

lives of the women

Volume 1 On Stage/Off Stage

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Edited by Jerry Pinto

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Preface

We've heard it said that a woman's work is never done. What they do not say is that women's lives are also largely unrecorded. Women, and the work they do, slip through memory's net leaving large gaps in our collective consciousness about challenges faced and mastered, discoveries made and celebrated, collaborations forged and valued. Combating this pervasive amnesia is not an easy task. This book is a beginning in another direction, an attempt to try and construct the professional lives of four of Mumbai's women (where the discussion has ventured into the personal lives of these women, it has only been in relation to the professional or to their public images).

And who better to attempt this construction than young people on the verge of building their own professional lives? In learning about the lives of inspiring professionals, we hoped our students would learn about navigating a world they were about to enter and also perhaps have an opportunity to reflect a little and learn about themselves. So four groups of students of the post-graduate diploma in Social Communications Media, SCMSophia's class of 2014 set out to choose the women whose lives they wanted to follow and then went out to create stereoscopic views of them. In this age of the sound byte and the hundred-word news item, visiting faculty member Jerry Pinto encouraged students to pay careful and considered attention to the lives of the women they chose. In this first volume of *Lives of the Women—On Stage/Off Stage*, we present the stories of four women who have had a lasting

impact on the cultural life of the city of Mumbai: the theatre director and playwright Nadira Babbar, the novelist and cultural critic Shanta Gokhale, the Odissi dancer Jhelum Paranjape, and the actor and public relations expert Dolly Thakore. These are the stories of their lives, their work and their worlds, in their own words, as told to our students and supplemented by research.

We hope that this work will interest academics and general readers, women and men, and add to the documentation on what it means to be a professional and a woman at this time in history, in this part of the world.

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- Students of SCMSophia, Class of 2014

Chapter 1

Shanta Gokhale

At the Bhutan Mountain Echoes Literary Festival, I was asked by Sathya Saran how I came to translate Cobalt Blue. I said I called Shanta Gokhale and asked her if she thought I would be able to.

She said, "You!"

And I felt I could.

She might have said, "You?" and then I would never have been able to.

She was the exclamation mark I needed. But I also began to ask myself: "Have I been the exclamation mark or the question mark in the lives of those around me?"

- Jerry Pinto, author of award-winning novel *Em* and the *Big Hoom*

As Shanta Gokhale sits in her quaint bamboo chair and smiles with her twinkly eyes, offering plump, homemade Diwali sweets; one can't help but wonder how an individual can be so talented and yet so grounded. The pastel cotton clothes, the soft, wispy hair, her frail but cheerful voice create an atmosphere of warmth around her. Her charm lies simply in the refusal to acknowledge herself as a figure of prominence, as an archive of culture. Despite being an active part of the blossoming theatre scene in Mumbai and a respected author and critic, Shanta Gokhale continues to live a simple life. She has rubbed shoulders with the likes of theatre director Satyadev Dubey famed playwrights Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar, filmmaker Govind Nihalani amongst numerous other prominent members of India's cultural scene, edited the arts sections of newspapers including *The Times of India*, and authored two novels, one of which has been adapted into a film.

Gokhale has always been generous with her vast repertoire of knowledge. Even as a middle-aged journalist she encouraged a group of young writers

and actively mentored them. These people are now established writers, poets and art critics and each one of them speaks of Gokhale in awe, marveling at the abundance of her knowledge and willingness to share it.

Arundhathi Subramaniam, poet and dance curator, was trained by Gokhale when she was self-admittedly young and prickly. She says, “She never played a nurturing mother figure, but she was really a mentor, incredibly encouraging but also the kind who always made you feel like she was listening to you because you had a point and not because she was in any way trying to condescend to you.” She adds, “There were always older writers, senior writers. Why did she recruit us? She needn’t have.”

Gokhale herself explains that looking around the vast, unchanging landscapes of the arts pages in Mumbai at that time, she noticed the lack of any sort of critical thinking. “It was only reviews earlier... never features. And those reviews were very Victorian in their language. I felt that these people weren’t getting it. They were still stuck in old modes of writing and thinking.” Digging deeper into the mess, she found a system that was crumbling from within. “One of the older critics at the newspaper was taking money from artists to cover their exhibitions. Then the music critic was covering only the area in which he lived and there were entire areas of the city which were uncovered.”

So Gokhale began keeping an eye out for people who could fill these gaps. “I did know that there were a whole lot of young people out there who were good writers. What I did was to keep my eyes and ears open. I see editing as having my antennae up for good thinkers and good writers, pounce on them and let them develop.”

First came Ranjit Hoskote, who is now famous for his poems, translations as for his works on cultural theory. Hoskote, was her son Girish

Shahane's classmate at the Elphinstone College and they would often go to art galleries in the area. Hoskote decided to write on one such exhibition by Vivan Sundaram and sent it to Gokhale. "I was very impressed. I asked him if he would like to review on a regular basis and he agreed. But I got a lot of flak from my editor who said, 'To read Ranjit you have to read the dictionary first,' So I said, 'Well that happens to young people. He'll soon settle into it.' That was Ranjit."

Hoskote remembers the incident clearly; To him Gokhale is an "editor who stood up for her writers and argued on their behalf. Someone said that they had to read the dictionary, she said, 'Well then you should carry a pocket dictionary for your pocket vocabulary'."

Another Bombay poet, Arundhathi Subramaniam was Gokhale's next acquisition. Subramaniam and Gokhale met at a class in Xavier Institute of Communications where Gokhale was teaching. "I had read something that she wrote and I thought I would like to have her on board."

Himanshu Burte, then architecture student at Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art and now assistant professor at Centre for Urban Policy and Governance at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, was another. Burte came to talk to Gokhale, "about his final year project which was to do with theatre spaces. While discussing his project with him I realised that he was an excellent writer so I asked him to write on architecture. It hadn't been featured on any arts page at all and he was only too happy."

Last came a "young chap called Varadarajan who wrote a letter to me about some Carnatic music programme that he had heard. He used to live in Ghatkopar or some such place in the suburbs and again I felt that this was a very perceptive response. So I told him to meet me and he began to review music at that end of town, which our own critic wasn't covering."

“So that is how I got this very vibrant group of young people to write and that was it.”

Jerry Pinto says, “She was actually incidentally, accidentally training another generation of writers into nuance. Into realizing that the world of the arts will never yield itself to the black and white, to yes and no, to one and zero, that there is no binary, instead there is constant fluid negotiation between what we consider aesthetically right and what we consider unacceptable.”

Gokhale admits to being aware of the subjectivity to which Pinto alludes. In a telling example, she says, “I do use different frames to look at different kinds of work. In Marathi theatre, we have a mainstream theatre and we have another off-mainstream theatre which is more experimental and less formulaic. Now this mainstream theatre has its own history and tradition and it does not attempt to do anything outside of that tradition. But within that tradition boundaries are being pushed. Putting a play in the context of what other plays are like on the mainstream, how those are still ticking with formulae and how this person within those boundaries is taking risks, tells me that it’s a serious play. Serious not in mood but seriously conceived, not just for entertainment.”

Even as her proteges have grown into respected figures themselves, Gokhale continues to discuss these ideas and more in her Mumbai Mirror columns. In her own words, her column discusses “theatre, literature, dance, art, women’s issues, from the underbelly of society and culture, which really means everything that we do, say, believe in and create.” The language is simple, yet evocative. The tone is matter-of-fact, but each article always touches upon a larger theme.

Unlike her peers, she prefers to write reviews in order to persuade readers to attend performances, rather than to criticise. Jabeen

Merchant, editor of several documentaries and feature films and Gokhale's daughter-in-law, says, "Supporting cultural expression and independent performers is something she believes in. Normally nobody writes about these actors, dancers, singers and documentary filmmakers. So she uses her column to get these people across to her readers. She believes it is something that needs to be done, something that she wants to do and something more people should do. So it's a cause she stands for."

Gokhale began to enjoy watching and discussing works of art from a very young age. Her parents insisted on taking Gokhale and her younger sister, Nirmal to watch plays that they thought the children would enjoy; and on the way back, the family would discuss what they had seen. While she was growing up, her mother, Indira Gopal Gokhale, was studying for a general Bachelor of Arts with music at the Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University and Gokhale helped her through most of her readings. When her mother had to study Hamlet, Gokhale would take up her lessons, "so I got my Hamlet to a pat even before I started studying Shakespeare".

Gokhale cares deeply about art and the practise of reviewing. She knows that reviewing is a profession that was looked down upon by artists throughout the ages, for not producing anything and only writing on what others have produced.

And so, reviewing is something that Gokhale takes seriously. All her reviewers were told before they started, "in reviewing, there are two important things. You should ask yourself what a review is for. The answer is not to show how smart you are. A review is your deeply felt response."

Her voice gains some strength as she speaks about reviewing. "You must not overburden a review with technical language, with jargon

because what you are trying to do is build a bridge between the artist and your reader. That reader hasn't necessarily heard that programme or seen that movie."

"The second important feature is to try and create an experience of what happened, through your writing. If it is a music concert, I don't want people to say that 'his tans were like lightning' and get into cliches like that. You don't have to get into everything as if it were a dhobi list. You can just choose to talk about one item which gives an idea of the whole thing."

At the same time, Gokhale does not want to write about works of art which according to her hold no value. "I could spend my entire writing life hammering at those, but what's the point. I want to share what I find exciting. In that sense I like to write positively."

Her reviewers were told, "If you feel the concert was poor don't write. We don't have space for that."

Jerry Pinto says, "She would always say, you don't have to be the public executioner."

Although as a ten-year-old, she "enjoyed writing verse about poor girls and beggars and the sky and rivers," Gokhale never really saw herself as a writer. Her father, Gopal Gundo Gokhale, Assistant Editor at The Times of India, didn't think she'd be a writer either. "He thought I'd be a teacher," she recalls.

Gokhale enjoyed writing essays in school, but she never really thought of it as a career. For her, journalism and writing for newspapers began "quite as a lark".

While doing her Bachelor of Arts in English from Bristol University, Gokhale would write long letters home about her time in England. "Every

year we used to have a 'rag day' in which various departments of the University would choose a theme and prepare a float. And I think one of those years we were ghosts, and I wrote a letter to my father, describing it. My father gave this letter to a colleague, just to see what he would say. He read it and said, 'I am going to publish this'. So this piece appeared in the Sunday Times."

Her friends at Bristol were aghast and Gokhale remembers how she was ragged about it. They said, "You just sit and write about something and it is getting published. That is not done." But the chance-publication set Gokhale off on a writing career in the arts.

Her father's colleague, wanted her to write for the newspaper. And so when she came back from England, she began writing 'middles' -- "something The Times of India used to have in the centre of the edit page, which which disappeared many years ago."

These five-hundred word pieces that she wrote for The Times of India, sometimes funny, sometimes tragic, foreshadowed her Mumbai Mirror columns that would come almost two decades later. But her happy life writing middles was interrupted by two incidents that she says are "still etched in my memory."

"I was teaching at Elphinstone at that time. One of my colleagues, Mehroo Jussawala and I had gone to some programme. She was sitting beside me and I don't remember what it was that prompted her, but she said in a booming oxonian voice, 'Oh, I see a middle coming up,' and I thought it sounded like some food I had eaten for lunch and I didn't want that at all; I didn't want people to think I was that predictable. Then another friend of mine said to me, 'Are you going to die writing middles?' That is how I got off writing middles and went in to more serious writing."

So Gokhale began writing about theatre.

Her first steps in the world of theatre criticism were hesitant and she took them one at a time. "I got thrown into reviewing the arts quite by accident." she says.

"It was Dinkar Sakrikar the founder of a fine Marathi weekly which folded up long ago, who wanted me to write about theatre. I said, 'What exposure do I have?' He said, 'You have more exposure than most people have.' I said, 'I go to watch theatre and am a lover of theatre but I do not have the analytical equipment which will help me say anything sensible about what I have seen.' So he said, 'What you think isn't important. I know how you respond. I have heard you talk, so just write.' He more or less bullied me into writing a regular theatre column for his paper. That was the beginning of my critical encounters with theatre."

As a young writer, Gokhale found that, "you begin to ask yourself questions". The reviewer wants to recapture the experience of watching a great play: with all the tension, the drama, the humour, the tragedy in all its glory and in the beginning Gokhale found that she did not, "have the language to express that experience".

In an attempt to better herself, she looked at other newspapers, but to her dismay she found that "there was no proper writing on theatre. Although there were regular reviews, I found them very boring so obviously I wasn't going to be influenced by them." It was here that her degree in English Literature helped her. Because literature included drama, culture, politics and sociology, Gokhale got "some insight into how art is made".

Slowly, Gokhale began finding a way to write intelligently about theatre. Each play that she watched would add to the questions in her mind. And these questions would enrich the experience of watching a play or listening to a piece of music. "When it is that much richer what you write about

it is that much richer and so you go deeper and deeper,” Gokhale says.

But writing freelance for newspapers doesn't pay the bills. So Gokhale fulfilled her father's prediction and joined Elphinstone College, “to temporarily fill up a vacancy in which I had to teach the BA honours classes and also some compulsory English classes”, a few months after returning from Bristol. As a twenty-something graduate, facing a class of sixty students seemed to be a nightmarish prospect.

Even her fellow teachers, who had noticed the diminutive young women in the staff room were worried that the notorious backbenchers would harass Gokhale. Every few minutes, they would walk by her class to make sure everything was okay. Their wonder was nothing compared to Gokhale's who soon found, “some other character take over” when she was in the classroom. And by the end of the class, the teachers had stopped walking by completely because, Gokhale says, “I think by that time, they must have confabulated and configured that this wasn't the person they knew in the staff room and this was someone else in charge.”

“I think that there must be a teacher in me that came alive in the classroom,” offers Gokhale by way of explanation. After teaching at Elphinstone College and occasionally writing for newspapers, Gokhale took a break from her career and returned to teach compulsory English at Hassaram Rijhumal College.

Gokhale wrote for several newspapers but she was “never, never a reporter,” she says vehemently. She remembers a time when she was forced to be a “hard-nosed reporter” at Femina, where she worked in 1976. She was told to do a “full report” on a rape at a slum in Worli. “I spoke to the police, I spoke to all the concerned officials but I did not speak to the girl.” she says. When she returned, the editor asked her why she hadn't talked to the girl. “I said I couldn't bear to intrude on the privacy

of a young girl who was so traumatised. It did not fit in with my ethics.”

The editors had no choice but to publish the report, but everyone, including Gokhale realised that she could not be the classic reporter. “Because you would have to go prying into people’s lives otherwise, what kind of reporter are you?”

After Femina, Gokhale began working for Glaxo as a Public Relations Executive. Even then, Gokhale continued writing. “Writing was my life. It’s what helped me keep my soul together while working in the only-for-profit commercial world of a corporate house.”

One of her friends was an editor at Femina and asked Gokhale to edit a two-page section called ‘Literati’ which selected and edited fiction produced in languages other than English. She did that for two years until “The Times management decided a two page literary section didn’t fit into Femina which they wanted to turn into a lightweight glossy. That’s why ‘Literati’ was closed down. Those two years were really really good,” she says.

Even after ‘Literati’ fell apart, Gokhale continued writing. Her stints at The Times of India and Femina had built her reputation as a writer and offers kept pouring in so there was never a time when she was not writing.

Gokhale worked at Glaxo for nine years. She remembers clearly that it was nine years because she didn’t get any benefits that she would have gotten, had she stayed on for a year longer. “Doing an arts page was very important,” more important than gratuity.

Even so, Gokhale learnt a lot during her tenure at Glaxo. “I got to know a whole cross-section of society under one roof and being in Public Relations. I was in constant touch with workers at all the levels,” she says.

What followed was a turbulent time. In the

three years following her resignation from Glaxo, Gokhale spent her time curating Arts Pages for The Times of India and The Independent and also had a stint as the Editor for Letters at The Times of India.

Amidst the 150-year celebration of Bennett Coleman and company, Gokhale joined The Times as an Arts Editor. During that time, there was a lot of celebration in which the company promoted art. The Times sponsored music concerts and organised a huge exhibition at the Victoria Terminus.

“Two years after we started the arts page, they began to feel that now why should we have this page and one fine day, they just called it off. No more arts page! Which made me redundant, because I was the arts editor!”

A lot of shifting from one newspaper to another followed. People were randomly shifted to Filmfare and instead of salaries, contracts were offered to employees, so, “they could be shifted around like pawns”. Management at the Bennett Coleman and Company Limited asked Gokhale what she wanted to do. She refused all propositions. The people at the top told her, “You’re refusing to do what we want you to do, you don’t want to go on contract, you don’t want to be shifted around, so now you tell us what work you’ll do.” Gokhale did not want to be shifted and so she announced that she would look after the letters page. “Everyone else hated doing the ‘letters to the editor’ section. There was a lot to be done there and I knew that I would love to do that. So for about half a year or so, I was looking after letters and having a lot of fun, getting a lot of hate letters too, but it was exciting.”

In 1992, as a rival to the Sunday Observer, The Times brought in The Independent, which was a newspaper that always had a shifting base. The Sunday Observer was known for its huge arts page and Anil Dharker, then editor of The Independent, asked Gokhale to edit the arts page in a similar fashion.

Gokhale refused to join The Independent. She wanted to continue working for The Times but she agreed to take on the additional role of arts page editor for The Independent. "I would plan the pages and commission stories from the third floor. These would be laid out on the fifth floor. So the subs used to run up and down with pages. I carried on as I had done for The Times arts page, but now it was for The Independent."

Since, lots of people were lured away from the Sunday Observer and made to write for The Times, they had to be paid at the same rates. Other employees at The Times were disgruntled. From their offices on the lower floors of The Times building, it looked as if some outsider upstart was having a go at their income. This caused a lot of unrest in the industry: lots of propaganda, people not talking to each other and intense union activity.

In 1992, after three years at The Times, Gokhale decided to quit her job and write a book that she had always wanted to write – on Marathi theatre. Her employers tried a last-ditch attempt to get her to stay. They said, "Everyone is writing books in the office time, why don't you do that?"

"That didn't fit in with my ethics, so I quit and that was it."

From writing about the arts to writing fiction was a progression that took a long time for Gokhale. "People write their major works in their twenties," she says, "I am not like that. It took me a long time to even begin to believe that I could write a long piece, whether it was fiction or drama. I wasn't a confident person, which is why I confined myself to these little things and it was much later that I began writing my first novel and even then, I was constantly doubting myself and wondering whether

I should be doing this at all.”

It was Nissim Ezekiel, the Sahitya Akademi award winning Indian-Jewish poet who gave her the push that she needed to start writing, by suggesting that she write fiction in Marathi.

Here again, she fell into doubt. How could she, a convent-educated woman who read English at Bristol, write in Marathi? But then she realised, “One isn’t conscious of the other languages one has. We spoke Marathi at home. The entire area (Shivaji Park) is a Marathi stronghold. My friends were Marathi speaking.” And to further clear her misgivings and assuage her fears, Ezekiel said, “Why don’t you just write? Language will come.”

And as she scraped her way through three short stories in Marathi, the language did begin to flow. “I was filled with excitement. For the first time I became aware that my grandmother’s language was with me. So I wrote in Marathi, and then all my creative work was in Marathi though most of my translation was from Marathi to English.”

Still, Gokhale does have some trouble navigating languages. Both Marathi and English, she says, “are equally home.” But in journeying from one home to another, she often needs a transition period “to get into that second home”. “If today I am writing a longer work in Marathi and then I have to write a longer work in English, I stop reading Marathi and pick up something in English just to grease that language along.”

This problem intensifies when Gokhale is translating. Sometimes, “I get stuck at the commonest words. Because in my mind, the languages have been locked away and to come to the new language becomes quite difficult. My two homes are streets apart.”

