmita Gupta's relationship with Jeroo was more than just a teacher-student relationship, "She heard I was a swimmer, so she took 3-4 of us swimming to the Willingdon Club, we used to go to her house and hang out. We even shot our projects at this

beautiful bungalow overlooking Walkeshwar. She was not much older than we were, so it was an informal relationship."

Over the years, Nirmita Gupta says she lost contact with her teacher but then the SCM network took over. "A friend of mine who was settled in Australia, came back to India. She called me and said, 'I just met Jeroo, and she remembers our batch.' A few days later, I came to Sophia Polytechnic because I was looking for something interesting to do, and there was a pottery course and a bakery course, so I came to enroll. I asked the receptionist whether Jeroo was still around and she said, 'Yes, she's just come; why don't you go up and say "Hi"?'"

Nirmita Gupta did go up and was startled that Jeroo Mulla remembered her as the girl from Ahmedabad. "We reminisced for a bit and as I was leaving, I casually told Jeroo to let me know if I can help in any way. Jeroo said, 'Actually, there is. You know Anupama is just leaving, do you think you can take up course coordination?' I told her that I hadn't come in looking for a job, but I would love to work here. For a few days, I didn't hear from Jeroo, so I thought they must have got somebody, then one day, suddenly she called me up. I told her that I would not be available for a full-time job. When she explained my role to me, I thought I

didn't need to come in every day, even if I came thrice a week for a bit of time, I thought I would be able to do the job. She insisted it was a full-time job. I said 'Jeroo, if it's the job you just described, I'm pretty sure I should be able to manage.' She wasn't sure but I think she knew she really needed someone.

It was as a colleague rather than as a teacher that Jeroo Mulla made an impact on Nirmita Gupta. "For the longest time, I had been somebody's mother and somebody's wife. For that time in my life, I had actually lost my identity. When I came back to SCM, I rediscovered an identity for myself. For me, that was very important, that was an opportunity that Jeroo gave me. And though many say that she's difficult to work with, I never had a day's trouble with Jeroo, we had a very cordial relationship. I saw her build an institution out of a course. And I think that is her biggest claim to fame, the course changed and took shape under her. Then Sunitha Chitrapu came in and brought in her own style, she brought her own ethos to the department. When she left, I took over and I am bringing my own change but if it did not have the foundation Jeroo gave it, the institution couldn't have survived. To that extent, she nurtured a baby, the baby grew up and could be handed over to us. And I think that every student who has actually gone through SCM will have been

impacted by her in some way or the other."

Jerry Pinto, Sahitya Akademi award-winning writer, journalist and a poet has worked closely with Jeroo for almost three decades and sees her not as a visionary teacher but as an institution builder concerned with the longevity of the institution**.** "For me, the single greatest thing about Jeroo is her ability to construct spaces where people can be themselves. The people who have worked with her are very different but she had managed to hold on to some very diverse people, keeping them committed to the department. They're people who care what happens to the department. And to me, an institution is not about the size of your building, or about how old you are, it's about who cares. Caring creates and sustains institutions. If SCM is alive today, it is because Jeroo created an institution about which people care. That's why so many people come back, some to teach, some to help, some to judge. Look at the staff, almost all of them from Kaumudi Marathe to Anupama Joshi, from Shyma Rajagopal to Anushka Rovshen-Shivdasani, from Nirmita Gupta to Parth Vyas, they've all been through the grind and they've come back to lend a hand with preparing the next batch.

"She can be tough to work with, tough as a teacher. When we were celebrating her life and career here on the eve of

her retirement, we asked students to put together a list of Jeroo-isms. The things she said were funny in retrospect but at the time, they must have been terribly cutting. 'This might have been good if you had had some taste'. 'How do you expect me to correct this? It seems to have been written in a language that looks like English but clearly isn't.' That kind of thing. But perhaps there was 'method in her madness'. The best compliment I heard was when I was talking to Barkha Dutt, the NDTV anchor. She said, 'I like hiring SCM girls, they've finished their crying and come.' "The Head of Department is like a jazz band leader. The jazz band leader has to make sure that there is a composition that everybody's playing. But she also has to be able to realise that there are individual artists to compose the band, and she has to give them those moments where they can display their individual talents. At the SCM Jazz Troupe, we are allowed our individual pitch, our timbre, our tone, our sound. All that is acceptable. But we all sing largely the same kind of song."

Homi Mulla puts it down to her tenacity. "I used to keep teasing her that you're doing this job for the last 30-35 years and you're earning nothing compared to what your students are earning. And her answer would be something very beautiful. She would just keep saying, 'Look, I enjoy what I'm

doing and that gives me great pleasure.' I think that's an amazing and remarkable part of her. There was a time when I used to tell her that I'm paying my servants collectively more than what she earned in college. I also told her that if you retire you will earn three times or four times more, which came true. She retired and started earning much more. But that's a lovely part about her".

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In 2012, Jeroo retired from SCM as Head of Department but not before she had made sure the succession was assured. She had hand-picked her successor and worked with her for several years before she retired. And the reins of SCM were handed over to Dr Sunitha Chitrapu, herself an alumna, who had worked with Shyam Benegal and earned her PhD at the University of Indiana, USA.

"I first saw Jeroo striding down the third floor corridor on the day of the entrance exam in June 1992. I was thoroughly intimidated by her presence. Here's someone, I thought, who is going to make me work very hard. And that did turn out to be true, Jeroo has a way of pushing you to give your very best."

But then she demanded the same from herself as well. "Jeroo put in very long hours in the classroom. I remember telling her that I had never met a Head of Department who

gave so much time to teaching. That is a unique thing about her. She took a personal interest in everything and was systemic in her approach. She took great care of every person in the department, be it the faculty, students or the support staff. She was always giving loans and donations without any fuss or anyone knowing about it. She was particular about equipment and studio maintenance and it is thanks to her that we have many of the facilities that we have today." "Jeroo Ma'am's documentary classes influenced me a lot. Her focus on intensive research and a clear writing style helped me enormously right through my Masters and PhD studies and in all my research publications thereafter. For me she will always be the teacher who insisted that we do our best." But Jeroo Mulla, Chitrapu emphasises, is not all work and no play. "Jeroo is a very sporting person, she once danced to the item number Jalebi Bai for Teachers Day. The crowd went wild! Over the years our relation has become deeper. Of course, there are a lot more hugs now when we meet. She is always training all of us to be responsible and take the initiative. Plus both Nirmita and I had come to SCM after some years in the industry. She would delegate responsibilities as well as support Nirmita and me whenever we took the initiative, so in a sense because we

were such a small and tight knit team, Nirmita and I were able to manage the department after her retirement."

Dr (Mrs) Vidita Rakshit, former Directress of Sophia Polytechnic and current in-council member, in her farewell letter on Jeroo's retirement wrote, "During her tenure, she has guided over a thousand students, working with each of them intimately. And they have gone on to flourish in their chosen fields, their achievements renowned noth in India and abroad. To both her students and her staff, she has been a living example of one can live one's life, firmly grounded on one's convictions. And her innate warmth and gentleness endeared her to them."

So even though Jeroo has fulfilled all her roles, she continues to work tirelessly after retirement. She continues to work as Visiting faculty at Sophia Polytechnic and at Symbiosis. And she never plans to retire as a dancer, once every year she performs a classical dance piece for her students. "Sixty-six is just a pair of digits; I'm not going to let digits hold me back," she says.

Cut to the words of Swati Dandekar, from the batch of 1988-89, "We had to go to Pune for a visit to the 'National Archives'. Since my parents lived in Pune then, I had undertaken to book our train tickets. In the reservation form I put Jeroo's age as 35, and came back and haltingly

told her I'd done so. She stared at me unblinkingly for a few seconds and with a stern look rebuked me, "Swati, you should know I am not a day over 16!" It took me a few seconds to realise she was joking!”

And that is Jeroo, the young, bubbly and passionate teacher, dancer and social activist. Her way of activism is raising a generation of socially aware individuals. And her dedication is what raised the mark of SCM, from a course to an institution complete in itself.

Elsie Nanji
Photo credit: Sweekriti Tiwari

Chapter 3

How Elsie Nanji makes jewel boxes of the mind

Bhoomi Mistry, Sweekriti Tiwari, Arshi Khan,
Navya Sahai Bhatnagar

The joy of talking to Elsie Nanji, who was at one point one of the most important presences in the advertising world of Mumbai and is now an interior designer of repute, lies in the unexpected.

Ask her about a comment on her website (elsienanji.com) where she talks about the fine line between art and commerce and she answers with a story. When Nanji was fifty years old, she decided that she would like to run Marathons. Her coach was Savio D'Souza. She describes him as "a simple Goan runner whose only motivation in life is running and to help people enjoy running. Savio had an ancestral house in Goa, but he had no money to do it up. He managed to find some 20/30 lakhs to do the roof because it was falling apart. He asked me, 'Will you do the interiors?' I went there with my young architect and assistant designer, who generally help me with top-end clients like Mahindra, Goenka and homes like that. We made a very simple plan, adding two more bathrooms connected to the home, yet keeping the whole old structure intact, which did not cost much. One of the runners had a connection with Asian Paints so she supplied the paint. That was the way it went, all of it. So many runners heard about it and wanted to contribute. If any question was asked of him, Savio would say, 'Ask Elsie.' I was choosing everything, and all of it was

crowd funded. A chandelier came from one person in the running community. The carpet came from somebody, the furnishing fabric from another, it became like a wedding registry, the registry for this home. Except for some old pieces of furniture which his grandmother left behind, it was the goodwill extended by everybody around him. All of us, together, built his home. It was such a lovely effort and such a lovely home. He and his wife Rose were so happy they could not stop smiling.

Now we come closer to her answer: "The line between art and commerce is so fine, you never know where it is and how it will shift. I am so blessed to be able to do a project with love, and the money always falls into place."

D'Souza was delighted. He says: "Elsie completely transformed my home. Now when anyone comes to the house, they are taken aback by how good it looks. Elsie has a keen eye, she can imagine how good a place can look at its full potential, and how it will turn out,"he says.

Take the line, draw out a story, fill it with people and with joy.

That's Elsie Nanji.

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Even as a child Elsie Chandy, as she was then known, had been drawn to art, to creation, to making beauty. Elsie was the youngest of four siblings. “My parents focused on my older genius siblings. One of my sisters became a PhD in nuclear physics, another is an IAS officer, and my brother was studying to be a doctor. All the serious attention was directed at my siblings; it left me free to do whatever I wanted. My parents never forced me to do anything,” she says.

Her father, John Chandy, was an officer in the Indian Railways; her mother, Rebecca Chandy, was Principal of Cultural Academy, a branch of Nirmala Niketan in Chennai. They would not force her to do anything but they could have a say about her life goals.

"I love art, I would still like to draw,” she says now. “My mother was visiting the Nirmala Niketan branch in Mumbai at Churchgate. I decided to tag along, and visit one of my school friends who had started the Foundation Art course at Sophia Polytechnic. That's how I got to know about the five-year diploma course in Commercial Art," says Nanji “I got so excited when I saw what they were doing in the classroom, I decided that it was what I wanted to do.”

But her parents wanted her in a secure profession. “They wanted me to do Economics, just imagine! That wasn’t their

only concern. The course at Sophia was five years long, which is a long time away from home. Moreover, they were afraid that I would find a life partner here and never come back," says Nanji. She pauses for a moment and then laughs. “They were right!That is exactly what happened!So at the time, they simply said, 'You can’t do it'. I had to battle my way to do this course. But then to be fair, they also couldn’t afford it, as my father had just retired. My eldest sister who was already married and working in Toronto, sent me the money to do this course. What helped was that there was a women’s hostel,” she recalls. "After I graduated, I lived as a paying guest with one of my classmates and paid ₹350 as rent. I took a contract bus to Lintas, my first job. I started out with very little money for someone who wanted to live independently in Bombay.”

As a Syrian Christian from Kerala, Elsie spoke English for most of her childhood. Adjusting to the work culture in Bombay at that time was quite difficult in the beginning.

"Thanks to the Indian Railways so I spent a lot of time all over the country. My first school was in Assam. Although I am originally from Kerala, actually, we used to only go there only for holidays and I have never lived there," she explains. Language was a barrier at Lintas where Alyque Padamsee

hired her on the instance of her childhood friend's father, T Thomas, the Chairman of Hindustan Lever at the time.

"It was dreadful, there were only Maharashtrian art directors who spoke Marathi and they gave me art board work:cutting and pasting with rubber solutions; and hand-painting the lettering on bromide paper. They would have already made the sketches; I just had to paste and trim, cut or clean up. There were no discussion on what and why we were doing what we were doing. We were like studio artists. I was in tears for nine months!" Elsie says with a laugh. "But Alyque was kind to me; he was doing these amazing theatre shows in Bombay, and asked me to help with the shows and backstage. I would get to design some of his theatre posters."

"By then I had met Hossi, and we were dating. Every evening, I whined to him about what a bad time I was having. He worked in the same building at Ogilvy & Mather (O&M) and he said, 'I know a girl who works upstairs, why don't you meet her?' His friend upstairs introduced me to the Creative Director and she gave me a creative test. I took the test and was hired. At O&M, where I stayed for the next three or four years my bosses were very good to me, giving me raises without my ever asking for them. I was in a cabin with three Marathi-speaking art directors, and nobody

spoke English to each other. I made friends with all the writers. They gave me small jobs to do. If there was a job for Stayfree, Johnson & Johnson, they would ask me to supervise a shoot of a girl in white jeans, feeding pigeons outdoors. And we would go with a great photographer to the area opposite the Taj [Mahal Hotel, Mumbai], and I could help direct the photos. As a result, I got exposed to photography, and to different clients. My first independent account was Flying Machine jeans. I designed the label, and they sent me off to do the shoot on my own, I got lucky with that. We cast this tall, slim model. Sudha, for the advertisement, "The whole right-hand side of *Mid-Day* was an image of this tall beautiful girl in jeans. There was a line drawn and it looked like she was standing and holding the line. Coincidentally, her son is now a runner with me. It is great fun to go in a full circle like this," says Elsie. If the start of Nanji's success as an advertising professional can be attributed to a campaign, it would be this one.

