



LIVES OF THE WOMEN

VOLUME III

An SCMSophia student publication
Edited by Jerry Pinto

Lives of the Women

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Preface

In the times of #metoo, we are all aware of the perils women will encounter in the workplace. And then there is the ingrained bias against women, the staggering gender inequality in representation of women in all managerial positions, the decline of the presence of the women in the workplace, the gap in payment. Yet, at SCMSophia, we need to send out a class that is largely composed of young women into that professional world every year. We look upon them as agents of change, the soldiers who will fight bias and inequality and will strive to create a more equal and tolerant world. This is even more urgent in today's polarized world.

I spent a frustrating morning looking for statistics on books featuring the lives of women. No amount of tweaking the question threw up a satisfactory answer. All I got was the figure of women authors (which has been falling since Victorian times) or works of fiction with women characters and what they do. In one study by the Modern Library of 100 good books, only one book featured a story about a woman not pursuing a man!

No one seems to have noticed that in real life women are increasingly looking for more than a man to validate their existence. Women work at non-domestic jobs, they fly planes, guide missions to Mars, excel at sports and do a range of things that are not related to the pursuit of men.

Our series, 'Lives of Women' is an endeavour to tell these stories. Stories about women who do! Stories that will inspire our students who go out and write them, to be more. We challenge them to do more than they imagine they could do and thus become more themselves. We challenge them to aspire rather than to settle.

At SCMSophia, we recognize the changing world and see the dichotomy in the constant sidelining of women. Our visiting faculty Jerry Pinto leads the students to graduate from 500-word pieces to writing a 10,000 word piece on the life of an inspirational woman of their choice. This in the days of limited-character writing and terribly tiny tales!

Lives of Women Volume III features the lives of four women achievers. They are all women who worked and worked hard: child artiste and screenwriter Honey Irani; filmmaker, author and curator, Madhusree Dutta; actor and theatre director, the late Rekha Sabnis and the communicator and innovator, Shama Habibullah.

We will continue to record the lives of women for we recognize the urgent need to record these voices before they are lost to us forever. We hope you will find our attempt at documenting the lives of women as interesting as we find it rewarding.

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Students of SCMSophia

Chapter 1

Honey Irani

Lead Writer: Suryasarathi Bhattacharya

The film: *Kya Kehna* (2000, Kundan Shah).

The scene: a celebration of the birth of a child born out of wedlock with all the attendant sneers and jeers but welcomed by a backyard filled with a family who want to rejoice at the birth of the newest member.

Up to this point in time, the biological father of the child, Rahul (Saif Ali Khan) has refused to acknowledge the child. Now, as he watches the family celebrate, he has a change of heart. Speaking out of guilt and shame, he proposes to Priya (Preity Zinta). It is clear that he expects her to fall over herself to marry him. But to his surprise, the mother chooses Ajay (Chandrachur Singh) a long-time friend over him, a friend whose constant help and support she has relied on through these difficult times. Audience *mein taaliyaan*.

Honey Irani, the child-star-turned-scriptwriter, who created that scene, says: “Why should she marry that guy? She definitely will not; she isn’t retarded. This is like saying, ‘This man has raped you, now get married to him.’ Why? Here is another guy who has loved her despite everything. Isn’t he a better person to live her life with than this asshole? When I narrated the script, other unit people were scared about that. At least Ramesh Taurani was sure that we’ll absolutely make it this way. And it worked.”

Irani has always been particular about she wants and to budge her from that is a daunting task. She is a strong-willed independent woman who has stood tall in the largely male-dominated Hindi film industry by virtue of her work. She is one of those few successful writers who have been able to carve out paths while bending conventions—a prime example of being unusual in the usual. In the book, *Women Screenwriters: An*

International Guide, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), Anubha Yadav, one of the many writers involved in the project, says: “Honey Irani creates atypical romances in which the characters, plot and narrative structure do not always abide by genre conventions...In almost all her films there is a constant search of a ‘good man’; however the ‘bad’ men are not typical villains. They are everyday men—obsessive lovers; spoiled, diabolical, and mentally challenged albeit with special powers.”

* * *

Born on 25th August 1954 to Perin and Noshir Irani in Mumbai, Honey Irani is the youngest of the five Irani children: Bunny, Menka, Sarosh, Daisy and Honey. The Iranis used to live in a big house called Roopkala on 16th Road, Khar, Mumbai. Their father Noshir Irani ran the famous B Merwan & Co., a bakery at Grant Road in South Mumbai. This Irani café was started by his father, Boman Merwan Nasrabadi, in 1914. After his death in 1919, his sons—Dinshaw, Noshir and Homi—took charge of the family business. Noshir was the father of Honey and Daisy Irani, two of the greatest child stars of Bollywood.

Noshir was an unlikely star father. His children agree that he was a meek and gentle person; their mother, Perin, was the exact opposite. She ruled her children’s lives with an iron hand, terrorising them into doing what she wanted, thus leaving all of them with no little ambivalence. Sarosh Irani remembers that it was Perin who carved out the film careers of her two famous daughters, “Our mother was very dominating. We had no say in front of her. It was only when she was out that we would play with each other. Since she wanted the two girls to work in films, there was no question that that was they would

do. At that time, we had rented out the ground floor of our house to film folks, who had come from Calcutta. That is how the first link to the Hindi film industry was established.”Those were the days of imprecise records. Reminiscing about her childhood, Honey Irani says, “I had some problem with my record of birth and I didn’t have a birth certificate. So, my mother was thoroughly confused about whether I was born in 1950, 1952 or 1954. My passport says 1954 while other papers say 1952. I went to the Holy Family Hospital to find out and they said they don’t have such old records.”Having next to no memories of her childhood, Honey Irani cannot even turn to photo albums, as there are none. “One day, I thought, ‘How come I don’t have a single photograph as a baby?’ It’s weird, right? My eldest sister Menka said, ‘You know something, Honey, none of us remember you as a baby.’ I don’t know where my mother kept me. I thought I was adopted or a stork brought me. The first thing I did when my daughter Zoya (Akhtar) was born, was to take lots of photographs of her,” says Irani, showing us albums of her children and grandchildren.

Honey’s elder sister, Daisy Irani, was a very famous child actor in the 1950s and 1960s in films like *Hum Panchhi Ek Daal Ke* (1957, P L Santoshi), *Musafir* (1957, Hrishikesh Mukherjee), *Naya Daur* (1957, B R Chopra) to name just a few. She was known as India’s Shirley Temple for her beguiling ways and complete lack of camera consciousness. When you are a busy child star, it is difficult perhaps to keep tabs of what is going on in the family. “I didn’t even know that she was also an actor. I was four or five years old and was busy shooting. Then I found out that she was born. I don’t really remember her as a baby.” Daisy Irani says.

No one seems to be sure how Honey happened. Menka Khan, Honey's eldest sister and mother of popular choreographer and filmmaker Farah Khan and film director Sajid Khan, says: "After Daisy, Honey was born. I don't know what the difference in their age is. I didn't spend a lot of time at home while they were growing up as I was in a boarding school. I just remember I had come home for the holidays in September and I saw a baby lying in a crib and my mother told me, 'This is your sister.' Daisy and I were in shock. I didn't even know of my mother's pregnancy. "Honey's entry into cinema was just as unexpected. She remembers: "The director Dulal Guha of *Ek Gaon Ki Kahani* (1956) had come to sign Daisy and I happened to be playing there. When he removed his cap or whatever he had on his head, I said, '*Yeh to takla hai.*' (Oh, but he's bald!) I immediately got a slap, but that was beside the point. He was very impressed: 'She is so small but she can talk,' he said and my mother was like, 'Oh, she can talk, she talks a lot.' He said, 'Listen, then I will sign her because I actually did want somebody younger than Daisy; so how about it?' That's how I began my film career. I wish I had not been there and I wish I had not called him a *takla*, I would have been better off. But I did say it and that's how I got the part."

Honey Irani was a favourite...of her parents, siblings, co-stars, directors and the crew of every film she shot, all of whom who thought she could do no wrong. Her mischief often went unnoticed which caused trouble for her amongst her siblings.

Daisy Irani says that she would get together with their youngest brother, Sarosh and "bully poor Honey. We used to bash her a lot as she was a big tattletale. She would go and tell Mummy what we did— falling off trees, stealing things, getting

yelled at by uncles, she would spit it all out. Later, when we found her alone, we would give her a good beating.” But she also remembers her sister’s intelligence: “Honey was bright, even in shooting she was bright. I used to get jealous of her. I grew up jealous of her. She had only to say, ‘Shot *nahi loongi, mujhe rasgulla khaana hai,*’ and the director would get them for her. One brat she was and I used to get very angry because everyone would listen to her and *mereko phatke padte the agar main aise kuch bolti toh* (I would get it in the neck if I tried those stunts). I was very disciplined... this one was a big brat.”

But there were some benefits to having a brat in the family, Daisy Irani admits: “When I acted with her in *Zameen ke Taare* (1960, Chandulal Shah), I would make her do all the idiotic things that I wanted to do and couldn’t do because of my reputation as the ‘good girl.’ There was a song sequence that Honey and I appeared in. There were some firecrackers that were part of the song, so we started playing with them. I told Honey, ‘*Jaa jaa, uncle ki dhoti mein lagaa de!*’ (Go and attach them to Uncle’s dhoti!) She went and did it. And *jowoh budda naacha!* (How the old man danced!) I still remember the way he jumped around!”

If Daisy remembers herself as the good girl, that’s not how big sister Menka Khan tells it, “Honey was the one who got the least scolding... our mother didn’t fire her so much. I think because she was the youngest and maybe her spirit was also on edge. Daisy got the worst of it; as did my brother Sarosh. The middle ones, you know! When they used to go on the sets, my mother would sit and play cards...I used to see Dilip Kumar and Ajit and all; they used to play rummy. Meanwhile, Daisy would run wild, you know. *Kidhar bhi, kuch bhi.* (She did anything she

wanted, anywhere she wanted to.) So, when she used to get caught, she'd get a good thrashing.

"I was a bookworm. And because I was at home during the holidays, my mother would say, 'Go for the shoots.' I had no interest whatsoever. So, I would smuggle a book out, and again Daisy would go nuts and I'd be sitting and reading the book. Honey wasn't so naughty. With Honey you just had to shout, 'Honey! Don't go there! I'll tell Mummy!'" says Menka.

The Irani children didn't have it easy with their mother, whose behaviour left some serious childhood scars. Honey Irani says, "My mom was a terror, a true terror. None of us liked her. I think...now when I look back... I feel sorry for her. I think she must have been quite badly brought up. Some kind of a warped background; something must have happened to her to make her like this. The way she used to treat her children was terrible. Maybe she wanted name and fame. After I grew up, I tried to analyse her and to find reasons for her behaviour. It is possible, I suppose, to figure out why someone would be like that. But when you're a child, when you're going through it, it was bad. We were petrified of her. I remember when there was a scene in which I was supposed to cry, all they had to do was say, '*Tumhari Mummy aa rahi hai*' (Your mother is coming) and I would burst into tears. So you can imagine what she meant in my life.

"If she was in a good mood, we were lucky. Then she would take us out for a movie and do stuff like that but there was no way of telling when the weather would change. All of us would be getting ready for a treat and suddenly she would snap and announce that one of us could not go. You are four or five years old, you have just been told that you're going out for something nice, you're full of joy, and now, it's been pulled away

from you. The other kids might want to protest but they didn't dare because the treat might just be cancelled or they would also be left at home. So, you could never be sure whether you were in or out until the last minute. Even that pleasure was always spiked with the possibility of poison. Why would you do this to a child? She was a psycho!"

Daisy Irani has the same memories, "She was a terror. She was mean and cruel. That was her personality. I think she had some baggage. She came from a very poor background. So, I think my father's side [of the family] were mean to her. She was very pretty, which must have made things worse. She was not educated and my aunties and uncles were all educated. My Grandma must have made her life Hell. Perhaps she promised herself: 'I will show them, what I am capable of.' With the success of her two daughters, her pride consumed her. She didn't want to lose what she got. She must have known

that child stars don't have too many years of work. Maybe it was just fear. I did love her. I spent a lot of time with her so perhaps I do understand her better than the others."

Menka Khan couldn't be bothered with terms like 'aspiration': "What? She was a pain... at least I used to find her that!"

Meanwhile, Noshir Irani had a bakery to run. This meant he left very early in the morning when the dough for the first loaves of bread was put into the oven and came home at night when the shop closed and the last drinkers of tea and eaters of bun maska had gone home. He had very little or no idea about how the children were growing up. Honey Irani remembers her father as a person of few words. She says, "He was a very quiet person, who kept himself to himself. He would get up at 5:30 am and wake me up; we would go for a walk. He

had a very charted-out kind of a lifestyle. At 6:30, we would be back. He would feed the birds, take a bath, say his Zoroastrian prayers and off to work and then back around eight pm. There were no holidays. He took only one holiday in the year—*Navroz*: Parsi New Year. We used to dread that day because he used to make us clean all our cupboards, and all that kind of nonsense. But it was fun.

“I was very very fond of my father. He used to hardly speak. One or two words and that’s it. But with him, it was like...I don’t know how to explain it to you. The only time my father ever hugged me was the day I was getting married...when I was leaving home. And I cannot tell you what happened to me that day. I burst into tears, a river of tears. My mother thought that I was crying for her and I was like, ‘No, I am not. I am very happy to leave you behind.’ It was my father’s touch, you know, the warmth of it, the rarity of it. I remember him very well, and I miss him very much. If I had only thought of it, if I had only had the sense as a child, I would have gone with him to the shop. I never thought of it. I grew up very fast. I wish I had spent a little time with him,” she says.

For Honey Irani, the void of a caring mother was filled by none other than superstar Meena Kumari. Both Honey Irani and Daisy Irani have acted in numerous films with Meena Kumari during the 1950s and 1960s. Some of these films include *Chirag Kahaan Roshni Kahaan* (1959, Devendra Goel) and *Purnima* (1965, Narendra Suri). This off-screen mother had a very special place in Irani’s life. She says, “On-screen and off-screen, Meena Kumari was my mother. She was like an ideal mother. I mean, I used to love her; I still do. I was very comfortable with her. And I think she knew my mother, the way she was and because she knew what we were going through, she

was even more generous with the love she showered on Daisy and me. Part of this may have been because she didn't have any children of her own. We did two or three films together where I would be shown playing and taken away from her, those tear-jerker scenes...I was tiny and I would cling to her all the time. Children can sense who needs them and who loves them. I felt her emptiness and I wanted to fill it; it became a kind of a bond. Otherwise, why would she take me to her house and feed me and bathe me and put me to sleep next to her? It was like a vacation from my own mother. Perhaps it was her way of sheltering me.

"When she was passing away..." and here it becomes obvious to us that the memory still has the power to move Honey Irani deeply. She continues with effort, "She was very ill. She had a bungalow at Juhu. I went to see her there. I sat with her for about an hour or so, she held my hand and it was very sweet."

Honey Irani had a ringside view of the Hindi film industry in its golden age. She worked with nearly all the big names. The sets, cameras, lights and actors became her refuge from the terror of her mother. She says, "I worked a lot with Rajendra Kumarji, Meenaji, Balraj Sahni. I mean now when I look back and I see my old photographs, I feel, 'My God! I have worked with such great people.' Today when people talk about Motilal, Balraj Sahni...I have worked with them. It was such a privilege and I didn't even know it. This is the only time when I say 'Thank you Mom.' Thrilling! I mean Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Ashok Kumar, Kishore Kumar, Nandaji, Nutanji...I mean! Such a fabulous feeling... Madhubalaji, Prem Nath... I am happy that I have at least one film with each of them. I learned so much from them. But *us waqt to itni akal thi nahi* (At that time I didn't know any better), but now when I look back then... I used to be a great

fan of Joy Mukherjee and Shammi Kapoor. Shammi Kapoor was my favourite. I never worked with either of them.

“Later on, of course I met Shammi Kapoor; we went to his house. He taught me how to play poker. I told him that my father would not let us see his movies and he would say, ‘I know. Many children tell me that; I am fed up of hearing it. But I’m glad you bunked and went to see them anyway.’ I was like, “Bunked? School *jaata hi kaun tha?* (When did I ever go to school?) He would say, ‘I really feel bad Honey that we never worked together’. And I would be like, ‘Yeah so do I.’”

At the age that most children are trying to figure out carry-over sums and cursive writing, Irani was working, working, working, shooting from morning to evening, going from set to set. Now when she looks back, she revels in those days and says, “I remember there were four or five studios in one compound, like Roptara Studios, Shree Sounds, RK and Rajkamal. That was lovely because we all had lunch together. All the sets used to have lunch at 1:30 pm. There would be a table in between and all the actors sat together... Now I look back, and I feel stupid, why didn’t I take a photograph? It doesn’t strike you, you know. Now I realize what I missed out on. If at all there was an early pack-up, we used to fly kites; we used to hold *phirkis* (spools) for Dutt Sahab (Sunil Dutt) and Dilip Sahab (Dilip Kumar). What fun we used to have! I remember them putting tape on my finger before giving me the *phirki*, so that I wouldn’t cut my fingers on the *maanja* (string that has been run through powdered glass). I mean so thoughtful! I think whatever I have learned, even the Hindi I speak, has come from them. Because whenever I made a mistake, they corrected me. I remember, there was this song of Dutt Sahab, *Mausam bhi hai pyaar ka* and I said you are saying – ‘*Mosam bi hai*’ *par vo aap ke*

haath main hai nahi. Then he said: ‘Wait,’ he called a guy, ‘*Mosambi leke aao*.’ Then he showed me that this (*mosambi*) is the fruit, in the phrase ‘*Mausam bhi*’, *mausam* means weather. You know, they had the time to explain to you. It was so beautifully done That was the real learning.”Neither sister finished school but both refuse to lament over their lost opportunities. Honey Irani, who comes across as a joyous and optimistic woman, recalls those days with pleasure and with a bit of Parsi humour. “No school would accept us, because we were never in class. Daisy got a letter from Jawaharlal Nehru to get her into a school. But even when we did get admission into school, we would eventually be asked to leave because we were taking so many holidays and we were perpetually travelling. And that has its effect on your academic performance; naturally you can’t keep up with the class.”

Honey changed many schools during that time. She started with Rose Manor Garden High School, Santa Cruz and then shifted to Hill View High School in Bandra. Talking about her time at Hill View, Irani says, “There was this teacher, Mrs Michael, who taught embroidery. I really liked her class. That was the only school that would take me. I was used to failing so I think I was very excited in the second or third standard when I came third in the class. I was thrilled. I kept boasting about it. Then Menka went and said, “There is nothing to rejoice about. There are only three children in the class and she has come third.’ So my balloon went *phussss*.”

After this, the young Honey finally ended up in Mount Mary High School, near the Basilica of Our Lady of the Mount in Bandra, where she spent the most of her school years. She says, “They put me in Mount Mary because they thought that

I really wanted to study. So I did the fourth and fifth standard at Mount Mary and I did quite well.”

But behind these comic tales there’s also a bit of remorse. Talking about the unfulfilled aspirations of her childhood, Irani says, “Because other children were going to school, they could speak good English. Other children were allowed to go out and play in the rain, or just play. We couldn’t. I used to love playing in the rain, I still do; first rain and I am out. We weren’t allowed to because we might fall ill and then we wouldn’t be able to shoot. At that time, it is not getting to play in the rain that bothers you but when you grow up you wish you had completed your education.