Recently, Gokhale added yet another translation to her already well established library of translated works, a reworking of Jerry Pinto’s *Em*

and the Big Hoom, from English to Marathi.

While she really enjoys the process of translation, her accommodating personality and her inability to say no sometimes puts her on the spot. "Sometimes a friend from my theatre circle might say, 'you have to do this'. I don't like the work but I like the friend. That can be painful. I treat that as another kind of challenge: to give your all, even when you're not invested."

The challenge in translating Em and the Big Hoom was something else. In the vast and varied literary landscape of Marathi literature, there was never a book that featured Catholic culture. Because, as Gokhale discovered, "Marathi literature is mostly Hindu literature. You don't even get Catholic characters in Marathi books."

How was she to translate Em and the Big Hoom? "This title itself! Big Hoom? The Big Hoom in Marathi?" After many a sleepless night, Gokhale decided to leave it be. "I believe in the work that we do in our dreams. Something was bound to come." Pinto too remembers the difficulty of translating the Marathi title to English. He thought of the more literal English title 'Em aani Mota Hoom'. It somehow didn't work.

One day, Gokhale had her eureka moment and decided that it would be 'Hoomrao'. "Em aani Hoomrao it goes, part of Marathi culture like Raosaheb, it gives you that feeling." and at the same time, "keeps the strangeness for the Marathi reader, does not act as a shutter". Pinto was also delighted, "Hoomrao, got the spirit of the word".

The title was just the easy part. There was another point in the novel that gave Gokhale much trouble. She considers it, "one of my triumphs". In Pinto's novel, the character of Em talks about oscillating between two things and sings a rhyme about it and Gokhale thought, "My God, what am I to do with this?" Another eureka moment followed when

she thought of the Marathi song 'Dolkar-Dolkar' which is about the swinging of the masts of a boat which conveyed that feeling of emotional sway.

"Translating is a very creative thing, because you really have to find ways from within the culture into which you are translating to bring alive something from other cultures."

But when she is translating from Marathi to English, a whole different can of worms is opened. Sometimes she will find English phrases pop up in Marathi plays and Gokhale has to change those phrases because, "they don't have the same meaning". Words like 'decent' are often the problem. "We say 'decent' dress in Marathi, when we mean someone is well-dressed. So what is that in English?" she asks. When that happens, Gokhale ends up translating, "from English to English. When a Marathi writer brings in English, he thinks he will get by because Marathi readers know just as much or just as little as he, so it can often be grammatically wrong."

Pinto's award-winning work was also a personal story, a story of mental illness and the relationships surrounding it, told in a heart breaking manner with clear minimal prose. Surely, translating it would have been a problem. Reading and re-reading the novel drenched in sadness and pain would be a difficult task to undertake forcing Gokhale to ask questions of herself she did not want to ask.

"No, no. I have to allow those emotions to enter me. Translation is like entering the skin of the writer, the original author. Like an actor enters the character, similarly, the translator enters the spirit and the voice of the person otherwise I cannot translate it."

In 1995, her debut novel *Rita Welingkar*, the story of the eponymous hero Rita and her struggles through life, as she grows up from the tender age of 8, that see her leave her home, find love, get her heart broken before she finally lands up in a mental hospital and goes on to realise the true secret for happiness, found its way into bookstores across the country in a new English translation. Originally, Gokhale did not want to undertake the project. Translating your own work, “is tough, extremely tough”.

“Much time had passed since I had written the book. During that time, I had undergone several painful experiences and some were related to the subject matter.”

In translating her own novel, there were two routes that Gokhale could have taken. One is the example of Arun Kolatkar. “His sequence of poems *Jejuri* and its translation into Marathi are two different works. He gave himself the liberty to recreate. I didn’t want to do that because I was a translator.” The second was to do stay faithful to the original and curb any tendency to rewrite the work.

With the second novel *Tya Varshi*, “I thought I could not translate. It takes a lot of time and energy and if I have written in Marathi, the novel is already there.” Jerry Pinto had read the novel for a conversation Gokhale and he were to have, and he told her, “You have to translate it”.

Gokhale was adamant; she would not do that translation. She would not do speculative work anymore. Why go through the pain of translating something, if it wasn’t going to be published?

Pinto was incredulous at her modesty. “I can’t imagine anyone turning you down!” he said. Gokhale agreed to translate *Tya Varshi* but told Jerry, “It’s your responsibility. I’ll translate it and hand it over to you and you do what you

like.” That’s how Tya Varshi became Crowfall with a dedication to Jerry in the introduction.

“I fell into translation,” she says with a laugh. Gokhale had recently returned from Bristol and Satyadev Dubey was one of the first people she met.

“Satyadev was completely single-minded, passionate about theatre,” Gokhale recalls fondly. All he could think about was directing plays and staging them in venues across town.

“There were enough men for him to choose from as actors but in those days women were difficult to find. So the minute he saw a young woman who he thought had some kind of potential, he would approach her. ‘He asked me, ‘will you act in my play?’ and I said, ‘no’. Dubey asked why not, and we began talking.”

“In the 1960s and 1970s very interesting things were happening in theatre. Dubey was the centre around which a lot of theatre in Mumbai was taking place. The people who were with him were not just theatre people. There was, for instance, his close friend Govind Nihalani. There was Vinod Doshi who was an industrialist but interested in theatre. There was Sunila Pradhan whose husband was a doctor. He was an extremely social person, he loved gathering people for parties, where you met this entire kind of cross section of people who were interested in theatre.”

Because of Dubey, Gokhale began to watch the experimental plays that he, and those of his circle were making. “There were a dozen or so groups which were active and each one was doing something interesting.”

Gokhale also credits Dubey with starting off her career in translation, because the first play that she translated was one that he asked her to,

and this time Gokhale agreed. "It turned out to be an okay translation," she says with characteristic modesty. "Once that translation was done, then all the theatre people knew that I could translate a play, so one after the other I translated a whole lot of plays."

Sunil Shanbag, a prominent figure of the Mumbai theatre scene, also remembers the sequence of events that led to Gokhale's first works of translation. "She was married to a naval officer, they had moved from Bombay to Visakhapatnam – and Dubey said, 'Shanta, you're wasting your time there, you should translate', so he really egged her into translation. Since then, she's been translating almost non-stop and become one of our key translators between Marathi and English and the other way around."

Gokhale attributes a lot of her personality to the way in which her parents raised her. The couple met through a magazine advertisement. Gokhale says, "This was in 1938. They were around the same age, but he had done his Masters and she had been taken out of school in the fourth standard. My mother felt that this difference might cause a certain imbalance in the relationship. So in her very first letter to him, she wrote, 'Look we are getting married. If it works, it works. Otherwise we break up'." Gokhale goes on to say, "She was quite a person, my mother. Full of guts and strong self-respect". After marriage, Gokhale's mother continued to study until her Bachelor of Arts. Gokhale admits that her mother had a difficult life, because her father was what his friends called an "eccentric" man.

In middle-class Shivaji Park, Gokhale's Marxist family stood out, although Gokhale says,

"It was still a family that interacted all the time with the neighbours. Some of them are as old as this house". Gokhale's father was a journalist, so their house was the only one that had a telephone. This served as a more practical connection with the neighbours. "We'd be shouting across, asking them to come and take the call. One of the people who regularly came to make calls, was the singer Mukesh's wife."

Gokhale and her sister were the only girls in their locality to go to an English medium school. Their family also looked different because Gokhale's father insisted that they wear the appropriate clothes for the games they played. Gokhale and her sister were the only girls in slacks, "but we had lots of friends and like everyone else we were down in the street playing hopscotch, kho kho, langdi, and all those things as children. It was a rule that exams were not to be treated as special days. Even when exams were on, you would continue with your evening activities, which included going out and playing."

Gokhale's favourite subjects in school were History, Geography, English, French and Physics, but, "Chemistry I hated". Gokhale remembers a time when Mr Gamelial, who the students called "Gamby", gave her a zero in a class test. Gamby said, "What you've got on your paper looks like a duck's egg, so please go around the class and say 'quack quack.'" Gokhale accepted the punishment and her classmates were "all laughing and were suggesting various ways in which I should say 'quack quack'. That was for me an outstanding performance!"

"At school," she says, "I used to stand first. So speech day was a pile of books which was terrific. Because I appeared to be clever, my father, in consultation with the school, decided that I should be given a 'double promotion'. Now this was

a big thing in the old days. I don't think it happens at schools any more, but double promotion meant that you jumped over one class. And I jumped over a very crucial class: it was the sixth, in which they had started Algebra and Geometry. So in the seventh I was suddenly faced with all these equations and diagrams and I really didn't know what I was supposed to do."

"Somehow, I managed Geometry and Algebra," she continues, laughing, "what killed me was Arithmetic. So I had to have a tutor, which in those days was a mark of shame." Gokhale had a friend who wondered why she had to sit at a desk doing decimals, so she would come to the window, by which Gokhale sits even today, and make faces at the tutor. As a result, Gokhale says, "Two of the tutors quit. The third person who came pronounced every word in his own way but turned out to be so good that through all that mispronunciation, I managed to find my way into Arithmetic". But Gokhale lost her first rank which for her "was a huge relief".

When Gokhale was fifteen, she got a first in the Senior Cambridge examination. "That was confirmation enough for my father that I was clever. Although he was ideologically a Leftist, he was also a strong nationalist. So he felt that to have a good education would make me a more valuable citizen of this country." It was only natural that her father would send her to England.

When Gokhale's father asked her what subject she'd like to study, she chose History. "He didn't think doing British and European history were such a bright idea. He came back and said, 'What about English?' so I said, 'English is something I do in any case'. So he gave me some idea of the kind of work that happened if you did Literature and Language as your special subjects and I recognised that I might enjoy these things, so I agreed."

At that time, Gokhale's father was working with The Times of India and journalists were not paid very well. "I really don't know how he managed, but he did send me after all. But then what happened was my mother said to my father 'It's all very well, all this idealism, but I'm not going to send our sixteen-year-old daughter all the way to England by herself.' So my father sent my mother and sister along with me. It was really shocking that he should do so!"

"My mother was not just extremely industrious, but had always thought she should earn her way. She was a wonderful tailor and a wonderful cook. Now of the two, she realised that tailoring was something she could do for profit, so when we first went to London, she hunted down someone who made readymade baby clothes. Every weekend, my sister would go to this lady's house and collect heaps of little frocks. Through the week my mother would embroider them. At the end of the week, this heap would go and a new heap would come. She made a reasonable amount of money.

"My father had certain ideas of how money should be spent, so there was never any money for any kind of fripperies, but there was always money for books and for travel. My mother was a practical creature and there were a whole lot of things she would like in the house, particularly because she cooked so well. Every weekend used to be full of my father's professor and writer friends, and she would be in the kitchen, cooking. So she wrote to my father and said, 'I'm coming back with these things, and I expect you to not say a word about them, because I have bought them with my money.' I'm still using that oven and that ovenware today."

When the three Gokhale women had been in England for a year in a rented apartment, her mother began to feel that her father had lived on his own long enough. He had never done this before, so once she

knew that her daughters were settled, she returned to India. Before leaving, Gokhale's mother found her daughters a house near their school, which was owned by a factory supervisor, Mr. Dean. The Dean family occupied the ground floor; Shanta and Nirmal were given the upstairs bedroom.

Gokhale says the family was very nice, but "the only problem with this old lady was that she wanted to make us more comfortable than we expected her to want to make us". Every weekend, she would "produce what she thought was a curry". Gokhale was able to think of the good thought behind the minced meat and curry powder stew, and swallow it, but Nirmal would roll it up into paper and throw it away. One day, Mrs Dean discovered this and was deeply hurt. Gokhale says, they were "dreadfully ashamed" of themselves, "but the curry stopped after that."

Gokhale's sister was unable to get accustomed to life in England. While growing up in Mumbai, Nirmal was the child who enjoyed visiting people and would always be in other people's homes. In England, although she did well at school, she was unhappy. Gokhale says, "There was family consultation and it was decided that she would come back. So my sister returned after two years, having done her O levels."

Gokhale remembers that she and Nirmal "were more or less opposites. She got a first class first in MSc. I got a second for both BA and MA. She hated reading at school and college and my problem was how to take my nose out of books." These differences did not come between the two sisters, "Despite being opposites we have been very close. We share a love for cooking and sewing, both of which we've inherited from our mother", says Shanta of the relationship.

Gokhale spent a total of six years in England, first studying for her A levels and then at

University. Her first choice for University was Oxford or Cambridge, but back then both required Latin, which Gokhale hadn't studied before. That was how she ended up at Bristol University. "One of the reasons I count myself lucky was because Bristol, at that time, had one of the finest Shakespeare scholars, whose books are still read."

"Every winter was torture," she says. "Every morning, waking up and looking at the sky and wondering what kind of day it would be. I loved being there, I really did, but I was dying to come back." But even then, Gokhale enjoyed her time, playing on the badminton team and making lots of friends.

In August of 1965, Gokhale decided to marry Vijay 'Viju' Kumar Shahane, because he was a voracious reader, and he loved theatre. "So we did have a lot in common," she says. "But along the way I realised that there are people who read almost like they are fidgeting. A mental fidgeting, which doesn't translate to anything in life. If people gave him food in a newspaper packet, he would eat and then read the newspaper packet. So it was a kind of obsession with printed matter. He had a very fine mind actually but his reading didn't appear to percolate into his life."

Her father was not too happy about her decision. He said to her, "We gave you the freedom to choose your partner, and so we cannot object." Gokhale says, "His unhappiness had to basically do with my husband's total inactivity, apart from his job. When Viju was not working, he was always horizontal." Gokhale's parents liked to always be busy, a trait that they passed on to her. "To see someone supine when it was not time for bed, bugged them."

Gokhale's father had built a retirement home

in Talegaon in front of a huge hill where Tukaram would compose his abhangas. And Gokhale's father would say to her, "Doesn't he ever feel like climbing that hill?" and she would laugh and say, "No, because he's Viju, he's not you." But Gokhale still maintains that he was a very nice man, one of those "completely harmless people". But being that, she says, "meant that he wouldn't engage with dissent. It's like being with an amorphous cloud. There's no comeback at all. It just disperses."

Shahane had a travelling job, and once when they were in Visakhapatnam, Gokhale's mother paid them a visit. Gokhale says, "I think she felt very miserable for me, for the life that I was living, because when she came back, she wrote and told me that, 'Your father sent you abroad and while we didn't have material ambitions for you, we did feel that you would make use of your education and right now, you're not doing that.'" Gokhale's mother also pained to see that her daughter's and Viju's relationship was superficial, that it wasn't a real partnership. After returning from the trip, Gokhale's mother came across an advertisement for a position of a lecturer at Hassaram Rijhumal College. She cut that out and sent it to Gokhale.

Gokhale says that up till then, she had thought of separating from Shahane, but had not figured out the logistics, given that they had two children, Girish and Renuka. In Gokhale's words, "the hows and whys were still bothering me". She had considered teaching at a school that a friend's aunt was running in Udhagamandalam, which she says "was perfect because the children could go to that school and I could teach there and that would solve the problem". But when her mother sent her the cutting, she told Viju that they needed to separate for a while. "And I got the job and I stayed on."

Gokhale says that she had "come away with

one trunk of possessions". Her rationale was that if the children missed their father, she would "pack up and go back, because it was important that they should have what they wanted to have". But the children settled in Mumbai and four years later, Gokhale met the documentary filmmaker Arun Khopkar, who proposed marriage.

Gokhale says, "I thought about it and talked to the children and they thought about it and said, 'Fine go ahead if you want to, as long as he doesn't try and become our Baba.' And I said, 'No, there's no danger of that happening. And then I filed for divorce.'" By this time, Shahane also had had time to reconcile himself to a separation and all the terms had been set including access to the children. Gokhale says, "See what people think, and what they say, depends on how you feel about it. If I were to feel guilty, my carriage, my posture, my behaviour would speak of guilt. And then the vultures begin to gather. But if you don't believe you have done anyone any harm, and these are your life choices and you are living them, they leave you alone. If they have to say things, they will say them behind your back, but who cares? But my mother had to face a lot of people when I was about to marry Arun. But she was such a strong woman, she had answers for everything anyone could say. It wasn't easy for her, a divorce and another marriage."

Renuka Shahane, Gokhale's daughter, remembers that she was twelve and her brother ten, when their parents got divorced, and they couldn't understand the situation. "We only knew that we were different, somehow," she says, "but I think it was because she gave us such a lot of security that we never really had emotional issues. Of course there were issues, but they would have been there even if we were living with our father, frankly."

Renuka also talks about how the women in her family have been very headstrong, and "not in a very stubborn way". For most, Gokhale's balance of

Indian and Western thought, was difficult to place. "They would have loved to hate her," Renuka says, "for what she stood for, but she had such a gentle, mild manner, that people let us be. After some time, they didn't care much about the unconventional life that Aai had led."

"And you know," she laughs, "she got married to Arun Khopkar so obviously that was another caption in the unconventional life in middle-class Shivaji Park."

Gokhale laughs and says, "I needn't have brought Arun Khopkar into their lives frankly. It's not a hundred per cent regret, because all of us got a lot out of his being with us, but it was balanced out by a lot of pain. But that's hindsight. In hindsight you know you forget why you do a particular thing. And pain is good for you. It tells you, you too are a fool, a complete fool and that is very humbling."

Gokhale admits that bring Arun Khopkar into the house was difficult, but she says, "the toughness was minimised because of how good the kids were. They were so mature. I used to say to Arun, 'Why do you have to be such a child? Look at my children, they are so much more grown up than you.'"

Gokhale's mother was not fond of Khopkar, and it was tougher because he had moved into her house. Gokhale says, "My children wanted my time, my mother wanted my time, Arun wanted my time." So dinnertime was graphed on to a timetable, because the children had their dinner first and they would talk about what had happened in school. Then, Gokhale's mother would have her dinner and she would tell Gokhale how horrible some of the relatives had been. And after that Arun and Gokhale had dinner "and that was our time together. So from 7:30 to 9:30, I had three dinners."

Renuka says, "We call Aai 'The Bishop' because of the story of 'The Bishop and the Candlesticks' [out of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*;

the Bishop gives Jean Valjean a new start in life by telling the police that Valjean has been gifted the silver candlesticks that he has stolen]. ‘Stop being such a bishop!’ we say, whenever we feel that she’s being a bit too selfless.”

Gokhale seems to have been the perfect parent. Gokhale remembers when she was talking to Renuka when she was about two-and-a-half years old, and someone listening to them said, “You’re talking to her as if she’s an adult!” And Gokhale said, “She is an adult”. Another friend asked Gokhale, ‘Why do you have to explain everything to your children? You just have to say to them, “Shut up and do it!”’ Gokhale says, “I could never bring myself to, I didn’t want them to shut up, I wanted them to talk, to ask questions and for us to thrash things out. It took time, but I enjoyed having this time with them. And much of the way I brought up my children had to do with the way I had been brought up by my parents, so those values were already in me. Our conversations started when they were two and three and they continued through life.”

“After Arun and I split,” Gokhale says, “a number of people said, ‘How come you have lost the lines on your face?’ So it’s not just how I felt, it showed on my face. And all the work that I have done in the last ten years and work that I have loved doing was because I have had my space and time. Even as little kids I was able to say to the children, ‘Look for the next hour or two I am not Aai, I am Shanta Gokhale.’ and I would left alone. That’s what I mean by good kids.” Renuka, says, “If we were not around, I’m sure she would have written at least twenty novels by now.”

Gokhale remembers a time when her son Girish was around ten years old, and she was in the kitchen as usual cooking and he was sitting at the table. Girish had found out that she had turned

down a couple of offers which would have taken her to Delhi with a lot of money. He looked at her and said, "I don't think you have enough drive". So she said, "Excuse me, exactly what do you mean by that?" He said, "Oh you could have gone places but you are here". She said, "But here's where I want to be. I don't want to go places".