"Mohammed Khan saw the ad and said, 'Who has done this ad? I want to hire this girl'. At that time, he was starting Enterprise and I was the only art director he hired. Enterprise did very well. At Enterprise, I got the 'Art Director of the Year' award for the year's work. Soon after

that, Ashok Kurien offered me a partnership in a start-up agency called Ambience," says Elsie.

When Ashok Kurien started Ambience, people came to him and advised him against partnering with Elsie Nanji. Kurien says, "Many people came and said, 'You're mad, there are so many big names in the industry; they'll all want to join you,' and I said, 'I don't want to hire them.'" For he had observed something interesting in her work. "She could see India through the White Man's eye. She had a sort of global, westernised way of looking at things; she had a completely different way of looking at India."

Elsie agrees. She explains, "I was more western-oriented as a child. Instead of Indian classical music, I learned western classical music, completing my Grade 4 piano examinations with the Trinity College of Music. I wasn't one of those kids from the South who learnt Bharatanatyam." Ashok's belief in Nanji would result in the start of Ambience, one of the best-known creative hot shops in the 1990s, when a wave of westernised ideas and products swept over the Indian consumers, as a result of economic liberalisation in the country.

Kurien is quick to point out he started with very little. "At that point, I had only one account and no employees. I had been working in an agency called Rediffusion. Someone told

me there is a very good art director who works for Enterprise. I asked her to lunch. We had a nice lunch, and then she said, 'No, I'm not joining!' So I asked, 'Why did you come?' and she said, 'For the lunch.' Later she did some freelance work for me and I decided that was it. I went to Elsie and said, 'Listen, I've got Thums Up and I've got Garden, please come and join me.' Thirty years ago, having those two clients was like having a Levi's and a Coca-Cola as your two accounts, as big as you can get. 'I had a clear vision for the agency?' I said, I want to get Lakme, the Taj Group of Hotels and Vadilal. I want to create aspirational campaigns and she said, 'Well, that's exactly what I want too.' I added, 'Look, with your talent and mine, we can get accounts like this. Why do we want to go after too many clients? Let's only take on two big clients every year' and we were mad, mad enough to believe in this. And mad enough to pursue this because we thought that if we take only two clients, we can really spend time on each of them and understand the product. So that's how we started, and then we got all five. It gave us the confidence to think that we didn't have to go chasing business. For ten years, we didn't do a single pitch. We were the only agency that didn't. We used to tell people, 'You've seen our work and everyone can see the results in the market. You want to give us your business, bring it in.'

That was the most arrogant thing in the world to do, but it worked. We didn't do a pitch and people came in," he says with a proud smile. "In fact, I remember telling one client: 'Listen, we've taken our two clients for the year and Elsie's too busy, come back next year and we'll take you on from January,' and they waited. This was possible because she was so talented."

He is all praise for Nanji's aesthetic skills. "Elsie would make the words of the copy stand out. She would make those words the picture. She would use the font or typeface or lay it out where the words became the hero. Somehow, she knew when to do what. Sometimes, the words were just two words at the bottom right hand corner and the visual was the story. So she had this ability to do that, and again I'm talking about a time when we didn't have offices that looked like this," Kurien says, gesturing at his grand office, with artefacts like Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves that rest in a glass case in a corner of the spacious room. Kurien attributes their success to their complementary skill sets. "I came more from marketing, so I had a strategic viewpoint, whereas she had a creative vision. So you could say that I had to take the responsibility of business and strategy, and she had to take the responsibility of the creative. But it was more than that, we went beyond responsibility and took

ownership of our work, because when you own your work, you make sure that you're proud of it. We battled with each other every day, because if I was going to sell a campaign, I had to believe in it completely. Which means I would transfer the ownership from her to myself. There were times when after the selling the campaign, we felt like it would not work. We didn't want to waste the client's money. We would go back and tell them. Again, I don't think anybody else did this. I think that honesty paid off, because Elsie is a very honest person. I'm a little flexible, but she's like one of those totally honest people, who will stick by what they believe.

"Elsie also had the ability to spot talent and nurture relationships. At our agency, we were like one happy family and when it came to hiring, we weren't necessarily hiring MBAs and the bright boys," he says.

Elsie's ability to stick to her vision and attend to the details amounted to work that served as a source of inspiration for many. "We did a campaign for the Godrej cooking range. She didn't make the cooking range the hero, she made the food cooked the hero. She understood that the pride of a housewife was not the cooking range, but the food she cooked on it. There were no food stylists at that time, she art directed every little chilli and papad of that South

Indian meal on a banana leaf. She made it look amazing, and that's what she also did for Vadilal too. If you ask me, she was the first great food stylist of India," he says.

Ambience went on to become one of the top advertising agencies in India. Elsie Nanji and Ashok Kurien worked on some of the most iconic campaigns in India, including Thums Up's 'Taste the Thunder' and the controversial Tuff shoes ad.

This was a print campaign, a black-and-white photo in which Madhu Sapre and Milind Soman appear. Neither has a stitch on, except for, of course, the Tuff shoes on their feet. Today, the campaign would have garnered millions of likes on Instagram but when it was launched in 1995, it caused a furore.

"I chose them because they were so athletic. Milind Soman was a national-level swimmer and Madhu Sapre was a national-level discus thrower. They also happened to be dating at the time, so I said, 'Oh great! They'll look so good together in our ad.' It was a series of six ads we shot for this campaign, including pictures of Milind, posing on a cement pedestal and another one where Madhu is posing with a discus, as if she were a statue. But this was the one that caught everybody's fancy," says Elsie, who created the campaign. "What helped was that the client was a new

player in the market, and said, 'Let's go for it!'. The nude part was Prabuddha Dasgupta's idea. Some ads had them with their swimming costumes on. While shooting, he was so taken by the images, he kept saying, 'Oh their bodies look great!' and asked them if they would be willing to pose in the nude. Tuff shoes were happy to do the ad because they had nothing to lose. Multinational companies go through so much research before the ad, after the ad, very often an instinctive good idea gets killed, by the time it gets out. It's creativity by committee and that never works," she says emphatically.

The Tuff shoes campaign generated a controversy. The moral police came out in force, and Nanji told the *Economic Times* that it was "a difficult time" but when things like that happen and the courts get involved, it is best to "not hide. Face it head on, take the responsibility, so you can sort it out."[14] It was a difficult time. Elsie Nanji nearly got arrested but was spared as she was five months pregnant with her daughter, Aria. "I had to leave my home, spend some time at my in-laws' home so that the police couldn't find me. It took

[14] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/from-milind-somans-tuff-shoes-ad-to-kohlis-fastrack-one-ads-that-created-controversy/articleshow/62704102.cms Viewed on 2 Jan 2020 at 11:12 am

fourteen long years to realise how baseless the allegations were, finally the verdict was in our favour," she says.

Hossi Nanji, Elsie's husband, dismisses the whole thing as political nonsense. However, he feels it accelerated his wife's growth curve, "It gave her a different way of thinking. She knew now that there were people who are ready to put you in jail for their own gain. But it made her more confident as she became more aware of the outside world beyond advertising and marketing and she became aware of its thirst for money and power."

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Hossi Nanji thinks he met his future wife, Elsie Chandy, when she was at Sophia College, somewhere around 1977. "I was doing my law degree from Siddharth College of Law which I barely attended. She was at the Sophia Polytechnic. I also played in a rock band called People. At that time, there was a cyclone in Andhra Pradesh and we had a fund-raiser for cyclone relief. We planned the event for a whole day of music. We knew all the bands in Bombay because we were one of the bigger bands in Bombay. There were four or five bands playing that day. But the problem was that in between bands there would be a gap of nearly 45 minutes to an hour while they were changing equipment. The audience would get restless, they might disperse, and the ambience

would be ruined. We needed something happening on stage continuously to keep their attention, so we decided on folk singers to fill in, because they just need a chair and a guitar. We knew of one folk singer and needed another. I thought I would sing as well and we were looking for other people.

"Someone in Lintas told me, 'There's this girl who sang at IIT; she is very good. Why don't you ask her?' He got me the number and I went to Sophia College to meet her. I said, 'Can you play something for me?' After all, I had never heard of her before. She brought her guitar down and she played a song called 'Feelings'. She played it perfectly. I said, 'You are too good, why don't you play in this show?' She said 'No, no, I don't know many songs. This is the only song I can play perfectly.' I said, 'I'll teach you five or six new songs, simple ones.' She demurred, 'No, I'm a little nervous about playing in such a big show with so many bands', so I said, 'I'll play with you.' Eventually, she agreed. We met a few times to rehearse. I lived in Breach Candy. She used to come down the road from Sophia to my house and we rehearsed. I taught her the songs. She played in that show and that was that. We both went our ways. I didn't meet her for a year after that.

"But she and her friend Neena would walk down to Breach Candy every evening. Remember this was the time

when there was nothing else to do, no Internet, no television, no live streaming, nothing. I saw her walking and I met her. I had just broken up with my girlfriend after five-and-a-half years and she had just broken up with her boyfriend after one and a half years. She was walking and crying. I asked her what had happened and Neena told me about her break up. A few days later, I went to see her at her college. I met her every day around 3:30 or so when college got over. And that's how we got together."

Theirs is a creative jugalbandi that has lasted over the years. Hossi has worked with Elsie Nanji on a number of jingles. When Thums Up was being launched, the creative director of Ambience was clear: "I told Hossi I wanted a hard rock jingle. There had been no such jingle in the country at that point of time. It was mostly melodic, Indian ragas composed to sound more modern. The earlier jingle of Thums Up, 'Happy days are here again' by the music composer Vanraj Bhatia was much softer and melodious compared to 'Thums Up Taste the Thunder'."

Thums Up's 'Taste the Thunder', understood the aspirations of middle-class Indians and celebrated their everyday victories. "If you look at the ads, there was a boxer who went out and fought or a dancer who goes all out or just the youth, painting some cars. In a simple sense it was

about winning, but the core of the idea was that you tasted the thunderous applause and it's the taste of victory," says Ashok Kurien. "We hired a freelance writer and he wrote some lines, a few of them with the word thunder. And somewhere, we put it together and decided to use, 'Taste the Thunder'. Elsie visualised it, of course, as the creative head of the agency."

It is that kind of out-of-the-box thinking that won Elsie Nanji the Art Director of the Year award, three years running. And the Cannes Lion, one of the most prestigious awards in advertising. "Receiving an award is a great honour," she says, "but it's always a chance, you know, because it depends on what else is on the board that year. You never know whether your great idea will strike gold, because there is so much competition. But when you do receive it, it's a real feeling of elation because it's a very tough jury to impress."

Although Elsie Nanji has won the prestigious Cannes gold multiple times, there is one moment that is close to her heart. "This one time, I remember, a young guy, Manish Patel, who worked as my peon kept coming to me with ideas. I used to tell him that they weren't good enough and he should stick to his day job but he kept at it. He was in charge of my library, so he used to stay late and go through

all our advertising books at night. One day, he showed me something and I told him it was not bad, set him up with a proper art director to help him with the idea, and asked him to come back and show it to me, when it was in better shape. I used to attend quarterly meetings with the international board, so I promised him if it was good enough, I would carry it to the next review meeting and if board members liked it, I would promote him to the creative department. Sure enough, they did, and the very next year, he created a radio spot which got us a Cannes Gold Lion! He was sitting in my office and we got the news, it was a golden moment. He did very well as a creative person in advertising, the award was his ticket to success," she recalls. "That, for me, was my highest accolade. Our agency was full of creative people discussing things; it really feeds you, it fuels your imagination. And the books, reading them by night, looking at them, and learning and churning those ideas...that's the dedication you need to make a Cannes gold happen."

Nanji has also been on the jury for Cannes too. "I love juries and I've been on many. I've been twice in Cannes, twice in D&AD, twice in Clio, several times in Asia-Pacific, and many more. Each time I've met such remarkable people! I learn from the discussions as the jury members say what they like and dislike about the ads. Of course, you have to

read between the lines too. Because there are cultural differences between what the Asians like and what Westerners like. The sense of humour is different; the degree of finish is different. In Japan, work is finely finished with intricate care and detailing. Britishers are also great with typography as well as their wit and humour. People in Spain and Brazil come up with incredible work. You look forward to seeing something that makes you say, 'Wow! I wish I'd thought of that!' Often it's could be a new take on an old idea but that's what creativity is," she says.

If you're wondering about how to strike Cannes gold. Nanji says, "The agency has to write the brief well. As a jury member, there are pages of things you have to go through for every entry, everything needs be mentioned clearly, if something has a cultural context in a country which is alien to another, it must be mentioned."

Once the entry has everyone's approval, it makes it to the nomination. "Even to be nominated in Cannes is a big thing. Because your work is up in the exhibition, and all the delegates can see it. But judging can be hard work. "For Clio, I flew to Aspen and it took thirty-six hours and the whole time I was jet-lagged, stuck in a dark room with strangers, and a television screen playing ad after ad, ad after ad, ad after ad and you have to just click 'Yes', 'No', 'Yes', 'No' on an

electronic device,. We had to struggle to keep awake in a dark room for the whole week as there are thousands and thousands of ads!"

The Indian market is a small one, compared to others. "Even the people who win awards do not win for their mainstream advertisements. I don't think our mainstream advertising has really won any awards because it is often researched and created to relate to the lady from Matunga in the most basic form, and that's not likely to appeal to a foreign audience, or anybody in these juries. For them it's the big idea, how it's been crafted and executed. I do know though that many, many of the ads from India that have won awards are made specially to be entered for the awards. I found out somewhere in the nineties, from creative people who came from other agencies.

Sometimes there are divisions in advertising agencies, which only do award-winning advertisements. Their job is to create ideas for any of their existing clients which could stand a chance in an international jury, and then they would go to the client and request them as a favour to release it, with the least amount of money spent or visibility," she reveals.

Fake news, we had heard of.

Fake ads?

“You have the big idea you think can win an award. In order to get it executed, you go around asking people for favours, photographers, filmmakers. Your pitch is, ‘Considering you're doing my P&G ad or my Unilever ad, which has such a big budget, can you do this for me for free?’ Elsie says with a laugh. “That's how agencies get the fake ads done. We need to convince a big client to spend money to do a campaign, based on a risky idea. These are the ones that win big in Cannes. It’s high risk, and most often these ideas get shot down in research, no big client in India wants to take these risks."