“I remember I wanted to be a doctor. So I guess the first film which I wrote (*Armaan*, 2003, Honey Irani) was based on doctors. And you won’t believe what happened. I said to myself: I have to be very realistic. I have to see what it’s like to be a doctor. So I made an appointment with one of the hospitals to go and see a brain surgery. Unfortunately for me, that day a baby was being operated. I was watching through the glass and I don’t know what happened after the surgeon took out the drill. When I woke up I was in bed. They said, ‘Ma’am, you passed out, before the drill could even hit the skull.’ So that was the end of my enthusiasm for realism. However, I started reading a lot of books and watching a lot of movies, English films, and stuff like that...That kind of helped me a lot.”

Despite a lack of formal education, Irani lacked no skill in making friends and winning the hearts of those around her. However, she didn’t always like what she was doing. “I used to hate entering a studio. I never liked acting. And they used to persuade me by saying, ‘I am taking you for a movie,’ ‘I am taking you for an ice-cream,’ and things like that. I used to say I didn’t

want to go. But then once you were in, there was no choice. The actors were very nice in those days. They really had a lot of time for you. I started feeling much more comfortable over there. Later on, I got it: acting would take me away from my mom, so I grew to like it. I really don't know how I did it. How I learnt my lines, how I acted; I have no idea about that till I was about 4-5-years old. Initially I didn't realize it was quite a thing for me. So I guess, I was lured by chocolates, fruits, biscuits, and stuff like that. It was actually like training a puppy - 'Say this and you'll get that'.

"The only thing that got my goat was when people would come and pull my cheeks. I was like, 'Oh God! Why doesn't she die? Go and do it to your own child! Why are you coming and pulling somebody else's cheeks?'"

Being a child actor did take its toll on Irani. "I would fall asleep in the car while coming back home from the studio. When I woke up, I was in my bed. So somebody must have carried me up. I am very ashamed to say this that I used to drink from a milk bottle up to the age of nine! It was a specific bottle, a blue one. It was all the rage when it came out, because it was a baby bottle but it was also a flask so it kept the milk warm. I think that was my security blanket. Freud would call it regression, of course, the desire to return to some state of innocence, to hold on to some element of childhood. Many people would say, '*Sharam nahin aati?*' (Aren't you ashamed of yourself?) Eventually I gave it up. I used to eat wax and chalk too; I would peel paint off the walls and eat that. Everybody thought it was a disgusting habit. At that time, nobody had any idea what a deficiency disease was. Nobody thought: Maybe she needs calcium or something. That was quite bad."

Most of the roles that the Irani sisters enacted were those of boys. Dressing up as boys did not affect Honey Irani's gender identity or psyche in any manner, she says. "See, again you know wearing pants and a shirt, there was no girl in front of us for us to realize what the difference between us was. You see only when we went to parties and stuff, we were dressed as girls. So, honestly speaking, at that time it didn't bother us why we were dressed in pants and shirts on the sets. "I had straight hair, my mother curled it. They used to use some kind of a liquid to make the curls—it was terrible! Later on, when I was ten or eleven, I couldn't do boy's roles anymore and that was the period I stopped acting because that time I was neither a woman nor a kid."

When the work dried up, their mother's temper worsened. It was also the time when Perin Irani produced a film named *Bachpan* (1963, Nazir) starring Menka and noted scriptwriter Salim Khan who was then an aspiring film star. Menka Khan says, "When Daisy's and Honey's sun was setting, my mother couldn't take the loss of face. She was so used to getting all that '*Mummyji aao, baitho*'. She was a star mother. On sets, she would play rummy with Dilip Sahab. She couldn't accept that her time was now over. She started pushing me, you know. She said, 'Now you start acting.' I didn't know the ABC of Hindi as I was in an Anglo-Indian boarding school; we never spoke Hindi. But, she got her way. She always did. Salim was my hero. It was the biggest embarrassment of my life."

Their mother later pushed the Irani sisters into dancing and stage shows. Honey Irani vividly remembers those days, "We used to do stage shows with Rafi Sahab, Kishore Kumar and Mukeshji. We used to train under Gopi Krishna and Lakshmi Maharaj and Raj Masterji (PL Raj). *Udhar bhi bahut*

pitaai hoti thi. (There too, we would get it.) One step missed, and they would fling something anything that was at hand at you. *Dhaaad!* It was scary. At 5:30 in the morning, Daisy and I used to go all the way from Khar to Mahim to Raj Masterji's house.

"I was doing shows till I was about fourteen or fifteen. There used to be these stage shows that Dutt Sahab used to conduct for the *jawaans* in halls or in stadiums...we would participate in Shanker-Jaikishen nights. That's how people see you— 'Okay, she's a good dancer, she's been an actress.' That's how you get roles, you know; you start a little bit here and there. Shaktida (Shakti Samanta) gave me a role in *Kati Patang* (1970). That's how Javed saw me and he suggested me for *Seeta aur Geeta* (1972; Ramesh Sippy, a film written by what would become the legendary scriptwriting duo of Salim-Javed) and that's how I got it. I did a few more films, which weren't released, thank God! They were terrible! I even did a few as a leading lady. I realised myself, that I didn't have it in me. I didn't have that patience or that kind of commitment; I was always interested in backstage."

On 21 March, 1972, the year of *Seeta aur Geeta*, Honey Irani tied knot with Javed Akhtar. They had become close on the sets of *Seeta aur Geeta*.

Daisy Irani remembers those days with a smile and says, "I was the one who went to speak to Javed Akhtar for her marriage. She was sitting like a heroine with her *ghunghat* and all. I knew Salim Sahab, so I went and asked him, 'How is this guy, Javed Akhtar?' I didn't even know what to ask, I was barely twenty or twenty-one years old. He said, 'Yeah yeah, I am

listening. Did he give you a picture of him for marriage? Tell him, I have one.' I saw that she was really happy to get married to him. So I asked Javed, '*Pakka, tu shaadi karega?*' and he replied, 'Yeah yeah.'"

Despite the box office success of *Seeta aur Geeta*, Akhtar was still a struggling writer. The newly married couple went to live in an apartment that belonged to Menka Khan's husband, Kamran Khan. Menka says, "We had a flat in a housing society; then we bought the next flat and later, a third. The third was empty at that time and we needed money. My husband and my family were not doing that well. At that time, they (Irani and Akhtar) wanted a place before they could buy something so they took our place for eleven months and paid the whole thing in advance, which was a boon for us. That was the time Honey would come and sit with us because Javed used to go to work. We would talk or play cards or play carrom or something or the other. That's how we became close."

After marrying Akhtar, Honey Irani started writing as a pastime. Although, she was a voracious reader, writing happened suddenly. With a childlike excitement, she talks about her childhood when she would read books, listen to music and watch films. She says, "Comics! Jughead, Archie—aah! I loved those. I remember those love story comics. I would read those in my teenage years along with *Dennis the Menace* and *Mad Magazine*. I was never into this Superman and Batman and all that nonsense. I used to love Jughead. He was so cute! Too cool yaar! He was a dude! He never bothered about anybody, just his food, that's it. That was fun...I could never get into anything heavy. I used to like reading James Hadley Chase thrillers a lot. It was Javed who introduced me to those books.

“I was a big Elvis Presley fan. For me, he was God! Even my grandchildren know, they see Elvis Presley’s photo and they say, ‘*Daadi*, God!’ My birthday cake was once designed as Elvis Presley. I said ‘I am not going to cut this!’ That was another thing my father used to give me on my birthday. We used to have one of those 16 mm projectors and Metro, at that time, had a supply of 16-mm movies. Metro had an Elvis Presley collection. So my father used to get me one for my birthday. He would put cotton in his ears and say, ‘I don’t like his singing, I like his looks.’ Full bawa he was.”

Writing is personal, very personal for Honey Irani. She keeps her drafts hidden and shows them only to those close to her. Irani says, “I started doing short stories. I would not show them to anyone. My spelling was bad, my handwriting was lousy but I suppose they were quite interesting. I don’t know how Javed came upon those stories. When he had finished, he said, ‘Listen, you’ve written very well. You must go on writing.’ I thought, ‘Well, he did come home late last night so he’s just being nice to me,’ or something. Even after we parted, I never had the courage to tell anybody that I was writing because I thought they’d say ‘*Javed Akhtar ki biwi hai, toh apne aapko writer samajhti hai*’. (She’s Javed Akhtar’s wife and so she fancies herself a writer too.) I could only talk to Pam (Pamela Chopra); I discussed an idea I had for a film with her. And she really liked it. That’s how it all began.

“But my problem was that I couldn’t write in Hindi. I didn’t know Hindi. I could read Hindi, but only very slowly. At the speed I was reading in those days, I would have been ten thousand years old before I finished a single book. I had to speed

that up. I kept reading Hindi novels but I couldn't manage to write in Hindi. Therefore, I always wrote in English, broken as it was.... even my dialogue would be in Roman English. Then of course I got polished, I got much better at it. Now I can do it on my laptop."

And so it was that Honey Irani in ever really left the realm of cinema even after she stopped acting. Her exposure to contemporary cinema and her constant interaction with writers and directors kept her abreast of trends in the industry. She even assisted the director Ramesh Talwar for some time. Talwar and Irani go back a long way.

He says, "She was a child artist in one of the films I had acted in. I was around thirteen or fourteen at that time and I was doing *Soutela* (1958) based on *David Copperfield* at AVM Studios, Malad. Comedian Radha Krishan was the producer and the actor Prabhu Dayal was the director of the film. I was fourteen but I could pass as an eight-year-old. She played the five-year-old version of me."

They next met when Talwar was working with Yash Chopra and Javed Akhtar on films like *Deewaar*, *Kala Patthar* and *Trishul*. "Later on, Javedsahab wrote *Duniya* (1984) for me when he separated from Salim Khan and then he also did *Zamana* (1985). We used to sit at their place—the entire group that included Raman Kumar, Rakesh Bedi, my assistant Sadar and Naresh and all. That was our adda. One day I said to her, 'Why don't you join us?' She was very interested in everything about cinema and so she joined us. Javedsahab was doing many films and there were always film people around so she must have been absorbing things unconsciously.

"As my assistant, she was very alert. We'd be chatting or joking and suddenly I would ask, '*Yaar, uska kya hua?*' (What

happened about that matter?) The answer came from Honey, always. She was an assistant during *Duniya* and then *Zamaana* and *Basera*. Four or five of us would get together and watch the latest movies or the Oscar-winning films at her place and discuss them. She was very punctual. If the shoot was scheduled for nine am, she would be there at eight-thirty. She would see whether props were in place, whether the arrangements have been made or not and things like that.”

It was around this time too that Irani began to write for films; mainly for Yash Chopra. Talwar says that she had a penchant for writing. He says, “Whenever there was a discussion, she would give her perspective as a woman and a cine-goer. Her knowledge was immense and her insight was outstanding, so I suggested one day: ‘Why don’t you write?’”

Talwar feels that there was something inside Honey Irani that was seeking expression: “I believe you can’t become a writer if you don’t want to. But if you want to, it will find its way out. Honey is a natural writer. I remember she was doing a film with Yash Chopra and I was there. Yashji had a problem with the way a scene had been developed. He explained it to her. She said, ‘Yashji, you are right. Just give me two minutes.’ She went off into a corner and wrote a fresh scene within fifteen minutes. That’s what I mean.”

Irani has collaborated with Yash Chopra numerous times. She wrote three very different movies for Chopra: *Lamhe* (1991), *Aaina* (1993), and *Darr* (1993). *Lamhe* tells the story of a man who loves a woman who is in love with someone else. The object of his affections marries the other man and has a daughter. After 20 years, he develops romantic feelings for her daughter, who coincidentally looks exactly like her mother. *Aaina* is the tale of two sisters, the elder one leaves her love for

her career on the wedding day. To save the family's honour, her younger sister steps in. When the elder sister returns she gets jealous and thus begins a battle of love and vengeance. *Darr*, meanwhile, is a romantic-psychological thriller about a man who is obsessed with his college crush and stalks her, even threatening to kill the man she marries. *Lamhe* tanked at the box-office; it was considered "ahead of its time" but both *Aaina* and *Darr* made lots of money.

Honey Irani has fond memories of working with Yash Chopra. "With Yashji, I guess I had a certain comfort level. Yashji had the art of getting work done whether with a mature star like Dilip Kumar or a superstar like Shah Rukh. He was adept at switching mental zones. He could relate to people. But I think what he excelled in was how he would respect everyone he was working with. You can get anything done if you know how to give respect. And he also had a great sense of humour."

Honey Irani firmly believed that the success of a film is linked to the audience's connection with the story; if they are convinced they will buy it. This connect, she feels, did not happen with *Lamhe*, her most ambitious experiment in storytelling. Talking about that film, Irani says, "*Yashji had narrated that idea to me in five minutes. 'Ek ladki hai, uska ek affair hota hai. Us aadmi se uski shaadi nahin hoti. Aur phir woh chala jaata hai aur phir uski ek beti hoti hai aur use iski shaadi ho jaati hai.'* (A young woman has an affair. She does not marry the man. He leaves her and she has a daughter with another man. The first man gets married to her daughter.) At that moment, I was totally confused. Here is a guy who falls in love with a woman. She has a daughter...and he falls in love *with her daughter*? How would the audience accept this? I thought it was impossible. But then I thought: what if the guy is younger than the woman? Younger

men often have crushes on older women. Thus Viren (Anil Kapoor) would fall in love with an older woman Pallavi (Sridevi). We also decided to make it clear that she is in love with someone else, so that there is no blood tie between Viren and Pooja (Sridevi again). He has not brought her up either; there is no relationship except the memory of his lost love. But the audience could not accept this. Many people felt that it was not clear that Viren had not brought Pooja up, that Pallavi was not in love with Viren. I thought we did our best to make these things clear but you cannot make someone who does not want to see something, see it. Closed minds will stay closed. I felt like saying: '*Abbey gadhon! Picture bhi toh dekho na poori!*' (Donkeys! See the whole film and give it a chance.) The film did much better as a rerun. Even today everybody tells me it's a good film and I am like, 'What happened to all of you then? Why did you all shut up?'"

She has also collaborated with the legendary Manmohan Desai. She says, "Manmohan Desai called Yashji and said, 'Honey Irani writes mostly for you. Will she write for me? Is she a good writer?' Yashji said, 'She is fabulous.' Then Desai said, '*Teri picture nahin, mere type ki picture likhegi?*' Yashji said, 'She is mad. She has got a weird, cracked sense of humour. You will get along very well.' Then I went and met him. He narrated an idea to me. I heard it and said, 'But Manji, tell me, what is the background of this character?' And he said, '*Ayee tu Satyajit Ray-wali baat mat kar.*' (Don't talk like Satyajit Ray!) I cannot tell you what a blast I had writing films for him. I wrote *Bodyguard* for him which unfortunately never got made. What a man he was! He understood cinema and he was superb at analysing his own work. It was amazing. What a brilliant mind! [In *Amar Akbar Anthony*] the mother is dying and three sons give her their

blood. This scene had a tremendous impact on people because of the way it was picturised. The blood goes out of one son's vein and joins the second son's blood and then joins the third son's blood and together, united, it goes into the mother's body. Doctors all over the country would complain that this had been taken literally. They would call him up and tell him, "Please tell people we cannot give three tubes to three different donors and insert that blood into the patient. You made this film and now people come to hospitals and say, '*Hum teeno milke Maako blood dena hai.*' (All three of us want to donate blood to Mother together.) Some others said, 'In the film she had tuberculosis which is why she ran away from home. A tree falls on her, she becomes blind and her TB gets cured. Where is that tree?' (*Laughs*) I used to have fun sessions with him. Absolute fun!"

In recent years, she has been working with Rakesh Roshan. Starting from *Kaho Naa...Pyaar Hai* (2000) to *Krrish 3* (2013), she has been part of the story panel. Irani says, "The first film I wrote for him was *Kaho Naa...Pyaar Hai*; I wrote the script with another writer¹. But with *Koi Mil Gaya*, there were more writers²."

Did those other writers bother her? "I never had any problem and I don't think anyone of them also had. It is great fun when you have more brains working on something, good time-pass. Once you know what you are talking about, where are you starting from and where are you going, what are you trying to say and what do you want to say then you know how to reach that goal. It was so comfortable and so chilled out; we used to be joking and laughing all the time. Again Rakesh Roshan is a

¹The website imdb.com credits Ravi Kapoor.

² [Imdb.com](http://imdb.com) credits Rakesh Roshan, Honey Irani, Sachin Bhowmick and Robin Bhatt; dialogue is credited to Javed Siddiqui.

very nice person and he knows how to get work done. You have to have that knack. Otherwise, put four writers in a room and they will start throwing things at each other. Each one will claim seniority. They will start saying things like, ‘Do you know what I have done?’, and ‘What do you know?’ Nothing like that ever happened. It was very well-handled. Again everyone had a very good sense of humour. I like people who have a good sense of humour.”

Rakesh Roshan thinks having a woman in the story team helps a lot in shaping a film’s perspective. He says, “Working with a woman like Honey has helped us a lot because she is knowledgeable and she knows the emotions—a mother’s emotions, a lover’s emotions, a girl’s emotions. That’s why I worked with her in three films. She was very punctual, very dedicated and a very good friend. I think she’s very well educated. She knows films very well, in and out. She has seen a lot of films, so she can give you any reference you need. And she is basically a very emotional person. So whenever she thinks of a scene or something, there has to be an emotion in it. It’s not just flat information delivery. Whenever she speaks about a scene or something, I can see her emotional connect. It is within her. It’s not artificially created. And whenever I see a film with her, even our films when we have trials and all, I see her reactions: she cries very easily. Tears just keep flowing. That means she is inherently very emotional. That shows in her work.”

Kaho Naa...Pyaar Hai was the debut film of Hrithik Roshan and Ameesha Patel. The film’s story revolved around Sonia (Patel) who is the daughter of a rich businessman (Anupam Kher) and Rohit (Roshan) who is a poor orphan and aspiring singer who lives with his brother and an elderly couple.

Both Sonia and Rohit are madly in love with each other, but this irks Sonia's father and he gets Rohit killed. Sonia goes into depression and is sent off to New Zealand. There she meets Raj, Rohit's doppelganger and a famous singer and artist. Raj falls for Sonia and comes to India.

Irani's son and notable actor-director Farhan Akhtar says, "You know her strength mainly lies in creating strong emotional content—simple human drama. She is more comfortable writing about real people, real situations, while dad has the gift of writing with a more dramatic flair. I mean, when I see her films like *Lamhe*, *Aaina* or *Armaan*, they have been written in a very believable kind of way with relatable characters. I'd say even *Darr* which has a black-and-white, good vs bad scenario has that touch. She writes from the heart which I think is a beautiful quality."

Zarine Khan, interior designer and wife of actor-producer Sanjay Khan has been a close friend of Irani for a very long time and values her friendship a great deal. She says, "I have known Honey for many years now. As we are both Zoroastrians, we have a certain affinity. When I think of Honey, the word dependable comes to my mind. If she says she will do something, you can rest assured that she will do it. Another good quality is that she is very time conscious. I admire her also for creating a career of her own, and she is known to be a big screenwriter and has many hit films to her credit. Whatever she takes up, she is known to give it all her attention; and hence, it's successful. She has admirable qualities and it shows in her upbringing of two very successful kids— Farhan and Zoya, who

today have become very famous names in Bollywood. She has been a single mother during their formative years of her kids, and that speaks for itself. Also, I have seen her behaviour with her daughter-in-law. Honey should seriously train other mothers-in-law on how to behave with their son's wives. She treats Adhuna as her very own daughter. Yet, Honey also has a strong temper that I've seen flare up when she views injustice being done to the weak who can't stand up for themselves. Then she acts like a protective Durga and sees that justice is done. I respect Honey for her forthrightness and I enjoy her company whenever we are together."