She says, "I would not have it any other way. Lots of younger women who are friends of mine have this problem. 'Shanta,' they say, 'I am trying to have a child but what would it do to my career?' I tell them it will destroy their career, so just be prepared and don't put a child into this world unless you can devote time to it. It's not necessary for every woman to have a child. I know lots of women who do have this problem, but I never did."

Gokhale made it a point to take the children to watch plays, but she says, "Girish often had problems with the things I took them to. So before we left the house, I would say to him, 'Girish, I haven't written that play, I have not organised that programme, so if you have problems with it, we can meet the organiser and tell them. But don't complain to me. Your choice is to come or not to come.' He would always come, of course." Gokhale remembers a time when she took them to watch Laurel and Hardy, and she says, "I remember thinking, wow, they're going to have so much fun, because we did when we were kids. And they sat on either side and not a single laugh from either! And I was laughing my head off, and then I realised that both were watching me, probably wondering, 'Why is this woman laughing? What's so funny?' So sometimes, my plans misfired."

Once children start going to college, they start an independent existence and Gokhale believes that there are lots of experiences that help them grow and "they don't necessarily want you to step in there, you get the hint, you understand

where the line is to be drawn.”

“But a whole area of the common space is still left and that’s lovely,” she says. “I remember going to Renuka’s college, St. Xavier’s, because her group of friends used to keep talking about this one boy who was so gorgeous and I said, ‘I want to come and see him’. So I sat with them in the canteen and they said, ‘There, there, there, don’t look now, he’s in the blue shirt. So I turned around later, and I said, ‘I see what you mean’.”

When Renuka wanted to get married while still in college, Gokhale was able to speak from experience. Renuka says, “She told me very categorically that it would not work for me, and yet she was willing to support the mistakes I made. I think she realises that it is important to not force decisions upon other people, to just learn through your mistakes. Aai said, ‘Whatever happens I want you to do your post-graduation’. So I did a master’s in Clinical Psychology after marriage, and would have gone on to do my PhD, but I got a role in a TV serial and I never went back.”

Renuka remembers how working in television was easy, because she was Gokhale’s daughter. She reminisces, “Even in Circus, Azeez Mirza, who was her junior at Bombay Scottish, would say, ‘Shanta ki beti ko bulao’. Aai never had a problem with my work because there were always a lot of avuncular people around.”

Gokhale wasn’t completely happy about Renuka’s career though. Renuka laughs and says, “She hated the hideous costumes I was made to wear, and the kind of glamour. There was this one time that she came on the sets of Antakshari which I was hosting with Annu Kapoor, I think it was the hundred and fiftieth episode. On the show, the clothes were all mismatched and gaudy. And I don’t have a sense of fashion, so I looked like a Christmas tree. And there I was smiling at her and

greeting her, and she walks away and calls out 'Renuka? Where is Renuka?' And I said, 'Me, you gave birth to me!' She was shocked. Now she has gotten used to it. But she has been a good critic of my work. In fact a lot of my work choices have been based on her reactions."

Twenty years after Gokhale taught at Elphinstone, her son, Girish, went to the same college, "People did not know that he was my son, because luckily we had different surnames. We kept to our own separate spaces, which is why in my column, I rarely write about the visual arts because I see that as his territory." They live together, but as Gokhale says, "He is stuck with his computer and I with mine. We compare notes, but he doesn't do my kind of music or dance or theatre so for him there is no question for stepping into my territory".

Gokhale says, "I think I became a writer because my father was a writer. It wasn't a given, like it is in a doctor's family, that you send your child to medical college because you want him to take over the practice. There is something in the genes that pushes you in that direction. Both Girish and Renuka chose that direction, but my sister didn't."

When Girish decided to marry Jabeen Merchant, who came from a conservative Muslim family, Gokhale had to convince her parents. Merchant says, "His mother of course never had any problem and I used to hang out at her place all the time. So my parents came to Shivaji Park, and they had a conversation which was most puzzling for my parents. My mother told Shanta, 'Yeh to bachchein hain, naadan hai, inko samajh nahi aataa (these children are young, they don't know better), but you are like us, you are an adult and you have seen the world'. So Gokhale said, 'Don't worry, your daughter is in very safe hands. If tomorrow something happens, and if my son is not good to your daughter, I will take your daughter's

side, because I'm a feminist.' And I was laughing and my mother didn't know what to say."

In 2004, Gokhale was diagnosed with breast cancer. Renuka remembers how the cancer was first noticed. "Somewhere in this Bishopness of Aai, she just procrastinated about her treatment. And I find it difficult to believe that a person who is so intelligent, so aware, well-read, would not look after her body. But this whole thing of looking after everybody else first, eating last, eating least, is such an Indian concept. We were lucky that it was after her menopause, so the cancer cells didn't regenerate as much as for a young woman."

Arundhathi Subramaniam thinks that Gokhale's cancer changed her in a fundamental way. She talks about the time Gokhale was diagnosed. "She had been through a very challenging time in her life with cancer, and just the way she talked about the experience, demonstrated a certain courage and depth. I remember her saying to me, just the day before she went into surgery that she was just reading P G Wodehouse and laughing. I love P G Wodehouse, but in a life-threatening situation like this, I doubt that I could look at P G Wodehouse and laugh."

Jerry Pinto remembers meeting Gokhale when she had cancer. "It was a lovely evening, we were working on something, something of mine of course, to which she was giving her time in such an unstinting and complete manner that you can only think, 'I can never pay her back so I will have to try and be like this with other people who need my help' and suddenly she said, 'Oh, time for my pills,' and she went and took some pills and she said, 'Fought and defeated cancer again today,' and we continued. I thought that was probably the 'mind over matter' that people talk about."

Jabeen talks about Gokhale's self-sufficiency, even while fighting cancer. "She went

through the whole thing: surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy. You lose all your hair. You lose all your appetite. She fought back, fully. Luckily for all of us, we had very good doctors and a very good course of treatment that actually worked. She was very clear about when she had to take her medicine, what she has to eat, what the doctor had told her. We were there and constantly around her, but she never leaned on anyone completely. It's just not in her nature," she continues. "I have never met anyone like her."

Perhaps the unconventional way in which Gokhale dealt with the situation, gave her the strength to continue. She says, "Cancer is one thing that doesn't come through bacteria and germs, where you can say, 'Oh I shouldn't have eaten that!' This is one disease that belongs to you, so you just accept it. All the treatment is lined up for you, you just have to go ahead and take it. I didn't want all these long faces that people pull, which people think you expect them to pull, which I didn't expect. I just had to say to Girish, 'I feel like reading Wodehouse' and he came with three thick collections. We would sit like this, I with my shawl, and these two chairs and they would take turns reading Wodehouse to me and we would roar with laughter. Wit finds wit. You have to have wit. And Wodehouse!"

Over giggles, Gokhale remembers how she managed to keep her humour intact. "I used to write health bulletins called 'breast bulletins' to my friends. Once, when I was getting my second or third chemo shot, my doctor changed the drug to a pink fluid and left the room. Suddenly I went completely hot. My heart was pumping. Jabeen was with me and I said to her, 'I think you need to call the doctor, something is happening'. The doctor slowed it down and then took it off. I had all my doses after that without any problem. But all the time this was happening, I

thought, 'This thing is pink. It is a Leftist colour, why is that giving me trouble?' When I came home I had to write this down."

"Another phase was what I called my 'renovation and reconstruction phase'. Everything was happening then. I had to have my cataracts removed before my cancer. I was wearing a scarf and dark glasses when I had gone to Hinduja Hospital for a check up. And there was a little child next to me and it was staring at me. It hopped off and stood in front of me and stared. I thought, 'Brave child, what is he doing staring at me?'"

In the radiation room, Gokhale remembers how there were people of all kinds, at different stages of sickness and recovery. A man sitting in the corner seemed to be at the end of his life. Another man walked out and said, "By the grace of God I have been saved!" So Gokhale said to this person, "No grace for this person? C'mon what kind of god is this? Leaves out one and blesses you."

Gokhale says, "It was very funny. At my first radiation, I entered this room and one after the other people came out grinning. So I asked my doctor, 'Is there a tea party going on in there?' People who have been through cancer and feel that they are on the way to recovery, they are so happy. That is something that got me through my radiation."

Even when Gokhale was battling cancer, she refused to look for refuge in religion. Renuka says, "I am married to someone who is extremely religious. Aai has brought us up to respect anybody's beliefs. But she would have been very disappointed if I was a believer. And she tells me that at worst times, like when your kid falls sick, you do tend to become superstitious, but that is the key time to test your belief. And cancer was the time when she tested her belief and she never felt the need for god in her life."

Gokhale explains that religion was never a part of growing up, because her family was Leftist.

“The ideology came to me by osmosis really, it was all around, there was no known religion in our house. My maternal grandfather was both a Gandhian and an agnostic and he started a tradition in my mother’s family of civil marriages and not Vedic marriages.” Gokhale’s sister was the first in the family to have a Vedic wedding, because she chose to marry into a rather orthodox family that insisted on it. Gokhale’s father, however, put his foot down and refused to conduct a kanyadaan. Gokhale remembers him saying, “Do what you like, but I am not going to sit down and give her away. You can marry her but she is still my daughter.” The family did celebrate festivals though, but only as social occasions. About her mother’s festival preparations, Gokhale says, “Her perfection of colour, shape, consistency, was just magical and my school friends who benefitted from that, still talk about my mother’s puran polis”.

Gokhale has passed on her value system of parenting, that she in turn received from her parents, to Renuka. Renuka says, “I keep thinking that I’m not even one-eight hundredth of what she was as a mother, and I feel so sorry that my kids do not get the benefit of that. But I’m glad that she’s very much in their lives.” Gokhale rubbishes this claim, and says that Renuka has always underestimated herself and that her sons have been brought up very well.

Gokhale feels that she is genetically inclined to believe that, “each and every moment has to be used.” According to Renuka, even days on which there is nothing else to do and all the columns have been written and sent to the Mumbai Mirror office, Gokhale will say, “I must watch this, or I must clean or I haven’t cooked this for a long time I must cook it.” Renuka confesses that she is, “a bit laissez-faire where life is concerned”. She is often exasperated with Gokhale’s inability to sit back and relax.

Gokhale admits, “I really just can’t sit back and be. She’s right. I’ll tell you something”. And she begins narrating an anecdote about her grandchildren, Shouryaman and Satyendra.

Renuka was taking a break and spending time with her friends so Gokhale offered to babysit. Renuka’s older son, Shouryaman, wasn’t well enough to go to school but not sick enough to do nothing. Gokhale says, “I sat and made a timetable and in the morning and I said to him, ‘Look, I’m putting down work hours and your break hours. Now count up your leisure hours. That should be okay with you. So we’re going to work during the day, it’s not going to be all watching television’.” He later complained to Renuka, “Nani made me work”.

Gokhale laughs at the complaint, “I think he quite enjoyed it, because I really feel that for children to have that period of work, helps them to enjoy the leisure period much more. And sure enough, he was looking at his watch, saying, ‘Nani, still 5 minutes more, no?’ So yes, I’m a little incorrigible.”

Gokhale talks about how spending time with the children is rewarding, “not just because you want to feel loved, which I do, but because there is something you can do for them which they want done. So my pizzas are famous with them and their friends. ‘Nani make pizza today,’ is the pleasantest line I can hear. If I make a pizza for the kids, and they’re too busy watching television and eating, I go and say, ‘How is it?’ and I’m happy when they do this (does a thumbs up sign in the air)”.

It was in the post-cancer period that Gokhale began writing her columns at Mumbai Mirror. “After I quit The Times, Bachi Karkaria invited me to write a cultural column. When she moved to Mid-Day she asked me to move my column with her. Meenal Baghel was working with Mid-Day and when she quit to join Mumbai Mirror as editor, she asked me if I would write for her. I told her I’d

love to but after my cancer treatment was over and I'd put my life back on track. I started writing a fortnightly column for the 'VIEWS' page in August 2006. In June 2010, the column was moved to the back page as a weekly with 750 words instead of the earlier 650."

Jabeen talks about how Gokhale has moved with the times, discarding the recipe books of the past and googling recipes and printing them out. In Jabeen's words, "She was always typing, for her work as a journalist. She also got a computer very early. A few years ago for her birthday, Girish bought her a large monitor because her eyesight is weak."

Perhaps the reason that Shanta Gokhale is not seen as a celebrity is because of her modesty. Pinto says, "I think Shanta is the kind of person who won't tom-tom her achievements around town. In a world of marketing-driven people, she seems shy, but she's also very sure of herself. You get this feeling that when Shanta speaks she speaks from a clear perspective, a thought-out standpoint." Ranjit Hoskote also feels that Gokhale's modesty is something of a byword. "I was horror struck when I heard that she was in the habit of destroying her drafts and manuscripts. I can't imagine doing that. But I think it has something to do with the absence of ego."

Hoskote also mentions her "wry, ironic humour" but over everything else, stands her sense of empathy. Pinto narrates another story. "I remember once I was sitting chatting with her and a young woman turned up to interview her. She asked the classic illiterate question, 'What is your novel about?' So Gokhale said, 'Let's have a cup of tea and we'll chat and when you've read the novel, you can come back and talk to me about it.' And the young woman was completely disarmed. They sat and chatted for a good forty-five minutes and then she left and Gokhale had made a friend."

Many friends have been made in this quiet

Shivaji Park apartment. Much has happened within the walls of her house. Marriages, children, deaths, heartbreak, happiness and Gokhale has been through it all. At seventy-four, she is still going strong, producing her regular columns in Mumbai Mirror with undying zest and writing her third novel in her free time. How does she manage it all?

“Laughter”, she says, “I believe very much in laughing.”

— Ketaki Savnal and Aakash Karkare with inputs from Smita Dutta, Srushti Iyer, Varun Sinha, Jonathan Immanuel, Mandira Bahl, Khushbu Shrivastava and Yavar Ahmed

Chapter 2

Nadira Babbar

Tilak Joshi was a third-year student in college when he first enrolled for an Ekjute theatre workshop. He says, "I didn't even know if I'd be able to do this workshop. I thought, 'Let me pay, let's see what happens. I took a chance.'"

For most students taking part in a workshop, there is an element of risk involved. 'Will I end up looking stupid? Will I be completely without talent?' For Joshi, there was an additional element; he has been visually challenged since he was six.

"I was scared as I have always underestimated myself. I was slightly repulsed when one of the Ekjute members first touched me in order to help me with an exercise. The good part though, is that it took him a second to understand that I wanted instructions only in my ear. The entire group was supportive and so at the end of the four-hour workshop I felt empowered enough to do a little performance on my own," says Tilak.

For the members of Ekjute to possess such a high level of sensitivity, they must operate on the basis of a strong ideology. How did this group train an eight-year-old boy in Prabhadevi, without letting the other children know that he was visually challenged? How does one convey the beauty of the Hindustani language to audiences in a metropolitan city, where it has been changed, altered and used for transactional convenience and where every new generation seems to drift further away into the clutches of English? How does one assert an opinion in the midst of myriads of others, without negating them? There is one answer to all the above questions; a name that has become synonymous with a certain kind of Hindi and Urdu Theatre: Nadira Babbar.

Full of vibrant energy and passion, Babbar founded the Ekjute theatre group in 1981. She is the daughter of the communist writer Syed Sajjad Zaheer, known for works such as London

ki ek Raat and Pighla Nigam. Much of her life has been influenced by his ideology; and by that of her mother Razia Sajjad Zaheer, a writer of Urdu short stories. When she founded the Ekjute Theatre Group in 1981 in Mumbai, she brought with her an appreciation of the way the world works and a love of language. Over the past thirtysomething years, plays such as Agha Hashar Kashmiri's Yahudi ki Ladki, Shrilal Shukla's Raag Darbaari, Shanta Gandhi's Jasma Odhan, Babbar's own Sakubai and adaptations of John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, and Eugene O'Neill's Desire under the Elms, have won Ekjute accolades. This list, only a partial one, shows the variety of her influences; western theatre, novels, folk theatre and even other performances. For instance, for Noor Zaheer's Hum Kahein Aap Sunein, a play that uses the ancient story-telling method of dastangoi, Babbar told journalist Mehjabeen Jagmag of Mid-Day in May 2009, "I watched the famous dastangos Mahmood Faruqi and Danish Husain and was mesmerised by their art. I have been waiting to use the style for a while and finally approached my sister Noor Zaheer to write a play."

How did a woman whose andaaz is Lucknowi, as Hanif Patni, a close associate for twenty-three years describes her, manage to set up a Hindi theatre group in a city like Mumbai? Especially since she says she did not want to get into theatre at all in the first place?

"Mujhe nahin jaana drama school.
Maine nahin karna drama-vama."

("I am not going to drama school.
I don't want to do drama")

-Nadira Babbar, age twenty

Nadira Zaheer, as she was then known, entered the world of theatre when she began her journey with the National School of Drama (NSD). Her potential for acting was revealed the day she decided to seek 'revenge' on her mathematics teacher. "She used to hurt, almost insult us; saying things like, 'Kasam se, maa baap ka naam dubo-egi ye ladki'" (She will destroy her parents' reputation).

She laughs now as she tells it, "One day, as she started yelling at me, I started crying loudly. I looked all around me to make sure I would be safe. I don't know how I managed to do this while I was still pretending to cry but I knew that I had to make sure nothing would hurt me. And when I was sure, I let my knees buckle and fell to the floor, in a mock-faint. I suppose I had observed other girls in school fainting. I lay there on the floor as everyone ran around in a panic, shouting, 'Nadira behosh ho gayi, Nadira behosh ho gayi' (Nadira has fainted). The teacher obviously got extremely scared. My elder sister Nasrina arrived, and started crying out 'Bibi', 'Bibi' in panic. When my sister bent over me, I whispered that I was okay. The principal then told the teacher to be a little more careful about the way she talked to students, and I was sent home, chuckling happily."

It is difficult to translate her vibrant energy into words. Her face contorts to conjure up her worried sister; her body expresses her hatred for the mathematics teacher. Her hands are in constant motion, adding drama to her words. She is not merely telling us about what happened, she is re-enacting the memory.

Nadira graduated from the Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow in 1968 with a Bachelor of Arts degree, after which her father enrolled her for a Master's degree in library science. Nadira confesses that her skills did not lie in the academic arena. "To him, there seemed to be none or little sense in me

passing with third division and he felt I could at least earn a living as a librarian,” she says. It was during this time, that one afternoon Ebrahim Alkazi, the man who practically invented modern theatre in Mumbai, came over. Alkazi nurtured a whole bunch of talents, from dramaturge Satyadev Dubey to ad man Alyque Padamsee to the poet Nissim Ezekiel. His roof-top theatre and his performances on the lawns of the Bhulabhai Desai Institute are still talked about. He was an acquaintance of her father and at the time, he was also the director of the NSD in Delhi. Alkazi suggested that Nadira should apply her talents elsewhere; in theatre perhaps. Nadira repeats her father’s reply to Alkazi’s proposition, “She is not very bright and also bad in studies.”

Her mother also held Alkazi in high regard as did much of the intellectual world of the 1950s and 1960s; she supported the suggestion that her daughter study theatre and so eventually Nadira applied to NSD.

“In spite of all my protests because I was not interested in drama, my sisters also agreed that I should join,” says Nadira Babbar. The best way for this story to unfold would be for the young Nadira to discover her *métier* and begin to enjoy discovering herself. Not true. Babbar says, “I was restless. I hated the atmosphere. But by the end of the first year, I had adjusted and was okay.” But then she starred in the annual production of *The Elephant Calf*, originally written by Bertolt Brecht, which won her a headline in the Times Of India. She recounts proudly and tells us, “It read, ‘Nadira... steals the show.’”