As a result, it becomes difficult for advertising agencies in India to make award winners. However, the advertising industry is different in countries like Japan and America. The audiences are more homogenous and agencies do not have to worry about the big contrasts in income, lifestyle and language. "They take two years to develop and flesh out an idea for television, print, ‘360 degrees’ as they say. Clients in these countries spend huge amounts on perfecting the packaging, and using each medium to its best potential."

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What made Elsie’s work spectacular, according to Kurien, was her ability to foresee the future. “Elsie had this vision of what tomorrow should look like. We're talking about thirty

years ago, she had this amazing vision to sort of demonstrate what she believed things should look like tomorrow. If you look at the styling that she used at that time, people didn't dress like that or look like that or even live like that. But she believed in her vision, she believed they would!" he says.

But the shape of the advertising industry has changed drastically since the 1990s. "Things are different now, I've heard. It has become possible to fine-tune and funnel your advertising to reach a select target audience. In that case, I think getting an award can be easier, because if you're fine-tuning your work for that one homogeneous audience, the jury members who are from around the world, can understand your entry better," she says. "But a good idea is a good idea. It doesn't matter which language it is in, everybody gets it immediately," she adds. "Now you can target your audiences so clearly, thanks to the reach of digital media. Everybody knows where you were, which airport you're checking into at what time and where you'll go next. This knowledge is invaluable to marketers and advertising people.

"The same could hold for interior design today, if I know my client well, it is easier for me to create the space. It is always an interactive process because you need to

understand your audience, in order to create something for them," she says.

The advertising industry is dynamic and ever-changing and with that, comes immense pressure. "People in advertising agencies are always trying to catch hold of creative people. They come around asking us if we're free, because suddenly, the client has come up with something for the next day. And everybody is under so much pressure all the time! Most of the work has to be delivered the next day. We hardly get time in advertising to perfect our skill and craft. Every brand wanted a new campaign every year, a new film to refresh the audience. We had to constantly keep changing and fine tuning strategies based. On market feedback and sales. Baselines would change, so many things would change," she says.

But how do you start the process? "First, the brief from the client should be concise and clear. Ashok was great on that front. He would distil what they wanted from them. Then, it's about how you look at the brief, interpret it in a unique way and finally, getting the client to accept it."

For an advertising person used to high pressure in all seasons, interior designing was a welcome change. "As an interior designer, you're doing long term work. For four to five years, the client is not likely to change their house. So

you have time to think through the details and you can really fine-tune your craft. It's not so much about ideas as it is about execution," she says.

Elsie Nanji was conflicted when Ambience was sold to the French company Publicis Group. "Initially, I may have been a little sad about it but towards the end I honestly was very relieved. It was a burden to look after 300 people. What I really loved, art direction, would take a backseat in handling all of this. Moreover, there was a Hinglish culture taking over the industry. Slapstick comedy had started to become an integral part of almost all ads. I knew I could not fit into this changing equation."

Another thing Elsie was visibly happy about was leaving behind Bollywood tantrums on ad sets. She was tired of unreasonable demands, star tantrums and over-inflated egos. She shared an incident of an ad shoot where she was working alongside Amitabh Bachchan.

"He was certainly not comfortable taking instructions from me. It was unusual to find a female creative director /agency owner. He would refer to me as 'Auntyji' or 'Madamji' on the sets. He knew I was from the South and would deliberately ask me how to deliver his Hindi dialogues. Once, we were shooting a commercial for a pain relief spray and I had to brief him on his role, (as a Godman,

of course) prescribing the pain relief balm. I described the amazing shots we had taken with a few cricketers the previous day expecting him to be happy to take part in a well-made TVC but he got offended and started walking off the set, saying 'Since these great shots had already been taken, why do you need me?' I had to beg him to come back on set, saying 'Come on, let's all just finish our jobs and leave. I'm sure you too have better things to do. The faster we finish this, the faster we can all get away.' Reluctantly he agreed, and offered to complete the shots on his own! I pretended to leave, but actually hid behind the monitors closely observing his performance. He asked if I had left and then promptly asked them to call me back on set, knowing full well that he was just teasing me. These were the crazy mind games we played. He would always shout out from across the set (jokingly of course) "Madamji ko pasand aaya?"

Elsie was very happy to leave advertising, she says. "I was so tired of too much work, of fighting so many battles, mostly other people's battles. I worked with brilliant people but many of them couldn't express themselves, present their ideas. I had to do all that. In many cases, I had to fight for their brilliant ideas. That's what a creative director should

do ideally. You should never be threatened by your juniors though many creative directors are."

While she may have moved on to interior designing, Elsie is still in touch with the people who worked for her previously. "They worked for me for eighteen years or more. Many of them say that they too will be happy to dip into this world of space design. If I get a project and I feel a particular creative person has a good eye for something, I involve them in it. Advertising people are always creating imaginary things. To bring the imaginary work into interiors is always great fun. It's not traditional interior designing. It's a little bit different. And it is a great break from advertising, where everything is wanted overnight."

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Elsie dismisses compliments with an easy nonchalance. But a closer look at her habits will make you realise that it is her unwavering commitment to perfection that has brought her this success. Recently, Elsie decided to run Marathons. Every other morning, she wakes up at 5.15 am and runs for up to 10 km, without fail.

"Running came into my life now, when I was fifty, right after I sold my company. After that, I realized I had a lot of time, despite starting up a design wing for Publicis in India because advertising was consuming all of my time. One day,

my sister (who is six years older than me) announced 'I am going to run a Marathon.' I thought, if she can run, then I must also run. I joined Savio's running group and have been at it regularly ever since,"she says.

Once again, it was discipline that did it. Savio D'Souza explains the secret: "What I admire about her the most is her commitment and her dedication. So often we say we don't have time. But even with her busy schedule, she makes time for everything. Elsie is basically a fitness freak. She runs, then the next day she swims and then she goes to the gym and exercises. She will get up in the morning, do her exercises first then go to her meetings, for the whole day, she is on her feet, but the next day again in the morning, she is back on the track. We run together, so I pace her. At her age, with the amount of work that she has, to still find time for running; hats off to her!" he says.

Interior designing came easily to Elsie after a successful career as an art director. "See, I was always doing set design anyway, for whatever photo shoot, or TV Commercial that I made. Whatever I imagined had to look a certain way. If we were shooting in a garden, then it had to look how we imagined it, with detailed moodboards. Let's say we were shooting with Aishwarya Rai, along with Farokh Chothia the photographer, we imagined how she would look against a

fluid backdrop in the Garden Sari campaign. So I just continued doing that, but under my name," Elsie says with a laugh. "And people actually pay me for it! I give them recommendations of designers, of people whom we can collaborate with and I supervise some of the teams, to make sure that the whole story is in place."

Elsie Nanji believes a look for any space cannot be assembled without a context, without a story. The space has to tell a story that brings out the personality of its owner. "I ask myself, 'Are there stories which you can tell about anything that you're doing? Is there a story to this or is it just a decoration? Is there some thought to it or is that just a piece of beautiful design?' I think from the beginning, there has been a story to whatever I do. Whether it was Dona Sylvia Beach resort, designed by Charles Correa or Lakme, there was always a story to every campaign. So even when I'm doing interior design today, I look at the house and think, 'What is the story behind this? Why is it different from other houses?' When you go to the World Tower Building in Parel, designed by Giorgio Armani, every apartment looks the same; they look like hotel suites. It does not favour individual character, and therefore there is no personal story. "

This attitude to the story influences her current career as an interior designer. Elsie's rendezvous with interior designing happened through her architect Nozer Wadia, who helped her and her husband Hossi design their house in Kashid, near Alibaug. "He is a fantastic architect. When we were designing our house in Kashid, I told him exactly what I wanted. I gave him plenty of references from our holidays in Mykonos. The home turned out so well, it became a model for Olive," she says, referring to Olive Bar in Bandra, a fine-dining restaurant in Mumbai, where Nozer asked her to help with the look, inspired by their home in Kashid. "That restaurant became a big success."

After a few years, Nozer came to Elsie with Four Season's Aer Bar, which marked the start of Elsie's career as an interior designer. "He said that he didn't want to do it, because it was too small a job for him. He told the client he would get somebody else to do it and asked me if I was up for doing a bar in Four Seasons. At that time, Four Seasons was not yet well known. 'Oh what fun! Let's do a bar in an open air rooftop!' Nozer negotiated my fee because I didn't know any better. "It was only a terrace, if you see the original photographs of Aer Bar, you'll be shocked to see how it looked, a balcony on the top of this building. Nobody came to that Four Seasons, because it was thought to be

located in a bad area. Once Aer Bar was launched, they were soon rated as one of the world's best rooftop bars by *Conde Nast Traveller* and many more. The client became best friends with me; they felt I had the Midas touch! A few years later, Nozer asked me to help him with the Mahindra Gateway Building," she says. That was the foundation of a long term relationship with Anand and Anuradha Mahindra, the restoration of the building, chiselling at every detail in the building, their home upstairs, their home in Goolestan, the directors' home in New Delhi and presently the museum and a public park project in Anand's Mahindra's father's name.

Harsh Goenka, the current chairman of RPG Enterprises, is one of Elsie's biggest clients. In an interview over the phone, Goenka described his encounter with Nanji as 'strange'. He had liked Nanji's work and wanted her to do the interiors of his office in Mumbai. "It was a strange meeting. Other architects or interior decorators come to you but in this case, I went to her office. I wanted to see where she does her work. I wanted to get to know her personality and whether our thoughts and tastes match or not," he said. Since then it has been a 'wonderful journey' for Goenka and Nanji. The designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee had a big role to play in their coming together. An art enthusiast, Mr. Goenka

wanted maximalist styles and designs to adorn the dining hall of his office. "I decided to have an Indian maximalist look in the dining hall of my office, particularly because there are a lot of foreigners coming in. I asked Sabyasachi Mukherjee to do the space. He came up with a lot of ideas after his first visit but it all went downhill after that; it took me months to chase him, he was rarely in Bombay. Like many creative people, he wouldn't reply to my calls on time. But in a corporate environment, one needs proper planning and delivery. When three months passed and nothing had been done, I reached out to Elsie."

However the beginning was a little rocky. "I had not thought particularly of the colours of the walls. I thought of pastel or white or cream. And she wanted black! Black walls! Radical idea, I thought."

In Elsie's telling of it, the shade was 'charcoal grey'.

"My advertising background has helped me a lot in terms of how to understand what the client wants. It has taught me to read between the lines. When I first met Harsh Goenka, I was heading Red Lion, a graphic design company. He came to my office and we tried to do a brochure but that did not work out. Later on, he told me that he wanted to do a lunch room in his office to look like Sabyasachi's showroom in Kala Ghoda. I told him that I could make it look like that

but Sabyasachi's story is about old Calcutta, with the vintage clocks, the old photographs that bring out the heritage embroidery and vintage style of his garments. I told him that I could certainly make up his story, because that's what we do in advertising; we invent a history, a philosophy and a cultural ambience for each product. But that wouldn't be his story. I'd heard he had a great collection of art, so I tentatively asked him if we could use smaller art pieces He Immediately thought of his large collection of one-by-one foot self-portraits. I suggested using those and other sculptures to cover up the walls completely, like at Sabyasachi's. Three walls of the room was glass so when you stepped outside and looked at it from the terrace, it looked like a glass jewel box, with two walls covered with some of the most precious artwork. So I said, 'That's your story, you have the most precious works of art in a place used. In a maximalist manner, like a glass jewel box filled with jewels.' He gave me a free hand to do it the way I wanted to. At first, he was doubtful about using charcoal grey on the wall. He preferred white which he used everywhere, 'Your art collection will stand out much more against charcoal grey,' I said. Goenka saw the possibilities and the wall went black.

“The dining hall had a beautiful terrace which wasn't being used. I paved the terrace, made sit-out areas, the

dining room had glass on three sides. That brought the black wall into focus, when viewed from the terrace. Those paintings with their jewel tones, the glass bringing in the light… “Nanji’s eyes gleam as she tells us of her conception. “Today, it's his favourite room. After that, he told me to do every floor of his various offices, one after another. After that, it was his own home, his son and daughter's house and their farm houses and so on.”

Goenka appreciates the combination of creativity and calm. “She says what she feels but she finds a good way to say it. I have seen many creative people who are arrogant. I have never seen Elsie lose her cool. She is willing to listen to contrarian views. At times, I would differ from her opinion or choices but we would eventually find common ground.”

Goenka selects the art and Nanji works around the aesthetics of art. “It’s a symbiotic relationship; Elsie has learned a lot about art from Harsh,” says Hossi Nanji. “In a way, this has helped her with design as well because interior design is like conceptualising a three-dimensional art work in which the client must live.”

Nanji says research has always been an indispensable part of her professional life. “Research is very important. Especially when you are doing collaborative work, be it a photographer you are working with on a shoot or a client. I

always keep updating myself with what has been done and what is being done in my field. I am learning all the time. I don't want to sound like a fool when I brief my photographer or my music director," she says. Goenka points to how Nanji goes to “various art fairs in Milan, Paris or the US, keeping herself updated with the trends. Her style is very contemporary and she blends design with art really well. All of her skills helped turn my office into an art museum.”

Apart from designing spaces for the Goenkas, Nanji also helps Goenka design New Year gifts for his clients. “Every year people ask me who designed the corporate gift or the card. I remember once I told her that I wanted to use a particular kind of paper as my letter paper. She asked me to leave it to her and within five days I had five options, each better than the one I wanted."

For Goenka, Nanji is a part of his family now. Today Elsie designs for Harsh's son, Anant Goenka and daughter Vasundhara Patni, as well. Goenka feels that Nanji's qualities and virtues are the reason behind the long lasting relationship. "We always found her disposition very pleasant. She has been working with the entire family for some years now and we’ve never had one design conflict. We have a lot of trust in her aesthetic sense,”Goenka says.