While professionally Honey Irani just went from strength to strength, her personal life wasn't all that smooth. In 1978, Honey and Javed separated after which she raised her children as a single mother. Initially she faced difficulties but her determination to be independent and ensure that her children's needs were not compromised, go to show her strength. Talking about the end of that relationship and the aftermath, Irani says, "I think I got married because I was confused and wanted to get away from my mother. I don't know what it was that made me marry him, whether it was love or something else. Maybe it was his sense of humour, I don't know. But when you separate, you need support, and Javed would support us. The children were growing up, education was expensive—tuition fees, this fee or that fee. I didn't want to burden him with that. I thought I was capable of doing something and I should do it. Why should I keep running to him for everything? So the one good thing that came out of all this was my independence. I learned how to earn my own money, do my own things. That way I think it was a good thing."

Zoya Akhtar says, “All my life, all my friends have told me that I was very lucky to have her as a mother. I think we are really lucky to have her. She has really been amazing with us; she basically just allowed us to grow. Not imposed herself, her personality, her needs or anything in terms of her life, politics, assets, nothing. In that sense, she just allowed us to become ourselves. And that takes a lot of security and courage. She was also a very young mother. I mean she was divorced when she was twenty-eight; I was eleven and Farhan was ten. It’s not much of an age difference; it makes a huge difference when you grow up with a young parent.”

Farhan adds, “After her separation from my father, she really didn’t want to be in a place where she was dependent on anybody else for money. She reinvented herself as a writer and really worked very hard; I could see that. Somewhere the pressure of bringing up two kids weighed heavily on her. When I stopped going college, she was really upset with me. But I guess, fortunately things have panned out okay.”

Irani ran a tight ship and she wanted it clear that her children might be different but they were equal in her eyes. “I wanted Zoya to be strong. If I suppressed her at home, everyone else would have done the same, and what would be the difference, how would I have been different? I am very proud of her; this is what I wanted her to be. I have enough faith that we’ve raised two good kids that’s enough. And they will not do anything wrong. They won’t purposely hurt someone, they won’t.”

Zoya adds, “She was not protective that way; she was protective of our rights: the right to have a childhood, the right to freedom etc. She has allowed us to make mistakes. She was never the parent that didn’t allow us to do stuff. We were always

the kids that could do everything. I didn't realize, till the time I went to college, that people treated their sons and daughters differently. We were treated the same. In fact I think I had more liberty than my brother because I was much more sorted than he was, when we were growing. My parents never did a gender disparity with us. It didn't exist."

Farhan corroborates this and says, "There was never anything that I was allowed to do that Zoya wasn't. There was nothing that Zoya could do and I wasn't allowed to. So we were, if ever praised, it was for our actions; if we were ever reprimanded, it was for our actions, but never because of belonging to a gender. She treated us as equals; there were no separate rules."

Not only her kids, but her extended family members share the same feeling for Irani. Irani's niece and choreographer-director Farah Khan says, "I remember when I was twenty-three, I wanted to get married. I had a boyfriend who I very desperately wanted to get married to. My mother and Honey Aunty got together and told me, 'See if you get married right now, we will kick you out of the house.' You know, other people used to force their girls to get married as soon as they turn seventeen or eighteen. But, they were like, 'You have to do something with your life.' In fact Honey Aunty sent me to Shankar Nag, who was a very good friend of hers and who was making *Malgudi Days*. So she literally paid for my air tickets and sent me to Bangalore to live with Shankar Nag and assist him on *Malgudi Days*. That, I think was a turning point because it completely changed my outlook on what I wanted to do in life. So I give full credit to her (Irani) for that. So, when I returned I decided, 'No, I want to make movies and I want to work in film industry as a technician.' That literally determined my career for

me. So we, Zoya and my other cousins and I, we have been brought up with strong women around. At no point did we think that we can't do what men can do, because we have always been taught by these women that we can do better. In fact they said, 'You better do better, or we will kick you out of the house.'

Despite being successful and globally recognised filmmakers, the Akhtar siblings still value their mother's feedback and opinions on all their films. Zoya Akhtar says, "She reads all my scripts. She is one of the first readers. She gives me very good feedback. And she is a good editor; she knows how to cut stuff. She has got good emotional intelligence, so she knows, in terms of the graph of a film what will work and what won't. She is very honest."

Farhan has a similar opinion, "She has always been part of everything that was produced by Excel, right from *Dil Chahta Hai* onwards. She is always reading the scripts and giving us feedback on them."

He recalled a scene from *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001) "I had written a scene where Akash (Aamir Khan) and Shalini (Preity Zinta) are coming back after spending a good time on a rollercoaster at the theme park. The song is over and they are at the subway station. Shalini sees a homeless guy and Akash comes up and it looks like a fight is about to break out...and then he suddenly turns concerned and asks, 'Are you okay?' and hugs him. The tension is instantly defused. That idea of hugging the homeless guy and asking him, 'Are you okay?' came from my mum. She said, 'This is not the kind of movie where Akash would fight. Instead he should just hug him and pretend that the homeless chap was under threat instead of being the threat.' That is the Irani sense of humour we've been talking about."

It's safe to say that everyone who knows Irani in the capacity of immediate family, a close relative or friend or even a colleague would agree that she is one of the kindest and most generous people they know.

Adhuna Akhtar, who was married to Farhan for sixteen years until they decided to part ways in 2016, considers her mother-in-law very close to her and her children. Speaking about the first time she met her, Adhuna recalls, "I remember the first time she met me she asked, 'Who's that pretty girl?' Obviously, that was many years ago. My feeling towards her was intrigued... 'Who's this lady who is talking to me so warmly even though we've met for the first time? I am a complete stranger to her.' So yeah, a very intriguing lady, right from the word 'Go'.

"I have lived with Honey in the same house for ten years. I think being a fairly strong character myself, living in the house of two other very strong women could have gone disastrously wrong in the very tongue-and-cheek sense of the word 'mother-in-law'. But I am extremely fortunate to have Honey in my life. She has been extremely supportive to me before marriage, during the marriage, and after marriage. She is one of those people I respect the most in my entire life."

Talking about how Irani has developed a close bond with her granddaughters—Shakya and Akira—Farhan says, "They have an exceedingly healthy relationship and that relationship is outside me being a conduit. They go for movies together, they go for lunches. My mum takes them out for shopping once in a while. So they have their own thing going on and that, to me, is an amazing thing. As parents, Adhuna and I know that tomorrow if we have to go to work or travel or whatever, we know there is someone we can trust implicitly

with the girls. She has a completely independent relationship with them that has nothing to do with me.”

To this, Adhuna adds, “She has taken the time out to build that rapport with both of them, individually. And from day one, she has been there with me through everything. She has worked at that and that is amazing. As a grandmother, she is so cuddly and warm. It is always upbeat with her and the things that she did with them as they were growing up—different things at different ages and stages. She would tell them Indian nursery rhymes that obviously I would never have known.”

Speaking about her childhood memories with her “*daadi*” (grandmother), Shakya Akhtar says, “She wrote a book for me when I was very small. It is about a little bee...It goes on like when I was a baby I was friends with that bee. She made that into a story. She got only a single copy for us. I guess it was called ‘Honey Bee’.” She also mentions about Irani’s sense of humour and her ‘Presley-worship’. “There used to be this tiny figurine of Elvis Presley at her home. When we asked who he was, she replied, ‘God’,” recalls Shakya. Just like her mother, Shakya too feels extremely proud of Honey Irani’s achievements. The third-generation Akhtar says, “I think what she has managed to do is amazing because considering how there is so much sexism in every industry, being a woman who has got this far without the help of a man is really inspiring.”

“Sometimes, I feel Honey is much more mature than I am,” says Menka Khan. “But she is also a romantic. She loves old songs and she loves quiet places and she’s got a beautiful house in Coonoor. She’s a serene person. And if you ask me to

describe Honey, I would say she's calm and she's serene. She's got a great sense of humour but she's quiet most of the time but when she has to speak, she will! And if she's angry with something, she'll never lose her temper at a person; she will lose her temper over a cause.

"She has been really kind to me, like if I have ever needed something and I would call her she wouldn't even ask, she would just send it over. Things you don't expect but she did.

"There was a point when we were going through hard times. Our electricity had been cut off...the shame of it. You see, we were not like beggars... our state was such but we were still staying in a flat and all. We didn't even have a phone; that had been cut off too, so I called her from a neighbour's house, and I told her our state. She asked me how much I wanted. I said "The bill is Rs. 1000." She sent me Rs. 2000. How can I forget those things? She would never even let me mention it. She was very kind," she adds.

"I think the one thing that not only she told me but I would even see her do is to really be kind with people and to help people when she could," says Farhan. "Not really hoping something in return but that's something that I have noticed in her whether it was with rest of the family or friends and even with random people out in the streets. I remember her always going out of her way to be kind to people. I think of her as a great example for women who just had no opportunity to study while they were growing up. The fact that they can still persevere and make something out of their lives...She has got some amazing qualities about her as a woman and that has nothing to do with her being my mom," he adds. "What I have learnt from her is that... keep it cool *yaar*," says Zoya. "She wears her success lightly. She has seen so much. She was working from the time

she was three years old in this industry. I mean she is in her early sixties now. She has doesn't let success go to her head and doesn't let failure get to her heart."

Adhuna adds, "She is definitely a role model for me and my girls in many ways — the way she has lived her life, the resilience, the grit and the attitude. She is always happy, she is always having a joke, she is always able to see the brighter side of things, and I think that is an amazing quality."

Honey Irani's only regret is not having spent much time with her father. "My father passed away in 1973. We used to do weird things. Like I remember, when Javed and I were dating and we were about to get married, Javed had bought a second-hand car— an Ambassador and he had just learned how to drive. Javed wanted to take him for a ride. I said, 'Javed, that'll be the last day we meet.' Javed was a very bad driver. So my father said '*Gaadi roko, side mein lagao*' (Stop the car, take it to the side of the road) and he said, '*Hoon walk karine gher jaao choo, tu pan mari saathe chal!*' (I'm walking home; come with me.) And Javed said 'I am not such a bad driver!' He said 'You're terrible! *Tumko license kaisa diya?*' (How did they give you a license?) And then when we bought the flat also, the new house, we said Pappa come and see the house. For one hour he was at the door only, I said "Pappa come inside the house!" All the locks were being checked; '*Isko oiling kar*' (Oil this) I told him, 'Pappa come inside the house! We'll do the oiling!' He said, '*Nai nai bou dangerous chhe!*' (No, no, it's very dangerous) You have a small baby, anybody can open the door. No, don't use this lock. *Godrej nu lock use karo!*' (Use Godrej locks).' Then he checked the cupboards and said '*Godrej na cupboards waapro.*' (Use Godrej cupboards). Javed said 'Why do I even call him over?' But did he care? He was sliding the windows and saying '*Javed, tu oil nahin*

karta hai! (Javed, you don't oil these things,) My dad was hilarious! That was his sense of humour. He used to do these mad things with a straight face. He was too sweet.

"Since it was very hot, we had an air-conditioner in my room. My father would say: 'Switzerland *maa paida thai chhe*,' (You act as if you were born in Switzerland) but he knew that it was not enough for me. So he said, '*Aa toh* she feels very hot, so put two ACs.' But he would add, 'Electricity *no bill ketlo aave, khabar chhe ke?*' (Do you know what the electricity bill comes to?)" As her mother grew older, Honey Irani decided to bury the hatchet. She tries to place her in context, to understand what drove her, "I don't know much about my mother's background. Once I had heard that she had also acted during silent era. But I am not sure. I know my mother had an uncle and aunt, brother and sister who looked after her. And they never got married because they were bringing her up. So, they were very old. They used to stay near Flora Fountain and we used to send lunch to them. They used to have one meal a day, they were that old. So, sometimes I would take the lunchbox with me and give it to them; they were very sweet people." "My mother passed away in 2001. I was shooting for *Armaan* and I was in Mauritius when I got the news. There was no flight. Bachchan Sahab said he'd arrange a flight for me. I said no, by the time I reach everything will be done. She had become a Christian so when I came back, I went to her grave and put flowers on it and said, 'I forgive you for everything you've done. Rest in peace.'"

From the house she was born in (Roopkala, 16th Road, Khar), to her bungalow at Bandra Bandstand (Sea Springs); Honey Irani has come a long way. She happily lives with her family and is an active writer even today. She has bought a house in Coonoor, where she visits quite often. She says, "I wanted to buy a place. I had a friend of mine, Seema, daughter of the writer Ismat Chughtai. She was staying there in Coonoor. I had been there for a shoot for *Parampara* (Yash Chopra, 1992) and I had gone to meet her and I fell in love with

the place. I bought land in 1998 and I built the house in 2008. I've done it from scratch. I had a friend of mine—Bijoy Jain who had designed the house for me and Kaiwan Patel built it. I did the whole interior myself. I don't know how I did it. I think, I did it all out of my imagination... that this sofa shall fit here and it perfectly fit. I was very impressed with myself and how I did it. Whenever I am there, I feel very relaxed. I remember my dad a lot; he would have loved it."

With Ananya Desai, Priyanka Arora, Meenakshi Verma, Minal Khosla, Minal Sancheti, Ritika Debnath and Yash Shah

Chapter 2

Rekha Sabnis

Lead Writer: Jovita Aranha

Evening on the terrace of Indira Niwas, a 100-plus-year-old building in Girgaum. Abodh Aras, Chief Executive Officer of the non-governmental organization, Welfare of Stray Dogs, sighs expansively. He has just had a great meal and he is sitting with his friend, Rekha Sabnis who has played several roles on the stage of life. She has been an actor, a translator, an activist and a firebrand.

“Rekha, you must write an autobiography,” he says. Rekha laughs and says: “Who do you think would want to read about me?”

Rekha Sabnis was a Sanskrit scholar, a theatre and film actress, an authority on Indian mythology, a producer of various plays including Kiran Nagarkar’s highly controversial and legally and extra-legally banned, *Bedtime Story*. She has acted in experimental Marathi theatre and in art-house cinema. She has been friends with all kinds of people but has had a special place in her heart for stray dogs. She was the quintessential Mumbaikar, living several lives to the fullest.

She was also the kind of person who did not think her life would interest others.

We beg to differ.

Rekha Sabnis was born in Girgaum to Dr Bhalchandra Sabnis, a well-known dentist, and Sudha Sabnis on 20th April 1942. Her mother passed away when she was only two. She was raised by her father and her grandparents; her grandfather was S. A. Sabnis who was a respected Sanskrit scholar and a lawyer by profession. This family was crucial in shaping her way of life and ideals.

Gustad Irani, the owner of Cafe De La Paix, a heritage Irani bakery and cafe in the same lane as Indra Niwas, has known Rekha for over twenty years. He recalls the stories she would narrate of her childhood: “She would tell me that when she was a kid, during Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations, every street in this area had a stage. Pundits from the big schools of music would come and perform in these gullies. She attended all these shows and that’s where she discovered the joy of being on the stage. This was encouraged at home. She was allowed to be the person she was. There was no hindrance from fate or her family...”

Sabnis went to Queen Mary’s High School and completed her MA in Sanskrit from the Elphinstone College, where she worked as the youngest teacher of Sanskrit for two years before the department shut down. Sanskrit, it would seem, ran in the family. In an interview with Savita Bajaj for *Dharmayug’s* March 1978 issue, Rekha said, “I would often go with my father to watch Sanskrit plays. At that time, I was six or seven years old. My grandfather taught me Sanskrit.”

As a student of Elphinstone College and a member of the drama club, she acted in and directed plays like *Usna Navra* and *Durche Dive* and won accolades for both acting and direction. She started acting under the mentorship of the veteran actor and Marathi stage personality Daji Bhatavdekar, who staged Sanskrit plays based on the Puranas, at the Brahman Sabha³, Girgaon. Kalidasa’s *Mālavikāgnimitram*, *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, *Vikramōrvaśīyam*, Bhasa’s

³The website of the Brahman Sabha says that it was started in 1888 and that it reaches out to people of all castes and communities. (see www.brahmansabha.org/about_us.html, viewed on 9 November 2017 at 20:57)

Svapnavasavadattam and *Daridra-Charudatta* were a few of Sanskrit plays in which she performed.

“She was the heroine of Kalidasa’s musicals and sang classical music wearing a nine-yard sari, looking absolutely breath taking. Dozens of people had a crush on her, but she took this public adulation entirely in her stride,” says Kiran Nagarkar, bilingual author of books such as *Saat Sakkam Trechaalis* (Marathi) and *Cuckold* (English). He was also one of Rekha’s closest friends.

But she did not only act as Shakuntala and Vasavadatta; she also excelled in modern plays including Shreekant Malushte’s *Kaksha*, a Marathi rendition of French writer Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*; *Paach Vaajun Paach Mintani* (At Five past Five; a version of Lalit Saigal’s Hindi play *Hatya ek aakaar ki*), Girish Karnad’s *Yayati*, *Asach Ek Gaon* (based on Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*), *Aakash*, *PashanPaalvi*, *Point Blank* and Badal Sircar’s *Vallabhpurchi Dantakatha* (original Bengali title: *Ballavpurur Rupakatha* or *The Fairytale of Ballavpur*.)

Most of these plays were staged as productions her own experimental group, *Abhivyakti*, which she co-founded with Shreekant Malushte in 1969. Malushte now in his eighties, is the director of the Satyam National Academy of Photography (SNAP) and has served as the president of the Photographic Society of India (PSI), the general secretary of the Camera Club of India (CCI) and secretary of the Federation of Indian Photography.

“My connection with Rekha dates back to the time that playwright Tara Vanarse, asked me to adapt *Kaksha* into an experimental play for a state competition in 1966,” he says. “I was looking for a young and beautiful actress with a fierce

personality to portray the role of Urmila, the lead protagonist. I watched Rekha perform at an inter-collegiate university competition at Churchgate's University Clubhouse. And I knew: she would be the perfect Urmila."

About the origins of Abhivyakti, he says, "Once when we were out drinking tea at one of the drama programmes, we started talking about our passion for experimental theatre. Because it was a driving factor in our lives, we said— Why not start our own experimental group and direct and perform our own plays? It was at the same moment that we decided to name the group Abhivyakti and make Daji Bhatavdekar the director."

The most controversial play directed and produced by Rekha Sabnis was *Paach Vaajun Paach Mintani* which dealt with the circumstances around Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. It garnered a lot of criticism from eminent people of the time, including Gandhian Usha Mehta, who argued that the play gave unreasonable importance to Nathuram Godse and glorified his assassination of Gandhiji.

This backlash led to the banning of Abhivyakti's performances at various venues including the KC College auditorium. But the media coverage of the story worked in Rekha's favour. While it was not allowed in most places, the play became popular internationally, especially in America. Similarly, *Point Blank*, directed by Dilip Khandekar faced a lot of flak as it was said to be a critique of the government. But the ban was lifted later.

"Rekha had a knack for finding talent," says Malushte. "For our play, *He Rang Manvache*, we required two small boys. While we had someone to play the role of the elder brother, we were struggling to find a boy who could play the younger one. Rekha took it upon herself to find the character.

At the time, a young boy, who often hung out in the gallery of the rehearsal hall caught her eye. Thinking he was just the character she was looking for, she immediately decided to cast him. This boy grew up to be noted Marathi and Hindi film actor, Laxmikant Berde who passed away in 2004,” he says. Malushte worked with Abhivyakti for thirteen years before resigning to pursue photography.