The practice of grabbing headlines has not left Babbar ever since and although she has come a long way since her first headline, she still remembers what she felt, “That must have been the first time I had been praised, truly appreciated for my work. I think that was the turning point for me,”

she says. That afternoon, Alkazi called her into his office and asked, "How many hearts have you stolen?"

She adds, "He looked at me seriously and said, 'See when you work hard, do good work, people say nice things about you. So Nadira, please start working hard. I have always scolded you, today I am requesting you. Look at your life changing. Take your life seriously.'"

By the time she finished her third year, she had translated John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* as *Main Zinda Hoon*, to be performed that year. She says, "I was most fortunate that Alkazi himself taught us. He used to teach dramatic literature from the West, and he taught so well that when you sat in that class for an hour and a half, there was nothing better related to the learning of theatre that I have experienced. At times, he would enter the class and draw sketches on the blackboard of the characters; then pointing out, 'This is Alison, this is Helena.' The way he explained things has left imprints on my mind. I used to hang around the stage as he used to direct the plays, even in my earlier years; and just being there made me feel so small. Since he was directing my translation of *Look Back in Anger*, in the middle of the rehearsals he would say, 'Let's ask the translator,' just to tease me."

Several years later, Babbar continues to be influenced by his teaching. In 2005, Ankur Parekh, now a team member and actor from Ekjute, attended his first workshop with her, "Bade-bade playwrights ko jis tarah se unhone samjhaaya. John Osborne ki *Look Back in Anger* unhone jab... uska ek expression samjhaaya tha... woh ek bilkul dimaag ki khidki khol denewaala session, poori workshop rahi." (The way she explains the work of various playwrights... The way she explained John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the way she explained a few of the expressions was very enlightening, not just the session but the workshop as well.)

After obtaining a diploma in direction from NSD in 1971, Babbar was awarded a government scholarship to study at the Berliner Ensemble in East Berlin for a year. This is the theatre founded by Bertolt Brecht, the legendary German playwright famous for plays such as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Threepenny Opera*. Here she had the opportunity to work with great directors such as Fritz Bennewitz, Wolfgang Heinz, Ursula Kchimskye and Henry Howard. In 1973, she was awarded a scholarship by the National Theatre of Weimar for further education, and she used this to continue her work at the Berliner Ensemble.

By now, Babbar had come a long way from being the girl who had said that she would not go to drama school. Her time abroad helped her shape her ideas about theatre and make her a stronger director. Parekh adds, “Unke paas itna experience hai ki har problem ka koi na koi hal toh nikaal hi deti hai.” (She has so much experience that she always manages to find a solution to whatever problem arises.)

The knowledge that Babbar accumulated through her years at NSD and in Germany was amplified with the experience she gained as a teacher of Drama in Sardar Patel Vidyalaya in Delhi, from 1973-’75. She continued to act in plays and it was when she was playing the role of ‘Dali’ in Shanta Gandhi’s *Jasma Odhan* that she met Raj Babbar, a student at NSD. Their courtship lasted for five months before they got married. Both continued to work in Delhi but were struggling to make ends meet. In 1976, their daughter Juhi Babbar was born.

Finding no good opportunities in Delhi, the Babbars shifted to Mumbai in 1978. He made his fortune in Bollywood through films such as *Insaaf ka Tarazu* (1980), *Nikaah* (1982) and *Aaj ki Awaaz* (1984). She spent these years away from the stage

bringing up their children. Her son, Aarya Babbar, was born in the same year that Ekjute was formed in – 1981.

Nadira Babbar talks about the dynamics of Ekjute, a group which has remained together for thirty-three years now. As she told Deepa Gahlot in an article called ‘Cues to Survival’ published in the Times Of India in February 1996, “Ekjute is the most democratic group. People may associate it with my name, but I have never tried to impose myself on the group. I have never insisted on directing all Ekjute plays ...everybody gets equal opportunities here. And I welcome fresh inputs.”

Ekjute was initially formed because young graduates from NSD needed a platform. Talking about the beginnings of Ekjute, Babbar reminisces, “There were no television serials then and getting a break in films was not easy. We wanted to work with different theatre people as I had been doing in Delhi. But there were hardly any opportunities and that is when we thought of starting our group.” However, she did have some reservations about the formation of Ekjute. She told Gahlot, “I was against the idea of forming a group. I thought it would narrow down one’s perceptions and have one thinking not about theatre as a whole, but worrying about the group.”

Ekjute brought together actors such as Satish Kaushik, Raja Bundela, Girja Shankar, Alok Nath and Rajesh Puri; giving them a stage on which they could showcase the talents they had honed under the guidance of Alkazi. The most vivid memories of these early days come from Juhi Babbar as she grew up in an atmosphere dominated by theatre. “Every day after school, instead of returning home, Aarya and I would end up at the

rehearsal hall, either sitting in a corner watching the ongoing play or running around with an actor on break outside. But the most special moment for me was the opening of a play,” says Juhi.

She recounts with excitement that is positively infectious, “At least in Ekjute, under my mother, the way she likes to be for every opening of the play is... jaise ghar mein shaadi ka mahaul hota hai (the atmosphere when there is a wedding in the family).”

“Everybody is going crazy working... nobody has any time... jhagde ho rahe hai (fights are happening) because last minute-waale kaam jo hote hain (last minute tasks are never ending) and then moods thik ho rahe hai, phir ghar se patile bhar ke khana aa raha hai (moods are getting better, there are vessels full of food coming from home) because everybody is under one roof and koi yeh lene gaya hai, phir last minute koi problem ho gaya hai, phir yahaan bhaag rahe hain... sajaavatwaale aaye hue hai (someone has gone to get this, there is some problem last minute, so they are running there, and the decorators have also arrived.)

“Literally, shehnaiwaale aate the, (the shehnaai players used to come) it was a mad house. Then there was a guest list and who is receiving the guests... I used to love all that. The openings were loads of fun.”

Out of this chaos grew a unity within the group that has sustained it over the past thirty-three years. Nadira Babbar admits that it was no easy ride. She says, “There were good days and bad, like it is everywhere.” She adds, “There is no martyrdom in this. I did what I wanted to do. I couldn’t have survived without theatre—my best friend.”

An incident that acts as proof for the above statement is the birth of Babbar’s son. Aarya tells us, “The day I was going to be born, Maa had a show of Maxim Gorky’s Lower Depths... she was in twelve

hours of labour pain and yet when I was born, she was so concerned about the play, she didn't even bother to ask if it was a boy or a girl, she asked, 'House kaisa tha?'" (How did the audience respond?)

Babbar's strong ethics have influenced the group; however, she has never let her ideology limit the group in any way. Hanif Patni, who has worked with Babbar and managed Ekjute for almost twenty-three years, says, "Although her philosophy is firm and grounded, it never acts as an impediment to her work with Ekjute. Her ability to love and respond to people at the personal level is incredible, and this keeps her from alienating any contradictory life perspectives."

Many young actors have not just been trained, but have also been guided by Ekjute. Patni adds, "She is always motivating people to move ahead in life, never holding anyone back from joining the television or film industry." In fact, quite the reverse happened to Ankur Parekh, who left behind his obsession with the film industry and focused on becoming a good actor once he joined Ekjute. He credits Babbar for this transformation and his growth as an individual. He remembers the first time when he enrolled for their theatre workshop in 2005, "Mujhe laga ki arre baap re, assi students mein main toh bilkul gayab ho jaoonga." (I will not be noticed in the middle of eighty students).

The lead in Babbar's *Salaam...1950s Ke Naam* (first performed in 2010), Parekh was rejected at almost 250 auditions when he first came to Mumbai from Surat. He then met Ravi Baswani, who suggested he join Ekjute theatre workshop to work on his language skills. Baswani had earlier directed Badal Sircar's *Ballabhpur ki Roopkatha* for Ekjute in 1982.

Talking about the importance of language, Babbar expressed her thoughts in an interview to DNA in 2007, "Today, nobody pays attention

to language. Good language is extinct. Someone speaking in good Hindi is looked down upon for not knowing English probably. It is a pity.”

Patni tells us, “Had I not been associated with Ekjute, I would’ve never spoken Hindi and Urdu in the way I do.” Parekh, the rising star of Ekjute has worked hard on his language skills and refined himself as an actor. He adds, “I had only heard of Nadiraji while in Surat, that she was a personality who did good theatre. I never tried finding out more, or thought that I would work with her one day, or even meet her like that. The only thought that brought me to Bombay was to work in film or television industry.”

At Ekjute, he found the first group of people who understood what powered him, “Aur woh bahut hi warm, aisa ek saal baad mera experience tha Bombay mein,” (It was my first good experience after being in Bombay for a year) he says. He is particularly grateful that he was allowed to pay the workshop fee in installments. “Apnapan mila mujhe,” (I felt as if I belonged) says Parekh. Patni echoes this statement when he says, “It is like family now.”

Yashpal Sharma, who worked with Nadira Babbar, talks about her as a director and a playwright. “She wrote many Indian plays, unhone apni maulikhta kabhi nahin chodi (she always stood by her ethical principles). Her plays include women’s issues, family issues, social issues and husband-wife relationships. The most wonderful part about Yaar Bana Buddy (a play that tackles the issue of friendship and conflict) is that she crafts in detail three characters; three women never visible on stage, but they stay in the mind of the audience forever. That is just the brilliance of her as a playwright. It is her willingness and enthusiasm that really marvels me,” says Sharma.

There is a deeply embedded work ethic

present in Babbar. Aarya tells us, “My mother’s work is something that is like her magic potion. I cannot imagine a day that my mother won’t work and if she is not working then I know she is unhappy. She will crib about not going on a vacation, but if she is going on one, she will hate the fact that she is not working.”

Alok Nath, who has worked with Ekjute, praises Nadira Babbar’s professionalism. “As an actor I think she is, in certain roles, more than brilliant. Mainly because her understanding of life is very unique. She understands life in a way in which generally people don’t. It may be her experience, how she has grown up, what all she has gone through in life herself or learnt from the experiences of others. There is certain willingness in her to learn from the mistakes of others. I think she learnt from others’ experiences and her own put together; that is the charisma of the lady that kept the group going for long, for almost thirty-five years.”

He continues talking about her enigmatic personality, “Being on stage with her can be a challenge. Sometimes as co-actors we had to control ourselves on stage. It can be difficult to stop yourself from laughing at inappropriate moments because Nadiraji has suddenly started improvising all over and again.

“Most actors settle into a groove in a performance. You know what they’re going to do and you know how you’re going to respond. This makes everything comfortable on stage. And comfort can mean the end of a good performance. When Nadiraji suddenly takes off, when she does something new, when she stares at you in a way that you get thrown off balance ki yeh kya kar rahi hain yaar, yeh toh nahin tha, (what is she doing, this wasn’t supposed to be done) this was not planned, but she is mast (lively), she does her own thing and she forces you to do something new too.

She challenges you at every step of the way.”

Though they have not shared the stage together, veteran stage actress and critic Dolly Thakore talks about her close friend Nadira Babbar, “I would have loved to have acted with Nadira but also I think distance has made it a bit difficult after a time, you know. Now of course, it is impossible because it takes you two hours to go to Juhu for a play, etc, you know, but we have never acted together.” Thakore makes it a point to go and watch every Nadira Babbar play and in turn, Babbar has invited Thakore to conduct sessions on speech and intonation for the students who enroll for Ekjute’s theatre workshops.

Thakore has strong opinions on Babbar’s plays and while she is not a fan of Babbar’s comedy, she appreciates Babbar’s *Dayashankar ki Diary* and *Sakubai*, along with Javed Siddiqui’s *Begum Jaan*. “What I admire about her is that she has done a variety of plays, but has never been tempted by the money-making mindless machine that is commercial theatre and has succeeded without succumbing to it,” says Thakore.

Patni’s opinion on Babbar’s comedy is decidedly different; he has worked in several Babbar comedies. He says, “We want our audiences to take back something even from our comedies. Even through the comedies we present a way of thinking, a *vichar dhara* that can make people raise questions.”

“Babbar is the true epitome of a modern woman and yet traditional,” adds Thakore. “Her ancestry is classy and cultured, and her attitude is full of *nazakhat*. Babbar does work towards portraying progressive ideas of education, women and emancipation. She is not aggressive in her portrayal either, instead using her plays as a medium of conveying her modern ideas.”

Not just the actors, but almost everyone who is

associated with Ekjute, pays careful attention to the details that go into the making of a play. Babbar makes sure everything from costumes to music is looked at carefully. Rajoshi Vidyarthi, who has also directed Marmabandha Gavhane's play *Bachche Hain Par Kachche Nahin* for Ekjute in 2011, talks to Mehjabeen Jagmag from Mid-Day about creating music for Noor Zaheer's *Hum Kahein Aap Sunein*, "As each story teller's piece is set in a different place—from Rajasthan to Himachal Pradesh to Sikkim—I have used a wide range of soundtracks to set the tone for each story. The music works like a visual in the play, creating a soundscape for the audience."

Patni describes the detail with which Babbar handles each production. He says, "She handles a household, plus the group... plus everything... matlab set bann raha hai toh kaun bana raha hai. 'Ye cheez aise honi chahiye, woh aisi honi chahiye.'" (When the set is being made, she needs to know who is making it. 'This should be like this, this like that'.)

Babbar's love for detail brought Bhanu Athaiya, one of Bollywood's most famous costume designers, to design for Babbar's play *Salaam... 1950s Ke Naam*. The play is a tribute to the golden era of Bollywood that uses music, the costumes and the tropes of the period. Athaiya spoke to Saadia Dhailey from The Times Of India in November 2010 about designing for the play. Athaiya says, "I have been designing costumes for Bollywood since the 1950s so I'm familiar with the costumes of that time....to get finer details right, I revisited films like *Madhumati* and *Nagin*."

Parul Rawat, a student at the Sophia Institute of Social Communications Media, who has also worked with Ekjute in the year 2008, talks about the play, "It showcased the 70 mm parda or Cinemascope charm of cinema rather than theatre, and so by the end of this two-and-a-half hour extravaganza; with all the music, dance and

costumes one was lulled into a romantic nostalgia.” Her attention to detail must be credited not only to her training and experience, but also to the fact that her roots lay in a family where ethics were strong, principles were followed and discipline was maintained. She proudly adds that it is her parents’ perspective of life and her father’s involvement with the Marxist movement that inspired her. She talks about her father with pride and her mother, with love and fond remembrance.

Nadira Babbar’s roots go back to her parents and their philosophy of life. Babbar tells us that she considers her parents to be, “...the greatest in the nation as far as literature is concerned, as far as general awareness is concerned, as far as education is concerned or as far as patriotism is concerned. And I say this not about my father but about my mother as well.”

She believes that her mother was “definitely equal to if not greater than” her father. Syed Sajjad Zaheer gained popularity for his work and leadership with the Progressive Writers’ Association; her mother, she believes, has been an eminent writer in her own right who did not get the recognition that Babbar’s father did.

Babbar comes from a politically influential family. Her Dada (paternal grandfather), Wazir Hassan, was the Chief Justice of Uttar Pradesh and had also been honoured by the British with the title ‘Sir’. The house where she was born bore his name: Wazir Manzil. “The road on which it stands in Lucknow is still called, ‘Sir Wazir-e-Hassan Road’,” Babbar says with barely-concealed pride.

Her Dadi (paternal grandmother) had extremely humble beginnings as she had lived in poverty and had grown up in a really small

village near Asanpur. Babbar tells us how her grandmother was at all times a pillar of strength to her grandfather, "She was grounded, she never got carried away by the wealth, never got influenced by the way Lucknow's culture tended to look back over its shoulder in regret to the grand old days which had passed and which were not likely to return."

Perhaps Nadira Babbar has managed to choose the best of her heritage and marry it to the vibrant energy of the city of Mumbai. She captures the essence of Lucknow in one sweeping sentence. "Lucknow mashoor hai apni achhai ke liye, aur apni faaltu ki Nawabi shaan, nakhre, aalas, susti, laidback attitude ke liye. Everything is just, 'Ho jayegaa...kar lenge.'" (Lucknow is as much famous for its fundamental decency as for its useless Nawabi flamboyance, laziness, laidback attitude. Everything is just, 'It will get done...it will happen.')

Her grandmother raised her father and his siblings in an extremely disciplined environment. With wide serious eyes and hands clenched on the table, Babbar says, "Ekdum sakht kanjoosi ke mahaul mein unko paala gaya (It was an austere upbringing), if there were seven children at home, exactly seven kebabs would be made. If anyone ever needed even half a kebab more, she'd say, 'Nahi, tumhare hisse ka nahi hai, jo tumhara hisse ka hai woh khao,' (Nothing doing, you've had your share and you'll get no more than your share). She enforced this by actually serving each person, putting their share in their plates. There was no scope for the kind of aish (extravagance) that Lucknow was fabled for and no one could expect to dress well. If they said, 'Hum fashion kar le' (Can we splash out on some new fashions?), they knew she would refuse."

It is this environment that made her father start reading, which in turn led to the growth of his awareness and an increased interest in the political and social happenings of the world. Babbar believes

that in order to be a Marxist, one has to be an extremely sensitive person, “jo mehsoos kar sakta hai uske aas paas kya chal raha hai,” someone who understands what is going wrong with society and has the courage to want to try and correct it.

When he went to Oxford University, her father met George Bernard Shaw (the famous playwright in whose vegetarian person were combined Fabian socialism and theatre) and became very closely associated with the novelist and editor Mulk Raj Anand and the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The philosopher Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who later became the second President of India, was one of his most influential professors at Oxford. Babbar tells us that her father studied in an environment that was full of political fervor. He and other likeminded students formed the Azad Hindustani Naujawan Association.

Taking us into a world that we visit only in history books, Nadira Babbar introduces her father through these stories. In them, he is nothing short of a hero, the sort who would sacrifice himself for a larger purpose. One can barely imagine what it must be to grow up with such a courageous, experienced and politically aware father.

Continuing the story of her father at Oxford, Babbar recounts how the Association purchased various books for themselves that were then banned in India due to the British rule. “They filled a big box with books and gave it to Dr. Radhakrishnan and asked him to transport it to India. They told him that they were art and history books while they actually contained Communist and Marxist literature. On arriving in India, Dr Radhakrishnan’s luggage was checked and he was held for transporting Communist literature. He should have been furious because his students had lied to him but he was completely supportive of them. He explained to the British officer that a

freedom struggle cannot be fashioned in a book. He said that the books did not give instructions on how to form a mob, and that if people wanted to form mobs, they would do it anyway, without the help of books of political theory.”

Sajjad Zaheer became very closely acquainted with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and joined the Congress after returning to India. He drifted away from it in 1936-1937. He shifted to Pakistan in 1948, working underground till he was arrested three years later. It was in 1948 that Babbar was born.

Her father was sentenced to lifetime imprisonment but because he fell ill with tuberculosis, many people fought to get him out of jail. In the December of 1955, he was released from jail and managed to return to Lucknow in 1956. Eight-year old Nadira Babbar met her father for the first time then.

Babbar spent the earliest years with her mother. It takes a woman of pure courage and determination to live life the way Babbar's mother, Razia Sajjad Zaheer did. After her husband moved to Pakistan, she went to visit him. He then asked her to move with the children to Pakistan. Nadira Babbar repeats her mother's reply, a powerful statement, one that transcends the space of the personal and becomes the political. Babbar tells us, “She replied, ‘I will never come to a country jiski buniyad hi mazhab ke upar hai.’” (...whose foundation is built only on religion.)

Her refusal to go to Pakistan was paralleled by Babbar's grandmother curbing all the ‘maal-e-madat’ (financial help). This essentially meant that the three children were on their own. Her grandmother blamed Razia for her son's arrest. Nadira Babbar recalls their conversation, “I heard her telling my mother, ‘Yes, he was a Marxist, he was a communist...but you could've at least

tried to persuade him to come back to the normal mainstream of the country.”