"Everybody is completely different, as I can see. Mahindra is different from Goenka who is different from the other big industrialists. Nita Ambani asked me to work on the Reliance IMG office, sport and fashion was the theme in this office at Nariman Point. I attempted to build a story for her office. I told her that her cabin should look like Anna Wintour's in New York. I told her that her room should be full of big portraits of sports stars, their portraits with their signatures should be blown up on the wall, and big vases with flowers should be placed. Interesting art and artefacts were to be placed in her cabin, for which she asked me to come to her home, Antilia, and curate pieces for her office. She was happy with the outcome as was the rest of the employees in IMG Reliance.

As an interior designer, Nanji makes sure that her selections represent the best of what the current time has to offer. "I go to these Italian fairs to select pieces of furniture and lighting. I see what's going on in the market and learn about design. I bring back references and memories in photographs and leaflets. People are always happy to be up to date. The world is changing so fast. A digital age is coming, you know, and I am try to be up to date with what's available online. People shop for things online now, nobody goes to stores or malls anymore. I browse the things that

make me happy, I have to calm down, though," she says with a laugh. "There's a bit too much now that makes me happy"

When asked about what she likes the most about interior designing, Elsie says, "I love it when projects get done. Because it is such a long and painful process. You have to go to sites regularly (I wear a mask to protect myself from the fumes when marble is cut.) But once it comes to an end and you get to see your vision materialise, there is a sense of great elation. Sometimes, it looks better than you imagined it and that is really satisfying, I love that. All those thoughts from over so many months have come together."

*

Kainaz Messman Harchandrai, the founder and chef of the famous patisserie chain, Theobroma, remembers meeting Elsie on the jogging track. Messman told Nanji about her struggles with opening a store. "I told her I was finding it very difficult to find packaging in India. I don't know who to go to because packaging is so expensive and being a small business we couldn't afford it."

Elsie was listening intently, Kainaz remembers, and said simply, "I understand. You can come to me." She added, "I'm a designer I can help you with the packaging."

It was only when Kainaz went home and Googled Elsie's name that she realized Elsie was one of India's top

designers. “It completely blew my mind! She was so humble and casual.'' When Messman and her mother (who was with her in the business) went to Nanji’s office for a meeting, she had already done mock-ups and had created new packaging ideas.

“We had never seen anything like that in India at that point of time. But then we wondered how we were going to pay for such expertise.” Nanji was casual about payment. “That's not a problem. When you grow big and you can afford it, then pay me. For around two years she did our packaging completely free of cost.

“What she did was a Colaba Causeway-meets-Parisian Patisserie look because we are situated in an old, heritage building, the Cusrow Baug. That is why there are crows and a chic colony vibe. She gave the brand life. The soul, the essence of the brand has been brought out by Elsie, not by us. It is her language in which we speak to our consumers. No one in India can think like her. People are still using the designs and concepts that she created or conceived thirty years ago.”

The result is another set of jewel boxes. “Many people come and tell me that they never have the heart to throw away the packaging but use it to store pieces of jewellery.”

Again when Messman asked Nanji to redo her store, Elsie did it for free. “The patisserie was a very dull and boring place like an old gentlemen’s club. Elsie re-imagined it. She took bits of my personality, the soul of the product and the cultures surrounding it and she mixed them to give me the iconic branding you see now in our stores and on our boxes.”

Little wonder then that a strong bond grew up between these two entrepreneurial women. “She is someone I completely and absolutely admire. I think she's just such a great person,” says Messman. “She's really just the most talented person I've ever seen. What makes her even more valuable is that she's also one very nice person. She's genuinely down to earth and totally unaware of what an impact she has had on so many. She is like a role model to me. She's someone I always aspire to be like. She's really amazing.”

Elsie has always been around for Kainaz especially during her maternity period. “When I was a new mum and I was finding it very difficult to manage work along with home. She was there to chat, give advice and help.”

“Working women are often made to feel guilty for not giving up their jobs to raise the children, after they become mothers,” says Elsie Nanji. "Kids grow up realising what

their mother is doing and what the father is doing, staying at home and monitoring your children the whole time is surely doing something for them, but kids respect the way you're living your life too."

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Hossi and Elsie thought of themselves as the Bohemian couple who put their ambitions before their family. They had decided never to have children but fate proved otherwise. They had a son Yohaan in 1993 after ten years of marriage, when they were at the peak of their careers.

"We travelled a lot as my job demanded it. Not having children allowed us to do many things which would've been difficult otherwise. By the time Yohaan arrived, she was 36 and I was 38, we were able to make more money and live a comfortable lifestyle. We had two maids for our first child, they came with us everywhere, even abroad. Around the time Elsie started working with Ambience, everything completely changed in our lives, things which were difficult to achieve because of lack of money were now possible. So it was very different than those couples who marry at twenty-four and have children at twenty-six."

In the initial years while Elsie was busy working late night shifts and putting twenty hours of her day to earn the

money to pay for the house that they bought together, Hossi stood by her and let her take the lead.

“If your salary is two thousand rupees and a house costs twenty lakh rupees it’s impossible to dream of buying a house. She used to do a lot of freelance work, she worked during the day and in the evening to make enough money to be able to buy a house. For months on end, she used to regularly stay up late working till two or three at night to complete her side projects along with the job that she had.”

When the Nanji children came along, she had to devise new strategies. Nanji says, "I dragged my children everywhere I went. They hid under the table in my board meetings. They were in the sea with me and the photographer, shooting for the ads. Sometimes the kids stood in for models who didn’t perform. I know I wasn't the regular mum who came home at 3 o'clock and took her kids to the park. That I couldn't do, my maids used to do that. But whenever I could, I would take them to my shoots including my out-of-town shoots that was the only way possible for me to send time with them. I feel women sometimes obsess over their family, and once the children go away they have nothing. Every woman has to have a life of her own, she needs to have some sort of individuality."

On a lighter note she adds, “Thankfully my kids turned out to be fine and they never really blamed me for not being there. But I always made a point to be with my kids every. Weekends, going to our Kashid home; that was sacrosanct."

Her daughter Aria Nanji, who is a singer and studio engineer, remembers weekends there with her parents. Their influence permeates her life.

“I started singing because my mom used to sing with my dad when he was in a band,” she says. “I suspect I am creative in my work and career choices because of her. She is quite a big deal in the ad world. A lot of people know her. My studio gets a lot of ad film music work. I got a leg up on that. If I need advice whether it’s how much to charge or creative ideas for lyrics or sound, I can always turn to her.”

Aria feels Elsie Nanji has “an aesthetic that no one else has in this country. Her decisions may be out of the box, but they are the best thing to do. If she has an idea for something you just have to trust it because in the end it is generally right.”

As for a lesson learned, Aria Nanji says: “My mum taught me to be kind to everyone.”

Krishna Mehta
Photo credit: Sukanya Deb

Chapter 4

Krishna Mehta and the reworking of the Indian man's silhouette

Prabhat Nambiar, Sukanya Deb,
Sakshi Sharma, Anuradha Nagar

"Krishna Mehta's label is known for its meticulous attention to detail. The fashion designer adds embellishments, buttons, stitches, and motifs to her stunning creations, stating that a 30 percent dividend of design must include the touch of a hand." -- architecturaldigest.in, August 2017

"I always wore clothes that were in fashion from the time I was born," says Krishna Mehta who is famous as a fashion designer, but much prefers the term textile designer and is known for the classic simplicity of the menswear she designs. "It was my elder sister, Jyoti, who actually got me interested in clothes. She would wear everything she saw on the screen; and by that, I mean Hindi films. And she made sure that I was suitably kitted out as well. I must have been only about six or seven years old but she put a bouffant on my head for an aunt's wedding. I was the little girl with the most hair! But then everybody was very stylish. That was the way I was brought up. We did not have access to fashion magazines like *Vogue* or anything, but we always wore the best of what was available here."

Mehta's memory for clothes is phenomenal. She says she can remember the colours she wore, the time when slacks came into fashion and a beautiful Chantilly dress with a cape that she wore as a little girl.

Clothes could be a suitable hobby for a young woman of her station. But as a job? Her father, Mathuradas Majithia, a businessman whose interests include construction, pharmaceuticals and other businesses, had other ideas for his children.

"My father was very clear. 'You can't be a fashion designer,' he would say, 'It's not a career, that kind of thing.'"

But the young Krishna Majithia was not to be turned away. "I bargained with him. 'Okay, Papa,' I said, 'I will do that if you let me do this.' I kept studying, putting in eighteen hours a day, twenty hours a day, non-stop. I put in a lot of work, this was in about 1978 and I completed my graduation in 1981."

With the deal made, Krishna simultaneously pursued her studies in Chartered Accountancy while studying at Sydenham College, for her bachelor's degree in commerce. When she was done, she followed her passion for designing at the Sophia B K Somani Polytechnic. I have never worked harder, my eyes couldn't shut until they had clocked 18 hours…the adrenalin rush was too high for me to miss sleep!" she says.

"With my graduation behind me I had just one year before I got married. I was already engaged then. I thought, 'Ha! Let me learn something more!' I had already trained

myself in the nuances of sewing, embroidery, knitting, crochet and other crafts. So I applied for a one-year post-graduation homemaker course in Nirmala Niketan College

"Here, I relearned pretty much everything, from painting, ikebana, cooking, sewing and embroidery but what I enjoyed the most during my education was the learning I got with my diploma in the studies of the mentally and physically challenged. Coming from a conservative Gujarati family, I didn't know if I would be able to work after marriage. I was very keen on doing something where I would be able to apply all that I had been learning thus far. I actually considered social service as my full-time profession. I felt if I would not be able to pursue my own business, at least social service would be acceptable to my family.

"My training at Sophia was all about stitching basics under the keen eyes of dear Miss Tantra and Miss Godiwala. Nothing fancy like the fashion designing you see today. But I loved doing it but I didn't know at that time that I would pick this up as a profession. For instance, my younger sister, Sunayna, would rush to me if she ever broke a button. I would help her out happily. At home, my mother had a sewing machine, and my sister, Jyoti and I would always gladly help her. In this way, I never lost touch with fabric.

"On the other hand, my father was instrumental in exposing us to fine things like art, paintings, classical music etc. On Sundays, Papa used to take us to Jehangir Art Gallery to look at new exhibits, or to the museums to look at the great art and sculpture of the past. All this experience and information that I was exposed to from childhood over the years, I must have soaked in, like a sponge. It has become my greatest asset, and probably made me what I am today."

Krishna Mehta still makes it a point to visit art galleries as often as she can; she finds them a great source of inspiration. "While working, I also did a course at the Weavers' Service Centre, where I learnt about the nuances of dyeing and block printing besides weaving fabrics," she says. The Weavers' Service Centre was a government initiative to bring artists to the weavers so that a collaborative endeavour could be created and both sides could learn from each other. "I didn't realise these seemingly simple weaves and processes can be so complicated! But again it depends on your skills and passion to see them through, to create something new each time! These courses really helped me form a strong base be it in fabrics, dyeing and printing techniques, stitching, surface ornamentation, most handicrafts in fact! I cherish all this immensely. This is what gives me the incentive and courage

to rise to every challenge that comes my way, or create challenges that don't come way, just because I wish to rise! My favourite phrase is 'Let's try it'.

"I distinctly remember that thirty years ago, I wished to do garments with bandhej which was not all over but placed on tunics in a particular pattern. Nilam, an intern of mine, suggested I meet a young man called Shailendraji in Jaipur. I picked myself up and landed in Jaipur. Shailendraji was very enterprising, with a great eye for colour combinations, and he had a great spirit. Till date, I have never heard him say, 'Can't do it'. We got along superbly, pushing ourselves collectively, working with paper patterns and bandhej workers. Fortunately I always found like-minded people who were willing to take that extra step whether it was my printers, dyers, embroiderers, all those who were involved. In a way, we have been like pioneers, scientists, pushing ourselves and each other beyond our boundaries. Because you can't do things which are different if you are doing what has already been done.

"I have always liked to take on challenges. Whether fortunately or unfortunately, money was never the point. As long as I made enough money to pay my karigars (artisans), I was happy. To be very rich, you need to enjoy the money for its own sake. As long as I get to do what I love, nothing

else matters. Or it's the passion that matters. It has been 38 years of doing what I have been doing, but I still wake up with a bounce in my step; I still love to get to work.

"I have just acquired a whole lot of blocks from someone who was closing down a unit, so I'm repairing and mending those blocks. I'm longing to work with them now. I wait for tomorrow when I get back to my tables. It's these small things which are special and they keep me going."

After her marriage, Krishna joined her husband Nilesh Mehta in the family business of garment exports. She got her big break at the very beginning. In 1982, she started to work with some of the best Swedish brands like Marc O'Polo, Indiska and Flash.

"As a designer, I already knew the nuances of textiles and related processes. This was a vacuum the international designers found in India and I was the right fit for the job. So I ended up working very closely with the designers themselves and learned from them. I would mix yarn and make weaves based on the trends that I had absorbed from visiting textile and trend forecasting fairs like Première Vision. I would note down the textiles and special weaves I saw there in my weaving jargon. Then I would fly from Paris to Coimbatore and have the fabrics woven there

and I would use my intuition to mix different yarns to make interesting weaves,

"I must have been about 24 or 25 years old when I got an exciting proposition from Leslie Fay, an American fashion company: an all-expenses paid trip to Sri Lanka! They sent me there to understand how garment production works and to study ways to make it more efficient. So I had to calculate the timings for different processes and the placement of the people and machines to generate optimum output. This trip to Sri Lanka's garment manufacturing centres was pivotal to my career. Before I was just looking at the textiles. Now, I started looking at the entire production and this completed the whole cycle. I worked like this for about five more years in the garment exports sector."

"Destiny had something else in store for me! I lost my son. I went into depression and stopped working. My friends truly helped me to come out of the dark space. Naseem Khan introduced me to Tarun Tahiliani who had recently opened Ensemble. And my journey began, with a small line of the simple Madras checks, block-printed, handmade, textured men's shirts. Those were the days of polyester shirts being "the" fashionable thing to wear, and here I come, with my collection of 100 percent cotton shirts. They sold out quickly and I said, 'Wow, okay fine, let's do some more.'

Things really took off from there. I remember one of the first fashion shows that we had aboard the luxury cruise liner *Queen Elizabeth II*, I went with my sold out every shirt, every last piece on that cruise."