But it wasn't only Laxmikant Berde that Rekha brought into the limelight. As her close friend Kiran Nagarkar writes in a tribute, “Rekha was also possibly the first student of veteran theatre director, actor, playwright, screenwriter, and film actor and director late Satyadev Dubey, who he says, ‘would park at her place and drink himself silly in good company.” In his article titled *Inside View* (Bombay, June 1980) Satyadev Dubey, the doyen of theatre in Mumbai, speaks of how Rekha helped discover India's Marlon Brando. “Like Cleopatra, Rekha Sabnis is on the lookout for new conquests. Her latest in Grotowski—yes, the famous post-Brechtian God of the West from Poland. When an American disciple of Grotowski—Steven Weinstein, came to Bombay looking for guinea pigs for Grotowski's apocryphal theatre experiments, only Rekha Sabnis had the guts to host him. Then finally Grotowski arrived, Rekha nearly gave him a heart attack by imposing a would-be Marlon Brando who was not in the original list of interviews. Rekha's perception or Grotowski's lack of it, got Brando selected. Unfortunately, people bitched because Rekha was also selected. Both Sabnis and India's Marlon Brando flew to Poland to attend Grotowski's theatre workshop. For most who did not guess it, India's Brando was Naseeruddin Shah.”

Dubey refers to Sabnis as the only tri-lingual actress he knew who besides Marathi and Hindi, participated in 'dead Sanskrit plays.'

"During her two-decade career Rekha Sabnis has irritated, infuriated and enthused many. But despite major efforts on her part she has failed to earn the lasting dislike of anyone. Given a chance I could wring her neck but her devil-may-care smile saves her....She must be responsible for many heart attacks and nervous breakdowns amongst the traditionalists and modernists in the Marathi Theatre," Dubey writes. Within the brief span of three years, Abhivyakti earned itself a space in the city's theatre community. One of Rekha's first assignments was directing Vidhyadhar Pundalik's one-act play *Chakra*. This play won 'The Soviet Land Award'. She enacted the role of Draupadi, and was lauded for her skills. Yet another impressive achievement for Abhivyakti was staging of Girish Karnad's play *Yayati* in a Marathi version, directed by Dr Shreeram Lagoo. The noted thespian (Lagoo) played the King while Rekha appeared in the comparatively minor role of the royal daughter-in-law, Chitralekha.

He Rang Maanavaache, an original play produced by Abhivyakti, had as many as 50 roles performed by more than 40 actors. Needless to say, this young group was winning accolades and prizes at various competitions in the city.

Abhivyakti stopped staging plays after 1982 for much the same reasons that many other experimental groups also fizzled out. "In my opinion, the dawn of Doordarshan, and the arrival of the VCR [video cassette recorder] have attacked the existence and threatened the survival of experimental theatre," Rekha told *Dharmayug*. She did a few cameos in

Doordarshan television series like *Ashtanayika* with Vikram Gokhale and the popular show *Yeh jo hai Zindagi*.

She acted in Dubey's production of Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh ka Ek Din* which was also turned into a motion picture by Mani Kaul (1971) where she played the lead protagonist Mallika. The film revolves around the life of poet Kalidasa. One of the most memorable scenes shot in the film *Ashadhka Ek Din* was the one in which Kalidas leaves Mallika. In a soliloquy, Mallika states one of the most important truths challenging the patriarchal society.

She says, "Even if I did not remain in your life, you have always remained in mine. I never let you wander from my side. You continued to create. And I believed that I too, am meaningful. That my life is also productive. And my life belongs to me."

That was Mallika speaking Mohan Rakesh's lines but it could have been a statement of Rekha Sabnis's life. She also played cameos in experimental new wave films like Avtar Kaul's *27 Down* (1974), Shyam Benegal's *Bhumika* (1971), Girish Karnad's Kannada film *Ondanondu kaladalli* (1979) and Amol Palekar's Marathi film *Akriet* (1981).

Many other actors have generated a lot more notice with a lot less work but Rekha maintained a low profile. "She always underplayed herself. This one time I asked her about her stint in *Yeh jo hai Zindagi*, she downplayed it calling it a one-off thing. Her contribution to theatre was exemplary, but she never portrayed herself as someone big. She was a contemporary of the Naseeruddin Shahs and Om Puris of the world. Naseeruddin Shah mentioned her in his autobiography too. Shanta Gokhale edited a book, *The Scenes We Made: An Oral*

*History of Experimental Theatre in Mumbai*⁴. Rekha was common to all three spaces of experimental theatre mentioned in the book. But it was a pity she was not covered,” says Abodh Aras.

One gets a glimpse into Rekha’s belief system in an article titled *Rekha Sabnis: Jigyasaoka Antaheen Silsila* (Rekha Sabnis: a Case of Boundless Curiosity) by her writer friend, Vasant Potdar for Hindi magazine, *Sunday* in 1977.

“During her school days Rekha started to feel the difference between the treatment of men and women in society. She would be furious about certain questions: If a man can return home at midnight, why can’t a woman go out after sunset? Does the privilege stem from physical strength men exert over women? Is wrestling (*pehelwaani*) the ultimate way of living life? Working for eight hours sitting in same place under the same designation, men earn more than women. What kind of math is this?

“While in college, she started speaking up about female students being mistreated by male students and addressing issues that embarrassed and shamed them. She would stun people with her singular intelligence and rational thinking. From donning clothes to smoking, watching movies to attending late night classical singing performances, she proved that she lived just as carefree as men did.”

Rekha was quite the daredevil and a risk taker as a college student. “When she was in college, she would go to Gokul

⁴ Published by Speaking Tiger in 2015, The scenes we made: an oral history of experimental theatre in Mumbai, looked at three major spaces: Bhulabhai Desai Institute, Walchand Terrace and Chhabildas School.

Bar, which is an old watering hole. She also told us stories of the Prohibition time of going to the homes of aunties who would dispense liquor,” says Abodh.

Rekha challenged patriarchy and encouraged women to be independent, self-reliant, and not be subdued by anybody. “Most feminists back in the day, despite having huge ideals would place their husbands first in their personal lives and give themselves second priority. But Rekha practiced the first rule of women empowerment on herself. She placed herself as her priority. She expressed her belief in equality for both genders through her lifestyle,” says Potdar.

“There were times when people would snicker behind her back and call a ‘shirt-pant-clad, sitting with men and smoking and drinking alcohol (she blatantly referred to it as *daaru*, no euphemisms for her). A few would try their luck and never pass up an opportunity to flirt with her. But they could never harm a hair on her head because of her strong character,” he says.

Her fondness for solo trips was summarized in Potdar’s article in the infamous Montreal incident, “...she reached Montreal alone at 3am. Sightseeing would follow at seven am the next day. She couldn’t wake up in the morning and missed the sightseeing. But there was no use crying over spilt milk. Instead, she decided to eat a hearty breakfast in the hotel restaurant. A young gentleman walked up to a sari-clad Rekha. He was a student researching Indian music and philosophy. They started chatting and immediately clicked. He was in the fishing business. So, he proposed she come and have a look at his business. The company was seventy or eighty miles away from Montreal but the gentleman had a private jet of his own.

They decided to have lunch and return in a span of two hours. Rekha was delighted and immediately agreed.”

Recalling the incident, Rekha said that a lot of her Indian women friends were agitated and asked her what she was thinking. How could she trust a stranger in a foreign country and take such a risk? She told Potdar, “You think I would pass the opportunity of drinking Scotch on a private jet while chatting with the pilot? I have met several men all my life, you think I can't say gauge risk or tell good from bad?”

Similarly, on a trip to Chicago, she met an American who was hell-bent on showing her a good time. Rekha said she wanted to go and see the Playboy Club. He was stunned that a sari-clad traditional-looking Indian woman would want to go to a place like that. But he did not have membership. He tried to sweet talk his way in, telling the manager he had forgotten his membership card but the manager was having none of it. But then Rekha sprang her next surprise. She nonchalantly asked, “Will you take me to a homosexual club?” “A very weird truth manifested itself to me that night,” Rekha said recalling the incident to Potdar in the same interview. “There were more than fifty men in the room but nobody stared at me. Unaware of my existence, they were just enjoying themselves. Every now and then, a young man would walk up to my American companion and caress his cheek, or ask him for a dance. He wanted to entertain me, I had to entertain him by saving his life and getting him out of the club.”

When her friends criticised her for going to a gay club, she laughed it off saying, “I go abroad to see everything I know I won't be able to see in India.”

Her love for travel helped her make friends she treasured for life. One such travel companion and friend to

Rekha was Vijaya Chauhan. A social activist and an educationist by profession, Chauhan retired as Programme Officer in charge of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) at UNICEF. She has also been a part of struggles like the Narmada Bachao Andolan and is a regular at socialist events. Vijaya Chauhan first met Rekha through her friends Neera Adarkar and her husband, the late Arvind Adarkar, both architects and urban researchers by profession.

Vijaya Chauhan says, “All four of us were fond of travelling around the world. Whenever we had time and enough money we would go. Those were not the days of tourist companies and we had to do our own planning. Neera was a perfectionist. We would pool in money to buy those expensive Lonely Planet guides because computers were unavailable and Neera would go through them. She would make sure she found out the nitty-gritties right from the bus routes, the timings of trains, all this had to be worked out. “I would share the room with Rekha while traveling. She would always carry Wodehouse books, as she loved her night reading. She had a thin book with her at all times. She would always carry a very compact bag. Now, if you are going to a cold country, you would carry perhaps, a sweater, fuzzy socks, a beanie or a monkey cap. But Rekha was never bothered. She would just have three pants and a few cardigans. For years together this didn’t change. She would carry her blue backpack, a small bag she kept on trips. Arvind hated that bag and would say ‘Rekha throw it out now,’ She would retaliate saying, ‘Why should I? It’s so useful to me! I would never do that.’” She remembers how the blue bag met its end. “We were sitting on a railway station somewhere, Neera and Arvind had gone to confirm the train schedule. Rekha was sitting with the luggage, a whole bunch of three to five bags. Her

blue bag sat atop the luggage, when she decided to go for a smoke. And as fate would have it that was the exact moment her blue bag was stolen. I remember the panic on her face. We went to the railway police to file a complaint. When things settled a bit, Arvind and Neera were happy that she had finally gotten rid of the bag. Luckily all her money and passport were in her pockets. Despite losing her bag, she did not lament over it through the trip. When we laughed that the bag was gone for good, she joined in the laughter too.”

Neera Adarkar first saw Rekha on stage in *Avadhya* and distinctly remembers being enthralled by a scene where Amol Palekar lifted the young actress in his arms.

“She was quite senior to me, so it wasn't actually a friendship. We acted in a play together twenty-five years ago. My husband Arvind remembered her as a beauty queen because she was senior to us, extremely beautiful and belonged to the upper class. They had a big mansion at the time. It all started when we acted together. We used to live close by, we first became film friends, then travel friends and because a lot of theatre personalities were common friends, we would often go to hers for dinners and parties. We would spend every Diwali vacation together,” says Adarkar.

Recalling their last trip to France, Adarkar shares an anecdote. “Rekha was an absolute rum lover,” she says. “Just that one-and-a-half peg was a must. When we went on the cruise, carrying alcohol was strictly prohibited. Because they wanted you buy it from them at exorbitant prices. The previous day we were staying at this Airbnb place. So, I told Rekha, ‘You better not take it with us. Might as well finish it here.’ But Rekha sneaked it in. Instead of just one bottle, she carried four quarters

in tiny rum bottles. They let her take it on board, assuming it was some medicine.”

It was Rekha’s complete indifference to what other people thought about her attracted a young Chitra Palekar. “Rekha was five years older than me. I met her for the very first time at my cousin’s wedding. She wore a *kaali chandrakala*, a beautiful black sari with a traditional border. She looked terrific! I didn’t know who she was except that she was my cousin’s classmate in Queen Mary’s, had completed her MA in Sanskrit and acted in Sanskrit plays under Daji Bhatavdekar.”

The next time they met was at Walchand Terrace, an *adda* for theatre enthusiasts in 1968. Chitra had only finished her BA and they were both working with Satyadev Dubey. Their friendship began when Rekha asked Chitra to work alongside her in *Asach Ek Gaon*, which she also produced and acted as Chitra’s mother in.

“We rehearsed at a hall in Gaiwadi. It was directed by Ashok Sathe and Dilip Kolhatkar was the *sutradhaar*. There used to be fights. Rekha, as a producer, used to get upset. Everybody would try to make up but the director would get upset and say – ‘In that case, I am not going to take the next rehearsal.’”

They also worked in a play *Dhadsi Dhonduchya Dhandali*, by Achyut Vaze in 1975, which faced pre-production censorship problems. This forced the writer to direct the play himself.

Chitra Palekar recalls how Shyam Benegal’s *Bhumika* was shot at Rekha’s house. “They would never allow it to be hired out for a shoot for money. But Shyam being a friend, they let the whole unit in. Rekha never did mainstream lead roles. Her role in our film *Akriet* was widely appreciated. She did not have a single line of dialogue throughout the film but her

expressions were exceptional. Debu Deodhar who shot it, called her extremely photogenic. The camera captured her beauty really well,” says Palekar.

Girish Karnad’s play *Nagamandala*, in Marathi, directed by Dilip Kulkarni and produced by Neena Kulkarni, was the last play they did together. Rekha was the *sutradhaar* and Chitra was the blind aunt.

Chitra Palekar refers to Rekha as ‘*nirmal*’, which means clean or pure. “She was like an innocent child. The four of us—Viju, Neera, Rekha and I, used to gather and call it our *chandal chaukadi* (inseparable quadruplets). We would gather at Rekha or Viju’s place, booze and gossip about the entire world. Neera would always laugh and say in Marathi “*Arre aapli Rekha na kamalcha paana ahe. Tyaachya var paanyacha themb padla ki nisatun jaato*. (Our Rekha is a lotus leaf; water may fall on it but it just slides off). She would never keep a grudge.”

Back in the days when there were no discos and pubs. Chitra and Amol Palekar would host house-parties at her marital home in Gamdevi which Rekha would regularly attend.

“She didn’t care for norms and lived a free-spirited Bohemian life in the moment. No judgments. And we are talking about late 1960s early 1970s where the social context was very different. Of course there used to be some people who said ‘Rekha can afford to.’ But she wasn’t a socialite in that modern sense and was very down to earth. Even in experimental theatre, men can be nasty. I’ve heard many snide comments made about other women; I never ever heard a bad comment about her even though she led a life different from most Maharashtrian women,” says Chitra Palekar.

Despite being at the peak of her career, Rekha’s decision to reject fame was a conscious one. “As a child, she

would say, she was really spoilt. During her college days, she got the freedom to do what she wanted. Her father and grandmother never restricted her. Imagine getting into theatre and being out till late at night in the 1960s. She realized she had everything she wanted as a child. From that point on, fame didn't really matter to her. Because she'd been there, done that, seen that," says Abodh.

Many of Rekha's friends refer to Abodh Aras, CEO of Welfare of Stray Dogs (WSD), as somebody Rekha loved as a son. He has known her for the last 20 years. He recalls their first meeting, "Rekha and I met through the Welfare of Stray Dogs in 1996. We were both volunteers at the time. The first time we met was when she hosted a workshop to train people on basic first aid for dogs at Indira Niwas. Imagine allowing the general public to walk into your house for these workshops!"

Labels are for clothes, not relationships, he says. "I would say that the relationship was more like a friend, with elements of the parent-child relationship. It grew over time and cemented over the last ten years. I never felt like calling her Rekha something. Like Rekha *Maami* or Rekha *Kaaki*. For me, she was just Rekha."

The WSD calendar (Stalwarts of Mumbai) was dedicated to her and so were the brochures during the WSD concert featuring Stop-Gaps Choral Ensemble and the Stop-Gaps Junior Choral Ensemble in October 2016.

"WSD and animals were a huge part of Rekha's world and she was a huge part of WSD's world," says Aras. "Right from, raising money for animals—which is still difficult for WSD, she would do everything including standing at stalls during

festivals. During the annual Jain period of *Paryushana*⁵, we would go and stand outside temples with a donation box, competing with beggars. But she would stand outside the Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan steps near Chowpatty on the road, in a beautiful sari at Dadar with a certain dignity that made people donate to the cause. She would do what was necessary for the cause. She would clean kennels if that was needed and she would stand on the street and raise money if that was needed.”

When one enters Sabnis’ house even today, one is greeted by a volley of interrogatory barking.

Nobody escapes the inquisitive eyes of Anarkali; no one can deny the elegance with which her four-legged Tipu Sultan walks. “All her pets had an amazing longevity and interesting names. Like she has a Tipu (cat), she had a Zebunnisa, Bajirao and Mastani, all historical names. All of them lived for about 17 to 19 years. Her mission was to get people to not buy a pedigree breed but adopt a stray dog, everything that WSD stands for,” says Abodh.

Gustad recalls her sense of humour with her pets, the way she would call out to her dramatically-named pets when they were misbehaving in the streets. Three of her pets were even named *Chavat*, *Vaatrat* and *Futaana* (pet names for mischievous kids). She saw them as persons, not as animals and she often spoke to them in the Urdu dialogue of classic Hindi cinema.

While most households give leftovers to their pets, Rekha’s Anarkali and Tipu have diet preferences and schedules that Suman Sinhalkar, 62, who has been working as a household

⁵The most important religious event in the Jain calendar, this is an eight- or ten-day-long time of fasting and prayer. The word literally means abiding or coming together.

help at the Sabnis home, for seven years now, diligently follows. From bread and butter for breakfast to meat for lunch and dinner, they live lives that match their royal names.

“I observed her love for animals even when we travelled,” says Vijaya Chauhan. “She had an odd way of communicating with animals—which country, which language, what animal—there were no constraints. She could spot a dog at a distance and even they would come to her, as if they had known each other for years. There was a huge dog at this one place we visited abroad and the owner said he would allow photography with the payment of five dollars. We were hesitant because we were unsure of how the animal would behave. But Rekha got friendly with the dog instantly. The owner was surprised too. She was quite knowledgeable about animals. You could meet her with your cat or your rat and she would start talking to you on that subject for long hours.

“If a meat dish was prepared or ordered at any of our house parties, she would religiously carry all the bones for her dogs. She never felt ashamed to ask for a plastic bag in which to take all the bones. She would say—‘My Mastani and Bajirao will eat them!’

“She never discussed why she loved animals but her love for the unattended and stray dogs told us all something about her nature. It wasn’t about pedigree and dog shows. Being the only one in the family and having all the attention, sometimes you need to share that attention with somebody. Human beings are not the only choice,” she adds.

Despite being a woman of many talents apart from her literary and theatrical achievements, many people including some her closest friends were unaware that she was trained in classical music, Kathak and artwork (*chitrakala*).

Bhushan Khanna, who owns a hardware store on the ground floor of Indira Niwas says, “We have been tenants here for three generations. She was our landlady. I distinctly remember it was Diwali. My wife and I were entering the building and she exclaimed, ‘Oh My God! Who is this lady singing with a beautiful voice?’ As we went on climbing the floors, we realized it came from Rekha’s house. For a minute we were mesmerized and at the same time we thought, should we disturb her? We rang the bell and the music stopped. And we saw Rekha singing ragas on a sitar. And she said, ‘I am just doing my *riyaz*.’ When she rehearsed, the dogs also maintained silence just like the whole building did.”

Vijaya expresses her shock over the revelation of Rekha’s singing too. But maintains it was just a part of Rekha’s nature. “I have heard Rekha converse in Sanskrit colloquially. When we went on tour she would never talk about her acting career, her language and translating skills or literary achievements. Then I would introduce her as the person who translated the novel *Cuckold* by Kiran Nagarkar as *Pratispardhi*. And I would tell people, ‘If you haven’t read *Pratispardhi* you have wasted years of your life. To read it or die are the only two options.’ And she would yell at me saying, “*Kaai ga kaahi tarich sangte*.” (Why are talking such nonsense?) But they might not be interested in the literature or my achievements, she would quip. And I would retaliate saying, ‘No Rekha! People must know who you are!’”