Nadira Babbar's mother was a strong and spirited woman. She lived through everything with a smile. She was also very highly educated; she finished her Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) before getting married and completed her Masters of Arts (M.A.) after marriage. She taught at the university, gave private tuitions; another activity her grandmother despised; yet, Razia did everything she could to ensure that her daughters got a good education.

The pride on Babbar's face is coupled with love and a smile of fond remembrance as she talks about her mother. Her mother never, ever spoke ill about her grandmother; “She had immense aadar (respect) for her,” says Babbar. She also talks about how she had to shift from a private English school to a Hindi and Urdu medium school in the second standard due to monetary reasons. Yet, it lies in the greatness of a person to be able to see, recognize and accept the good out of a bad situation. She says, “That helped me to learn Hindi and Urdu which otherwise doesn't happen to children educated in so-called private ‘British’ schools.” Those were probably the first steps that shaped the Nadira Babbar we see today.

Nadira grew up looking at photographs of her father and watching her sisters mimic him. “That was the happiest time of my life, the happiest time,” she says joyfully. “My mother was a fantastic person; she smiled and laughed although there were so many troubles in her life.” She adds nostalgically, “Kai baar mujhe lagta hai ki woh mere andar zinda hai (I feel like she is alive in me). I too have undergone a lot, yet my fun-loving personality has never left me. I can laugh in the most unhappy and the worst situations of my life. When I look back at my life, at the kind of a person I have been, I laugh again. I think I have inherited my laughter from her.”

Perhaps this is why she integrates humour

in her plays in a way that, “People keep laughing throughout the play and in the end may suddenly find themselves thinking. This may startle them a little *ki arre kya hua?* (What just happened?) I was laughing and suddenly now I am thinking about this matter in a different way,” she says. “Humour is a powerful weapon and it can be used for the creation of dramatic effect but it can also be suspended with one powerful line. To get that powerful line in place, the writer must be in full command of the potential of language, the actor must understand the unfolding of the play and the change in tempo, and then the audience gets it.”

“Thodi si bhulakkad bhi hain, itni cute hain na Nadiraji, bachchon jaisi lagti hain kai baar toh bilkul...” (She is a bit forgetful, she is very cute, she often seems childlike), says Yashpal Sharma. These thoughts are echoed by Nadira Babbar’s daughter, Juhi Babbar, who claims that her mother reverts to the same age as her fourteen-month-old son, Imaan, in his company.

Juhi recalls what her shocked maid once told her, “Cerelac nahin kha raha tha. Nani ne kitna dance kiya. Woh aisa Nani ko dekhta raha, pura kha gaya.” (He was not eating his cereal. His grandmother danced so much. He kept watching his grandmother spellbound and ate the entire bowl of Cerelac.)

Known for her energy and vitality, Babbar does not let illness get in her way; whether it is doing work for the production or playing with her grandson. It is this quality that inspires the group members and keeps them ‘Ekjute’.

Babbar’s maternal instinct extends beyond her children and grandchildren. Everyone who works with her in Ekjute becomes her child, a part

of her family. Yashpal Sharma recalls the incident where she introduced him to her son, Aarya Babbar, at a muhurat pooja. Nadira turned to her son and said about Sharma, “He is one of the best actors I have seen.” Then she turned to Sharma and said, “Beta, please take care of my son because he is as good as a brother to you.” Yashpal Sharma says that he will never forget the respect and love he experienced that day.

He further narrates the ‘incident of the bag’, which took place between the two of them. It is an incident that reveals the extent to which Babbar takes care of minute details, ensuring that everyone she meets is always at comfort.

As he recounts the event, we can imagine it playing out on stage in front of us.

Yashpal Sharma on a stage getting ready to perform a show of ‘Yaar Bana Buddy’; a red and somewhat worse-for-the-wear bag in his hands...

Nadira: Yashpal, what a dirty coloured bag that is, it is horrible...

Yashpal: That boy brought it for use at shootings...

Nadira: Don’t use that bag, it’s a horrible colour. You are a big actor, buy a good bag.

Yashpal listened to Nadira’s advice only for the sake of it, forgetting it in the next moment. He did not want to undertake the mundane process of buying a new bag. One day, out of the blue, he gets a call from Nadira.

Nadira: Yashpal, what sort of a bag is required for shooting?

Yashpal thought that Nadira was shooting for a

film and so required advice about a generic bag.

Yashpal: Madam, a bag which has a lot of pockets is good, one that has pockets all around it, to keep cigarettes, books, etc. It should be large enough to carry a file or a laptop.

Nadira: All right. Anything else?

Yashpal: It should have a lot of small pockets as well, for lipstick, make-up, blush and all that.

Nadira: All right, all right.

Two days later, Yashpal receives another call.

Nadira: Your bag is at my home, come pick it up.

Yashpal: My bag? Which bag?

Nadira: Arre, I had talked to you the other day, about the kind of bag you wanted.

Yashpal: For me? I don't need one, I thought you were buying one for yourself.

Nadira: No, no. I was asking for you. You are wandering around with such a horrible bag.

Sharma was unable to pick up the bag from Nepathya (the Babbar residence and the Ekjute office) for a very long time, but when he finally managed to take it, he found it to be a "beautiful leather bag," and was overjoyed on receiving it. He hid the bag for the longest time, not using it, keeping it on the top of a cupboard so that no one else could use it. The bag finally made its big appearance on 27 September, 2013 when Yashpal Sharma was shooting at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Yashpal Sharma is not the only one who was treated

with a mother's love and concern. All the others in Ekjute have also received the same treatment from Nadira Babbar. Her daughter most readily attests to this.

"I was a little possessive about my parents so to see so many people around my mother and so many people getting so much attention from my mother... you know because it's her theatre group and it's her actors and she has to have a one to one with each actor and she has to see to that this particular actor delivers what she wants, she had to be in very close communication with them and at times pamper them and take care of them so I used to start having issues with them.

"Especially, I used to get very jealous of the girls around; ki isko kyun itna importance mil raha hai ya iska kyun itna khayaal rak rahi hai..." (why is she getting so much importance or why is she paying this girl such close attention?)

Parekh talks about her as not just a director but also a mentor, "Ek jo unki quality hai woh bahut badi quality hai Bombay jaise sheher mein: ki woh sunti hai. Unke paas bahut patience hai. Woh jaise Juhi didi ya Aaryabhai ko sunegi, waise hi unhone mujhe suna." (She has the amazing quality of listening. She is extremely patient. She heard me out exactly as she would've done for Juhi didi or Aaryabhai.)

Babbar exposed her children to a variety of different things. For her it was important that her children visit art museums when on a holiday. She wanted them to watch a Broadway play when in New York or at a West End theatre when in London.

She was a woman who was handling two kids and a theatre group in its development stage. Given her background, a "seed" was planted in Juhi Babbar's mind about wanting to be an actress. Her mother was the mediator between Juhi and Raj Babbar when the news was broken to the

family. Babbar has been her daughter's constant supporter and her critic as well. She believes in being impartial, especially when it comes to work. This Juhi experienced when she joined Ekjute, as her mother would make her work the same amount, if not more, to belie the rumour that "there would be favouritism shown towards her daughter."

Working together in an atmosphere where professional relationships entangle with the personal, it becomes difficult for the mother-daughter pair to separate these into specific boundaries. Common dinner time talk usually consists of, "...usne yeh kar diya, iska wo ho gaya! (he has done this, this happened to him!)... now see, he's fighting over Rs.100, usko zyada mil gaya hai...(he got more). That one always comes late for rehearsals..." They engage in 'functional' talk rather than a 'creative' one.

Arguments between the two have obviously existed, and some have been absolutely terrible, but as Juhi Babbar puts it, "...at the end of the day, she's your mother; you can't throw in a resignation letter and say 'I'm not working.' You cannot do that at all. The next day you will receive a phone call from your mother. If she does not call, then you will have to. There will be some or the other reason. A guest is going to come or she has bought something for my child, and she has to deliver it to us... you can't help it. God throws us into a situation where we have to mend it."

While playing the challenging role of Radha in *Itihaas Tumhe Le Gaya Kanhaiyya*, (a play written by Nadira Babbar and Pushpa Bharati, wife of noted Hindi playwright Dr Dharamveer Bharati) at Prithvi Theatre, a role that demanded deep emotion and copious tears for an hour and fifteen minutes, she was distracted by two sniggering girls on the front row who were engrossed in their phones. Being responsible for the costumes of the

show as well, Juhi was already under pressure to execute the role well, but the extreme disregard for the performer on stage made her angry.

Juhi yelled out with a sweeping hand gesture, "SHUT UP!" and continued with her monologue in which she is imagining Krishna. There was pin drop silence both in the audience and backstage, before the whispers, "Did she just say shut up?" or "shut up bola usne" started.

Juhi expected a reprimand on this issue from her mother and director, but Babbar did not mention a word about this incident, not on that day, not on the next day, and even not on the day after that. Juhi sat apprehensively in front of her mother, asking her, "Why aren't you saying anything to me?"

Babbar replied in a seemingly calm tone, "What are you expecting me to say? Do you think I can say anything after you have behaved? Do you think that this is what a professional actor should be doing on stage?"

Juhi defended herself by making the point that an actor should also be respected for the effort, sweat and tears they put into a play, a play that is no light-hearted comedy, but an emotional one. "Radha is waiting for her Kanhaiyya to return, and questioning the very meaning of Krishna, which changes from love and beauty, music and nature to war, bloodshed and manipulation. The girls should have realized what the play was about," said Juhi.

To this, Nadira Babbar replied, "They are our audience. You cannot talk to the audience like that. Don't forget when we start our prayer; we pray... hum agarbatti, naryal, jahan darshak baithte hain, uss jagah pe karte hain. (We light incense sticks, break the coconut at the spot where the audience is seated) They are our God. You have no right. I've nothing to say to you."

Juhi feels that this mistake cost her her mother's

trust in her acting skills, and this in turn caused her to go into depression.

No one in Juhi's family realised that she was severely affected by this mistake for the next six to seven months, and it took her a long time to rebuild her confidence in her acting abilities. She needed to regain the confidence that she had won her mother's trust and pride again. It was evident that the incident had left its mark on her as she burst out into tears each time her mother told her, "You did well, Juhi" for the rehearsal sessions that followed after this.

The transition from a mother to a director is captured in Aarya's experience, especially his first one, which was an Ekjute children's theatre production called Aao Picnic Chale, written by Aslam Parvaiz and directed by Babbar. Working in this play at the age of ten exposed Aarya to a new side of his mother, one that was extremely strict and disciplined. For him, it led to a revelation. "It was only after this that I started to understand how well my mother handled her theatre group, her home, the kitchen, and her kids, and her kids' homework. She was superb at it. Looking at her directing and watching her manage a group for almost thirty to thirty-five years now, what I have learnt the most from her is that you have to be humble, at any ground of life. That is what I really look up to in my mother."

Nadira Babbar is a woman who remains calm and in control while giving her reactions to the Ekjute team after the opening of a new play. For the first four to five days, she will not point out the mistakes. Juhi says, "Probably uske baad (after that)... we have a whole meeting. That's when she kind of pulls everybody back to earth...udnaa band karo, neeche aao (Stop flying in the air, come down to earth)."

Patni manages to capture this trait of Babbar when he says, "It is very rare to find people like her, who tell you the correct things, show you

the correct path.”

“Nadira was this great goddess from the NSD who had arrived in Bombay and so naturally one had heard of her and known of her,” says Thakore. Their friendship blossoms from having been through many similar situations in life, and that they were there for each other while braving the storms that life threw their way. Both these strong women were characterized by the media world as ‘victims’ and were the “talk of the town” when their lives literally fell apart.

In Thakore’s words, “...there is a support system one needs, a bond of women, going through the same kind of pain and emotional upheaval in their lives, and so, that established a terrific bond, and since then every time Nadira has performed at the National Centre of Performing Arts, Mumbai (NCPA), we have made it a ritual that she would come to my place.”

Thakore admires Babbar’s strength on ploughing through the harsh years and managing to establish herself as a theatre person. Babbar’s profound strength lies in her acceptance of reality and of moving on in life without holding grudges. “And I admire her, because it is not easy, after you’ve been through an emotional kind of hurt, to accept and to allow...to allow the whole family to accept things as they are,” says Thakore.

She further adds, “...the personal equation that we shared over the heartbreak and pain that we both were going through at more or less the same time, maybe that bonded us and cemented our respect and support systems for each other much more.”

According to Thakore, “Babbar’s work ethic is also something to admire, for she runs a home, a company and is a director. There is need for an endless amount of energy for such arduous tasks, and Babbar definitely has it. And yet, she

isn't flustered. You never see her impatient. I have never heard her or heard anybody saying that she is screaming or it's not good to work with her."

Babbar's caring soul is evident to anyone who has come in contact with her. "I am honoured and privileged to know Nadira and to be able to pick up the phone and speak to her at any time of the day and night and I just need to send a message or a phone call and she will always promptly revert, and you know, find out how it is and not just about me but also about my family. The caring that she has... Okay, I am a friend, I am a contemporary but she does that for, I think, everybody," says Thakore.

— Rashmi Mehta and Nehal Jain with inputs from Parul Rawat, Arundhati Sethi, Nikita Raijada, Shantala Phatarphod, Juhi Maheshwari, Abhra Das, Sneha Parasrampur and Deepali Seth

Chapter 3

Jhelum Paranjape

Most classical arts in India are steeped in religion. And so it comes as something of a surprise when renowned Odissi dancer, founder-director of Smitalay, 'star' student of Padma Vibhushan Kelucharan Mohapatra, fifty-nine-year-old Jhelum Paranjape tells you that she is an atheist.

Odissi is a classical dance form that originates from Orissa, the land of the temple of Jagannath at Puri. Its dance movements find their roots in chouk (the square position/posture), the posture of the idol of Lord Krishna in that temple. Its principal exponent in the city of Mumbai says that she has never experienced God, except on one occasion.

"I have choreographed this piece on the abhangs (devotional Marathi poetry) of Chokhamela, a Dalit. He was a great bhakta (devotee), acknowledged in his time but as a Dalit he could never enter the temple. He sings to the God he loves while standing in front of the temple, keeping the regulation distance between himself and his God. When I was performing this piece in Goa, I remember our stage was built near the church in such a way that straight in front of my eyes I could see Jesus. Suddenly I was in the same place as Chokha. I say I am an atheist and I don't pray. I did not even turn to God when my husband was almost on his deathbed. I have not been brought up to be religious; but that day while I was dancing I could see Jesus right in front of me, and that day I don't know what, but something weird happened to me, I don't know what it was. That experience was different... maybe one can call it spiritual... by the end of the item I was in tears."

Is she still an atheist?

"Yes," her answer is uncompromising. However she feels that this has nothing to do with her background as a mathematics professor. Jhelum was born to Sadanand and Sudha Varde,

members of Rashtra Seva Dal (RSD). The RSD was founded by the writer and freedom fighter Sane Guruji to fight social ills of superstition, class and caste inequality during pre-Independence India. Throughout her life, Jhelum was raised on the teachings of truth, justice and equality. She identified with no class, caste or religion. The Varde home was liberal. Jhelum-tai, as she is fondly called by her students who see her as much as a guru as an elder sister, recalls, “We were allowed to do what we wanted but, *kisi ke saath jhoot nahi bolna* (never tell a lie). Don’t hurt anybody, don’t be a ‘separatist’. Be truthful to yourself. I remember once some money was left on the dining table. My brother took the money and bought some chocolate. My mother saw and asked who took this money. Then she said, ‘Okay, I am not going to drink water till I find out who took this money’. My brother was forced to confess.” This was Gandhism in action.

But then Suhita Thatte, Jhelum-tai’s childhood friend and a television actress, remembers the Vardes as Gandhians in thought and action: “As part of the Rashtra Seva Dal, they were involved in the freedom struggle... at different times, different places. They were all followers of Gandhiji and Sane Guruji.” Jhelum-tai agrees that the RSD had a deep impact on her parents, “They believed that there should be social equality; that was the basis of that institution and it was also the basis of the way I was brought up. There was no awareness of caste, there was no religious hierarchy, no male-female hierarchy. I was brought up to believe in equality and I lived it because I saw it in action around me.”

But perhaps the RSD found willing adherents in her parents, for Jhelum-tai recalls an incident that predates their encounter with the organisation. “When my mother was young, there was a slum near their house. Fire broke out

but my mother told me that she remembered how her father, my grandfather helped many of those families by giving them food. So, perhaps it was already in them somewhere, this belief in social justice. We imbibe what we see and so I often feel that it is the influence of the old that shapes the young and makes them aware of the need to work for the betterment of society. Then you do not have to preach democracy or liberalism; it grows as a natural process.”

To her mind, the pernicious awareness of caste is also a problem that is fostered unconsciously by the older generation.

“We learn by imitating. You do not even know how you resemble your parents because the process by which you acquire their beliefs, their prejudices and their values is unconscious. I didn’t know that I was different from others. In fact, when I fell in love and decided to marry this friend of mine (Avinash Paranjape), another friend of mine (a girl) asked me ‘kuthala aahey?’ I said, ‘He is not from Rashtra Seva Dal, he is not from the Socialist Party or anything else’. She repeated her question. I still did not understand her. I said, ‘He is from my college.’ So finally she said, ‘That’s not what I mean to ask. I was asking you about his caste.’ I replied, ‘I don’t know. I don’t know what my caste is so I don’t care to know what his caste is’.”

Like father, like daughter, Jhelum-tai got into political activism in her youth. In 1975, Indira Gandhi had imposed Emergency on the country. The nation was enraged and there were voices of dissent through its length and breadth. People from all walks of life began protesting against the autocratic manner of functioning of the government and the way in which Sanjay Gandhi seemed to have extra-constitutional authority. (Haath nahin hai panjaa hai, panje ke peechhe Sanjay hai, went a slogan of the time, referring to the hand that was

the Congress Party's electoral symbol; it's not the hand, it's a claw. And behind the claw is Sanjay Gandhi.) Sadanand Varde was among one of the first political detainees. Speaking about the period of fear, anger and dissent, Suhita says, "Those days we really didn't know whether our friends who went to jail would ever come out. Everybody was so passionate about fighting against the Emergency, doing whatever they could, gathering people in small secret groups and making them aware of what was happening—secret because they were not allowed to gather in public. We would pretend that there was some ritual reason for the meeting, we would say, 'Mala haldi kunkula zhaichai' (I have to go to a haldi-kunku ceremony), we would gather women and give them handbills to distribute."

Jhelum-tai was not to be left behind. Her husband, Avinash Paranjape, remembers Jhelum-tai's passionate involvement in the protests. "On the university campus, she would distribute pamphlets opposing the emergency and she went to jail." Jhelum-tai's cousin and friend, Padma Varde says, "It seemed as if my uncle, Professor Sadanand Varde, was always in jail. First when he was part of the freedom struggle. Then during the Emergency in 1975, he was in jail for 20 months. I think that was what fired Jhelum up and she also felt so committed to this whole thing about freedom of speech. But when push came to shove and she had to go to jail, she was brave enough, tough enough to take it on."

Jhelum-tai feels that it was a deeper commitment that led her to court arrest. "I believe in democracy, that is why I protested against Indira Gandhi because at that point of time, she was becoming autocratic and subverting the basic institutions of democracy," says Jhelum-tai. "I did not believe then in perfect democracy. That's something you can't have in government or in the

arts. But you must be able to take people along with you, you must build a consensus for democracy to function at all and Indira Gandhi had stopped trying.”