At that point in time, Krishna Mehta was designing clothes under the label Vastra. "But influenced by the wave of designers selling under labels with their names, I changed too and the label 'Krishna Mehta' was born. We designers were very close and helped each other. We enjoyed being together, working together, trying new things. I fondly remember dearest Rohit Khosla, the brilliant designer, he influenced me in more ways than it is possible for me to recount."

The classic simplicity of the design that Mehta was offering, combined with the exquisite detailing brought the buyers in. "I think that this suited my aesthetic. I became the first most popular menswear designer in the country. I'm not a person who likes a lot of 'froo-froo'. I preferred working on menswear, which can be simple but also incorporate a lot of details, and when I did, the sales were brilliant! I was selling men's kurtas like crazy. Encouraged by this, I then expanded to doing everything pertaining to menswear. I realised that I relate with menswear the best. Even though I eventually expanded to cover womenswear a few years down the line, it was actually just an extension of the menswear."

Mehta believes that her aesthetic was refined in the crucible of the workplace. “While working in the factory, I initially used to wear kurtas but found that dupattas were an outright inconvenience. Working in a factory is not at all like a desk job. You have to do a lot of running around all over the place between the different departments and then you’re meeting clients! Dupattas, or for that matter, wearing anything fancy, is simply impractical. Keeping working professionals in mind, I started making straighter garments for women, I did away with the salwar and the churidars and made trousers which looked smarter with tunics. These tunics also had a band collar, making them a feminine take on the male kurta. This was for the woman who desired to wear something Indian which was not a sari. A Nehru jacket for women. This was how I started my ensemble.”

For Krishna, her first love will always be textiles. In her own words, she “is not a fashion designer, but a textile designer. I love textiles! I call myself a textile designer because I think fashion is frivolous. As I like to put it, fashion can go out of fashion. But if you’ve got style, you can never go out of fashion.”

She explains further: “Something that is relevant is called fashion, to stay relevant and up-to-date with the changing scenario. You need to keep changing the formulas to adjust to the changing times. I suppose there is something that I must be

doing right for the past 38 years that has kept me going! I will keep doing what I love to do, till the day I have this bounce in my step each morning. The day it's missing, I'll hang up my boots and call it a day!"

And so it's always been back to basics for her. "For instance, if you wish to prepare a dish, what do you need? You'll require great ingredients. If not, it will never turn out right. A chef will travel miles to get the perfect ingredients to get the perfect dish. The same logic applies to me, my profession or any other profession for that matter. I still create and weave my own textiles, in Benaras, Bhagalpur, Bengal, Manipur, Maheshwar. Style and elegance are what comes first to me and for that, you have to get to the core which the warp and weft and related nuances of the fine fabric. That is why I call myself a textile designer because fashion is only a by-product. Also, I don't like to make garments that may go out of fashion. I like to dive into the archives of our traditions to make garments that my clientele can relate to. That's what my work is all about: no fuss, elegant, timeless."

What makes Krishna Mehta's work so special is the reliance on the clean lines and the sensuousness of the fabric enhanced by the decorativeness of embroidery. Maybe I'm from old times where we do everything from scratch and that's what I learned, that's what I love and printing is very close to me so

you buy good fabric and you print on it or you dye. I love different dyes. We are constantly exploring new ways of doing things. New weaves, new textiles, the world of readymade clothes has no attraction for me.

Mehta feels she has an advantage. “Because I started early, I have my systems in place. My weavers know me and I know my weavers. We have a rapport. Today, it's not easy, it's not rocket science either.”

So would she teach if she were asked? “Always! “she says “But the students must want to learn. The thirst for learning in them then fuels the enthusiasm to teach. But due to lack of time, I can only take occasional special classes. Teaching students taking them to another level, being able to infuse the hunger to do more research etc., and seeing student’s desire to excel is the best reward. In college you do one or two fashion shows or exhibitions and sell a couple of clothes. Done and dusted. No! You have to rise and shine. Your time at college may last about three or four years but your career span will go on for forty to fifty years. The base you form during your college years is what will help you succeed. So make the most of school and college years. If you’re taught one way of doing something, think of ten other ways of doing it because you have the lab, the colours and everything ready for you. The moment you step into the real world, you’ll have nothing.”

Despite Krishna's impatience with the next generation's lack of innovation that led her to stick with part-time teaching, she has been a great influence to young designers. A testament to this would be Rachana Ved, now a designer in her own right, who trained under and worked with Mehta.

"I met Krishna for the first time when I was doing my apparel manufacturing design course at Premlila Vithaldas Polytechnic, SNDT Women's University. She was a guest faculty there. She used to mentor the ladies from the batch and inspire them. I remember being impressed by the way she used to present and conduct herself. That's when I decided that I want to work with her. I went up to her and got her visiting card, just in case, for any future reference or correspondence or any time I would need help. After my internship was over, I told her, 'I want to join you,' and sent my resume. She took me under her wing. This was my first-ever project with Krishna. The two years that I worked with her were amazing. I focused on pret lines while she handled the bridal attire. I soon found that I was a natural hand at pret lines, all thanks to the exposure and confidence that Krishna instilled in me. There's a lot of things that I learned from her. She knew how to give a designer time and space to settle down. As creativity is paramount in this field, she is very open to the idea of someone going a little apart from her way of thinking. So she would always give

someone a lot of creative space that they would like to explore and trust in their aesthetic senses. It was very nice that she was open to new ideas. She would never insist on her own ideas; she would merely guide and mentor us."

There is another side to Krishna Mehta at which she hinted when she made her first choice at an internship. "During the one year of the homemaker course in 1981, we had to give exams and also learn about the different kinds of handicaps and how you can work with each of them. I decided to get into social service because I knew my family would allow me to do that. I remember my mentor telling me, 'Krishna, you're not yet mentally prepared for this. You'll need to move with them, encourage them and you can't feel sad. Don't pursue this.' However, the work I did there moved me so much and after finishing the course, I did an internship first with the Fellowship of the Physically Handicapped in Worli and then there was a school for the deaf and dumb on Nepean Sea Road, the name of which I can't remember, so that's where I went and worked with these children. Since then, I wanted to do something for the underprivileged. So once my children went to university, I had more time on hand. I opened a block-printing unit in Palanpur, which is my husband's hometown. The unit would only employ those with special needs; there were the visually impaired, the hearing impaired, the neuro-

divergent. So, we would teach them and give them work and take their work everywhere and give them the money."

For many years, Krishna Mehta has worked with SPJ Sadhana School, a school for children with special needs. Tejal Kothari is a coordinator with the school. "One day, I had this idea that maybe my relative, Krishna Mehta, could come to the school and work with our students. When I put it to her, she wasn't very sure what she could do. She came with the mind-set of saying no, but then she met the children and I've always found that when people meet our children, their noes turn into yeses. She guided the teachers to help the children to use colour schemes and designs on the fabric she provided."

Krishna Mehta says: "It was a great joy working with the differently abled. I was invited to teach at Sadhana School by a member of my community. She said that she intended me to start a fashion show exclusively incorporating the works by these kids. I had my misgivings about this idea but then I was like, 'Let me give it a shot.' I was pleased with the way the school functions; the teachers and volunteers giving their heart and soul to the children and realising their potential. When we started giving fabrics and paints to the kids, I was spellbound by their work! They stand in front of me and their hands are shivering and shaking. I give them a sponge soaked in colour and when they lay these sponges on the fabric, stunning

patterns emerge. It was definitely one of the best fashion shows of my life; every piece was sold, even when I didn't have anything left to sell, there was huge demand for it, not just locally, but internationally! Such a proud moment. I didn't proclaim that the garments made by the differently abled as I didn't want to make it my USP [Unique Selling Proposition]. I wanted the people to buy them just for how beautiful they are. But they are just students; I cannot give them mainstream work. When they have acquired some level of skill, they can find work, even a lifetime job, at sheltered workshops like Om Creations. This gives them a sense of purpose, and a feeling of agency and of independence.

"So you can see that a lot can get done by the differently abled. All you need to do is figure it out. You go to the slums, you can get the women to work because you know they'll do the stitching. I feel that everybody can do something; we need to see how to provide them with that purpose. But these kids then add their own inputs and the results are magical. What they can do is something you can't even imagine, the way they can mix colours, they have given me so many different kinds of prints and dyes. This experience with the Sadhana School kids made me realise that there is no 'cannot', but just a 'can do'.

"It is very easy to get carried away by name and fame but once you have given the love and experience that I gave to

these kids, the feeling of richness and wholesomeness you get is really special."

Dr Jignasa Shah, Head of the Department of Dress Designing and Garment Manufacturing (DDGM), Sophia Polytechnic, remembers that show at Sadhana School: "The clothes were fabulous because Krishna Mehta has a knack of dealing with everyone. She knows how to bring out the best in people, whether it's a *kaarigar* or a student who is differently abled. The show itself was conceived beautifully. I was talking to the Principal of the Sadhana School and I was told that it was all her idea. Most fashion shows have loud Western music but she had classical music with tabla players and a classical dancer. It was truly different, both from inside and out."

Dr Shah had heard of Mehta but did not know that she had studied at the Polytechnic when the course was a tailoring one. It was at one of the Lakme Fashion Weeks that Krishna Mehta came up and introduced herself. "She is always available if we call her as a jury member or a guest faculty, in fact the idea of her coming here and teaching the students also came from her. I thought she was such a big name, she has her own label, she's tied up with such huge brands, how will she have the time? I thought she would be too busy but it has been such a pleasure for all of us that she comes and teaches and interacts with the

students. It's not a regular thing, that would be expecting too much, but whenever we call, she is always there."

Krishna Mehta also believes that there is a huge amount of creativity in rural India. "I have bought some fully hand-stitched garments from the tribes in and around Ahmedabad. Currently, I'm working with a tribe from Jaipur that makes garments that are hand stitched. Such a wonderful concept! They just make something which is different. Suppose you're looking at a particular tribal garment; it has been developed in a certain context. Now the question is: how can you modernise it, use colours that work today. Look at Rajasthani block prints; they're always the same kind of print, the same kind of colours. The challenge is to bring newness, make a new block. My blocks are very modern. While I do like to wear modern blocks, I make and cut them on my own. They're so unique. You can do things differently. People, in general, wear blinders. All you need to do is to think out of the box. You should never think to do something like someone else, but aspire to do the same thing in a different way. You should think about how you would create something new, like a plastic garment, a leather garment or a paper garment, maybe. There is room for everything, but you need to think. Some fashion designers seem to think that showing a lot of skin is all you need to do. When I'm looking at doing something for the tribes or for the

differently abled, I don't do it just like that or because I pity them, I do it because I believe that they can do something. And just like me, they do it with great pride. So I'm not doing it to help them, I'm doing it so that they can help me create something new. They help me think in a different light. This is what I love. They are helping me to challenge myself and I like to be challenged. Maybe that's why I love this work, otherwise life is very boring." But you don't get to do exciting work without fighting a few battles first. Coming from a conservative family, getting into the world of textiles wasn't easy for Krishna. So, she had to fight for her passion. "I did not have any role models to follow. In my family, I was the rebellious one, always breaking norms and only doing things that I wanted to do. In fact, I incited my elder and younger sister to rebel. I had to pull strings to get my way; sometimes persuading mom or dad or be good to them and try to manoeuvre to get things done. Slowly, but surely, I started getting what I wanted and now, I have no regrets whatsoever."

However Krishna attributes her independence to her parents, particularly her mother, Lakshmi. "Mom was my great pillar of strength, who encouraged us five children to follow our dreams. She was not the kind of woman to attend kitty parties, coffee meets, or even go and see films. But for all that, her strength was unparalleled. I believe that the ability my

siblings and I have to stick through all odds and stand by what we want to do comes through my mother. She ensured that we were self-dependent; be it washing, cooking or cleaning, we had to learn it all on our own. And once we'd done that, we were free to do whatever we chose to do. She was this person who would never say no to anything I would say, like, 'Mom, I want to go for guitar classes,' or 'Mom, I want to learn French.' Whatever we asked of her, she would never say 'No' to it but will always keep a watchful eye on us, silently observing if we were on the right track or not. I guess this was her way of saying 'Do what you must, but take care.' My father, on the other hand, was the person who would say no to pretty much everything I would ask.

"For instance, I announced to my parents that I intend to move out of the city for my studies. My father refused point-blank but Mom kept saying yes. So between the two of them, I got my strength from my mother and values from my father. After my siblings and I were all married and settled, she transitioned from a homebound person to running our pharmaceutical factory in Ankleshwar! She kept working until she was 78. Now she's 82, but she still prepares her own meals and loves to live life on her own terms. This is my mother: she's five feet, thin and frail. But when it comes to strength, she can rival an elephant."

Family is very important to her. The Majithias had four daughters and then a son. First comes Jyoti. Then comes Poonam, a dance director and choreographer. Krishna is the third sister and then comes Sunayna, a jewellery designer. “I can see all of us pursued some sort of art form in one way or the other. My youngest brother is Suketu, and he had to look after my father's huge businesses. So I guess he'd never had the time to pursue art. But he managed what he does beautifully. We are very close, all brothers and sisters. We meet every now and then. We all live in Bombay.”

Female strength runs through the family. Natasha, Krishna’s daughter, looks up to Krishna as well and in fact, they both look up to each other.

Oh my God, she’s a bullet,” exclaims Krishna. “She has a lot of me in her but is far more balanced and focused. Also, she wants to try her hand at everything. She is very artistic.”
“My mother is the artist,” says Natasha Mehta, “Personally, I don’t have a relationship with textiles. But being surrounded by it practically all my life, I have obviously been influenced by it. However, our styles are remarkably unique as she prefers the natural Indian garments and I’m more Boho. The handicrafts I like are those made by hand and are edgier than her styles. I design my own collections which have tie-and-dye techniques seeping in with a lot of natural paint brush strokes.

On the other hand, her works are more concrete with block prints."