Kiran Nagarkar speaks of the jagged relationship he shared with Rekha, saying, “If you think we had one of those made-in-heaven, author-translator relationships with nary a ripple of dissent or disagreement, think again. We disagreed about as many things as we agreed about; we argued, we fought

bitterly. I have never met anyone as obstinate; perhaps the right word is pig-headed, as Rekha. And yet I cannot underline enough that this remarkable woman had not a single mean bone in her." He first heard of Rekha when she appeared in Mani Kaul's film *Ashad ka Ek Din*, when a rare screening of this parallel cinema classic happened at Eros. He tagged along with his friend the poet Arun Kolatkar to see it. They managed only ten minutes and then left. "I remember telling her, 'Your movie bored the pants off me.' Her only response was— 'Oh yeah? Okay.' I thought she was going to fly at me. Nothing of the kind. No anger. So that really brought me much closer to her. She used to call me, *maanush-ghaana*—a misanthrope, somebody who hates people. Because of the translation projects we became much closer friends. She used to have a fantastic kitchen. I had absolutely no shame in asking her— 'May I come over and have food, *yaar?*'" he says. The first time, the author and Rekha met in person was at film director Sai Paranjpye's home in Juhu for dinner. She had just come back from shooting a film in Goa. At the time, Govind Nihalani was finding it difficult to read Nagarkar's book *Saat sakkam trechaalis* and kept asking Rekha to help him understand the text.

"That's how Rekha was introduced to *Saat sakkam trechalis*. Years later she told me that it was only after a second reading that the book had its full impact on her," he says.

After a gap of a few years, he ran into her in Delhi at the International Film Festival. "I was staying a zillion miles away from the Plaza theatre where the films were being shown for the press. Rekha was ensconced at painter Bal Chhabda's flat along with a friend of hers and invited me to stay with her. I jumped at the offer. That was the beginning of our film festival sojourns. Often, we didn't meet the whole year but come the

International Film Festival in Delhi and we were inseparable for the whole fortnight. Like a friend of mine who had migrated to the States decades ago, Rekha too, called me dhobi for I would return home after watching six movies around 12.30 a.m. and I would start washing my clothes,” he says with a laugh.

Their translation journey began when Nagarkar returned to writing after a gap of almost fourteen years and decided to go over to Rekha’s place and read from his new novel, *Ravan and Eddie*. Rekha went on to translate a number of the author’s works into Marathi including that classic of Mumbai chawl life. “She was also the first to listen to *Cuckold* even as I wrote it. Believe it or not the seed for my novel *Cuckold* was sown when she and I were returning late at night after the last show at the Plaza theatre in Connaught Place in a rickshaw. It was cold as hell and I was wearing a thin parka. My teeth were clattering away, while Rekha sat comfortably with just a shawl covering her. It was during this ride that it struck me that Meerabai was perhaps the most well-known woman on the subcontinent and her words were on everyone’s tongue in India just as the Bible is for Christians, often without their realizing it. And yet ... nothing was known about her royal husband.”

Cuckold (1997, HarperCollins) is 609 pages long. “She translated this very long book. We had tremendous arguments with the publishers; nobody in Marathi would touch it 1997. Even after it got the Sahitya Akademi award, nobody wanted to even read. Khushwant Singh wrote ‘I regard (Cuckold) as the best(novel) by an Indian.’ She translated it and to me, she was really a life support.

“I needed assistance in Sanskrit all the time. She was doing a PhD and she gave it up. And that is one of the reasons we fought. I was always in trouble while writing or just thinking

about some complex issues which puzzled me. Her knowledge of our mythology, our epics, of the *Bhagavad Gita*, of the *Dnyaneshwari*⁶ and Sanskrit literature was phenomenal. I would call her at any time of the day to ask her the meaning of a word, the significance of a passing reference in the *Mahabharata*, ask her to interpret the Rasa Theory for me, or beg her to recite passages from Kalidas, and she would oblige. She even read the Gita on her own from Dnyaneshwar's early Marathi version."

Rekha also saw the merit and urgent relevance of *Bedtime Story* and had the courage to produce it when nobody else did in the dark times of the Emergency. "When Dr Lagoo asked every experimental group in Bombay to come over to Ruia College, read the script and said rehearsals would be held the next day, the government intervened. They asked for 78 cuts which was madness. After constant negotiation, we got this down to 24 cuts. Words like Gandhi or Buddha couldn't be used. But far worse, extra-legal censorship got into the act. "I could barely afford to make one copy of it because I was jobless at the time. Finally, she took all the risks and produced it in 1995. There were twenty-five performances in Marathi, the actors loved acting in it so much that they produced it themselves. But after that, nobody had the courage. So, if you are going to talk about our relationship, then mine is one of total debt, I had little if anything to offer and she just gave unstintingly," he says.

Rekha expressed sensitivity to the needs of her friends through subtle gestures, he says. "In the early days, I used to have beer at the most. But Rekha wanted her Old Monk. And in between it got completely out of hand. So, in the

⁶The Dnyaneshwari is a thirteenth century Marathi text by Sant Dnyaneshwar. It is a commentary on the BHgvd Gita.

afternoon, she would have vodka or gin. She smoked at least 20 cigarettes a day. And I am terribly allergic to cigarette smoke. You know, without even thinking, or saying, 'Kiran, I am doing this for your sake' she stopped when I was around. So, the debt of gratitude is enormous. But I think we were also terrific friends by the grace of God."

The year 2004 marked a rift between them. "I had a very bad fight with her. And there was a long gap of four years when I did not speak to her. And to date, those lost years bother me," he says hesitantly.

One of the articles, we stumbled upon, written by Ambarish Mishra mentioned Rekha had turned recluse and was lonely. Abodh was quick to clarify this misconception saying, "She was staying alone which is different from being lonely. She used to go out for her social evenings, parties, teas, art auctions, lectures, movies with different people. There were dinners at Shyam Benegal's house and at hers too. She was never typical and she would never let herself be turned into the cliché of the beautiful actress of yesterday who has suddenly closeted herself away."

Rekha made a conscious decision to not get married. "She would always say that I am not the type, I cannot get into that relationship and be bound to a person...who would tolerate me as a wife? Being so independent, it was not her cup of tea at all," says Vijaya Chauhan.

Neera Adarkar agrees, "She had no pangs of motherhood but she was into relationships. She had no long-term relationships. She wanted her independence; she said that if she were ever to be reborn, she would want to live exactly the way she was."

Rekha's underground rebellion wasn't a rebellion at all, believes Nagarkar. "She just knew what she wanted. She was not going to allow anybody to dictate to her. So, in that sense, she was a far better rebel in protest. And even though she had a boyfriend, she saw to it that her private life was private," he says. One of the many facets of Rekha's personality was her open resistance to technology. That explains why her well-kept brown diary at home still has the names and contact numbers, residential addresses and email ids, of everyone ranging from her favourite wine shop to important theatre personalities, listed alphabetically. She refused to have a mobile. Chitra recalls the unending arguments she would have with Rekha on it saying, "She would say, '*Naai baba, maala nako.*' (No, I don't want one!). I told her it's so difficult to contact you. So I asked her, 'What if I have no work but I want to send you a simple message, saying 'Rekha, I miss you or Rekha I love you?' So, she replied cheekily saying, 'You can always contact me on the landline and tell me that'. As just one example: Neera suddenly decided to go to Sri Lanka and she called everyone and said the offer was expiring, we had to answer quickly or the tickets would get expensive. We tried reaching Rekha repeatedly. But she wouldn't pick up the landline. And she was royal, no? She had a fixed schedule and rules for calling." Rekha wasn't great at math and her resistance to the computer meant manual calculations. "In those days, she had lot of tenants. Since it was old tenancy, the rents were meagre, close to free really. But she had to work out the property tax too. And Rekha being Rekha, would do it manually. One day, she got so worked up doing these calculations, her blood pressure shot up and I had to rush her to the hospital," says Abodh.

She started using a computer only the day she realized it saved time and Marathi typing software could be installed for her translations too. "The amount of enthusiasm she had for everything! Most elderly people wouldn't sit and learn the computer. But she made it a point to. Every time she had a difficulty, she would call me. She wrote all the commands on post-its: how to email, how to attach a file, etc.," adds Abodh.

Her terrace garden is her 'labour of love.' She would plant in old car battery boxes that beautified the footpath. The little pots she made as nesting boxes for sparrows are still inhabited today. "At 73, who does these things?" Aras asks. "Three years ago, she suddenly said, 'I want to learn French' and did it on her own, playing cassettes and asking people who were fluent to check her pronunciations.

She read somewhere that taking up a new skill in life reduces the chance of getting Alzheimer's."

One of her French tutors was Vanessa Caru, a French student, who met Rekha 11 years ago, when she was looking for a place to stay in Bombay. She was introduced to Rekha by Neera's husband, Arvind. Only a day after arriving in the city, Caru began staying with Rekha as a paying guest. "She was a very good student, good with pronunciation but easily fed up with the grammar. We used a very old book, which used Old French that nobody in the present age spoke colloquially. But Rekha wanted to follow the exercise and whenever I pointed out anything wrong, she would keep questioning me till I came up with a satisfactory explanation." On her last visit to France, Rekha visited Vanessa's parental home. "I think she had a great time. My parents don't speak English. My father loves cracking jokes and they would interact despite the language barrier."

“One of Rekha’s hidden talents was stitching,” says Caru. “She used an old hand-operated machine (still placed near the swing, in the corridor). She stitched her blouses, her salwar kameezes and beautiful quilts. She used fabrics from old saris and other garments and stitched them together in beautiful colourful arrangements. She would call it ‘time-pass’ but they were really amazing.”

Caru recalls an incident during a weekend trip to Matheran, a hill-station in the Western Ghats, which she took with Rekha and Neera. “As we were walking up to our hotel, people were surprised to hear her(Rekha) speaking Marathi and would say, ‘Oh! A foreigner who can speak Marathi!’ They mistook Rekha for my mother! We couldn’t stop laughing about it for a while.”

Vanessa recalls that Rekha told her that she had wanted to become a doctor. At that time, medicine was a male bastion and she was not given admission. But her grandfather insisted on Rekha being educated. “She told me how both of them would sit on the swing and discuss Sanskrit texts. And how afraid her grandfather was of the Communists coming to power, thinking they (Sabnis clan) would lose everything. So, he encouraged her to stand on her own feet, get educated and be independent,” Caru says. Apart from Caru, a number of Rekha’s friends from across the world would come to stay at Indira Niwas. Her enormous social circle was no surprise. “Her love for literature and her travels helped her have the friends she had. Despite having a huge friends circle, she was also a private person. She wouldn’t mingle meaninglessly. And that compartmentalization was in a positive way, not a secretive way,” says Vijaya Chauhan.

Neera speaks about one such personal experience: “When I went for her birthday, a classmate from her school days walked up to me and said, ‘I have been wanting to meet for a long time.’ I told her even I wanted to meet her because I had heard so much from Rekha. I told her Rekha never wanted us to meet and we laughed. So, she would keep these exclusive relationships.”

Every year, Deepa and Dr. Shreeram Lagoo honour a theatre veteran with the Tanveer Sanman. The award is named for their late son, Tanveer, who was killed by a stone flung at random at the Pune-Mumbai train on which he was travelling in 1994.

Chitra recalls meeting Rekha in 2015, at the Tanveer Sanman function in Pune. Rekha acted in many of the plays for their theatre group, *Roopvedh* including the iconic play, G P Deshpande’s *Uddhvastha Dharmashala*⁷.

“I went to Pune for the award function. Rekha and I sat together. I remember the award being presented to theatre veteran Alyque Padamsee. That was the last time we met when she was healthy,” says Chitra Palekar.

Palekar left for Australia and returned after a long gap. It was only when she attended the launch of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* that a friend blurted out, mid-conversation, “Did you know that Rekha has cancer? And now of course, she is okay.”

Chitra says: “I was shocked to the core. I did not know how to react. I didn’t say much. I came home and asked Neera, she knew. And she assumed I knew too. It was only later

⁷ Uddhvastha Dharmashala literally means ‘The ruined dharmashala’. The translation into English, by Shanta Gokhale, was published under the title, ‘A man in dark times’.

that we found out, Rekha hadn't disclosed it to anybody," she added.

Rekha had a terrible cancer of the oesophagus. She found it extremely difficult to eat. Abodh recalls the time, he would scream at her, because at that time the only thing that kept her going was some protein powder. And once when it was almost over, she didn't tell him she needed a refill. "I used to come here almost once or twice a day at the time. And I said, 'Rekha, why would you do that?' And she said, 'I did not want to bother you.' I was angry beyond words. So, in my opinion, she was terrible, a terrible and very difficult patient," says Abodh.

Vijaya seemed to have gotten the news of Rekha's health from Chitra. "The last time Rekha got operated, Chitra told us. I rushed to Hinduja and asked her why she hadn't told us. She told me, 'What was your loss in not knowing what happened? This is just sentiment. You couldn't have provided any service there.' I said, 'I was so worried. I could have sat with you, spent some time with you at Hinduja.' And she said, 'What would you do, sitting next to me?' So, she was very rational about everything. She told us the doctor said there was nothing to worry about. She was in good spirits and asked us to plan our next trip. That never materialised.

"The second time it happened, her cousin was immediately called and Rekha would always discourage us from coming because visiting hours, passes etc. were never hassle-free. I would constantly ask her sister to take a break occasionally, so I could spend the night. But she refused. Rekha's condition was deteriorating, but she was allowed to go home. That was the time; she realized this is not going to last long. Any major operation affects the person in many ways. We would

drop by at her home sometimes but she wasn't able to even converse. She would only keep playing with her pets," she adds.

But there were good days too. Neera remembers a sick Rekha trying to give Gustad singing lessons while she lay in bed. "She would lie on her bed while both of us sat. She would tell him to sing a couple of songs. His singing gave me tremendous happiness. He said that he was finding it difficult to sing. This woman lying on the bed in her last two weeks told him, 'You have to practice.' Since he had no classical training, she made him practice octaves, 'Sa Re Ga Ma.... One octave higher each time,' she would instruct. Every time he sang, she would keep correcting him, 'No no, not like that!' and it kept going on," says Neera and she laughs with the memory of tears mingled in the sound.

Needless to say, Rekha had her bad days too. One of the closest persons to have witnessed her fast deteriorating health in her final days was her house help, Suman.

"She didn't eat at all. From January she was on a liquid diet. Later on, even if she smelt food, she would feel nauseous. She was alone and her memory was becoming a little hazy. She couldn't even walk alone from the room to the bathroom," says Suman.

They stayed together like sisters and friends. "Madam wasn't close to that other full-time caretaker who was brought in, due to palliative care. If she sat next to her head, she would say 'Call Suman!' For everything she would call me. Even if someone gave her something to eat, she'd say, 'Why did you get it? Where is Suman? Call her!' The caretaker would say, 'She's cooking food.' Madam would get angry and yell, 'For whom is she cooking? Order from outside. Don't make anything here. Suman, you sit here with me,'" she recalls.

Suman spoke about the night she accompanied Rekha to her chemotherapy. “We returned at 11pm. We usually made her sit on a chair that we carried up three floors. So, at first, when she sat downstairs, the watchman as well as Abodhbhau was with her. She fainted right there. We rushed her to the OPD and came back home at 1am.

“It happened twice. She fainted and couldn’t remember anything. I used to try to pick her up initially, but later I couldn’t do it. Then I would scold her and ask her to call Abodh and take her to the hospital. Because at that point her backache was unbearable. After her last operation, she took a bad fall in the bathroom and hurt herself. The pain shifted from the front to back, so much so, the skin blackened. She would always tell me, ‘Suman press my forehead,’ ‘Rub my feet,’ ‘Rub my arms.’”

The operation drained Rekha of all her energy. “It was either in February or March 2016. In the last three days, she was unable to recognize anyone, she didn’t talk properly. Her memory worsened. She would get breathless very often,” says Suman.

Neera recalls her last close interaction with Rekha. “September 5 is my birthday. I was in Goa during the day to visit my 94-year-old father, who is obsessed with my birthday. It was the first time he had forgotten. He wanted me to stay back to make up for his bad memory. But I told him, I had to meet Rekha. So, I went to her house on my birthday. She said, ‘Today is your birthday, so did you have a drink?’ I refused saying I have had my quota in Goa. She made Suman search for it, scolded her for not finding it and I kept pacifying her. She got the bottle out and poured a drink for me. But I had couple of sips. It was nice. It was my last close interaction with her,” she says.

Chitra was one of her regular visitors while at Hinduja. She says, “I would secretly smuggle her favourite Konkani dish *batata song*, for her cousin and Abodh. She would say, ‘Give me also.’ When we refused, she’d say, ‘*Chalta hai yaar*.’ Her mouth had become sensitive after the radiation therapy. On our last meeting, she refused to eat. So, I requested her, ‘Let me feed you.’ And on that day, Rekha who always refused any kind of help allowed me to do that. That moment, I knew she was sinking.”

25th September 2016, was a quiet day for the residents of Indira Niwas. “Madam told me she wanted to me sleep in her room. But she sat on the swing in the corridor. Her brother-in-law, who was here to help was also asleep. A sound suddenly disturbed me, like someone breathing deeply. But the noise of the television drowned it immediately and I continued watching. Her caretaker rushed in panic yelling, ‘Turn the TV off, turn it off!’ I asked her, ‘What happened? Is the volume too loud?’ The last thing she told me was, ‘No, no...Madam—she is gone,’” recalls Suman.

Everything happened in a quick rush—calls were made, messages were sent. A few words had to be said before the body was taken. While most people in the room didn’t know each other, each one had something to say about her. All of these people from different walks of life came together joined by one common thread, Rekha.

“I had only met her on the Friday preceding her demise. It was pouring. She wanted me to help her come outside her room. We took some photographs. On Saturday, my father became really ill and passed away. And immediately the the next day, Rekha died,” says Neera.

A small meeting was organized in her home itself, after which everyone proceeded to Chandanwadi, for a memorial service. Naseeruddin Shah attended it too. "Another *shok-sabha* (memorial service) was conducted by Yuvak Biradari's Kranti Shah at his Fort office," says Chauhan.

Rekha did not believe in customs, rites and rituals. She expressed in writing that no final rites and rituals be conducted and asked for all her organs to be donated instead.

"She did not want anybody mourning her. She wanted them to celebrate her life. We continue the tradition of bringing in the New Year at her house and also her birthday with a small get-together, remembering Rekha. People across spheres, from the theatre world, animal world, her social circles and the art world come together," says Abodh.

Even in death Rekha helped many learn from the life she led. "I learnt a lot from her death. She would throw her hands on either side of her head on the pillow and gaze deep inside herself in that small bedroom. In her eyes, you could make out that she was going through entire journey of life, and there was no regret. Even if there was, she was too busy moving forward to mull over it. I just had a chance to hold her hand. She sat up in bed, with great effort, we were alone in the room that day. I told her that I just wanted her to know that she was somebody, I would never forget. She put her head in the crook of my neck and stayed there for a long time. We exchanged nothing but silence and she slept. I just had to constantly caress her hair. Now when I look back, I have learnt so much, that there is nothing to miss today," says Gustad.