In the 1970s, Churchgate Station in South Mumbai opened out on to the street. “There was no subway and there was a lot of space outside Churchgate station where nine of us were standing, shouting slogans and distributing pamphlets.” The police swept down on them as political protests were forbidden. “But they could not touch us as there were no policewomen with them. They had to wait until the women constables arrived and we made the most of it while everyone was waiting.”

But the women constables did arrive and suddenly Jhelum-tai was being bundled into a police van. “I couldn’t believe I was being arrested for speaking my mind, for saying what I thought was wrong with the government,” she says now, her eyes sparkling. For a moment it is possible to see the nineteen-year-old on the verge of a political adventure. “But then I thought about Sr. Maria Rosa.”

Jhelum-tai remembers her school principal Sr. Maria Rosa at the Apostolic Carmel High school, in Bandra (West), who always said, “Don’t be afraid.” Jhelum-tai and her classmates were taught to be bold and say what they wanted to. “She was a very wise woman, if we could not say what we were thinking for some reason, she told us write it down and get it out of our systems. That was what I was doing at Churchgate Station that day. I was saying what I thought. I was getting it out of my system. And so there I was, the youngest of the nine women who were trying to change the world.”

Jhelum-tai’s father, Sadanand Varde was a member of the Praja Socialist Party and became a municipal corporator because he wanted to serve the people, but that cut no ice with the judge. All nine were given one-and-a-half months in jail. For

the first fifteen days they were at Arthur Road Jail and then they spent a month in Yerwada Jail, Pune. Arthur Road Jail was a memorable experience for Jhelum-tai but not for the reasons you might imagine. "I enjoyed life in jail. I never went in fear. No, that's not true. I did fear something: cockroaches."

Jhelum-tai made most of the experience in the jail. She says, "Somehow my nature is such and the way we were brought up was that whatever comes your way, face it the way it is. In fact my mother said that one of my aunts says that I am like a sponge, *udhar paani hai toh paani le liya*, *dudh hai toh dudh le liya* (she absorbs whatever she is offered)." It is this ability to adapt that helped her make best of the most trying situations. Even through the colourless monotony of jail, uncertainty over her father's release and treatment, Jhelum-tai soaked in the life and times of the inmates and their situations.

There was Meherunnissa, in a "white petticoat, white bra, with a beautiful figure and beautiful face, a mangalsutra chor (thief). She would stand in the line for morning matinee shows and would then steal the mangalsutras. She was very good at it but once in a way when she'd be tired of stealing she'd let herself be caught, so that she'd have a peaceful life in custody. She would be arrested and then be let off after a few days."

She recalls her interaction with other women with compassion and an understanding of the dire circumstances of the women put in jail. There was an old woman who ended up in jail for defending herself. Her friend had tried to rape her but her husband had intervened and was killed by the friend. The woman broke a bottle and stabbed the friend in defence. "I wondered how she came to be in jail and what she must have gone through, to be subjected to near-rape, to watch one's husband

die and to attack his killer. And then to find herself in jail?”

The third woman she recalls is a juvenile who got pregnant after she was raped and started stealing for a living. She had been given a sentence of seven years. “Her child was with her. There are many children in jail, born there if the woman is pregnant when she is arrested or brought there because there’s no one else to look after them. But this was a child who had been born out of rape so his mother didn’t care much for him. To me, he was just a baby and I enjoyed looking after him. I think his mother suddenly saw him through my eyes, as an innocent child and suddenly she took to him. These women taught me something about humanity, about another world and how its people must survive there. They are still a huge inspiration.”

For the next month of her sentence, she was shifted to Pune’s Yerwada Jail. The inmates were curious about her. Most inmates were in for petty crimes like theft, burglary etc; the idea of a political prisoner did not make sense to them. “I didn’t know how to explain it to them and then I hit upon a plan. I started telling them the story of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and let them discover how it was similar to the Indian scenario and then they understood,” says Jhelum-tai.

“She had inherited dance from me. It was all in the blood,” says Aai, Jhelum’s mother. Sudha Varde is a trained Bharatnatyam dancer and has done several folk performances for the Rashtra Seva Dal. This was the time when many dancers worked to help conscientise the people; like Zohra Sehgal and her sister Uzra Bhatt, for instance.

Jhelum-tai acknowledges her debt to her

mother in an interview on a website, narthaki.com: “One can see that inherent grace and poise...and a free spirit... she gets up spontaneously at any party when the music comes on and dances; she does that every year when it rains for the first time too, gets drenched dancing in the rains...I really am lucky, for I have inherited this natural grace and poise. And I must say her beautiful curvaceous bottom too... these three factors are a definite ‘add on’ for the Odissi dance style.”

Jhelum has not only inherited her mother’s exceptional dancing ability, but the trajectories of their dancing career are similar. Perhaps one of the few differences is that Sudha Varde never had the support of her family to pursue dance even as a passion. Just like Jhelum-tai, Aai got the opportunity to perform through Rashtra Seva Dal as Aai’s father would only let her dance for the cause of spreading nationalist and social messages through her art. The RSD had begun the Rashtra Seva Dal Kalapathak (RSDK) to spread awareness about their cause. (The word Kalapathak means ‘pathway for the arts’.) Suhita says, “The RSDK did programmes to educate people; programmes that were meant to highlight the history and beauty of India, such as Bharat Darshan. I remember there was Shiva Darshan which was on Chhatrapati Shivaji. So we’d give them a dose of history with a little tamasha to help it down.” This is much the same, one can see, as the golden age of Bollywood; in the 1950s, many filmmakers felt they had a message to give and they masked the message in entertainment. Aai began performing folk dances for RSDK.

The peak of Aai’s performing days came soon after the nation was freed. During the partition, the struggle of separation and displacement inspired poet Vasant Bapat to write ‘Jhelumche Aashru’ (Tears of the River Jhelum). As luck would have

it, Aai was chosen for the lead role of Jhelum, the river. It was through this performance that Aai was formally introduced to Bharat Natyam and began taking training in the oldest classical dance form of India. The show 'Jhelumche Aashru' became very successful. Around the same time Aai got pregnant with Tai. And so the baby from Maharashtra who would make an Oriya dance form popular across the country got the name of a river from the Punjab. Aai was able to continue her training in Bharat Natyam sometime after Jhelum-tai's birth. However, after a few years, due to various circumstances, Aai had to discontinue classical dance training. But the pieces of this broken dream were picked by Tai, who showed an inclination towards dancing at a very young age. Aai recalls the first time little Jhelum danced. "She was around two or two-and-a-half years old. We used to stay in our old house, where the doors of all the houses were kept open. We could see people passing by. We had a radio and Jhelum used to dance while listening to it. I was busy with household work. Jhelum's cousin also stayed with us. Once while Jhelum was dancing, several people gathered to watch. Her cousin shouted angrily at them."

Through Aai's constant encouragement, Jhelum-tai was able to explore her true love: dancing. Jhelum-tai says, "When I was nine years old, Aai put me in Raghavan Nair's Bharat Natyam class. But I did not enjoy it at all. I tried it for a full year, but could not find any creative satisfaction in the form. Aai did not force me; she let me quit. Then she tried Kathak. She put me in Sudarshan Dheer's class. Here again, I was not too happy. Poor Aai, she let me quit again. She was sad, but she was sure that she did not want to coerce me into doing something that she loved but had given up."

The same institution that brought her parents together and laid down the basis for their,

and Jhelum-tai's, libertarian views was also the stepping stone for her expression through dance. Again, Jhelum-tai followed her mother's footsteps as she gave her first performance for the RSDK, the folk dance group. "Every summer and Diwali vacation, up to my eleventh standard, we used to be travelling, doing folk dances across the country. This was a very good experience because we went to various places, we met different people," says Jhelum-tai. Aai recalls, "Jhelum's first performance was when she performed at an RSD programme named in a song written by Mr. Go. Nee. Dandekar, named Humba Horay."

Jhelum-tai's initiation into Odissi happened much later, after a lot of experimentation with other classical dance forms. Aai recalls, "I think she did not take to Kathak because of her poor eyesight." Jhelum-tai remembers, "Evening time was always playing time for me, so I did not like going for dance classes in the evenings." Even today, Jhelum-tai insists that children should be allowed to play. They should not be forced into joining dance class if they do not wish to.

Aai continues: "She performed quite late on a professional level. I wanted her to perform early. There was a renowned Kathak dancer who stayed opposite our home in Bandra. I don't remember his name but he told me not to worry. He said, 'I know that Jhelum is very talented, and I will do whatever I can for her.'"

The National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) used to conduct various dance workshops. Then NCPA had invited the Odissi dancer Kelucharan Mohapatra to conduct a workshop on Odissi. Jhelum-tai had seen him perform when she was on tour with the RSDK and she remembered the experience vividly. "I happened to see Kelucharan Mohapatra teaching in Cuttack at the Kala Vikas Kendra," she says. "I was immensely

fascinated by that style. And I said, 'I want to learn this.' Also, around that time in Mumbai, Sanjukta Panigrahi was performing, and seeing her dance only confirmed my decision."

At this time, she wasn't contemplating a life in dance. Odissi was going only to be a hobby. Being a multi-talented person, Jhelum-tai was for sometime at a crossroads before fully immersing herself into Odissi. "I was good at Maths and Science. I was also very good at drawing and painting. So, my mother wished that I should go to the Sir J.J. School of Arts, but, I still remember after my eleventh standard I found a different Maths book and I had solved all the sums after my exams because I loved Maths. I decided that I would do Maths or Science."

It was also difficult to find an Odissi teacher in Mumbai then. Her father was a professor and she did not wish to burden her family with paying for her tuition. She decided that she would finish her education, work and fund her own dance classes. After her M.Sc., she worked at Hindustan Lever and gave mathematics tuitions simultaneously. She then taught math at M.M.K. (Mithibai Motiram Kundnani) college to the class 11 & 12. She came to know about Guru Shankar Behera, the only Odissi teacher in Mumbai. She began to take classes in May 1977, at the age of twenty-three, and slowly found that this was her form.

"I was happy to be dancing but when I took up Odissi seriously; Aai's joy knew no bounds. She would find time through all her work and do anything to help me further my passion for Odissi. Since Jhelum-tai was an extremely gifted dancer, Guru Shankar Behera asked her to stop teaching math and focus only on Odissi. She still remembers how she told Guru Shankar Behera, "Dance mujhe paisa nahin dega" (Dance will not give me money). After learning with Guru Shankar Behera for a

few years, she got to know through her dear friend Smita Patil that Kelucharan Mohapatra was in town. Jhelum auditioned in front of Protima Bedi and after that before Kelubabu himself. Jhelum-tai says, “I was lucky to have a Guru like Shankar Behera. He let me go and learn with Kelucharan Mohapatra as he knew that Kelubabu was the best. If you are a good student, some teachers tend to hold on to you but that is not what Guru Shankar Behera did.”

Working with Kelubabu was a league shift. “He actually sculpted our bodies, every move, every posture had to be perfect, he was a task master,” she says. Jhelum-tai trained with Guruji for ten years (1980 to 1990) without a break. But then Guruji had an open heart surgery. So the training after that was not as rigorous and continuous as the previous years. But it went on till his death in 2004. “It was an association of 24 wonderful years”, she says. Either she would stay at his place in Cuttack or he would take classes at the NCPA in Mumbai where he was often Guru-in-Residence. When she would stay at Guruji’s house in Cuttack with other girls, they would dance for twelve to fourteen hours a day. Jhelum-tai talks passionately about the guru-shishya parampara (the teacher-student relationship): “In dance or music, you build a personal relationship with your guru.”

Jhelum-tai soon became one of Guruji’s favourite students. Like most classical arts training of those times, Guruji too was extremely hard on his students. “Initially I was shit-scared all the time, because he was a very angry person. As he grew older, his anger subsided. But initially, if we went wrong, whatever paas mein hai woh fek-ke marte the, aur paas mein hai toh wahi se marte the (he would throw whatever was within his reach at us, and if we were closer, he would hit us with whatever came to hand). Gradually their relationship evolved and Guruji became a father figure to her. “In about

four to five years I was as close to him as I was with my father. My father and he were of the same age. My father was born in 1925 and Guruji was born in 1926.” However this close bond wasn’t taken too kindly by Jhelum-tai’s peers. “There was one year where his (Guruji’s) daughter-in-law was pregnant, and they needed a third person and during that one year he must have called me five or six times, just at the last moment, ‘Tum ajao, ye karna hai’ (Come along, this has to be done) and I would rush. The other students began to ask: ‘Why only Jhelum? Why not one of us?’ So I asked him, ‘Guruji why do you call me only? There are these three others from Mumbai, why don’t you call them?’ And then he answered, ‘According to me, you are the best amongst those, and more than that, you adjust to any situation, I will tell you there is just one room and you, me and my son have to sleep in the same room and you will be ready to sleep, if I tell you we cannot sleep tonight, you will do that.’ He knew I was ready to do this because of my behaviour at his workshops and at his home. I would try and adjust with everybody. And he said, ‘Also, I know your family, I tell you to come and you will leave your family and come, and they won’t misunderstand. I know your husband well, I know your son well.’”

Such was her devotion towards Guruji, that she took every word of his as a command. Though there were students who would disagree quietly about Guruji’s choice of selecting a performer for a show or a way of choreography, Jhelum-tai never questioned his decision. In her eyes, Guruji was always right. Whether one likes it or not, dance is expressed through the body. Thus a dancer may be judged not on her skill or her understanding of her art but on the basis of quite extraneous characteristics such as her physical beauty or even the colour of her skin or her bodily proportions. Dance critics of the time were quite unashamed of

referring to a dancer's 'dusky beauty' or her 'lissome beauty', coded ways of talking not about the art but about the artiste's body.

Suhita Thatte recalls an incident when she feels wronged by Guruji, when he took a decision to keep her out of a performance for those reasons. "According to me, everyone should be performing. It's the same work. According to me and most of the students, I was one of the better dancers. I would say, one of the best dancers. And here was another girl who was very tall, who was good looking. She was in the central position as she was tall and because visually, she would not fit in with the other students. So here we were: two students who didn't fit. And see how it worked differently for us. She was given the central position and I? Guruji called me separately and said, 'Aap mote ho na, isiliye fit nahin hote' (You are fat and hence do not fit in the group). I felt terrible. I felt: am I good dancer or am I not a good dancer? If I am a good dancer, I should be part of the performance."

Suhita expected Jhelum-tai to agree with her. However, "Jhelum was my teacher and my friend and as Guruji's favourite student, she should have said something on my behalf. In her mind Guruji was right in his own way and now at this distance, I myself feel, 'Theek hai, nahin liya us waqt, kya farak pada' but when you are part of it and going through that experience it feels terrible. How can she remain silent? How can she do that to me? She should have said something. But then that's Jhelum. If Guruji had said something like that to her, she would have taken it."

Perhaps here is the secret of her 'atheism'. "My first guru, Shankar Behera, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and my student Vishnu, all three ardent Jagannath devotees, tease me when I say I am an atheist. These three men have in their different ways all said to me, 'You say you are an

atheist, you say you don't pray, you say you're a non-believer and all that. But the way you look at your dance, the way you practice your dance, it is clear that dance is your God, and your faith is in dance. So you're very religious."

It could well be said too that her Guruji became her God. Jhelum-tai does not precisely deny this when she says, "My husband used to tease me like, 'Arre Guruji tar tuza dev aahe, jaa deva kade' (Guruji is your God, so go, I won't say anything). And I am an atheist; we don't have a God or anything in the house. Even when my father-in-law was alive I would never do a namaskar, may be only during some occasions. But after my very first workshop with Guruji at his home, when I came home, I had changed so much that for few days, every morning I would do a namaskar in front of my father-in-law's photograph. And my husband would say, 'Geli kamaatun geli' (She's totally lost it)."

Jhelum-tai tries to explain her relationship with her Guruji, "If Guruji had told me to jump into the water, I would have jumped...because he gave me my purpose in life."

There is an RSD connection to almost every important aspect of Jhelum-tai's life. It was at RSD that Tai met Smita Patil and they both hit it off instantly. Tai fondly recalls, "When I was in class five, the RSD would have camps called shramdaan. It means apne shram ka donation (donating your labour). You visit a village, clean it, dig a well there, or improve the roads. That was shramdaan."

Jhelum recalls vividly the day she first met Smita, as she calls her. "We were in class five or six. We were seated in the same room with our beds were opposite each other. The rivaaz (tradition) in the camp was to sit on your bed and introduce

yourself to the person in the next bed. So Smi and I had to introduce ourselves to each other. And when she said she is Smita Patil, I asked 'Oh, are you Anusha Patil's younger sister?' That was the first conversation we had."

Physical distance barely came in the way of their blossoming friendship. Jhelum says, "She was based in Pune. However that wasn't an issue. We had so many conversations in the form of letters. And after her father became a Congress minister, they moved to Mumbai. They were living in Tardeo. She was in Elphinstone College and later in Xavier's. When I was in Ruparel, she used to come over there and we used to study together, though our subjects were different. Our friendship just grew."

What made them bond so instantaneously?
"Our social thinking was very similar. We had no sense of hierarchy in life. The 'I am bigger than you' way of thinking was absent in both of us. You are older then you will behave in a particular way. That is okay. But the younger person can be definitely brighter than the older one. That's what we both believed."

Both Smi and Jhelum performed for the RSDK. They matched each other equally as dancers as well. They shared similar dancing strengths. The RSD and the RSDK were a part of Thatte's childhood too though she was six years junior to Tai. She spent her post teenage years at Tai's house and remembers Tai's and Smita's friendship. She recalls Tai and Smita performing together. She says, "We always remember the time when both of them danced so beautifully together. Even those days they used to play the role of male dancers. They both could match up with other male dancers. It was great fun watching them dance."

Tai and Smita would share the smallest as well as the deepest experience in their lives even in their adulthood. Tai recalls how Smita would tell her about the little joys of pregnancy. She says,

“When she was pregnant, there would a phone call every day. However, at that time Guruji’s workshop was going on and I couldn’t visit her every day. So she would tell me everything—the baby moved, this happened, that happened—on a daily basis.”

Sadly, their friendship was brought to a sudden cruel end due to Smita Patil’s untimely death. It was to be one of the hardest times Tai would have to go through. Yet she managed to remain stoic through these trying times. Her cousin Padma speaks about Tai’s inner strength, “Unfortunately Smita died very young. And I must say she (Jhelum-tai) was very brave during that time as it must have been an extremely traumatic time for her. But she internalized her grief. She rarely even spoke about it.”

The intense emotions of loss and bereavement that Tai felt helped her evolve as a dancer. Thatte says the ordeal contributed to Tai’s abhinaya. She says, “I remember, after Smita’s death there was a performance. And it had been quite some time since I had watched Jhelum perform. She had not cried much, she was holding herself together. And it was her first performance after Smita’s death and I saw her breaking through (her barriers in dancing) during that performance. I would say that it was a breakthrough for her acting ability.”

Looking back Jhelum-tai has reached a place of higher perception and understanding. She has made peace with her loss. Tai says, “Sometimes I feel, she died, *achcha hua* (good for her), because she would not have been able to cope with the industry. Initially, she didn’t understand hierarchy. Smita had not only become a film actress, she had become a star. On one of the sets, the junior makeup artist was from our RSD days. So when he came and said, ‘Madam, shot is ready,’ Smita recognized him and cried out, ‘Hailaa Ashok!’ and slapped him on his back in a very friendly manner. ‘Madam’ didn’t realize what was

to happen because of what she did. People started asking him 'Kya samajhta hai tu, kya maska lagaata hai tu madam ko?' (What do you think; you can gain personal favours by acting friendly with Madam?) The guy needed to speak to Smita but didn't know where to meet her. So he came to my mother's house and told her to tell Smita not to recognise him in public."

Tai had grown wiser after losing her closest friend. But she will forever hold her memories that she shared with Smita close to her heart. In Smita's memory, Tai named her dance school Smitalay. "Smitalay means the house of Smita just like Vidyalaya means the house of knowledge." says Jhelum-tai.