Despite their stylistic differences, the mother-daughter duo have combined their skill-sets to offset their weaknesses. "Speaking about her work, she is very focused, whether working with hand-woven, hand-dyed and tie-and-dyes, she sticks to her routine. I come from the business side of things. In this way, we work in symbiosis and complement each other quite well because I know the business while she knows the art. For her, things are fluid but as a realist, I consider what we can and cannot do. This really worked out for us because if there are two people who are doing the exact same work, conflict is bound to arise. Now, I do all the black-and-white stuff while she adds colour to the business, which works perfectly for us."

"Growing up, I obviously looked up to my mom because she, like my father, returned home after a full day of work. So, I was brought up by my grandmother for the most part of my childhood. That's what I saw in my mother: a super hard-working woman who went on to make a name for herself in the world. So, by the time I was old enough to understand the news, figure out the world, know who's in the limelight and who's not, I realised that my mother is something of a celebrity too. Looking back at it now, I remember that my deepest secret

was to be able to make a name for myself just the way my mother has. It wasn't by any means a conscious desire, but imbibed in me by looking at mom. To me, she was this super-hard worker. Also, as a child, I was this fat kid. I then started losing weight and now I look just like my mom. I think, in a lot of ways, that was what I always desired: to be like her. I may have not made a name for myself yet and I'm far from that. But hopefully, I would soon! Just like her, even I am unable to sit at home and do nothing. I've tried saying to myself that I should go out and party all night. But I simply get bored out of my mind just after a couple of days.

"For all her hard work, she can be very naive," Natasha adds. "Sometimes I have to exercise caution regarding what I say to her because she might take it in a different tone altogether. She also has a tendency to say things she didn't intend to say. I would say that I am a little more street smart because she gets taken for a ride a lot more than I. On the other hand, she is a lot calmer than I am. As a working woman, she did a marvellous job, juggling her work, kids and school. Rahul and I were not easy kids, you know. We kept mom on her toes all the time. So working around all this was an achievement in itself which I think much bigger than whatever else she might have done professionally."

Krishna's son, Rahul says that he cannot be more different from his mother: "I don't have what it takes to design. You are either creative or not. Coming from a family of garment manufacturers, I have been able to use some of Mum's talents in my current business. We export to Spain, Mexico, and some countries in Europe. So we take some of her designs and sell them to our current buyers and this is a helpful bridge to other buyers as well."

He has also learned other lessons: "Mum connects to her staff, right to the factory-level employees. She is very involved with the whole factory itself, actually, she spends more time in the factory than in her office. I still find it difficult to imbibe this aspect of her personality in me."

Riddhi, Rahul's wife, has also become part of Krishna's business. Not born and brought up in Mumbai, she had her own set of challenges adjusting to this new environment. "I got married five years ago and I have been living here ever since. About six-seven months in, I started working with Mom. Fashion designing was new to me. Mom, ever the independent person, threw me into the deep end. Everyone in this house works full-time so from week one I was pretty much home alone before I started working and the staff would just come and ask 'What do I need to do?' and 'This has broken' and 'That has happened'. My Hindi was appalling at the time and I had no

experience dealing with the kaarigars. How do you communicate? But Mom's attitude was like, 'You'll figure things out for yourself.' After learning the ropes for about six months, I became a sort of a junior designer and started my parallel collection. The great thing about her is that she gives you a free hand. Of course, she kept guiding me throughout the way and she was okay so long as I wasn't creating anything really hideous (laughs). I could take creative liberties while working with her. I did a whole collection of hand-painted outfits with her, using her fabrics and her tonality, but with a more contemporary take, like more dhoti sets and things I would like to wear, for a younger bracket and a younger audience. We did a fashion show with the whole collection, I think it was in 2014-'15. Regarding her style though, I think it's very ethnic and classy. Most of her menswear clientele buy her work without thinking too much. The repeat clients just say things like "Send it to me, size 42, at my place". At most they would give a colour reference and that's about it. The rest whether it is the kind of work, what type of collar, what buttons, the customers leave to her. I think this speaks volumes about her credibility as a designer. They trust Krishna Mehta to not create something that would end up making them look like a circus clown. They know it's going to be classic and elegant."

Sustainable fashion is now in vogue. However, as a designer

who focuses on creating timeless pieces, Krishna feels that she is largely unaffected by it: "We always were sustainable in a sense in our country because we only wore sarees. So sarees people kept wearing all the time and it was passed on and even when it was torn they used to make *godhdis* (quilts) out of it. *Kuch phekte hi nahi hai* (Nothing is discarded). How can you consume less? When you make a quality garment that can last a hundred washes, it's sustainable, right? It's quite unlike the garments that cost about a hundred rupees that *tum do-teen baar pehenkar nikaal doge* (You wear it twice or thrice and get rid of it). For sustainable fashion, you need to look at your weaves, your colours and styles that never go out of fashion. Look at classics. Certain colours that have been worn for over a hundred years; these are special and they have a history. If you want something to stay, it needs to tell a story that strikes a chord with the people, even if it becomes a little expensive then. People may buy at least one if they love it so much, if not two. It's a win-win: they buy it because it looks so special and you save so much of nature. Whether you make a collection of ten or four pieces, they must elicit an 'Aah, drop dead gorgeous!' reaction from the people. The point is this: spend more research time and see how you can make it special."

For a person to whom fabric means everything, Krishna does not restrict herself to just that. "My Hindi was not so

great, so I joined this course where we had to learn about the Hindi poets, the interpretation of their words and all of that. I did the whole course just because I loved that. Then I did the Alliance Française, the French language course. My passion for dance led me to learn Bharatanatyam. I also dabbled in music -- learning the harmonium, Hawaiian guitar and now the Spanish guitar. I must admit, though, that I'm not really good at that. I'm very much an outdoor sports person and I really enjoy skiing and scuba diving is something I do very often."

This balance that she maintains between the new and the traditional, between the experimental and the classical is probably what gives the woman and the label their mojo.

Pinky Chandan Dixit
Photo credit: Atul Kasare

Chapter 5

Pinky Chandan-Dixit and the Secret of Soam

Tanisha Lele, Nayna Agrawal, Karen Dsouza,
Anjali Awasthi

Soam, the restaurant that Pinky Chandan-Dixit invented in an under-utilised piece of South Mumbai real estate, changed the face of the South Mumbai encounter with fine vegetarian dining. For a while, the city had Nosh which specialised in international vegetarian cuisine but that closed down in a couple of years. With the other restaurants, there's generally a fast-food feel to eating out if you're vegetarian. You slip into most vegetarian restaurants, you make your choice, and you eat and you get out again as quickly as possible. Many of them feel like diners, a classy American diners sometimes, but diners nonetheless.

But Soam is where you can sit down in style that feels right. The cutlery is bell metal, the waiters are trained not just in politeness but also in warmth and the food is special because it doesn't try to be fusion or international. It is clearly inspired by culinary traditions from Western India and actually lives the 'Act Global, Think Local' motto that is now on the verge of turning into a cliche. With Soam, Pinky has brought us our first culinary encounters with panki and ponkh; you can sip clean sugarcane juice here and linger over lunch.

This began when Pinky Chandan, as a seven- or eight-month-old baby, developed asthma. Her parents, Rita and Karamshi Chandan were advised to take the little girl to a

hill station so that her lungs might have a better chance of recovering in the clean cold air. And so the Chandan family moved to Mahabaleshwar.

"While my parents were living there, they met up with an elderly couple who used to own the Fountain Hotel, a heritage property. This couple had no children; they wanted to sell their hotel to someone who would look after it. And they sort of took a liking to my parents. So they said, 'Why don't you just take this from us? We will help you look after it and then if you make any money, pay us back.' My father was an architect, my mother a homemaker. But it was she who said that they should take up this offer. So that's how I landed up in Mahabaleshwar. I grew up there."

Pinky Chandan went to St. Joseph's Convent, Panchgani, which is not very far from Mahabaleshwar. Her mother, a chemical engineer had much on her mind; she was too busy to be bothered with cooking. "But I had an aunt who lived with us; she was a staff member from the hotel and the wife of one of the managers. She was a fantastic cook and so when we were fed up with eating hotel food, she would cook home food for us. Simple things like masala pulao, sheera, things like that. One day, I asked her to teach me how to make nariyal ki barfi (coconut sweet) and that was the first time I got into the kitchen."

The lack of educational opportunities in the hill station led the Chandan family to move to Bombay so that Pinky could go to a good college. (Her lungs were in better shape by then.) There she completed her Higher Secondary Certificate Examination after which her interest in cooking peaked.

"When we shifted to Bombay, my mother refused to go into the kitchen though she would make *chapatis*. So I helped Uncle Eknath who used to look after us and we would cook together."

Mrs Chandan was very pleased with her daughter's cooking prowess. "My mother was very happy with my cooking and still is," says Pinky Chandan-Dixit. "She is very encouraging. When I bake or cook anything, I ask her to taste it. She is a very good critic; she has a good nose for such things."

Food ran in the family. "My father's restaurant in the Fountain Hotel served a lot of Gujarati food. They served a thali at lunch. There was some continental food on the menu at dinner so food in various forms and tastes, was always part of our lives. Dad was always very involved with menus, and Mom used to garden a lot. She would grow our vegetables. And because Mahabaleshwar was not very accessible at that time; you couldn't get everything you

wanted. She would grow tomatoes, chillies, eggplant, strawberries. I remember a couple of seasons she grew so many flowers that she sold them to the florist."

It was out in the garden too that the children had their lessons. "She was very strict," Pinky Chandan Dixit remembers. "She would be gardening while we did our homework. If she got angry with us, she would fling the book at us and we'd have to start again. She never let us compromise on our education."

With this background, Pinky Chandan applied to the Hospitality and Food Technology (HAFT) department at the Sophia Shree B K Somani Polytechnic, but her father insisted that she must complete her graduation first. So she simultaneously started a degree through correspondence and juggled both. Most people find it difficult to complete a single graduation but Pinky Chandan managed to combine it with a full-time polytechnic course. "It wasn't that difficult," she says with a shrug. "It takes a little more out of you but when you're younger, you have the energy to pull it all off. For a degree in college, most colleges only expect you to go to college for a few days. You have to go once to pick up your identity card and you have to sit for the exams. For the rest, you study at home, you prepare for your papers and appear for them and that's about all they need or want. I majored in

sociology and psychology. When I passed out of college, I wanted to study bakery because I was seriously in love with it."

HAFT was only a two-year course then but she remembers those years with a touch of nostalgia. "HAFT gave me a sense of belonging I never got anywhere in the world. Those fifty people became my family and that I will never forget. Except for Sundays, we were always together and in a way that welded us into a group. It was a nice bunch. We are still in touch."

HAFT is said to be very strict but Pinky Chandan-Dixit feels that this discipline is necessary to prepare the students for the life they will lead. "It can't be any other way. The hospitality industry is a regimented life, dude, you cannot change it. You cannot function if you do. Dining may look like a casual experience, ordering lunch or dinner for you may not take too much time but to make sure you get what you want, we have to be ready. And to be ready, you have to have a regimen. You have to anticipate what the guests want before they know they want it. So if you're not spot on, you are not going to figure it out. Take a simple example. You go somewhere and order a plate of fried rice. To give you a good plate of it, I need to have rice cooked already. I need to be able to throw that into a pan and make it. I need to have

someone frying an egg to go on top of it. Someone else has to think up the condiments you might want. And you're saying, 'But this has green chillies, I said there should be no green chillies.' And that's one plate. This is going on, all the time, dozens of plates coming in, with special requests, 'Please make it like this, please make it like that' and if you do not have a kitchen driven like an army, with a regimen, you can't get through lunch. Because you don't get to show your best in two hours or in two days. It's showtime all the time, you have to do it right all the time. That regimen is required." And then HAFT was part of the Sophia College campus.

"I think Sophia is an amazing college, an ecosystem of education, really. It has so much history and yet it's so much fun with Kaleidoscope, Sofiesta. But for me, the biggest takeaway was those fifty mad people we met and the friends we made."

But she also believes she learned values at HAFT, values that are timeless and which could be embodied in people. "There was a gentleman called Joe D'Cunha, who used to run the canteen, he passed away recently. He was among the most beautiful people I have met. He knew we were in college and we were broke all the time so he would feed all of us students, giving us two *chapatis* extra without charging. His kindness was legendary. I think sometimes

that you can teach without actually teaching, you can teach by being. So if you take all this as toil and labour, it is toil and labour. If you take it as joy, it is joy."

Part of this joy was that she met her future husband, Aseem Dixit there. Their romance began in HAFT. As they tell the story, we can't help thinking it is a rom-com, complete with meet-cute, Cut to a long-haired, guitar-wielding Aseem getting into it with a taxi driver over some missing change. Pinky Chandan intervenes and there you have it: one of the best students in the class pairs off with the tearaway whose friends call him 'Deep Shit' because that's where he finds himself-always in trouble. Aseem Dixit remembers: "The next day, there's a day of ragging--running through an obstacle course while jeering seniors pelt you with chicken heads--and a welcome party afterwards." When she had finished HAFT, there were campus interviews and she managed to get into the Oberoi Bakery Department even as she was finishing her third year BA.

"I did a few months there and then I wanted to do the course at the Cordon Bleu. I bullied my father into letting me do it. He did not want me to go because he thought I was too young. But I kept on insisting and finally, he agreed to send me to London. The course itself was three days a week. I was at a loose end for three days of the week for six months.

So I managed to train at the Langham Hilton Hotel in the pastry department."

London made a refreshing change for Pinky Chandan-Dixit. "Remember I started in a hill station and then moved to Mumbai. But even in Mumbai, I was surrounded by family. My sister, my brother and my mother were around. London was a league shift. It was a huge cosmopolitan city and I was on my own. I had to do everything for myself."

When she came back to India, it was with the dream of opening her own bakery but her father needed her to help him with the hotel. "You know what business families are like. My brother was too young. So as the firstborn and as one who had trained in hospitality management, I had to step up."

The work made for a good experience but it was not what you might call exciting. She was in charge of upgrading facilities at the Fountain Hotel and opening up a space for the conference room. When things had smoothened out a little, she applied for a scholarship to the Federation of Hotels and Restaurants Association of India (FHRAI), which, its website claims, is the largest national body representing India's hospitality industry.