"You can imagine when someone goes out of your life, you feel betrayed. Even though the person has done nothing of the kind. Whoever has died has no say in it. But every time I

think about her, I always call out—Rekha, Rekha, Rekha, I have a bone to pick with you, actually many bones. Come back,” Kiran Nagarkar wrote in her obituary.

Suman continues to live with Anarkali and Tipu on the third floor of Indira Niwas. “All my previous jobs were such that I took care of elderly people and had to leave the place, once they passed away. But Madam didn’t let me leave. She told me to keep the house the way it is and to not leave. She did not fire any servant at all. I am still here, the lady who sweeps and mops is still here, the watchman is still here. We are all still employed,” says Suman.

“I make food, handle the kitchen, feed the pets, dog (Anarkali) and cat (Tipu). When Madam was there, I used to feed her. She used to have two chapattis, vegetables, salad and fish in the afternoon and at night she would have *dal-chawal* (lentils with rice), vegetable, fish and salad. Yes, if any guest would come over she would help me in the kitchen. She would cook herself and I would help her in the preparation. She loved cooking.”

Suman still remembers Rekha’s schedule. “She would wake up and freshen up. Then she would drink her tea. She would sit down to watch news on TV. At eleven am, she would rest a little. Then she would have lunch at one pm—her food had to be served exactly at 1. I would go to the market to buy vegetables and come home to cook again. Madam used to come out whenever it was time for snacks, tea or food. I knew the time well--one in the afternoon and nine in the night.”

“When I was new here, I stayed alone for a month. Madam had gone out for two months. I used to be so scared back then— all alone in this big house. Now it’s been about six months since Madam passed away. The first month, I was very scared. I didn’t like anything. Even when I sat and slept in the

living room. The bathroom is close by from her room. But she used to come all the way with her walking-stick and say— ‘Suman come, take me to the bathroom,’” she says.

“In the beginning, I could hear her walking-stick. I hallucinated. I used to keep looking in the same direction. Even now, I don’t like going towards her room in the day time. Only in the mornings, the other maid comes to clean her room. I have overcome my fear now,” she concludes.

Rekha listed Lyla Bavadam, Daisy Sidhwa and Abodh Aras as the executors of her will, all of whom were connected to her via Welfare of Stray Dogs. “It was not only the relationship but also things we thought similarly about in life— our ethics and values. The trust was always there. The three of us are just executors, we have no personal benefit. She has willed her wealth to some animal and environment-based organizations. I am sure she was approached by a number of developers, and builders. But she never wanted this to be demolished because it is a heritage structure. In her will she has also said that WSD can use it for its activities without claiming tenancy. So, we still hold activities here,” says Abodh. It’s a delight to see troupes of students rush into the house on weekends for these workshops.

Rekha’s garage on the ground floor bears a WSD sign board. “Years ago, she was generous to give us her whole garage for storage for our garage sale. Every time, a donation came in, people would get their things here, come to the third floor to a lady called Rekha Sabnis, take the key of the garage, put it in, lock it and give the key back.”

The key still hangs by that window.

With Nilofer Khan, Ritu Sharma and Vindhya Barwal

Chapter 3

Madhusree Dutta

Lead writer: Mayanka Goel

The National School of Drama, Delhi, has a sprawling campus. Students regularly visit the huge lawns to relax, and maybe have a drink or two, while the watchmen keep coming to shoo them away. Most students handle this diplomatically and try to placate the guards so that they may stay just a little longer, like screenwriter Atul Tiwari did, in his time. “*Abhijaa rahehai, bas paanch minute,*” (Give us five minutes, we’re just leaving) he would say in a pleading, placatory voice. His classmates would use a similar tone. One of them, however, was an exception.

“*Aye! Tum hamaaraa baap hai kya jo humko yahan se uthaata hai? Itna toh hamaaraa baap bhi nahin roktaa humko peene se jitna tum humko rokta hai,*” (Aye! Who are you to ask us to leave? Even our fathers don’t stop us from drinking as much as you do) said then theatre student, and now filmmaker, curator and activist Madhusree Dutta.

“That was her rebellious, fighting spirit. This was how upfront she already was in college! And she still has that spirit today; you can see it in her films, in her writing and all her work,” says Tiwari.

And indeed, Dutta presents this spirit at every step of the way. From making a film like *I Live in Behrampada* (1993) on the communal riots in Mumbai, to a film about domestic violence such as *Memories of Fear* (1995), the activist has firmly stood by her beliefs and challenged the status quo with each work. When we ask her niece, 33-year-old Tarshia Dutta whether her aunt still has that rebellious streak, she exclaims, “Yes of course! If you ever work with her, you will definitely be scared of her, till she makes up for it with her fun attitude.”

Dutta’s work has always been unconventional. Her documentary films unabashedly include fictional elements and narratives—such as songs and poetry—to convey a very real

message. Her visuals, meant to convey reality, are simultaneously surreal, such as when she shows pictures floating over water in one of her works. And if her peers and relatives are to be believed, this originality is no less than what they expected of her.

“There’s an old picture of her with my father—her brother—from when they were children. They’re on a cycle and she’s sitting behind him and even then you can see that spark in her eyes. She still carries that with her today,” says her niece.

Dutta’s particular brand of energy was also nurtured by the 1980s, which is seen by many observers as an important time in the development of Indian feminism. In 1980, a tribal girl named Mathura⁸ was raped by two policemen—Constables Ganpat and Tukaram—in the police station of Chandrapur district of Maharashtra. This was not the first or the last time that something like this had happened; incidents occur and some get written about while others are lost. But this case was different. The Mathura Rape Case was to become one of the landmark cases in the women’s movement in India, primarily because of the people’s response to it. The police station was surrounded by the people of the bazaar when the incident came to be known, and justice was demanded. The public was not going to let this case die a silent death. People all over India protested against the judgement which acquitted the accused and even without the internet, the news spread like wildfire. Big cities and small towns held protests and out of those protests sprang hundreds of organisations. Such was the atmosphere

⁸ This case happened before the media began to protect the identity of the rape survivor. The case has come to be known as the Mathura Rape Case and so we have used her name but we record our discomfiture with this.

when filmmaker, curator, author and cultural activist Madhusree Dutta was a teenager.

“In Mathura’s case the constables were finally released because Mathura did not have scratch marks on her body and because she could not prove that she had resisted. Rights, you see, do not exist on their own. Things have to be proved, and they can never be proved unless the culture is changed. Can you see how interlinked rights and culture are? Rights have to be extracted out of the system and the system will never be conducive to rights unless we change the culture. That is why when Flavia Agnes⁹ and I started Majlis [an organisation devoted to women’s rights]. Our motto was ‘Right is Culture, Culture as Right,’” says Dutta.

This philosophy is explained further by a former trustee of the organisation and the Head of the English Department at SNDT University, Mitra Mukherjee-Parikh. “Legal rights cannot function in a vacuum. A cultural context is required for the law to function effectively. Majlis was for designing and establishing such cultural spaces, a space for meaningful jurisprudence and efficacious laws,” she says.

Dutta explains: “Rights have to be part of the culture, and rights have to be normalised. There’s no point in only fighting. You can punish someone and you may get compensation, but it will not change things. It will not bring rights. Because a case only works when there is a violation of rights. It doesn’t work to establish rights. Only culture can help. People don’t live under legal rights. They live under cultural rights, cultural facts. It’s all about whatever you believe.

⁹ Women’s rights lawyer and one of the key figures in the women’s movement in India. For more details on her life, see *Lives of the Women*, Vol 2, and her own autobiography: TK

'Hamaare mein yeh hota hai, usme yeh hota hai (This is how we do things; that is they do it).' What you believe is correct and right and whatever you're taught is right."

Feminism, as a movement, according to Dutta, finally arrived with the Mathura Rape Case.

"See firstly, nobody *joins* a movement. It happens on its own, because a time comes when a movement just emerges. The feminist movement here began in the 1980s. The women's movement, on the other hand, has been going on for a very long time. There were women in the Independence movement, women who mobilised for different causes and all these can be considered part of the women's movement. Feminism was definitely part of a political discourse but in the 1980s, feminism, as a practice, developed. So now there was a substantial practice behind the discourse," she says.

This wave swept over the entire country and had an effect over the young and the old. Dutta, as an undergraduate student, was equally affected.

"People were discussing this in colleges. There were heated discussions and debates everywhere. There were so many people joining in and there were so many people opposing it. So I think it was time; any man or woman interested in whatever was happening around them could not escape this. You may oppose it, you may say, I'm not with the *jhola*-type, the screaming bitches, nor am I with the Communist feminists. But everybody was touched. Everybody had to be either this way or that way. Feminism had arrived," she says.

Dutta first found exposure to the political and social discourse of the country at Jadavpur University, while studying for a Master's degree in Economics. The institute afforded her

opportunities and perspectives such as she had never known as a child in Jamshedpur.

“This was in the late 1970s. It was post-Emergency¹⁰ so the university was very radical and forward-looking. We had a debating society, drama club, film society, everything. It was a very exciting time with student movements and various activities,” remembers Dutta.

Soon after though, she realised where her interests lay. As a child, watching jatra—Bengali folk theatre performances often by a travelling troupe—during the Durga Pooja¹¹, left an impression on young Dutta’s mind.

“That was the high point of culture in Jamshedpur because there was nothing much to see otherwise. It was not that I specifically had an interest in theatre, but that that was the only thing I was exposed to because that’s what there was.”

While in Jadavpur, she remembers thinking aloud about a place where one might study theatre. And then, for the first time in her life, she heard about the National School of Drama. How she applied and made it to the Institute is a different story altogether.

“I was at somebody’s house and right there on the table, was the admission form. I asked the person if he was applying and he said that he wasn’t,” she recalls. “I asked if I could take the form and he said, ‘Sure’. Otherwise I didn’t even know how to ask for an admission form. This was before the

¹⁰The Emergency refers to a 21-month period from 1975 to 1977 when then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency across the country, resulting in the suspension of citizens’ fundamental rights and civil liberties.

¹¹An annual Hindu festival, dedicated to the worship of Goddess Durga, and celebrated from the sixth to the tenth day in the Ashwin month of a bright lunar fortnight as per the Bikram Sambat Calendar.

internet so somebody would have had to pick it up and post it from Delhi.”

Dutta applied from her hostel in Kolkata, without informing her family of her decision. Admission to NSD required an entrance test, and fortunately, Kolkata was one of the centres. As luck would have it, not only did Dutta clear the admission test, but she was also awarded a scholarship. The battle was only half-won, though. When her father learned of this development, he was not at all pleased.

“My father didn’t know what had hit him! He said, ‘What? You will go to learn *jatra*?’ That’s the only context he had. He said I must finish my studies first but that was just one way of buying time. I said, ‘No, this is studying. I want to study this.’ *So bahut naatak hua* (There was a lot of drama). I said, ‘I am already eighteen so I can go, and I even have a scholarship so you don’t have to pay for me.’”

Dutta’s father and brother were the primary decision-makers of the family. In the midst of all the shouting, Dutta’s quiet mother gave her opinion.

“While I was sitting with her in the kitchen, grumbling, she said, ‘Run away, if you must. But if you cannot, then don’t grumble.’ That was all she said.

“I don’t remember now how I organised money for my admission after my father refused. I just remember coming home and telling him that I had the money and that I had booked my train ticket. That was when he finally gave in,” says Dutta.

The National School of Drama helped her, she says, get a sense of India in its entirety, as she met people from different states and all walks of life. She delved into various social issues and found exposure to multiple perspectives. And as she found her voice, there were battles to be fought.

Tiwari recalls, “Madhusree would always try and do different things and do things differently. On top of that, she was quite a street-fighter. Very much like Mamata Banerjee,” he laughs. “And she came from the student politics of Jadavpur University, so she had a fearless streak.”

Recalling one of the memorable incidents from their college days, he says, “We were in the second year and we decided that our school should also celebrate May Day. May Day, not as Maharashtra day, but as International Labour Day. By then I was the General Secretary of the School Union. We asked the school. They refused but some of us, including Madhusree, decided that the least we could do was to skip class and celebrate it on our own. A certain production was going on at that time and the guest teacher didn’t like all this. He was a very despotic kind of a man. He said we were undisciplined boys and girls, and asked us how we could dare to do something like that. He accused us of disrupting rehearsals and being drunk and filed a complaint against us. Not that we did not drink. We used to, of course, almost every day. But that did not mean we were drunkards. We were all the toppers of our class. The cream of the class. But we had a temporary director at the time, and when the complaint reached him he had to take some action. He asked us to apologise but we refused. So we were all thrown out of the school. Expelled.”

The group of friends found the most interesting way to address the situation. They approached their contacts from the Supreme Court and fought their case. An agreement was reached after much trouble, and they were reinstated.

“We were a wonderful batch. And the best thing about the National School of Drama is that since this is the only school at the national level of theatre, there are people from

different areas, different states. We had two Bengalis in our group. Madhusree came from Kolkata and Jamshedpur. The other was Sushmita Mukherjee. Sushmita was an actress from Delhi and Madhu was many things at once. Though she specialised in acting, she was never only an actress. She was more the thinking kind,” says Tiwari.

The stage got a fair share of Dutta as she directed and acted in various plays over the years in Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. One such play was *Aaj Pyaar Bandh* (1991), an adaptation of the 4th century (BC) Greek classic *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, produced by Majlis. Atul Tiwari, who worked on adapting the work for an Indian audience, confirms its significance.

“All the texts we did were feminist texts. It wasn’t accidental nor was it because of a lack of choice. Majlis’ work with women included work on legal rights as well as cultural empowerment, which was looked over by Madhu. And a work like this was a reflection of her beliefs. This play was about how the woman should be at the centre of society. It was a modern feminist text on how women use peaceful ways to resist war by refusing sex to the men who want to wage it. They wage a peaceful war against the men. Sex and violence, war and rape go together. The women say to the men that they (the men) could go to war but when they come home, they (the women) won’t be there for them.”

As Dutta continued her work along the same themes, she eventually found herself behind the camera, instead of in front of an audience. Known for her cultural activism, it is interesting to note that the filmmaker and curator had never

seen a single documentary till she made her very own. *I Live in Behrampada*, her debut, went on to win widespread critical acclaim and a *Filmfare* award.

With no particular interest in documentary filmmaking, how did Dutta manage to accomplish this? “It was 1992, Majlis had just recently gotten registered and we got a single room, with no bathroom and no water connection, as our office in Bandra East. I had gone to get a carpenter to make a table or something else. This was the 7th of December. The Babri Masjid had been demolished on the previous day. I was still a newcomer and didn’t know the city well. I reached Bandra East station but I could not go out, because the riots had started,” she recalls, “I remember standing on the overbridge, trying to figure out what was happening. I didn’t know what I was looking at. When you go by the highway, you cannot tell how big the slum there is. Slums are always camouflaged in big cities. So, though I had passed that route from Bandra station to the Western Express Highway many times, I never thought I was passing a slum of 50,000 people.”

This was the first time Dutta noticed Behrampada. Firings had already killed and injured numerous people over those two days. “I didn’t even know its name then or anything else about it. Then Nirmala Niketan’s students came for a survey. Many people were affected and they could apply for compensation from the government but many were illiterate; they didn’t know the procedure so the students had come to help. Nirmala Niketan needed some local guardian in Bandra because young students were involved and thus they spoke to us,” she says, “They were young and enthusiastic, and thought they were saving the world. They came, went around, and we didn’t even know where they had gone when suddenly some

students came huffing and puffing and told us about a girl who had collapsed inside Behrampada. That was the first time I heard the name. My first instinct was: 'This is a Muslim ghetto; if something happens to this girl there'll be a riot'.

"I did not know if the girl was Hindu, Muslim or Christian. I still don't remember, but the story would have anyway been that a girl got killed, violated or raped. If the story leaked in some form or the other, by the time the truth prevailed, it would be too late. So we rushed. When we went inside, we realised that some of the people who had been injured in the firing on December 6 were there. Their wounds were festering because they were not going out of the ghetto. They were scared to go out for medical treatment. The sight of those injuries had caused the girl to faint. That moment made me a documentary filmmaker.

"We came back and tried to call our journalist friends to cover this. But by that time, Shiv Sena had mounted a *huge* campaign. There was also a Marathi newspaper called *Navakaal*. *Navakaal* launched a campaign against Behrampada, that it is a ghetto which is breeding criminals and bombs. Now I'm sure there are as many criminals in Lokhandwala as there are in Behrampada. All such densely populated areas in Bombay have criminals. Who's arguing against that? But now there was a huge campaign directed against the slum. We tried to cover the truth but nobody responded and every day some story or other came out of Behrampada."

This was when Flavia Agnes, co-founder of Majlis, asked Dutta to make a documentary film on Behrampada. This was a prime piece of land and clearing it would make it available for real estate development. They decided that proof must be gathered before it was taken over. "I remember telling her that

I'm not the kind of a filmmaker who shoots dying people. I said it is not a solution," says the activist.

But thankfully, Dutta relented. With borrowed equipment, she began to shoot the people and the place. But even with the decision in place, it was not smooth sailing.

"I told a friend, Hari Nair, that we're shooting at a Muslim ghetto, and he said he would join us. In the morning he called—on the landline, no cell phones back then—saying that he cannot come because there's a curfew around his house. He sent his assistant instead," says Dutta, "It was a Friday and we wanted to shoot the namaaz which happens on the road because Behrampada doesn't have a mosque large enough to accommodate the people. The previous namaaz day, there was a fight with the namaazis and some people had died.

"As a result the next Friday more able-bodied Muslims had come to do namaaz on a working day at one o'clock. To protect them more police were employed as if there were no other problems anywhere in the city. Because many people complain that Bombay police is partisan to Hindus, the army had been employed near Behrampada; to keep an eye on the army, people like us with cameras were there. It was madness! I kept thinking, what is this country? It is a Friday afternoon, there is so much to do and all this to protect a namaz? I mean what are you reducing the country to, what are you reducing the discourse of politics to? More Muslims attend namaaz, more police will come; to keep an eye on the police more army will come and to keep an eye on the army more citizens with cameras will come. It is a very silly situation.

"This is what the demolition of the Babri Masjid has reduced the situation to. Nobody on the road knew what Babri

Masjid actually was. But look how it had influenced our life and our time, at a site so far away.

“Anyway, I only shot for five days and then the police were after me so I had to run away. I had very little material but with that we put together a film to submit to the Srikrishna Commission as evidence.”

While she worked on her films, her work in Majlis also demanded equal attention. An organisation devoted to women’s rights, it had a number of cases of domestic abuse among others. And as these cases presented themselves to Dutta, so did a number of dilemmas. She recalls,

“One day a woman came in and said she was a victim of domestic violence. Her husband had been beating her. She talked about it and asked us to help her. She had approached many others but no one was responding. So we asked her about the people she had gone to. She said she had gone to the Shiv Sena MLA. She said, ‘Yeah, yeah, I am in Shiv Sena no. I am a member of Shiv Sena, so I know him very well.’ He was in jail at that time and she said she had gone to meet him there as well. This got very interesting, and she started to brag, ‘I am a big activist. I get beaten up at home but I am a big activist. Do you remember outside, some fifteen days back, when one taxi was burnt and three Muslims were killed? They were riding the taxi. This taxi was stopped and they came out, trying to escape but they were burned. They were trying to run away, but we women, we threw stones from the terrace so they got injured, fell down, that’s why they could be burned.’

“But again, the fact remains that she still gets violated at home. The fact remains that she gets beaten. So what do you decide? Do we decide only women who are good to others deserve their rights? These are complex issues. Ethics are

not so simple. Do we become judges? You are not entitled to your domestic rights and So-and-So is, or do we say gender rights take priority over and above all other rights? What do you think? There is no easy answer to this. Life is complex,” says Dutta.