It has to rain for the rainbow to come out in the sky. But this was not an easy period. First, her best friend died. Then Jhelum-tai suffered a slipped disc. Tai recalls, "In 1988, I got a slipped disc problem. In fact, I was touring America and it was a solo tour for three months but unfortunately I had to cancel the last segment of seven to eight performances. I was on painkillers when I was completing the tour but the doctor advised me to not dance as it was dangerous for my health."

"I would wonder what I would do if I weren't able to go back to dance," says Jhelum-tai. However she was not the one to be defeated so easily, especially when it came to looking at a future without her deepest passion, Odissi. Thatte talks excitedly about this period being the seed for the idea of teaching Odissi, "That is when she started teaching! That is how she began teaching! I will not dance but I want to teach I don't want to forget my dance."

And thus was born Smitalay, Jhelum-tai's school of Odissi dance. Padma speaks about the change, "I think after she started Smitalay she was able to channelize that grief into something that makes sense, you know? When you lose a close

friend, you can't keep talking about it, what do you keep saying? You do something in her memory, which I think has given her a lot of sustenance, a way to handle her grief."

Jhelum-tai's objective behind starting the school was clear. She says, "My first thing is to teach Odissi in Mumbai, Maharashtra and make as many people as possible to learn. So, that's my basic thing of teaching classical Odissi, making people understand it and then move away from the traditional fold."

She was awarded the Kumar Gandharva Award for innovative choreography in Odissi and for propagating and popularizing the Odissi form throughout Maharashtra. Being an artist first, the administrative nature of running Smitalay drains her. Padma says, "There have been times, you know, when she gets frustrated with the administrative stuff for Smitalay. Then there is a sense of frustration and she says 'I think I will take a year's sabbatical', but that doesn't last."

What if numbers start taking shape on the illuminating stage? What if arithmetic and geometric progressions dance on the rhythm of music? What if mathematical treatises become experiential knowledge and not informative baggage? All these happen in Leelavati, the Odissi dance ballet choreographed by Jhelum Paranjape.

At a Math Olympiad, she was given a Sanskrit shloka from the Leelavati, a treatise on mathematics, written in the twelfth century by Bhaskaracharya. Later she kept thinking about it and came up with a complete ballet depicting mathematics. That ballet was named Leelavati.

This foundation of math echoes in her profound understanding of music and dance.

Beats, rhythm and counts in dance are all about the sequence and progression of mathematics. Some steps may start on the count of x, some dancer may perform only at a count of y and so on. Jhelum-tai's excellent command over mathematics and geometry makes her teaching and choreography accurate and unique.

Her youthful exuberance plays out while she talks about similarities in math and dance, and says, "both have facts and figures!" She explains how math helps to visualize, choreograph and execute dance. Thatte says it is Tai's pragmatic approach in constructing dance movements that makes her stand apart amongst other choreographers, "Being a mathematics student she has a mathematical mind and this logic shows up in the way she choreographs. Most dancers work with their emotions or with the visual. But not her. In Jhelum's case, there is logic to every movement. I have seen so many dancers now; I see that logic in very few dancers."

"See if you are sitting in chouk [the basic position from which all movement begins] and you have to shift weight from one foot to the other, the logical thing would be to shift your weight from your right foot so that your left foot is free, and you can start the next movement on the left foot. You would think this is a logical thing but not everyone thinks that way. Most dancers seem to be guided by emotion and by their sense of what they want to do rather than what the body can do in a situation." Jhelum-tai's innovative choreography not only incorporates the mathematical understanding of the dance or its conception, but it is consciously tinged with linguistic diversity. Jhelum-tai is passionately keen about bringing Odissi to Mumbai and making as many people as possible learn and excel. "But you cannot learn something until it gets you in the heart," says Jhelum-tai. "You must

be able to understand it in your own language.” So, to popularise Odissi and to make it a ‘heart-experience’ rather than just a dance form, Jhelum-tai has performed and taught Odissi in multiple languages, including Hindi, English and Marathi. Jhelum-tai says, “It is difficult to ask people to accept a new dance form in a language that they do not understand either. My initial innovation was to use the Marathi language because once you understand the language, then you understand the dance better. I want to take Odissi to where I live.”

Beautiful dance movements are a result of equal and effective use of the intellect and the body. Each person has a different body. Tai looks at every individual according to their body. The balance, the meaning and the beauty are accentuated when the body has been trained and when its particular qualities are recognised and emphasised. Says Ankur Ballal, who has been studying with Jhelum-tai for more than a decade, “Jhelum-tai is aware of how each individual student’s body is an asset. So I believe, if a short person sits completely she or he might look a little odd. Tai makes sure that every step is taught differently to different individuals so that the beauty of dance and the person reaches its peak. Moreover, she somehow manages to convince them to bring a certain dedication to dance. When the students have conviction, they perform in communion, with completeness. She makes it a point that anybody can dance. Boys can dance, if taught appropriately. That is the reason why there are now quite a few male Odissi dancers in Mumbai.

“As a teacher, she is tough. She gets angry with a person to make him/her better, to make him/her perfect.” Ballal says. He continues with a sparkle in his eyes, “She is a teacher, she is a guru.

There are some incense sticks whose fragrance spreads far, Jhelum-tai is like that”.

Ballal came to know about Jhelum-tai for the first time through the show *Baaje Paayal* which was organised by the famous Kathak dancer Kumar Dogra. Jhelum-tai had choreographed the title song for the show and Ankur had seen her name in the credit roll. His mama (maternal uncle) was a singer and used to perform live music for Jhelum-tai's performances. Seeing Ankur's inclination towards dance, his mama asked him: “Why don't you go to Jhelum-tai to learn dance?” Was that the life changing question? Not quite. Ballal went to meet Jhelum-tai and she asked whether he had seen any Odissi performances before. It was 1996 and the Rashtra Seva Dal was celebrating Vasant Bapat's seventy-fifth birthday, so Jhelum-tai asked him to come and watch the performance. Ballal went and watched the performance at the Ravindra Natya Mandir and saw Odissi danced to a Marathi song, which got him extremely excited about Odissi.

Besides mathematics and language, music is the third dimension of her passion for Odissi. “The music of Odissi is a blend of Hindustani and Carnatic,” Tai says. “For a lay person who just wants to enjoy the music it is like a blend of the North and the South.”

Both the students and teachers at Smitalay are constantly astonished by Jhelum-tai, in her avatar as a teacher. What makes a passionate dancer and an innovative choreographer a unique teacher? “She never teaches half-heartedly. She believes in giving and sharing knowledge.” says Sumedh Pawar, Jhelum-tai's student who is himself a teacher to young Mumbaikars says that he follows the same principle of Jhelum-tai. Her words, “The satisfaction that one can derive on sharing one's knowledge cannot be expressed in words,” are ingrained in his mind and he experiences the same

while teaching youngsters.

“I remember once there was a girl who had a giraffe on her t-shirt and so I invented a giraffe, the way it walks, with a mudra and then the kids were thrilled,” Jhelum-tai says. It is possible to see in this instance—and they can be multiplied—a teacher who has not confined herself to the traditional forms of Odissi but who is willing to try and reinvent it in order to reach out. If dance is a form of communication, then Jhelum-tai’s giraffe is an evocative example of how to teach kids.

— Apoorva Rao with inputs from Lisha D’souza, Mimansha Punamia, Parth Vyas, Shloka Patwardhan, Mitali Puthli, Shenoya Fernandes, Sharvari Prabhu and Geetika Shrivastava, Rasika Patil

Chapter 4

Dolly Thakore

There are many ways in which you could tell Dolly Thakore's story. You could tell her story as a woman on her feet.

"Right until my eighth month of pregnancy, I wore high heels," she says. And then at another point, in another story, she laughs as she says: "Oh yes, my heels were nibbled by bandicoots." She was barefoot and pregnant but that didn't stop her: "I travelled from Trivandrum to Mumbai in bare feet." You could perhaps also tell Dolly Thakore's story as that of a woman who was made for fame. Here's Thakore on the applause that rings in her ears still, a possible beginning to a life in front of the arc-lights: "I must have been about six years old and there was a Republic Day Function at the Air Force Camp in Palam, Delhi. I was part of some kind of performance. The curtain opened and my sari did too! Everybody applauded and laughed. I could hear it, a non-stop stream of giggles, even after the curtains closed. It's odd how what was so embarrassing then is so funny now. Though I made a fool of myself, weirdly enough, that applause is still ringing in my ears and that has made me want to be applauded right through my life."

Then there is her recounting of how during her eight years as a newsreader on Doordarshan, she often did not have to pay taxi fares or for soft drinks. She was instantly recognized, and this meant that children flocked to her for autographs, and colleges sought her out to judge their events.

Or maybe you could just simply tell the story of Dolly Thakore—the artiste, the single mother, the friend, the indefatigable spirit—of herself, of her time and of the use she made of the resources that were made available to her at the time. Says actor Pooja Bedi of Thakore: "Dolly's the kind of person who is all heart. Her heart is open, her home is open, her kitchen is open, her doors are open. She's an incredibly loving and giving person."

Back to the beginning then.

Dolly Rawson, as she was then known, was one of four kids. She was an Air Force child and this, she says, may have defined the kind of person she became. "I mapped the country when I was very young. My father's occupation gave us the opportunity to see many new places. After every three years, he would be posted to a different city. The Air Force literally and metaphorically gave me wings and made me a dreamer."

Where other children with similar backgrounds talk of the difficulties of adjusting to new schools and new friends, Dolly Rawson looked forward to change. "I was psychologically conditioned to want change every three years. Until the age of eight, I was left in Delhi with my grandparents and my aunt, Rani Solomon, who I love very much. She is ninety years old today and the most giving, caring, and the only University graduate of that age.

"I was pampered by my Nana and Nani and indulged by Rani Auntie and that made me what my mother called ziddi (stubborn). But I became a confident revolutionary and it made me the person I am today. From my mother I inherited my sense of cleanliness and tidiness and I owe my obstinate determination to my father," she says.

But it was not as if the young Dolly moved on after every three years and forgot. She seemed to know instinctively that power rests not in what you know but who you know. And so each new move brought new friends, but they didn't replace the ones she had made before; instead the circle of her acquaintance just grew larger.

Her sister, Esmie Jacobs, says of her: "Where I was the quiet one, Dolly would always make her presence felt no matter where she was. I think that's the reason people love her; because she is so good at keeping in touch with every single

person she meets. She has got a vast circle of friends, in India and abroad."

Even the name Rawson has a romantic history to it.

"My paternal grandfather was from Peshawar. He fell in love with a woman from another tribe and they were not allowed to marry. So they eloped to Burma and got married there. My grandfather died there. But this is all hearsay. I was told that he might have been bitten by a cobra or a jackal, the details are not very clear. My pregnant grandmother got into one of the caravans that were coming to India. She collapsed outside Palwal, which is thirty miles from Delhi and delivered my father there at a Christian missionary school or hospital. She too died after a month and my father was orphaned. He was sort of adopted by a missionary called Miss Rawson. And so Dawood Roshan Khan became David Rawson."

Esmie Jacobs tells of their father's humble origins. "He dreamed of becoming a pilot. He dreamed perhaps of eating a whole melon or a whole banana. He was an orphan and had been deprived of all the daily joys of life that we take for granted. Our origins were humble and we grew up listening to stories of my father's tough life. I think that's what made Dolly so willing to reach out to others in distress."

However, it was not easy to have a confident revolutionary as a daughter.

"My mother would nag me constantly: 'Chapati banao, bhaji kato' (Make chapattis, cut those vegetables), and I resented that. My mother believed that housework was a girl's destiny. I didn't agree. I was the eldest and I had the highest degree of stubbornness," says Thakore. "I knew I was not going to let my world revolve around in-laws and kids. I wanted to do something. I wanted my life to be heard."

After college at Miranda House, Delhi, Dolly found herself a job as a sub-editor with the British Information Services. An incident stands out in her memory. "I was asked to take a young visiting colleague from London sightseeing. While I was showing him around, I overheard some men talking. They were the lumpen elements who I heard murmuring under their breath quite clearly saying, 'Gore ke saath achcha lagta hai?' (Do you like being with a white man?) That sentence left a deep impact on my soul. I decided never to be seen with a white man."

That wasn't the only uncomfortable moment, recalls Dolly. "The British High Commission was opposite the Ashoka Hotel. We often celebrated pay day with a coffee at the only five-star hotel in Delhi at the time. The darbans outside the hotel were well-built Sardars with huge twirling moustaches who leered at every woman entering the hotel. So one grew up having trivial complexes."

Dolly's work with the BBC Overseas Services took her to London. She found herself among a group of like-minded people. Among other things, they started Hindi classes for those Indians who wanted to learn the language as well. "A chance encounter at the British High Commissioner's garden party in Delhi led to my meeting the head of the BBC World Service from Bush House, London, who assured me that if I ever visited Britain there would be a job waiting for me," says Thakore.

While working with the BBC in London, she met like minded Indians who among other things were keen to propagate Hindi amongst the Indian community. They used to hold Hindi classes at the Indian High Commission, which happened to be in the same premises as Bush House . They even brought out the first Hindi magazine, Pravasini for overseas Indians. Life was busy, life was creative, life was good, recalls Thakore.

It was during her time in London, that the young Dolly met Dilip Thakore, who was studying law at Lincoln's Inn and began to date each other. Dolly Rawson, who didn't like wearing mini-skirts, had to make a concession for Dilip, who believed that she should show off her "nice legs". And so she wore miniskirts on Saturdays on their visit to the Town Hall Library.

Four years later they were both back in Bombay and decided to get married. They were able to rent an apartment in Cuffe Parade, for six months, but not before Dilip flaunted his British passport in front of the Parsi landlord.

But marriage was not a bed of roses for the young couple. Dolly says, "Dilip and I were the same age and Dilip was being lionised by the girls of St Xavier's college. He played the guitar and serenaded the girls with King of the Road. He was 'London-returned', a handsome young man and a barrister to boot. With all this attention, Dilip resented being married and he made me sign an open marriage contract, which said we would have independent holidays, independent friends and we would each pay exactly half of what we spent in running our home." She recalls an incident when the director Shyam Benegal and his wife Nira had come over for dinner. Dilip had bought a packet of salt. He threw it on the table and said, 'Old fruit, you owe me six paise.' But I was old fashioned and marriage implied traditional values."

"Dilip never picked or dropped me, to work or anywhere else. We did attend International Film festivals that were held at the Shanmukhananda Hall. We had a scooter, and if the scooter stalled at the traffic light he would insist I kick-start the scooter—and this would be on Mohammed Ali Road where there were few women to be seen. If I hesitated he would say, 'What's wrong? Why can't you start the scooter?'" Her confidence was taking

a beating and she often felt belittled by his attitude. Their marriage only lasted fifteen months.

But Dolly Thakore was already being recognized as a broadcaster. She had already graced the cover of Femina magazine and had her own radio show, Women's World, which used to air every Sunday afternoon. "That meant I was already known as Dolly Thakore and so I kept the surname. It was a practical choice. After all, it had become the name by which I had begun to get recognition for myself and for my work in Mumbai."

Thakore already understood the effect of names. When she was in London she was invited by the Central Office of Information to translate their London News Letter into Hindi and broadcast it to Mauritius, Fiji, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and Chennai. "When I announced London News Letter read by Dolly Rawson, their programming head immediately interrupted and said they needed an Indian name to be associated with these broadcasts. In about thirty seconds, I came up with the name Kavita Mehta. In school I had known a very pretty girl called Kavita Rohatgi, at present Kavita Nagpal; she's a drama critic with Asian Age now, I think. I didn't want to use her entire name, so I chose Mehta as my last name; it seemed like a common enough surname.

Dolly says, "When I got back to India and I was recording for All India Radio, I opened the door to the Station Director's office to ask 'Girishbhai, woh recording kitne baje hai?' (Girishbhai, what time is the recording?). The man sitting opposite him said, 'Yeh to Kavita Mehta ki awaaz hai.' (That's Kavita Mehta's voice). He was the Station Director of Radio Mauritius and recognized my voice."

Theatre had always been an integral part of Thakore's life—right from her college days through her years in London. However, it was only when she met Alyque Padamsee on her return to India that she came into her own as an actor. "For what it's worth, I suppose this was a defining moment, or a series of defining moments in my life," Dolly Thakore says.

Thakore and Padamsee attended the Asian Advertising Congress in Delhi in November 1970. She was as a delegate, sponsored by Alyque Padamsee. As advertising professionals, they had worked together earlier. But it was in Delhi that the chemistry between them became apparent. She needs hardly add that at the time Alyque was married to the redoubtable theatre person, Pearl Padamsee. Soon Padamsee left Pearl and moved in with Thakore.

Alyque Padamsee says: "At that time she was not in my theatre group. But theatre was a large part of my life. Anyone who becomes a part of my life gets pulled into theatre. She was one of the first newsreaders in the country and had a great fan following. People loved her."

Thakore's life in theatre had begun early. While still at Miranda House, she acted in Tagore's play *Malini*. She did it with Joy Michael's Little Theatre Group. She (Michael) was an important theatre person in Delhi. For lack of a venue, they staged the play on Michael's verandah. During her college days, Thakore says she also shared the stage with Amitabh Bachchan in the Miranda House annual play. So it was natural that she would gravitate towards theatre when the opportunity arose in London.

In London, Dolly Thakore worked with Zohra Segal, Saeed Jaffrey, Rani Dubey, Vinod Pandey, Devi Shah, Shivendra Sinha, and Kunwar Sinha in some plays. "There was no

money involved, just the love of theatre. In the late 1960s, theatre in London was different. There were audiences for experiment, and for plays from other countries though the mainstream hardly noticed. We may not have produced theatrical masterpieces, but we did a fair job of staging a number of indigenous plays,” she says. Among these were *Shunya* directed by Vinod Pandey. “Ours was not like the theatre group run by Alyque in Bombay. Alyque’s group was well established and highly regarded in the city. In London, most of the actors were struggling to make a living and we often found ourselves as part of the crowd in British television serials.”

On her return to Mumbai, Dolly was back on stage in months, this time in partnership with Arun Sachdev who was very active in theatre in at that time. They worked on Asif Currimbhoy’s *Thorns on a Canvas*. Then there was a production of Joe Orton’s *What the Butler Saw* at the Palm Beach School on Warden Road. It was during this time that Alyque was doing Girish Karnad’s *Tughlaq*, which everyone rushed to see. Meanwhile, Thakore had already joined the advertising profession as well as begun work at All India Radio.

“My first Alyque Padamsee production was *Mira* by Gurcharan Das. I played Udabai alongside actors like Zafar Hai, Nirmala Mathan, Dina Pathak and Homi Daruwala. After that, Alyque produced Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* in which I played the role of twenty-six-year-old Lulu. The role needed me to wear a short skirt and a tank top, and this was way back in 1971-’72.” (Incidentally, she reminds us, ten years ago Thakore’s son Quasar hosted a festival of plays directed by his group, QTP, which included a re-staging of *Birthday Party*, directed by her son’s friend, Arghya Lahiri. Thakore says, “This time, I played the old lady and Delnaz Irani played Lulu.

Ashwin Mushran, now in films and ads, was in it too. Aakarsh Khurana played Stanley, a part originally played by Vijay Crishna.” Life comes full circle in many ways. The other plays in which she acted with Alyque included Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee’s *Inherit the Wind* and Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But Thakore’s favourite remains her role as Linda Loman, the wife of Willy Loman, a role played by Alyque in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*—a play that ran successfully for years.

Padamsee is all praise for Thakore’s talent. “Dolly is an actress in her own right now. You can’t become an actress without having an innate talent. I have had many actresses and they were quite good, but they were not good enough. Dolly was good enough to be on her own and she has done many plays since then.”