"The FHRAI has a scholarship that anyone who has been in the business for a while can apply for. It lets you go and

study in Ivy League universities in the US for summer programmes. I didn't have the heart to ask my father to pay for it. So I applied for the scholarship and I got it," says Pinky Chandan-Dixit. "I spent a good six months there. The scholarship wasn't much so I thought I had better work and supplement it. Books are an important part of learning but they're not everything. I wanted to do practical work, actual work. So I spoke to one of my father's friends who had a travel agency, Raj Travels, Calcutta. I said I want to train somewhere but I need to do it without any paperwork. He had a friend who owned hotels and I stayed in Florida for a while and I trained with them."

When she returned her father announced that it was time to get married. "He had major hopes of his eldest child marrying within the community and setting a good example for the other two children," she says.

But Pinky and Aseem had been going around for a dozen years by that time. "There was no proposal, no yes-and-no," Aseem says, suggesting the slow, steady building of a relationship. Pranks, of course, like the time Pinky Chandan had a tooth extracted and could not speak so Aseem accused her of eating chewing gum to their teacher with the result that she got thrown out of class. And long hours spent at

Cafe Naaz on Malabar Hill with the city spread out beneath them like a jeweller's tray.

"To be honest in those times, you could not go down on one knee. It had to be in parts. First, a step here. Then another suggestion there. Because it could all go horribly wrong and then you'd be stuck in class, facing the same person for another year and a half and that would be Hell," says Aseem.

By this time, theirs was a relationship that had survived separation too. "After college, Pinky did her Cordon Bleu. She is also a master baker. I went on board two ships. Then I did my hospitality management from the University of Michigan and Pinky Chandan did hospitality management from Cornell University. We met again when she was looking after Hampton Hills in Florida," Aseem says.

It was time for the bird to fly the nest. Pinky Chandan-Dixit remembers, "At this point, I was still working with my parents but it was beginning to get difficult. So I took a job as a research person with the famous vegetarian cookbook author, Tarla Dalal. At that time she was just about developing her Test Kitchen where recipes could be tried out. There were three of us and we researched all her recipe books. The basic ideas came from her. We tested the recipes. We shot the pictures, designed, published, launched the

books and did the public relations for them afterwards. This was for about seven years. It was a real learning experience."

But finally, in 1999, Pinky and Aseem could not wait any longer and she told her parents that she was going to marry Aseem who had returned from Miami at that time. (There was no question of her shifting to the States. "I told him that he had to make a choice. I did not see myself living in the States away from my environment and my ecosystem. So he quit and came back here.")

Her parents were unhappy about this even though they had met Aseem and liked him, kind of. The Kanpur boy met the Gujarati family for lunch. Rita Chandan's *rotlis* were puffy and delicate and really, really small for a Dixit boy.

"I was the guest so I was served first. I'd pick one up and it would go straight into my mouth. Bang. Finished. I was enjoying the food so I didn't notice that everyone was looking at me like I was a jungle man or something. Finally Pinky had to kick me under the table and indicate that I should try nibbling."

(Rita Chandan liked the young man; she thought he would make a good friend and was very sweet. But marriage? That was different.)

Likewise, when Pinky Chandan went to meet the Dixits, she was in awe of the huge quantities of food that were cooked for the family which comprised eight children: seven doctors and then Aseem.

And so as luck would have it, Pinky asked Aseem to come back to India so she could work and be supported by a family network only to find that they were having none of it.

Since both families were opposed, they left home and "stayed with a friend for a night and then we stayed with another friend for about 30 days," Aseem remembers. "Then we somehow managed to hire a small flat in Bandra. She started working and for about seven to eight months we did not even have a refrigerator at home. Then we opened up a brand known as Wraps & Rolls in Phoenix Mills and other malls. Then a coffee shop known as Sugar Waffle House. That was in Phoenix too. But we had to shut it down; there were renovation issues."

Nothing can be more romantic than the story of their wedding. "On Thursday afternoon we said, 'This is it, let's get married.'" Aseem says. "Pinky said, 'Okay. This Sunday.' I said, 'Okay.' A friend said the Arya Samaj would do it. Next day, we went to Gallops at the Mahalaxmi Race Course and told them we wanted to book it for that Sunday. And people book it a year in advance. They said they could give it to us

for lunch. I said, 'Done.' We told them, 'Do your own menu,' can you imagine? But we were too busy to manage those details. I was driving around with two phones, arranging things. Flowers, invitations, that kind of thing. And then it occurred to us that we needed a priest. So we went to Matunga and got a hold of one. He had a list of things he needed. I said, 'I'll get all of it.' Then he said, 'When do you want to get married,' I said, 'Sunday.' He said, 'I don't work on Sunday.' But I just talked and talked and talked until he agreed."

Aseem believes Pinky Chandan had it tougher than he. "I was a boy so my family didn't care. They said, 'Okay, do what you want to do.' But her family was against the whole thing. One day before the wedding, we went to buy some gold jewellery. On a Saturday morning, we went to the jewellery store and we bought her a set and whatever things are required in exactly four minutes. This, that, these, those, chosen, bang, done. Best purchase in the world. Then she went back home and called me and said 'We don't have a photographer.' So we called up friends and someone suggested Manu. Manu was like: 'Boss unless you give me a deposit I am not going to come.' I said 'Boss I am in Bandra right now and can't get to you. Tomorrow is the wedding, if you don't come, it is okay, we'll get married anyway. But if

you come, I will pay you.' But he showed up. He was the earliest baaraati."

But it wasn't the photographer that was worrying Aseem. It was his bride. "I wasn't even sure she would show up. Everybody was getting cold feet and she also belongs to a very close-knit family. So I told the others, 'If she doesn't show up, then we'll just have a party and go home.' She did show up. She was so shattered. From there we went to Shirdi. She said she did not want to go back to Bombay. From there we drove to Goa. Because I said, '*Chalo* let's spend some time together.' We stayed by the beach for six weeks.

But then it was back to the grind. "Being an entrepreneur also means a heightened sense of responsibility. "Pinky and I, both of us, believe that if someone is working for you, there are four other people who are also eating because he has a job. So if you have forty employees, that means one hundred and sixty people are eating because of those jobs. So we must look out for them. But there's some enlightened self-interest in this. If we look after them, they will look out for us. There are lots of people to work for; they can walk out tomorrow. How do you get loyalty?"

But those early days were a struggle that have left their mark. "We did a lot of hard work. There were times when

we would start at 7.30 am and finish at 4 am. We slept for two or three hours. Look at my leg. Do you see these black spots? Standing for hours and hours and hours. People think if you're working for yourself, you get loads of time to yourself. That's absolutely false. It takes up more time because every decision you take not only is a decision for your business, it is a decision you take for all the people who work for you."

It was a difficult time but eventually, her parents did come around. "About a year-and-a-half after the marriage, my father and my mother warmed up and realised we were doing okay and began to make gestures of reconciliation," says Pinky Chandan-Dixit. "Maybe they saw that we were doing okay, we were actually happy so they let the anger go. Four years into our marriage, my husband was running a brand called Wraps & Rolls, which had an outlet at Phoenix Mills. But life was not easy for him. He was used to working in America. The system is different there. If someone can't do something, he will say so. Or if a person says she will do something, she does it. The ethics are different there. But in India, they say they will do it but they never do what they say. This drove him nuts. He would say, 'Pinky, what are we doing here? Let's go back!' For five years, he had to go through this. I was still working with Mrs Dalal up to 5 pm

and then I would run to Phoenix Mills to work at the mall. I'd come home at around two or three in the morning. I was burning out."

As luck would have it, Mr Chandan did mention that there was a property in the city which he thought was underutilised. This was on Babulnath Road, right in front of the entrance to Babulnath Temple.

Old-timers still remember the radio spot.

> Little girl in precocious voice: Papa, Papa…
> Dad in an indulgent tone: *Bolo bete!* (Tell me child)
> Little girl: *Chuttiyon mein* Mahabaleshwar *chalenge,* Fountain Hotel *mein rahenge.* Fountain Hotel *ka* phone number *yaad hai na*? (In the vacations, let's go to Mahabaleshwar. We can stay at the Fountain Hotel. You do remember the phone number, don't you?)
> Father: *Haan*, Fountain Hotel *ka* phone number: Two-Two-Seven!

But in case you had forgotten that three-digit number, you could simply go to Babulnath and book a room as well. This wasn't the only use to which the place had been put.

"My father used to run a restaurant there way back in the 1980s when we were children," says Pinky Chandan-Dixit. "It was called Fountain Fast Food, an early version of Shiv Sagar: Chinese and *dosa* and *pav bhaji* in one place. They ran it for a while but couldn't manage because we were in our last few years of education. So it was shut down. It was then used as a reservations office. I worked there for a while, booking conferences for the hotel. He said, 'It's a great location, do something there.' I looked at him and thought, 'I don't know.' It's difficult to work with family. I didn't want ever to be disrespectful to him or to come to a place where we would be uncomfortable with each other because of work. He must have seen my misgivings because, after much deliberation, he said, 'I won't interfere. You deal with Gaurav.' Gaurav is my brother. That seemed fair. But I also had my requirements. I said that I wanted it to be a simple and business-like arrangement. I'm not doing you any favours. So we took a small loan from him, which we paid back in one-and-a-half years, took his property and gave him a percentage of the take and a profit.

Pinky Chandan-Dixit wanted to start a bakery of course but a feasibility study of the locality said otherwise. "In the place I was, I had to make sure this was a money-spinner. Fifteen years ago, coffee was not such a big thing--coffee

culture is very modern--and a coffee and cake place would have been very niche. I needed this to be mass. I was very very disappointed. But my husband sat me down and said, 'Then the next best thing to do is our food'. So we sat down and we beat out a game plan. Good Gujarati-Marwadi cuisine. That I thought I could do. Up to that point, the only Gujarati-Marwadi cuisine you could get in the city could be summed up in one word: thali. Just put all of it on one platter and never mind if half the food is wasted, never mind if the first round fills you up so much that by the time the rice comes you're just stuffing your mouth mechanically…"

This was also the time Pinky Chandan-Dixit came home, gustatorily speaking.

"It must have been half an hour after I left home that I realised that I never learned how to do what I thought of as *ghar ka khana*. Like, you know, for all the fuss I made about food, I never did learn how to make standards like a decent *thepla* or a *dal dhokli*."

Combine these two elements--relearning the basics and deconstructing the thali--and you have the secret of Soam, named for 'soma rasa', the nectar of the Gods, numerologically adjusted for success.

Pinky Chandan-Dixit adds another element to the mix: "I work with stuff which is locally available and so is the least

tampered with it. If you use things that come from distant places, they have to be frozen, chemically treated sometimes. With local stuff, you can enjoy the base flavours you are working with. I don't like complicated things so I would make the gravy easy. Once again, that allows natural flavours to come out."

This is remarkably in line with modern thinking about food. There was another variation too that the young restaurateur wanted to try. "I told Dad I'd like to break that thali into many components so guests could order exactly what they want to eat and enjoy that. That way food would not get wasted. That way, I could deliver quality food at a good price point."

The only difficulty was that Gujarati and Marwadi food had already vanished behind the thali. Few people outside the community knew the names of what they were eating nor did they know what went well with what.

"It's not like Punjabi food where, by now, everyone knows a naan will go with paneer; nor is it like Mughlai where you know that if you order biryani it won't come with gravy. So as I said, 'Let's do a pre-plated menu. We'll curate the food for them'."

When Soam opened in 2004, this did not go down well. "In the first three to four months, a lot of people would say,

‘Please, do a thali. It is so much better.’ My waiters would come and tell me, ‘*Ma’am thali kar lo*.' (Madam, please serve thalis.) And I would be like, ‘*Nahin mere ko nahin karna. Chheh mahina ruko*' (No, I don’t want to do that. Wait six months). We opened in April but by July, August, we were doing well.”

This was, she reminds us, the time before food bloggers became influencers. However she does remember how one day, a journalist, Rushina Munshaw Ghildiyal, from Savvy, a women’s magazine, came to Soam to review it.

“She turned out to be really my fairy godmother. She came in and said, ‘I’m doing an article and I need to shoot these dishes but you don’t have them on your menu.' I said, ‘So what? I'll do it for you. I'm free in the afternoon so come.’ That’s how we met and we hit it off beautifully. I connected with her over the next weeks during which a friendship grew that was based on a shared love for food. She said to me, ‘Winter's coming, why don't you put *ponkh* on your menu?’ Or another time, ‘Summer's coming. Why don't you do a *panna*?’ That was invaluable because when you're managing the business you're looking after the logistics, things like, ‘Has the cook come on time?’ and ‘Is there enough inventory?’ You're looking at the operational aspects of it and you get caught up in that so much you can’t

think of new ideas. But it is the creative buzz that keeps you going through the grind of, 'Check this', 'Make sure your license is renewed with the Municipal Corporation', 'See if there's enough flour'...all very important, all very frustrating."

This was the time of teething troubles for Soam. Part of the problem was the entrenched patriarchal mindset of the staff. "I had to deal with a whole bunch of labour which did not think that a woman should be giving orders. Nobody was willing to listen and I was not the kind of person to shout or scream or use rough language."

But she had an ace up her sleeve. She had watched her mother deal with the staff of the Fountain Hotel as she was growing up. "She was in her late twenties when she took over the Hotel. The staff was close to seventy or eighty people. She was the only woman on the property. I observed how she dealt with people, how to conduct oneself. It is very difficult to manage people on holiday. They become different people; they're intent on having a good time, on partying, they drink, they smoke, they do things they wouldn't do at home. They have a different life on holiday. But you are living there. For a child to see that and take it as normal behaviour would be disastrous. She would always tell me, 'They are here on holiday. We can't behave like this.

We can't socialise with them. They come and they go. We live here."

"My father was very particular, especially because we were raised in public property. It was not home. We were living in a hotel. He insisted that we had to conduct ourselves well. I learned from him how to deal with staff. How to get work done without being rude. Another crucial thing that I have learned, is how to deal with the boys on-site, not to have to poke them to get things done. But for them to understand that it is business. It's got nothing to do with them personally or with my life. And I think of this and the other thing I learned from him is how to be fair."