The topic of domestic violence is addressed in Dutta’s *Memories of Fear*, which was made when Majlis needed a film to campaign against the issue.

“The story is about young girls where nothing actually happens to them. The girl is out at night and everyone keeps thinking she will get raped but nothing happens; a girl is menstruating and she goes to a sacred place and everybody thinks she will get into trouble, but nothing happens. The story is all about something that doesn’t happen, but living in fear of it happening. When something happens, if Mathura happens, Mathura happens. But there are so many Mathuras in whose lives nothing happens but they lead every day in fear of something happening. These are memories of fear. And these are passed down through the generations. It is not only about external forces. This is culture, because the culture of rights is not there. Your mother loves you and so she fears for you. And so she restricts you. By restricting you she gives you fear. So what you get from your mother, out of love, is fear. There’s a chain of fear, memories of fear,” explains the filmmaker.

Interestingly, as if in response to this very statement, Dutta made her niece watch the film as well, while she was still a child. Tarshia Dutta remembers:

“I was really young when she made me watch it. I couldn’t really understand it but could still identify with the

visuals that the movie had, of the little girl and another one on a train. And no one was telling me what to make of it, and how to understand it. I had to see and interpret it for myself.”

Dutta’s approach to these issues, as is evident from the description of her films and her personality, isn’t conventional. Cinematographer Avijit Mukul Kishore has worked with Dutta on a number of projects. He explains what sets the activist apart from the traditional practices of filmmaking.

“There is one thing that both Madhu and I have always strongly believed in: We deal with real subjects in a documentary but we know that we would definitely never exploit a real person in order to make a strong political point. We won’t frame one of our subjects through the lens of victimhood, which is against, I suppose, a lot of documentary-filmmaking where your subjects are clearly divided into two: there are victims and there are villains, there are the oppressors and the oppressed. But these are real people that we are talking about and we’re possibly filming them in situations that are not very good for them. So there is a sense of dignity that we want to respect. There is a very clear politics of power. We have power, behind the camera. Which is why I feel that Madhu and I had a very clear understanding of what we won’t shoot. Let’s say when we’re talking about the city, we will not shoot a slum demolition, because it is a very violent act against people. It has its own history in politics. Of course, you can say these people are squatters and so on, but they’ve been made squatters. And validated as squatters over a long period of time by the government. It makes for a great story—the government validates you and then kicks you in the butt and tells you to get

out of here. But, that is not something we are comfortable shooting,” he says.

Different facets of the same belief were elaborated on in another one of Dutta’s experiences. She recalls, “While I was shooting in the slums, I asked this boy who was assisting me to take me to the oldest person there. So he took me to an eighty-two-year-old lady, who claimed to be the oldest resident. When we began the shoot, she came wearing her finest white muslin. It was a little torn so maybe it was her only one. She was a slum dweller, as proper a slum dweller as you can think of, and my heart broke when I saw her because who would believe she came from the slums, looking at her. But that was a mistake, even though that is what training teaches us—that slum dwellers must look like slum dwellers, viewers should feel sympathetic and that only then will our story be true. That is what our vulgar, realist training teaches us. I was also a part of that training and my heart broke and I thought she should go and change but I didn’t have the heart to make her do that.

“Now I know that everyone performs in front of the camera, anyway, so you should allow the person to perform to their heart’s content what they think they are. You should respect your audience and believe that between you, your protagonist and your audience, the truth will evolve. The truth will not be revealed. It’s not a magic trick that a curtain could reveal the truth. The truth will have to evolve. The relationship is there and you have to respect that. So since then, whoever wanted to wear whatever fancy costume, I let them. I let them choose their surroundings. In fact, I carry lights even if it’s in the day now because I want them to feel good.” In this lady Dutta met, she found another one of her biggest teachings.

“I pushed the lady to talk about Partition. I asked her where her original home was and she said that this was it. I asked for her native village and she said, ‘What native village?’ I asked her where she lived before this and she said she didn’t know. I kept thinking how I was going to make this film. Finally she said Hyderabad after a lot of coaxing, and I thought I had found the initial story. So I said Hyderabad? And she said, ‘Yes but I’ve never seen Hyderabad.’ I replied that she did have the traditional Hyderabadi accent, and that it was very nice. She said that she sounded like that because she didn’t have teeth.

“So you see? The more I imposed my middle-class, less-educated history on her life, the more she resisted. I remember thinking then that it was a completely disastrous interview. But today I see the film and feel angry with myself for not having her occupy more space in the film. I was too young to handle the fact that she was demolishing my sense of history. She told me how earlier there was water everywhere and that they had had to put in sand and mud to make firm ground to build their home on. So she had actually, literally made the land. What nation and country am I talking about when she is talking about making land, right? Why was my training and what I had been taught about the Independence movement more important than her life experience of making one 10 by 10 foot patch of land? Has any one of us made land? She has. Why is that history not as important as my history?”

This belief in inclusion and exploration has been prevalent in lots of Dutta’s works. Her documentary films, such

as *Scribbles on Akka*¹² (2000) and *Seven Islands and a Metro* (2006) have unashamedly incorporated fictional elements and challenged traditional ways of doing things. Mukul Kishore elaborates on this innovative style and says, “The one incredible thing about working with Madhu is that she is truly experimental and interdisciplinary in her approach to work, whether it's film making or whatever it is that she may be doing. You bring in elements of other arts into the making of a documentary, whether it's performing arts, literature, or history, across all of these spheres. So the way of producing something becomes the way you interpret another art through the medium of cinema, and it's very interesting because when you are talking about a painting or installation art, each painting you have seen is going to define how you have interpreted it,” he says, “There is no set pattern as to how you may do it because let's say, installation art specially is more site specific or experiential wherein you move with it. It's a different experience for each person. So how do you recreate this in a two dimensional audio-visual medium? You figure out how to go about it visually, and that was the most fun part about working with Madhu because that excited the both of us and we kept figuring new ways of going about it.”

Similar sentiments are echoed by Mukherjee-Parikh, who first met Dutta over three decades ago, when the latter was

¹²Akka Mahadevi was a 12th century Kannada poet, mystic and saint, and the first woman to have written Vachanas—didactic poetry which was informative and educative—in Kannada literature. Modern scholars consider her to be a prominent figure in the field of female emancipation.

invited to conduct a theatre workshop at the institute she was teaching.

“Each one of her films is different. There is a certain realism to them as well as resonance and metaphoric nuances. Instead of saying the problem has been solved, the camera points to many problems,” she says. Citing *Scribbles on Akka* as an example, she continues, “Here, there are the personal and the political aspects at work. I say personal and political because the movie is about interpreting the heritage of a poet, while it talks about gender issues. Madhusree’s films emphasise the narrative and illustrate the pertinent ways cinema can enter into the complexity of narration. Her films tend to have this probing quality. She’s not an academic filmmaker; her films are poignant and poised at the same time, and are like riddles, confronting us with complexity.”

The camera is a witness in all of Dutta’s films, and that makes us all witnesses as well, according to Mukherjee-Parikh. “*Seven Islands and A Metro* depicts the existing heterogeneity and what happens when things get uprooted. There is no end to the layering, it’s a palimpsest. Everyone adds their own layer of reality but someone might use brute force to enforce theirs over others. That’s what the movie protects; it makes you acknowledge different realities, multiple truths. Multidimensionality is a strong part of Madhusree’s films,” she says.

According to Dutta, her sense of storytelling as well as aesthetics owes a lot to her upbringing. For instance, frequently occurring sequences of moving trains, meant as

various metaphors, have their roots in the railway line that moves goods across factories in Jamshedpur.

“Another childhood memory is from when we went to school in the morning at six. This was also the shift time for workers. So we used to be waiting for the school bus and suddenly, over the completely deserted road, thousands of people would come on bicycles. They were on their way to work. The street used to be full and then within five minutes it was left deserted again. That was quite a visual,” Dutta recalls.

In such a case, with her own brand of style, what does Dutta, as a filmmaker and curator, have to say about the current standards of popular culture? She explains her take on it through another story.

“Now, Bombay was chiefly a textile industry area; but the mills began to close down in the 1980s and there were numerous retrenched workers. Like with slums, these workers were hidden, but they were the mainstay of Mumbai. I made *Seven Islands and a Metro*, on Bombay. There is a long section on the mills in the film, and some of the mill leaders came to watch it at its premier. Now the film has English, Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil and a little bit of Marathi. There are six languages in there. So actually it is not accessible to anybody who cannot read subtitles. But Bombay has that many voices, so my film had to have that many languages. That makes it restricted in another sense because if people don’t know English they cannot access the entire film.

“So I was wondering what the mill workers would understand. With Hindi, Urdu, the Maharashtrians wouldn’t be able to read the subtitles. But the next morning one of the workers called and said that they wanted to show in the maidan. I hesitated. I said, ‘I’m very honoured but would people

understand? It's in a different language.' One language was fine, but six? And you know what he said? He said, 'So what if they don't understand? Why do they have to understand the entire thing? Do you know that we do not understand half the things we watch in Hindi films? It does not matter; we are not middle-class people *ki paisa diya hai toh pooraa samajh mein aana hai* (That because we have paid money, we have to understand everything). We understand only a part of most of the things.'

"That made me understand the consumerist attitude we have towards art, I did not like it because I did not understand it. *Mujhe pooraa ice-cream ke saare flavours pataa chalna chaahiye, kyonki maine paisa diya tha* (I should taste all the flavours of the ice cream because I paid for it)."

An understanding of how cinema and culture operate in the city arose out of this encounter. And with that came other concerns. "I understood that Hindi cinema is nobody's language. Nobody speaks like that. That is a homogenised fantasy language that is common for all. Even if there is nothing else in common between you and me, if we are travelling on train, we can still play *antakshari*. It is our only common language because it is a fantasy language. It's a very interesting thing. Indian Railways, English language and Hindi cinema actually gave India its uniqueness and diversity. Otherwise India is like a federation of many countries. So at one point popular cinema consolidated the public. So many people, say a worker, a housewife, a professional, everybody could watch the same film together and cry or laugh at the same sequence.

"But today, that popular culture is completely reversed. Multiplex is different and slum cinema is different. The slum cinema audience will never watch a film with people who

watch films in multiplexes. With television and video and digital more and more people are watching films at home.

“In the urban city, all kinds of people, in some sense, were tied together by popular cinema because it was a public culture. All sorts of people used to go to the neighbourhood single screen cinemas. And today that public culture is absent. That public culture has been killed, because real estate cannot afford it. Popular cinema is still good commerce so it has been maintained, but its public nature has been killed by destroying the neighbourhood cinema halls,” says Dutta.

Viewers of her works would agree that all of Dutta’s works portray issues with a number of layers present. The topic of cinema and the relationship it has with the city of Bombay is no exception. *Project Cinema City* (2013), an anthology of text and image essays, maps, graphics and annotated artworks documents the relationship of the city of Bombay to the film industry it harbours. Films and activism, to be sure, aren’t the only contributions that Dutta has made to the cultural landscape of the city and the country.

“It is a fascinatingly designed book in the way it maps and mediates a city, a cultural installation, and a project. It is one of the most significant books for cinema, urban and cultural studies.” says Mukherjee-Parikh.

“I started working at Majlis when Project Cinema City had just started. It was in its inception stage then, and the first two years were only about research. The project was looking at the entire city, looking for traces of cinema from the last 100 years.” says researcher and editor Shikha Pandey, who assisted Dutta on the project. “We were not just looking at the

output of the film industry. We were interested in looking at cinema as an industry and the people who constituted that industry: the union leaders of the various departments, the art directors, the spot boys; we were looking at studios and theatre spaces etc. These are the people we met with and I think their understanding of Bollywood is very different. It's not so glamorous for them, it is an occupation. That is also an important aspect because cinema is an income-generating industry and gives employment to so many people. Now if you go through the project, you end up exploring and figuring out and negotiating the city, with a layer of cinema added to it."

The project took over five years of planning, research, execution.

"And then it just so happened that the year of our final exhibition coincided with the year that marks 100 years of Indian Cinema," remembers Pandey. "We were actually looking at the cinema of the past 100 years and a lot of people were impressed thinking that we had planned this from the start, but we had not. It was a lucky coincidence."

Dutta's ambitious and innovative projects have garnered much attention and praise from many. And her journey to acquiring enough funds for all her projects deserves as much appreciation as her journey towards achieving her level of creative expression.

"The thing is that you will be and you always should be in a financial crunch. If you get ten rupees, your budget will be fifteen so you will fall short of five rupees. If you get ten lakhs, your budget will be fifteen lakhs. You should be that ambitious and you should be that imaginative. If you are an artist, you will always face a financial crunch, you will always have a deficit. It may look like I always have funds but I am always in crisis. People get scared to work with me worrying that I will go

bankrupt midway. According to me, an art project is bound to be in financial crisis. If you think that a certain amount of money will be fine for you, that isn't true. Secondly, why should anyone give you money if you tell them that you want to make a film on illiteracy? They'll give money for a literacy project; everyone knows there's a literacy problem in this country. So you have to say something more. No intelligent funder wants to give money to have a moral lecturer telling people about something or the other. You will have to do something more than that," says Dutta. "What, I don't know. Each interest is different. One project that everyone talked about was Project Cinema City. Everyone saw the funding. But I gave seven years of my life to it. I could have made a film. I've not made any film after *Seven Islands* because Cinema City took up every minute of my seven years. You need to have that kind of a commitment. It had a budget of crores. How? First budget came from Doordarshan. It was of nine lakhs. We made four films of ten minutes each. We had a lot of difficulty even with that. They were shown on Doordarshan. Nobody saw them. Who watches Doordarshan? But now we had made four films for Doordarshan. This was a handle to seek more funding. Then we got some money to run a course. To run the course with that money, we wrote the book. Then we got some money from publication, and then we did an exhibition. So there was lots of planning. It's a capitalist society and capitalism is very shrewd and you have to be equally shrewd. And if you account for all the time and energy that was invested, the money isn't much. So then when you see a film and wonder how they got the money for it, it's not fair. People love large scale projects but you have to work for that scale. You have to work very, very hard.

"Why should people be interested in one pretty little ten-minute film? There has to be something more. So, we wrote a book on the history of Bombay, seen through popular culture—*dates. Sites: Project Cinema City: Bombay/Mumbai*. But how many people read a book? So we decided to make a game and put it up at the Kala Ghoda Promenade. We even made a Marathi version of the

game. So you have to think differently and creatively. Out of the box.”

There are always hurdles along this journey, according to Dutta, as well as risks. But that’s the fun of it.

“What really is the risk in documentary filmmaking? The only one is that either you will make a film that people will remember, or you’ll make one that is completely forgotten. Anyway you can never become rich by making documentaries. You will never be able to buy a flat in Bandra, it will have to be in Malad. But that is an advantage as well. That is the only real risk. Take the risk. Like a poet. A poet never lives on poetry either. Documentary filmmakers are like poets. Good ways and bad ways. They can be as anarchic and as irresponsible. And they can be as honest. As old-fashioned. So make it fun for yourself at least. Since it isn’t as huge a career choice monetarily, why make it if you don’t enjoy it?”

And for those who find people accusing them of selling their problems and who have the police coming after them over a project, Dutta advises,

“There are always occupational hazards, but I don’t want to give you that as inheritance. I want to give you the confidence as inheritance,” she says.

With Elton Gomes and Saurabh Thapa

Chapter 4

Shama Habibullah

Lead Writer: Dalreen Ramos

How does a storyteller tell her own story? At seventy-eight, Shama Habibullah ponders this peculiar situation.

“I could’ve been anything,” she says. “The point is I grew up in communications. I lived between two cultures and when they run counter to each other as British culture and Indian culture often do, you need to be able to communicate between them. And to do that you must find an anchor. We found that in our mother, Attia Hosain.”

Attia Hosain was the preeminent woman writer of the South Asian diaspora. Her fame then rested on the beautiful and elegiac novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, which was published in 1961 to universal acclaim, from literary novelists like V S Naipaul and Elizabeth Jane Howard. It told the story of Laila, an orphan, who must make sense of an India that is heading towards independence and Partition.

Attia was the formative influence in Shama Habibullah’s life. “My mother was our *kissah-goh*, our story teller. It was she who kept us rooted in our own culture,” she says. In the foreword to *Distant Traveller* (Women Unlimited, 2012), an anthology of short stories by Hosain, Shama Habibullah writes: “Her narratives also provided us the images of our imagination; they became our touchstone to families, people, interests outside ourselves which gave us a sense of our own identity. They helped remove us from ‘an absence’.”

Shama Habibullah’s story begins with her birth in Lucknow. Her family—Shama, her brother Waris and her father Ali Bahadur Habibullah and her mother—came to Bombay

when she was two years old. Her first encounter with the cinema was *Make Mine Music* (1946), an animated Disney film at the Metro Cinema, Dhobi Talao. She distinctly remembers its final segment which had Willie the Whale performing at the Metropolitan Opera. Another of her early memories is that of her home in Mafatlal Park (now Sea Face Park), Breach Candy, where barrage balloons appeared to hover in the sky during the Second World War. In 1944, she remembers the sky lighting up when the *SS Fort Stikine* blew up in the city's harbour. "My father was blown right under his desk in his office at the Ballard Pier," she says.

The Habibullahs went to England before India became independent in 1947; their father was to head a Government of India Trade Commission that was mandated with the division of assets between India and Pakistan. Travelling on British-Indian passports, on the P&O liner the *RMS Strathmore*, which had been converted into a troopship during the Second World War, they arrived in a London that had been scarred by the blitzkrieg.

They were welcomed by the Rawlinsons, a Jewish family that had escaped Lithuania through Bombay. "My father had helped them in Bombay when they came during the War. So when we went to London, they helped us. They became our family and that remains so to this day," she adds. "William Rawlinson recited Kaddish at my mother's funeral in England, in 1998."

When two nations were carved out of the subcontinent in August 1947, the Habibullahs were in England. "The British allowed you to choose between three places, India, Pakistan or England," Habibullah says. "We were far from home and had few to guide us. My mother was from a family of staunch

nationalists and said, 'We will remain here, we will become British and then the children can choose where they want to live.' It was ironic that England became the only place where these three countries could actually meet."

In the aftermath of war, England was a country in disarray. "It was grey, bombed-out, with everything rationed; you could only get a fixed amount of anything, from eggs to clothing," Shama remembers. As a child in Bombay, the house had always been full of conversations facilitated by her mother; it was a place for a little homegrown Lakhnavi *adda*. England was in complete contrast to Habibullah's early childhood, but the people made it better: "London was a mosaic of people who came there after the war. Bonds grew out of shared hardships. So in the building where we found ourselves, there'd be a Russian émigré and a Polish refugee, people of all kinds. Bombay had also been a place many people came to for shelter during the war; they had come there for safe harbour, which we in some small way helped to provide. But when we went to England, we were the lost ones. We had no community. We had to build that community."

In England, the Indian community wasn't as evident as it is today, Habibullah says. "Someone in a sari walking down a London street would stand out. It was only during Harold Macmillan's time, when the British economic revival happened around 1957 to 1963, that Indians and Pakistanis began to arrive in large numbers for work or other reasons." She points out that a section of Attia Hosain's 'lost novel' —*No New Lands, No New Seas*—to be found in *Distant Traveller; New and Selected Fiction* (Women Unlimited, 2012), also took account of this.

The transition was much more difficult for six-year-old Shama. Her father became an independent businessman

whose work took him to different European cities, leaving his family of three in a one-room flat found for them by the Rawlinsons. To help balance budgets—there were strong foreign exchange regulations—her mother started work in the late 1950s with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the Asian Service.