While they had a successful partnership on-stage and off-stage, Thakore and Alyque’s relationship had always been slightly highly strung, erupting every now and then. They had a child together, Quasar. The end of their relationship was abrupt. “He left just like that but I was determined I was not going to drink or take drugs as many women do when they are dumped. I’m proud to say I never did any of that. I even gave up smoking four years later,” says Thakore.

During this time Thakore’s friend Protima Bedi came to the rescue. She moved in with Thakore for a while and helped her right through this negative phase, in her own inimitable style. “She let me mope around for a week and then she put her foot down and demanded that I get back to some semblance of normalcy. I had got used to being driven around in Alyque’s car so she would take me for drives to Marine Drive and make such outrageous comments about the men and their cars that I had to laugh.”

Dolly Thakore may have wounds she does not speak about from her relationships but she is sure that there are wonderful things that came out of her time with Padamsee: a renewed romance with theatre and her son Quasar.

With Alyque out of the picture early on, Thakore took on the responsibility of parenting Quasar singlehandedly. Quasar knows all that she has done and all that she has given up so that she could bring him up properly. "I am very much a mama's boy," he says.

Quasar was exposed to great art and great theatre from the very beginning. While the little boy Quasar hated every new painting that his mother bought, because it meant less space for him to play ball, the grown man Quasar appreciates the exposure immensely. Quasar admits, "I have learnt and my sensibilities and sensitivities to art have grown because of the pictures on my mom's walls."

His childhood was often confusing and at times complex. Quasar says he did not have access to his father. He was on his own a lot. His mother decided it would be best if he were sent away to a boarding school, which would provide a healthy, stable and nurturing environment. So she zeroed in on Rishi Valley Education Centre, a residential school based on the philosopher J Krishnamurthy's ideology and teachings.

Thakore recalls, "When Quasar was growing up, there was this television programme called The Wonder Kid. There were latchkey kids in the series. At that time Quasar was six or seven and I used to take him to every meeting, every art gallery, and every rehearsal. He didn't mind the rehearsals so much. But my Laadli and Alert India or the India Sponsorship Committee meetings and brand meetings were another matter. He would naturally get bored at these meetings and I remember him

saying to me once in all earnestness, 'Mama, can't I become a latchkey baby?' I did the next best thing. I put my latchkey baby into a boarding school."

Quasar says, "It was hard. We don't have a conventional relationship because I grew up completely in boarding school. I used to cry a lot, like a Bollywood scene. But it was a big decision to send me there. I am glad she did that."

Today Quasar is close to his mother. He says he tries to come and see her at least once a week but that's never enough. Sometimes he ends up seeing her once in ten days, but that is also because either she is travelling or he is busy. When they are together they share personal and professional bits of information.

With Thakore as a mother, there is never a dull moment. According to Quasar, Thakore hates the nitty-gritties of cooking, not the cooking itself, but the cutting of vegetables, the putting of things away in the fridge, all its non-creative aspects. "But I think she enjoys trying to cook for me," he says. "There would be times when I would come home and the house would be filled with smoke because she had forgotten to turn the gas off. She would start cooking, get a phone call and get busy with that. After two hours or so, when she would smell something strange, she would be like 'Aww, I forgot to turn it off.'"

Once for a project Dolly got her hair coloured. "She asked me, 'Would you like to get that too?' and I was like, 'No, I'm okay.' She said, 'Tattoo, then?' And again, I'm like: 'No...you know me. I am exactly the opposite. I am the not-cool son.'"

He recalls another incident: "I was sitting at the dining table and writing something. It must have been around seven in the evening...and my mother walks in, comes near me, smiles, looks at my face intently and asks, 'Is Quasar at home?' I was like, 'I am here'. Just because I hadn't shaved,

she pretended she couldn't recognize me." Then there are times Quasar says he will call his mother and say "Hey Ma, what's up?" And she will ask, 'Who is this?' and I get irritated and ask, 'Who else calls you Ma?'"

Thakore tells the story of Quasar's birth as she remembers it. Right opposite Metro shoes in Colaba Causway were the offices of Blaze Advertising. Once a week, Blaze would have special film screenings for the advertising heavies. A very pregnant Thakore and Alyque went for one such screening, post which Thakore handed over a pair of shoes for repair at Metro (which the bandicoots in Kovalam had chewed up) and then went with Alyque to Pradeep and Shandana Khaitan's home for a potluck dinner—a pretty common practice of theirs. Once there, she decided it would be fun to play a prank on Alyque. She went to the loo and came out saying, "Alyque, something is happening." Alyque walked her to the nearby Jaslok Hospital. Thakore's water bag broke in the hospital's lift and Quasar was soon in his proud mother's arms.

One month later, Quasar was on his way with his mother to Pune to help his mother fulfill a commitment made previously. "During my pregnancy I had promised to compere a show in Pune for the Army. It was scheduled for four to six weeks after the birth of the baby. I set only one condition: that the organizers had to provide me with a tent at the venue since I was sure my baby was going to go with me. While I was on stage, Quasar was with the maid, but every hour-and-a-half I got off the stage and went into the tent to breastfeed him. No one noticed."

Quasar has been surrounded by theatre personalities from the very beginning. In fact, there are not many who can claim to have been taken to the loo, or have had their diapers changed by theatre greats. Recounts Thakore, "Once at the

Prithvi [Theatre], Quasar wanted to go to the loo, so Shabana Azmi took him. He was two or three years old at that time.” More recently, Thakore heard from Lubna Arif that her father, the famous playwright, Javed Siddiqui had changed Quasar’s nappies at one point. “There used to be script sessions at home, but I had to go and read the news twice a week. So there would be a carrycot with an eight-month-old Quasar in it, with Shama Zaidi, Javed Siddiqui and Alyque sitting around and discussing the script. Apparently, Javed would be changing his nappies while I was on the news on Doordarshan,” says Thakore.

It seems obvious that Quasar would become a theatre professional. (He says he was never pushed into anything.) His earliest childhood memory is of being physically uncomfortable inside a theatre. He began by working in an advertising agency, but finally chose to go back to the theatre. “I don’t know whether I would have been in theatre if my mother’s life had not been so immersed in it,” he says. “She has never ever interfered with my work, although she always talks to me after a play and offers fair and objective feedback. She has been my most honest guide. When I first started directing in college, she was very blunt and that was helpful. We have very different styles of working, quite opposite from each other in fact. So there is a ninety per cent chance that if she likes something, I won’t.” But over the years, she has encouraged him to hold on to his opinions when it matters and fight for what he believes is right.

Quasar says his mother reads a lot and sleeps very little—just four hours a night. “I think I get my workaholic nature from my mother. I love to be told that I am like her. She walks in to a room and the room just gets brighter. That I can’t do, of course.”

“My mother is very straightforward and I

will wait for things to come. I can't ask. Some of the things that she has done and things that she still does are incredible. Her living room is an art gallery and her bedroom like a library. She loves to read and I love that," says Quasar of his mother.

Thakore has never let Quasar feel a vacuum in his life. She has gently, and when needed, firmly helped him turn his inhibitions into strengths. She has taught him that his sensitivity is not a weakness, but an innate strength that can power all that he does in life.

Thakore has never been "just" anything. She has never been "just an actress" nor has she been "just a news reader" or "just someone fighting a good cause". She has been and is all of this and so much more. Consider her work as a casting director for instance. Rani Dubey, the co-producer of Sir Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*, had been a good friend in London. They had been in the same theatre group. "It was early afternoon in the May of 1979, I was sitting in the bedroom breastfeeding Quasar, when the door bell rang and in walked Rani. Only she was accompanied by Sir Richard Attenborough. In those days we had no real furniture, only mattresses. Rani had come with Richard to help him cast for *Gandhi*. I rang up Alyque and told him that Sir Richard Attenborough was here in our house and told him to come straight home from work. "The moment Alyque walked in Richard said to himself, 'That's my Jinnah'. We had a wall in our home that was covered with photographs of Theatre Group productions directed by Alyque. And soon Richard asked me to be his casting director on *Gandhi*. So I was made casting director within half an hour and that's how the association started," recalls Thakore.

"Fortunately Richard allowed me to travel

to Calcutta, Lucknow and Delhi to meet the actors and to see their plays which nobody lets you do. So I met the actors, saw their work, saw their plays. In a couple of months we started setting up the production unit in Delhi and they allowed me to take Quasar and a maid. I had a room at the Ashoka Hotel with the unit where we were all staying and Quasar was there with me. Bim Bissel and John Bissel had by that time started Fab India, and Bim also used to run a play school in Delhi on Tughlaq Road. Quasar was put into that when he was two or two-and-a-half years old.”

Gandhi was the first film that Thakore ever worked on. She says that it was a “terrific experience” and she “learnt a lot. It was actually so easy to learn because they gave you every facility. You never had to cry for a car to take you anywhere, you never had to cry for money. You could entertain anybody, you could meet anybody. All I had to do was to inform the office and take the car and go to National School of Drama [NSD] to see [Ebrahim] Alkazi, to see all the plays, to meet all the actors. And I cast all NSD boys. All the young men in the film were NSD students at that time; many would come and touch my feet.”

Thakore remembers that the first person they cast definitively was Rohini Hattangadi as Kasturba. While she had narrowed the choice down to her, the final decision of course rested with Sir Richard Attenborough as he was the director. Thakore says with pride, “He never said no to anyone that I had brought. In some cases we had one or two alternatives so we did have that.”

Thakore’s career as a news reader was, much like her entry into films, a result of her talent and the friendships she nurtured. Kunwar Sinha, again a good friend from her London days, was one of the first producers of English news at Mumbai Doordarshan. When Doordarshan news

started, there were only a handful of people called to read the news until the News Department was transferred to Delhi. Thakore was one of them. She continued reading the news for the eight years that it was being telecast out of Mumbai. She recalls the experience fondly: "I had a very good memory when I was young. I used to read a page once and I would know it almost by heart. I don't have that memory anymore. I would pick up fifteen words at a glance. I didn't have to look at my script all the time. It was a knack that I had developed. When we were reading the news, most of the news I was reading was government news so there was Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. I didn't have to look at my paper to say 'Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi.' I knew who had won by how many votes, which seats, from which locality, I was very interested in my news. I knew my subject and I didn't have to look at my script. We didn't have teleprompters in those days," says Thakore.

Thakore's passion for theatre continued. "I did a lot of theatre with Janak Toprani, Adi Marzban, and then of course Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* which has been running for eleven years," she says. "I've been lucky. I've worked with the greats. I particularly enjoyed working with Mahendra Joshi in plays such as *Ek Shuf* and Geoffrey Kendal's version of *Gaslight*, where I replaced Pearl. I also acted in the adaptation of Ryonosuke Akutagawa's *Roshomon*. It also meant I got to travel a bit. We would be touring, performing in Singapore, Hyderabad and Goa. I don't even count Calcutta and Delhi; those were like being at home.

"We were in theatre because we loved it. We couldn't care a damn about what people said, if people came or didn't. We knew that whoever was interested, would come and that was enough reason for us. We had a very close-knit set. We were snobs. We hated films, Hindi films, at any rate. We did see English films though but we hated the idea of

running around trees and getting wet in the rain,” remembers Thakore. “Times are very different now. Today, everybody wants to be in films because the quality of films has improved. At that time, they didn’t take people in theatre. I was the first person to cast theatre people in Gandhi. After that many directors began to cast actors from the stage in films.

“I think we saw cinema as popular art and theatre as high art. These days very good films are being made,” says Thakore. “But way back in the mid-seventies, wonder if Mahesh Bhatt remembers that he asked me to act in a film called Naam. I said ‘You must be joking, right?’ Nutan played the part. Dev Anand asked me to play a part in his film Gambler. I said no. Rekha got that part.”

Then recently, Madhur Bhandarkar rang her up and said “I am shooting my film here, it’s the first shot, and it is at Mukesh Mills in Sassoon Dock.” He asked Thakore to come over. She said she would. He said “We’ll be there from six in the evening”. Thakore replied, “My play is at six; it ends at eight. I’ll be there after that.”

She recounts the evening: “At eight o’clock I rang him up and asked, is there still time, can I come? He said, ‘It’s not even started, you come in an hour.’ I was invited to the Swiss Consul-General’s house for cocktails, so I went there first and from there to Mukesh Mills. Madhur greeted me and introduced me to those who were there. He was shooting the cabaret song in the film Kuaan Ma Doob Jaoongi. He turned to me and said, ‘Will you do one thing?’ I said, ‘Yes’. I was asked to say one line. You just say that line.’ And I said, ‘Okay’. The line was ‘A truck driver’s song’. I was standing there, in my own clothes and the item number was going on on stage. Before I knew it the camera had turned on me, there were no lights, no makeup, nothing. He said, ‘Just say the line,’ and I did just that.

“Three days later I got a call from him saying,

'Dollyji, you have to come to the set.' I said I didn't have time. He said, 'You have to come.' Before I knew it, I was cast as a society journalist in the new film that he was making: Page 3."

The experience was very different from doing theatre, says Thakore, "I did ten days of shooting with them. We were never given scripts in advance. I arrived on the sets and was told to say 'Show me something in white'. And my few lines are quoted often. I never took it seriously. I am not the type to push and shout and say, 'The camera should come to me!' You know how women behave on sets. The people who worked with me were Anju Mahendra, Maya Alagh and Suhasini Mulay. The four of us were always together. They are good friends so it was fun being on the sets. We shared the same dressing room. We had long breaks. Each one had one or two lines to say, so we spent a lot of time together. It was great fun and totally stress-free."

After working on Page 3, Thakore decided to try a television serial too. She began working in Kya Hoga Nimmo Ka, in which she played lead actor Eijaz Khan's rich mother. "I made no money on this serial. Everybody buys a Mercedes out of their work in serials. I never even bought a Maruti," Thakore says with amusement. However she adds, "They were a nice set of people. I must say that Ekta treated me extremely well, with a lot of respect. I was allowed to go from somewhere beyond Aarey Milk Colony [in north Mumbai, where all the film and television work happens] all the way to Bombay Gymkhana [in south Mumbai] to do my book reviews or book recordings and go back to the sets. Only I was allowed to do that, and they gave me a car and a driver. So, they were very good like that."

Her true love remains theatre. And here is why: Thakore remembers that she had just stepped off the stage after delivering one of the monologues in The Vagina Monologues, when a middle-aged

Bohri couple came up to her and said, 'Thank you very much, we loved it'. "They said they had been trying to watch The Vagina Monologues for years and got to see it now. It just feels so good to see people appreciating your work, no matter what age and time bracket you naturally fall into."

"There's a demand for theatre. There is a demand for all kinds of things that I love and I have never been bored. I think I am one of the few women blessed who has never been bored of what they do. I have never had a day of boredom in my life because I read a lot. I really believe there is a lot to read and catch up on. Every single day something or the other is happening in my neighborhood, in my immediate environment, in the world. If I don't go out and am at home, I prefer to read since that gives me utmost pleasure. I don't think I can ever stop reading because I have a thirst for learning," says Thakore.

Thakore has been associated with the Population First Save the Girl Child Laadli campaign. She has been their National Coordinator for their media awards for years now. However, there are several other causes that Thakore is involved with – each one close to her heart.

"I have been involved with every aspect of the underprivileged. Whether it's the National Association for the Blind, Alert India, Citizens for Peace, The India Sponsorship Committee which looks after destitute women and children, I try and contribute in whatever way I can," says Thakore.

When the Gujarat riots happened, Thakore went around to some fifteen petrol pumps in the city between 12 noon and 6 pm collecting foodstuff and clothes that people had donated and then deposited this at Teesta Setalvad's Citizens for Justice and

Peace office in Juhu. There was just one truck driver who was brave enough to go to Gujarat at that time. Thakore urged people to donate simple things like sanitary napkins and baby food for the kids, as these were what was required—other things were coming from other sources.

Her son Quasar says: “Whatever she has ever had, however small, she has shared. She goes to Tejpal Theatre [in Mumbai’s Grant Road area] to watch plays. The air conditioning there is really strong. She always carries a shawl knowing that she will feel cold. But before you know it, there are eight people under that one shawl. Economically, sharing has been difficult since she works freelance but she still manages.”

The actor Pooja Bedi agrees: “Dolly has been a very big support system to me in many ways. I think the most special part about Dolly is her uncanny ability to give so much despite sometimes having so little.”

There are others who are equally glad to have Thakore in their life. Says author and cultural critic Shanta Gokhale: “Our friendship has evolved without a hitch. We are very honest about our responses to each other’s work and our children’s works. She is a very warm, outgoing woman, so it isn’t difficult to have an enduring friendship with her. We mostly have telephone conversations about her work, my work, the plays and films we have seen together or individually. There are times when we happen to be together at a cultural event and if she is going straight home afterwards, she persuades me to come home with her and have potluck. It usually happens that I don’t get to go, but whenever I can, it is always a lot of fun and more discussions.”

Journalist and author Jerry Pinto says, “I first met Dolly when I was a very young journalist, and even then I was struck by her democratic

approach to everybody, which meant she would greet you after she had met you, with as much affection as she would greet Jiten Merchant who was then the leading theatre critic of Bombay. And over the years there is genuine warmth at the bottom of Dolly's interactions with everyone she knows. And doing things for young people is the reason behind her youthful spirit, which still outlines her persona."

Pinto talks about Thakore's giving in a different way. He says, "There is a generally held myth that theatre is made by directors, actors and technicians; that theatre is what happens on stage. This is untrue. Theatre is what happens when what happens on stage interacts with the audience. Then theatre comes into existence. If five live actors walk onto a stage, and there is no one in the audience, the play ends there. In film this does not happen. If there are zero people in the audience and the cinema is booked, the film can play to an empty hall; whereas theatre presupposes an audience and this is one role in which Dolly Thakore has been invaluable to the theatre of Bombay. She is a constant presence. She has seen almost everything that has ever been released in Bombay since the 1970s. She's been present for English, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, in fact any theatre that comes to town. One person that you can rely on to be present is Dolly Thakore."

Over the years, Thakore has come to be known as someone who lives her life on her own terms and conditions. She has lived on her own for a very long while now, and continues to do so. In fact, for her, it is a pleasure to live alone because she believes she doesn't have to make somebody else's breakfast or somebody else's tea. And she admits that it has made her selfish, because she really can't be bothered. She can very well get away with her hatred for kitchen work as well. Thakore

says she doesn't regret a single step. "My life," she says, "is an open book. Perhaps that's because I've always tried to be completely honest with myself." Talking about her life as a source of inspiration to many, Jerry Pinto believes that she needs to write her autobiography. "Dolly's autobiography would be a fascinating story, because it takes in so many different aspects of what makes up Bombay, including the aspect of it being a cosmopolitan city where someone with the name of Dolly Thakore is actually a Protestant by birth, but seems to be a Sufi by predisposition, and was married to a Hindu, and had a son by a Khoja; and the son has grown up to be his own person, and carries likely all the elements of his mother's makeup. I think those are important things, and they remind me of what the city of Bombay was like, and what the city of Bombay can still be, if we all work towards the kind of warmth of spirit that Dolly has," says Jerry Pinto.

Dolly adds: "When marrying somebody from a different community was a taboo, I lived with the man I loved without getting married and I even had a child with him. Today, I feel happy when I hear people talking openly about relationships. It's healthy that we're talking about this; that it's all out in the open. I think this was the change I really wanted in our society. I have broken rules and yet have commanded respect," she says. She's come a long way from the woman who could be intimidated by the doormen of a hotel.

— Madhurima Chatterjee and Deipshikha Dhankhar with inputs by Prarthana Uppal, Sapana Jaiswal, Akhila L, Loyola Rodrigues, Krithi Sundar, Juhika Desai, Crysel D'souza and Zulekha Sayyed