But you can't always be sure the other person would be fair. In the early days of Soam, there were nightmarish moments. "There would be days when someone would say, 'I'm leaving and taking six men with me,' and I would have a meltdown because I'd have no staff. But then Aseem and I would drive around Grant Road, Nepean Sea Road, and look for cooks. We'd hire them for the night, make do, keep going. I just hung on in there and slowly began to build up a rapport with them. Now, most of the staff are people who have been with me since the beginning and they are like family. Especially when I decided to have Ariana, my daughter. I was not sure that if I was able to take that

maternity break, I didn't know how much attention I would be able to give the child. We live alone, my husband was with Wraps & Rolls and our schedules were very different. When Ariana arrived, he used to work in the morning and come in the afternoon. I used to work from afternoon till late evening. When I came home he would leave for his work again. So the only thing I could do is take her with me. She was two or three weeks old when I put her in the stroller and took her with me to work."

Pinky Chandan-Dixit has a clear-eyed view of the family, however. Gaurav, her brother, manages the property at Mahabaleshwar though he keeps an eye on the finances of Soam. "My brother and I decided to make sure we kept our work worlds separate. I saw my parents working together and they had many disagreements, so we decided that we would keep our work lives independent and that worked."

She also knows her own strengths and weaknesses.

"I'm badmash [a rebel]," says Pinky Chandan-Dixit. "I don't learn from other people's mistakes. I learn from my own mistakes. I've had a lot of hard times. I was rebellious for a while. Being the oldest my father would also say what kind of an example are you setting for the younger children?"

The maxim 'The customer is always right' has now turned into a cliche but in the restaurant business, it still works. For someone who describes herself as basically an introvert, there are days when dealing with people, in the plural, in the flesh, can be taxing. But Pinky Chandan-Dixit has found a way to deal with that too. She took some advice.

"At some point, Cushrow, my manager at the restaurant told me, 'If you're not feeling up to it, don't interact with people. In our business, you have to smile. You cannot be rude. Stay locked up inside if you want. Don't come to work. If you do happen to work, don't interact with guests.' These were golden words. I've learned some coping mechanisms too. On the drive from home to Babulnath here, I switch off, I'm silent if I can manage it. That helps me to maintain my balance."

The future includes a Soam recipe book. "I've started to archive all the recipes I like. In a few years, I want to do a little Soam cookbook; we are going to call it Seasons at Soam. What we have is a seasonal platform. We have winter food, food for Holi which is a spring menu, then summer food. After that comes food for Shravan, we do *faraal* because the Babulnath Temple is close by, at Diwali we do festivities, then again when it comes to winter we've got *khichdi* and *undhiyu* happening. Then there's Sankranti so

we also do *tilgul ka* ice cream, then we do *chikki, tilgul ke parathe,* so basically all your winter warming foods That allows us to play with many other cuisines, experiment with ingredients and it also gives our guests who come in three times a week something new to taste. Because a lot of my guests are people who live in and around the area and I'd want them to have something new to try, rather than have them go somewhere else. It also gives the boys something new to learn so they get to do something creative. We also do some food festivals and take the boys on a field trip; after all where else will they get opportunities like that? So we do a lot the food festivals where they get to see other people, get to show off their skills and can learn and understand what's happening in the market...generally get up to speed." Pinky Chandan-Dixit is not concerned with the competition. Soam lies in a zone that is full of restaurants, most of them vegetarian. We ask if there is something that differentiates Soam from the rest.

"I am happy to do my work and it's nice to say lots of people exist and we all give each other business in terms of overflow when busy, in terms of footfalls when not. I have never looked at it as someone should do badly for me to do well.

Soam can be habit-forming. “I have lots of regulars. I know them by name. They call me every day and they’ll bite my bum off when I slip up. I remember my mother had her first cancer surgery in the second year of Soam and I was working out a menu for the restaurant and checking dishes. We were fixing the menu for Shravan and nothing was working out because Mummy was going to the hospital, *Bhaiya* was getting married, a lot was happening in my life. So this aunty comes to me and asks, ‘What are you doing?’ and I say, ‘Nothing. I’m working on a Shravan menu but nothing seems to come to the brain.’ Do you know what she said? ‘I have a friend whose grandmother is fasting and writing a book on *faral*, can I send it to you?’ I said, ‘Of course, please. The book was in Gujarati and I can't read Gujarati so I called Cushrow and told him to read it and I’d take notes. She called me later to ask, ‘‘Are you reading it? And is the menu ready yet?’ For the first couple of weeks, we do a trial you know, and after it was done, I called this lady and said, ‘Listen, I’m ready to do this. Why don’t you come with your family and try out the food?’ The writer of the book said she was seventy-five and couldn’t come but she said her family would come. I said, ‘No issues, seven, seven-thirty I'll see you at the restaurant.’ Those days, my brother was not around so I had gone to my mother's place for chai

and was going to come back by seven. Later Cushrow called me and said, 'You didn't tell me there was so much protocol around this guest.' I said, 'Which guest?' He said, 'Madam, twelve cars are waiting outside and normally the police tell us.' This 'aunty' happened to be politician and minister Praful Patel's wife and I was like, 'How am I supposed to know this? For me, she was Mrs Patel." This is how we have evolved. I mean I was just there at the right place at the right time with the right energy.

We talked to Chef Irfan Pabaney who has been with the late and much lamented Under the Over and the hip and much celebrated The Sassy Spoon. He has been friends with Pinky Chandan-Dixit for decades. "She was a very good student. There were eight to ten students who were really good. She was one of them," he says and then adds, unrepentant: "Aseem wasn't among them. Nor was I." But he was among the friends who have been a constant in her life. Chef Irfan was there when she was being courted, he was there when she got married but he believes she hasn't changed at all. "She is the same. She has been a fun, caring person. Soam is now a household name but it hasn't changed her one bit as a person. She is still a good, fun person."

"One of her biggest inspirations which she tells me for starting Soam was home-style Gujju food," says Chef Irfan, referring to the iconic eatery in Bombay Central. "She may have been inspired by Swati but Soam is her own creation. The *ponkh* for instance. The seasonal cuisine. You should go to Soam in mango season; they will give you *aam ras* with *puri* and fried *karela* [bitter gourd] and the combination is so good you will really love it. Their food is damned good, yaar."

Chef Irfan continues, "She is always smiling. She is always laughing. When she has issues, she discusses them but she won't make a big deal out of them. She will deal with the situations and that's the best part about her. Aseem is not an easy guy to get along with but she deals with everything. Ariana is like her father; she's a full-on dada. So Pinky has to deal with her also. You know that her parents were against the marriage, na?"

We indicate that we do.

"Today, they get along so well. It's really nice that finally, they made peace with it because most of the time, these things don't get sorted out. You don't make peace with situations like those. Things should change but they haven't. That's the way we are as a society. I should know. Mine was a love marriage too. When we had made up our mind, I went

to talk to them. They were supportive. They said, 'You know your mind. It's your choice.'"

Chef Irfan attributes the peace to his friend. "She is very peaceful. Pinky is the sweetest person, so even when you look at Soam, you look at the people who have been working there, who have been working there for years, they're there because she is really a good person. She deals with stress well. She lets her people handle situations and she backs them. I have not seen her getting angry. She treats them so well and I think that leaves them no choice but to be good back to her. I said, na, if you have to deal with Aseem, you need to have a certain temperament, but she has that temperament. And even when her parents were opposed to her marriage, she just carried on as if she were still a well-loved daughter and they were her well-loved parents. She made sure that she was always there when they needed her, that she was always around. Eventually, at some point, the parents also said, 'What are we doing? Let us make peace with it and let us move on.'"

Both these restaurateurs have given us some of the best food we've eaten in the city and they both have fond memories of HAFT. Pinky Chandan-Dixit says: "We learned to rely on each other; we learned from each other. We are still professionally connected; there is such a lot of bouncing

back and forth but it is without any ego. The vibe is: 'Let's get through this together, let's support each other in a tough patch and if you want to kick me later, kick but now let's do this.' For instance, I am good at dealing with compliance and governance and the municipality so if someone has a problem, they call up and say, 'This has happened' and I can generally sort it out for them. I can make a call or suggest a solution."

The world of food and dining is now a highly visual space. A new generation of diners feels a meal is incomplete if it has not been photographed and put on social media. Pinky Chandan-Dixit wonders aloud whether food photography should become part of the syllabus at catering colleges and food technology courses.

It is a challenge she sees for her own business too. "I have to understand the digital world and get familiar with it. Honestly, I think it's a waste of time, I'd rather let my work speak for itself. When I have four generations of a family at one table and they all are enjoying themselves, that's what makes me sure my work is good. But, I realize that a digital presence is necessary to. The digital world just expands your work."

As for more of the same, Pinky Chandan-Dixit says she has often been asked why she doesn't have branches. "I'd

love to but not at the cost of having to take time from my little one. You have to decide what is important to you."

Aseem Dixit says, "Pinky is a modest person. Soam is an operation based on sustainability. 'Buying the ugly vegetables,' we call it. If you go to the market, the beautiful vegetables, the hybrid vegetables are twenty percent of the actual crop, eighty percent is thrown away. Not because they taste different or taste bad but because they don't look good. This is criminal. We buy those vegetables so the farmer is helped. At the end of the day, no food is stored for the next day. Soam is the only restaurant that won't stick things in the fridge and then serve it the next day. It is all donated. That's why people come again and again. You can eat this food and not fall sick."

Soam is based on a network of relationships that Pinky Chandan-Dixit nurtures. It was she who set up the WhatsApp group that nurtures the relationships between the HAFT students of her batch. Chef Irfan says, "You know how it is. Years pass. All of us got married and started leading our lives. Old friendships get sidetracked because of everything that's happening and so much is happening. Then WhatsApp happened and suddenly it was possible to get in touch with each other in real-time. When Pinky made this group, it just exploded. For the first week, there were

three hundred messages every day; everyone had gone crazy. Two of our classmates were in New Zealand, three or four in Australia, one had moved to Mangalore. Manish Khanna, who owns Brownie Point, is in Mumbai. I'm in the city too. I am part of many WhatsApp groups but this one is different. Everyone just forwards stuff they find. Here everybody is chatting and saying things that are meaningful. People respond to each other. It's always very interactive. Other groups you just sort of flick through the feed or archive it and forget it."

The head of the department of HAFT, Ms. Dopati Banerjee says that Pinky Chandan-Dixit can be relied on to come through whether it is for a sponsorship or a demonstration. "Though she is the proprietor of Soam and a cordon bleu chef, she is humble and down to earth. This year we had the good fortune of having her come for the Indian Artryst and do a demo for both our students and other college students as well. She did her demo with so much simplicity that even the toughest of dishes appeared to be simple. She has a tremendous amount of patience and love for her alma mater. Even though none of us have really taught her, whenever she approaches us for anything or talks to us, she will always say 'Ma'am' or 'Sir'."

One of those bonds she has nurtured is the one with family. Aseem believes that his bond with his wife was forged in the fire of their dreams. Theirs is a combination, according to him, that is heaven-sent. “I can dream of something to make; she will not, she likes to keep it real. So the combination works nicely. You know this *pani puri*. We decided, ‘Let’s do a sweet version’. I said, ‘No put *boondi* inside and on top, put *rabdi*.’ Oh, they loved it! We do have our differences. There should always be some in any relationship. Two people can’t be the same. But it is also imperative that there is a bit of romance.”

His wife thinks Aseem is the better cook of the two of them, “more instinctive, he will go by his gut feeling. I am much more systematic. I want to know the recipe, I want to follow it to the letter.”

“I am in charge of making dinner today so I asked for zucchini; now there are French beans. Now I will have to think about what to do next,” says Aseem. He likes to mix it up, in the kitchen, at least. “Today we decided to make pesto with mint and parsley, rather than basil. We wanted to see how the flavors emerge. People think Indian cuisine and other cuisines are not linked; they are all interlinked in some way or the other, with the treatment of vegetables, the

treatment of spices. It didn't work, *baad mein gobhi bani*. [Later we made do with cabbage.']"

Besides cooking, Pinky Chandan-Dixit loves to read. She also travels but this too "revolves around food. A couple of years ago, we went to Spain for a food festival because they have that a whole month of art. Then we went to Turino and stayed in an Airbnb. We also enjoyed the local produce. As I'm getting older, it is a nice feeling to realize that we are exploring places before the energy wears out."

But the bakery dream is not dead. "That's my retirement plan, I want to go to a small place and have a bakery and live upstairs."

But for now, there are things that make her happy. Her eight-year-old daughter Ariana is one of them. This young lady has very clear views of life. Her mother cooks better than her father and her khichdi is her best creation. She loves Soam for the pani puri and also because she gets to go there and listen to people talking. She doesn't want to cook; she'd rather draw. However, she does like to bake: cakes and pizza, she says.

Rita Chandan, Pinky's mother, makes no bones about her preferences. "She is the favourite one, yes." Mrs. Chandan remembers a good child, one who would look after her younger sister. "There was a two-year difference between

my girls but Pinky helped me look after her younger sister. I remember the day, nine years later that I delivered a boy, Gaurav. The expression on their faces, the love that they were feeling, their willingness to accept an addition to the family, all that was very precious to me."

Pinky Chandan-Dixit loves her mother's sheera. "She makes *aatte (wheat) ka sheera*, It is amazing with *papad.*"

Papad?

"Yes, you have it with a *papad*. I know it sounds like a weird combination, but it is really nice."

Equally nice is what she says is her therapy. "I think what I like most is watching people eat. I like watching people enjoying food with their families. It is always special when you connect food with family. That's what makes me happy. That's my therapy."

Lives of the Women, Volume lV follows the lives of five inspirational women who have made a lasting impact in their fields.

Sr Anila Verghese, currently the Director of Sophia Polytechnic, a scholar of international repute and Provincial of her Order;

Jeroo Mulla former head of department of the Social Communications Media department and the architect of its intellectual space;

Elsie Nanji who co-created the path-breaking advertising agency Ambience and now tells stories with her interior designing;

Krishna Mehta who liberated men from polyester and reshaped men's clothing in India;

Pinky Chandan-Dixit who has reinvented the experience of vegetarian fine dining in South Mumbai with Soam.

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Cover design and illustration: Bhoomi Mistry