“My brother and I would go to the radio recordings, all kinds of things. Our mother voiced for BBC radio plays—Shakespeare, and Jean Cocteau and Harold Pinter translated into Urdu, all recorded on wax discs!” she says. “We’d go to small cafes and she’d ask my brother and I, ‘Do you want to go to the park or do you want to see a film?’ and we chose the film every time.”

It was in this grey and tired city that she discovered the magic of books.

“My earliest memories are of a history book. The other one that I remember was the *Picture Show Annual 1948* which had all the British film stars in it; it had a blue cover and sepia pages. I studied it carefully, so carefully that I knew every British film star of the time and every film that was made in 1948. I never let that book out of my sight. That became my fantasy land. And that was how film seeped into my life,” she says.

But when she was admitted to a day school in London, (“Miss Ironsides Academy”) she fell silent and refused to speak. Shama’s elder brother, who would become the noted filmmaker Waris Hussein, was sent to Akeley Wood, a boarding school in Buckinghamshire. Since Shama had never been

separated from her brother, as a desperate measure, her mother sent her to Waris' all-boys boarding school.

"The Headmaster looked at me as if saying 'What is this silent thing doing here?' But he had a daughter, and thought I could be a companion to her. He asked me what my interests were; I said I was reading about Joan of Arc," she says. "I was all of seven years old!"

The school library was filled with books of every kind which again were a safe refuge for the young girl. Habibullah stayed at Akeley Wood till she was eleven. It was then decided that she would go to Cheltenham's Ladies' College. On February 6, 1952—the day King George VI passed away—the headmistress Miss Popham, "a very severe woman", called a meeting with students and parents. "She told my mother, 'We don't normally take girls from India in the junior school, they don't know enough English!' My mother informed her that I read and spoke English quite well. I had to sit for an entrance exam and I passed. In the 1950s, there were very few 'brown faces' who went from junior to senior school. I was most possibly among the first—others from India had mostly studied in the Home Economics section which was like a finishing school.'

Cheltenham had been founded by women activists in the 1880s, suffragettes who were passionate about women's education and empowerment. The first principal was Dorothea Beale (1831-1906) who also founded St. Hilda's, a college for women in Oxford.

"Cheltenham was a well organized school with a high intellectual standard. We were incredibly lucky. After the Second World War, there wasn't a wide job market for women other than teaching. Thus we got some brilliant women who were keen on giving us everything they had," she says. "To

survive as a student at Cheltenham, you had to be clever, or fierce, or good at games. I tried all three—I was on the cricket team, I got my name on the Honours Board with an Exhibition Scholarship to Cambridge. And I am still said to be fierce!”

Shama read history at Cambridge where her brother Waris had pursued an undergraduate degree in English Literature. But he wasn’t particularly interested in academics. Theatre was his passion; he was part of the talented theatre group of his generation directing the likes of Ian McKellen, Derek Jacobi and Margaret Drabble. Waris Hussein would go on to become a critically acclaimed television and filmmaker in the United Kingdom and the USA. He would win both BAFTA and Emmy awards. His credits include *Edward and Mrs Simpson* (1978), *Little Gloria...Happy at Last* (1982) and *Clothes in the Wardrobe* (1993). He was the first to direct Sir Ian McKellen in both a play and a film; the youngest director to be inducted into the BBC Television Drama Department; and the first Indian to have a play on at the National Theatre.

Shama, on the other hand, was academically inclined. “I was rather shy. Acting didn’t interest me. I was never going to go up and stand on a stage. I couldn’t have learned lines. But I could sit in a cinema. Film was my comfort zone. I hated being in England. It was cold. It was wet. And one of the joys of cinema, to all of us deracinated people, was that it gave us entry into a wonderful world of illusion. Because all film is illusion. The sleight of hand of a magician is the same as the retina turning a still image into a moving one. But I also loved books. Words, to me, were the most wonderful things. Words that came with images were even more wonderful. So film became my area.”

Cambridge encouraged one to have a life outside university and Waris, when directing an acclaimed television

series on Cambridge, *The Glittering Prizes* (1976), would describe it well. "Today they're all students. Then we were undergraduates," he'd say. Habibullah became part of the Cambridge Film Society and was the founder member of the Cambridge Film Unit. The unit was responsible for giving out money and equipment to filmmakers. She also wrote for *The Cambridge Review*, the official university weekly gazette; occasionally for *Granta* and the university newspaper *Varsity*, and edited *Broadsheet*, a weekly magazine of reviews and events.

"Peter Graham¹³ and I brought out an issue of *Cambridge Opinion* on film, covering interpretations of new influences in cinema in the 1960s, including the films of European directors like Bergman, Antonioni, the French New Wave and the Cinéma Vérité documentaries of Pennebaker, Leacock and Drew in the USA, Jean Rouch and Chris Marker in France."

These documentary films made a lasting impact on Habibullah, she says. Graham and she co-directed a film *A Shilling Life*. Its title is taken from a poem by W H Auden. Auden's niece Anita appeared in it, and fleetingly, Stephen Frears¹⁴ and Richard Eyre¹⁵. She also made film sequences for Frears' theatre productions.

In between she found time to write for the *Calcutta Film Review*, often corresponding with Satyajit Ray. Habibullah

¹³ Peter Graham is the author of *A Dictionary of the Cinema* (Tantivy Press, 1964) and other books.

¹⁴ Stephen Frears would go on to become a notable director with films like *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Victoria and Abdul* and *Liaisons Dangereuses* to his credit.

¹⁵ Sir Richard Eyre is a film, theatre, television and opera director. He was also the Director of the National Theatre, UK.

remembers travelling to Calcutta to meet him. Ray had been working on his film *Devi* (1960) then — a film on Dayamoyee (played by Sharmila Tagore), a 16-year-old believed to be a reincarnation of goddess Durga. “No one here [in India] had really looked at his work. It was only known abroad. He asked me if I’d like to watch it. His wife [Bijoya] said, ‘But she may not understand it. Where will you take her?’ So, Mr Ray and I sat in this almost empty theatre watching *Devi*. And he explained the film to me. I was very privileged.”

Habibullah left Cambridge in 1963. “I was always interested in the ways that communication could be used to change things in society,” she says. “So I did a course at the Centre for Educational Television Overseas, set up by the Nuffield Foundation in London. It was the better part of a year and it was intended to help its students go back to their countries and set up these communications programmes. At that time, when people spoke of communications, they only talked about the hardware. But the message, which was at the heart of communication, was ignored. This course looked at the way in which you could take a message and break it down and construct communication around it.”

The following year she began working with Film Centre, an organization co-founded by Sir Arthur Elton and John Grierson, which was also linked to the Shell Film Unit (SFU) in London. Grierson is considered to be the father of documentary filmmaking, coining the term ‘documentary’ in 1926. SFU was a production company privately sponsored by Shell Oil; it pioneered Britain’s documentary movement. And here, she did

research for films commissioned by agencies of the United Nations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

By then, Habibullah had graduated to being an assistant editor at Grierson's unit. "I was fortunate because I was working for his company and I was working with people who were great filmmakers or who would become great filmmakers. On their roster, they had people like Lindsay Anderson and John Schlesinger. I was the humble editor. Film was on celluloid. We worked on optical tracks, no magnetic tape; we spliced film and joined it with Scotch tape to edit! We had nails on wooden racks that acted as little hooks. So when the film was cut, we would hang each section up on a peg so that we wouldn't lose a single of those precious strips. Each reel, each frame, whether it was cut or kept, had to be logged."

Here Habibullah put empty editing rooms to good use. "I used to run the films on an edge numbering machine when everyone had gone home so that I could look at the timing and the rhythm of the shots. I would watch a wonderful film called *Night Mail* which had music by classical music composer Benjamin Britten on a poem by W. H. Auden—a night train that carries the post from London to Edinburgh. I would sit and watch this film again and again. I'd see where the cuts came, I'd see where the sound carried over. Because the eye sees before the ear hears—light travels faster than sound—you could learn certain tricks. I never went to film school. That was my school."

In 1965, she went to Washington to work with the Airlie Foundation, a branch of George Washington University in Virginia, where she helped with the production of educational documentaries for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) on

subjects such as ecology, air pollution, cancer research and heart transplants. Habibullah stayed with the family of American actor Melvyn Douglas—then a famous star who was cast opposite Greta Garbo in the iconic film *Ninotchka* (1939, Ernst Lubitsch)—another association she owed to Bombay.

“In the early 1940s, my mother had met Douglas in Bombay when he was here, in the army, during the Second World War. She would often mention that she knew Douglas, who was a very huge star then, and we would scoff. One day, I was standing outside my flat in London, and a man walked up to me. ‘This is a very strange question, but are you Indian?’ he asked. I said I was. ‘There was an Indian lady I knew very long ago. You wouldn’t by any chance know her, would you? Her name was Attia Habibullah.’ I asked Douglas if he would like to meet her. And we became very dear friends. His wife, Helen Gahagan Douglas¹⁶, guarded and befriended me during my time in America.”

America was in the grips the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King was marching on Washington and the press coverage of the war in Vietnam had sickened the heart of liberal America.

The students were burning draft cards so that they wouldn’t be marched off to a war they didn’t want. “It was another time,” Habibullah recalls. “People were putting flowers into gun barrels, listening to Jefferson Airplane and Grateful Dead.”

But Habibullah still maintains that being a political animal had nothing to do with her inclination for documentary

¹⁶ Helen Gahagan Douglas was both an actor and a politician. She stood as the Democratic candidate against the infamous Richard Nixon in the presidential election of 1950.

filmmaking. “Anger is not the only impulse to make a film,” she adds, looking at the world today.

As Habibullah got involved in making films, she realised she could no longer write about them. “Filmmaking is collective whereas writing is personalised. Once you start to deconstruct film, you realise that it will always be imperfect. I would imagine it is very much like being a novelist. And my mother felt it. She would say, ‘Who is Attia Hosain? How are they interpreting this woman? Is that what I meant? Are we only alive in the imaginations of others? Within their perspective? What is ours? If you make art, it begins as yours but when it is experienced by someone else, a reader, a viewer, it is absorbed and transformed.’”

Habibullah feels that if she had continued to work in the West, she would have remained an editor or, “at best, a production secretary.” She recalls meeting Ashoke Chatterjee in Washington—the former Executive Director of the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, who was working with the World Bank. “He introduced me to Nirmaljit Singh, the Consul General of India in New York. He looked at me and said, ‘Why are you people here? You should be in India doing things for us.’ And I thought about it, and I gave up my job. But I did not want to come to India as I had as a child: with nothing to do.”

But the next two people Habibullah ran into were filmmaking duo James Ivory and Ismail Merchant. She joined them as an assistant director on *The Guru*. The film tells a fictionalized account of The Beatles’ lead guitarist George Harrison’s first visit to India; in place of Harrison, we have

British rock star Tom Pickle (Michael York) who travels to Bombay to learn the sitar from maestro Ustad Zafar Khan (Utpal Dutt). “So, I didn’t actually come back to do what Nirmal suggested. I took the job as a way to return to India to see whether I would like to work here. Ismail was a charming exploiter. He’d cook these fantastic meals for his staff but never paid us. One forgave him for everything. But I have to say, Ismail remained a lifelong friend. And I loved Jim.” She glows with pride at the Oscar the nonagenarian filmmaker received for *Call Me by Your Name* (2017).

When she returned, Habibullah had lived outside India for over twenty years. It was 1968, and all of Europe was in turmoil. There were race riots in England and in France, a major political insurrection had occurred, bringing workers and students to the barricades.

“It was a time of ferment in England and in the West. So, for me leaving the UK was the most marvelous relief. Here, in India, people were actually building a country, you know? It was magical,” Habibullah says. She planned to stay for six months; she stayed fifty years.

When working for *The Guru*, Habibullah had to learn most of her job on set as she wasn’t trained for it. “I was the script supervisor who maintained continuity sheets [a detailed log of a day’s shoot]. And Subrata Mitra would say, ‘What are you doing?’ But while everyone was filming, I had to sit there with my Olympia typewriter and keep typing.”

She recounts an amusing incident on the set of *Bombay Talkie* (1970), another Merchant Ivory production on which she assisted and for which Merchant paid her five rupees a day (including transport expenses). The film follows the on-off

relationship of Vikram (Shashi Kapoor), a movie star, and Lucia Lane (Jennifer Kendal), a bestselling author visiting the city.

It was understood that Mitra would take a long while to set up lighting. And when he finally did, the set-up would have to change, because the light had changed.

Jim: Is this all right for you, Subrata?

Subrata: Hmm, Hmm

Shashi: And why isn't anyone asking if it's all right for me!

Habibullah also made her first film in India, *Ashiana*, in 1968—a documentary on her village Gadia in Lucknow with Govind Nihalani as the cameraman. However, she received little support from her Lucknowi household during the process of filming it.

The film was originally narrated by Attia Hosain. But American actress Diane Baker who had been assisting on the project got a second version done, with actor Lorne Greene voicing it, much to Habibullah's chagrin. "I told her that we couldn't have that voice. She said, 'No, no. We have to sell this...this will sell, you see, a man's voice will sell it.' I couldn't believe it, because here's a story of a little Indian village and she was imposing a Canadian man's voice on it. She still has credit for being the producer—but she had no marketing experience."

But Shama was about to learn a lesson in improvisation: "I shot on 16mm internegative stock which had been left behind by Lous Malle after he filmed *Phantom India*. It was stored at Kodak, and was to be given to a promising film maker chosen by Gopal Dutia, the film enthusiast who ran the film society Anandam. The problem was there was absolutely no facility or equipment for 16mm in India! Nor did I have much money, so we improvised! I borrowed a wind-up Bolex from

Durga Khote (which was essentially for home movies at the time). The maximum shot length could only be ten feet before a rewind....and the rudimentary Uher tape recorder ran non-synchronized sound...so I 'built' the track myself with ambient sound. I recorded Talat Mahmood's voice with a mike in his living room in Bandra, with doors and windows shut. The couplets from Ghalib, Bahadur Shah Zafar and Iqbal were transliterated into English by Cecil Day-Lewis, Poet Laureate and Daniel Day-Lewis's father. He was also the editor of my mother's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*."

Ashiana was completed in 1971. Nihalani's camera watches quietly, as the voice of Talat Mahmood draws the viewer into Gadia and Habibullah's ancestral home. It paints an intimate portrait Lucknow's people, and perhaps of Habibullah herself. The documentary won the Gold Medal and Special Jury Award at the Atlanta International Film Festival held in Georgia, USA.

Jeroo Mulla, former Head of Department of Social Communications Media (SCM) at the Sophia Polytechnic, recalls watching the documentary in the mid-1970s at SCM, as the film was never publicly screened. "It was my first exposure to documentary filmmaking. It was lyrical and beautiful; I didn't think that documentaries could be made that way," Mulla says.

A DVD copy of the film now remains the only documentation Habibullah has of her directorial work, as "film stock doesn't preserve itself."

Creating a film, according to Habibullah, is an impulse different creating from a book or a play because all film is illusion. This helped her make a choice to gravitate to the world of documentary and the fact film. Although she loved watching feature films, she couldn't make those films.

“I could not actually, ever, be part of that life. The difference is probably akin to the one between a fiction writer and a journalist. Because you can’t go back and polish anything, you can’t go back and rewrite it. You can’t sit and write and say, ‘I will create this narrative’. My mother, for example, says that when she wrote, her characters often took over the book. We can’t say that. We can’t be taken over. When you go out into the field to make a documentary, you’re looking at something very different. You have to be part of the community or the thing that you are shooting. You must melt into the sea of it. But you must still keep watching all the time. So you are shifting and changing because it has to be there instantly to you otherwise it is never going to come back again. You can’t redo it.”

In Bombay, Habibullah didn’t know many people, but the friendships she built in the city back then are still strong today. “I couldn’t even go out and eat because I was a woman. You didn’t just go out and sit somewhere in a café to eat. I used to eat at the Victory Stall by the Gateway of India and the irreplaceable Samovar. There I got to know the artists and writers. My friendships with Tyeb Mehta and Jatin Das, Monica and Charles Correa, Kiran Nagarkar and so many others date back to this time. And then there was the film society, Anandam, run by Gopal Dutia, to which Mumbai’s whole creative world seemed to belong! It was a very small, wonderful community and I was very happy to be part of it.”

To her the city was special. “It was about the people, and how you could meet these people and interlock with them. You could bring your dreams here and together we would make

them happen. We were dreaming yes, but we were also doing. And in the dreaming and the doing, we felt we were building the nation.”

They say you must have a ‘godfather’ in the film industry. Habibullah says that nobody stopped her from entering the industry but it did take time for her to settle down in the city. She found some work with the legendary Durga Khote who was to be a huge influence on Habibullah’s life and career. Durgabai, as she was known, had defied the strictures of her time to forge her own career. Widowed in the 1930s, she began as an actor and made her mark in films with V Shantaram at Prabhat Studios (which now houses the Film and Television Institute of India) and set up her own documentary production company. She was honoured with the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1983¹⁷. But it wasn’t easy to begin with.

“When I came back, I didn’t know any Marathi and Durga Khote had a cameraman who only spoke Marathi. His set of lenses was basic: 25mm to 75mm lenses. And that was our language. I had to tell him the lens and fix the camera position. All I knew in Marathi to deal with the cameraman was...*Camera ikde, camera tikde, ho*, (Put the camera here, put it there, yes) that was all I could say to him and all we could understand of each other. But what we had in common was the language of the lens. Once again, I was out of place; my tool was actually the 250 zoom lens of which he had no knowledge. Ah, exciting times!” she says with a smile. Mainly, though, her cameraman was Govind Nihalan.i, still a valued friend, with whom she had a very good visual rapport.

¹⁷ Durga Khote told her life story in *Mee Durgabai* (1976), translated as *I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography* (OUP, 2016) by Shanta Gokhale.

For Habibullah, the most important lesson she learned from Durgabai, was integrity. “I had Durgabai as my umbrella. For a woman to be in film, and hold on to dignity was very important for me and for all the women who followed her into the industry. I just adored her. I worshipped her because she put that umbrella over my head. She told me something very important. She said, ‘If you look at your profession with dignity, it will treat you with dignity. Never bring your work home.’ And I never did.”

At that time home was a series of places. On arriving in Bombay, Habibullah lived on and off with Pamela ‘Piki’ Chatterjee’s family for almost a year. Pria Chatterjee, the youngest in the Chatterjee household, was barely six when a twenty-something Habibullah arrived. She recalls being instantly captivated by Habibullah’s vivacious personality. “All I know is that I was fascinated by her and that I really wanted her to be around. It could be because she was quite different from most of our family friends. She had grown up in England so she presented a different type of extended family in our community.”

Educational consultant and author, Chatterjee regards Habibullah as a role model. “Even today, she is a powerful woman. I grew up in an all-woman’s household, where women were strong. Shama’s entire persona and strength and focus on being independent as a young woman sat very naturally with me. She is probably twenty years older than I am, but still it very much felt like her focus, her intelligence, her commitment, reinforced the values I believed in. So when I was very little it was affection and fascination. The affection just continued to grow but the fascination matured into a feeling that here was a role model. A woman who really exemplified and

lived many of the values that I myself believed in and grew up with.”

Chatterjee vouches for Habibullah’s great willpower and phenomenal intellect. “I’ve been privileged to have been around many smart people all over the world. I work in education, I’m around very fine minds. But hers was a phenomenal intellect. I think her work draws from her intellect, from her encyclopaedic knowledge as a historian, from her multiculturalism. I think these three elements coming together make her work utterly unique.”

Habibullah was simply ahead of her time. Chatterjee adds that she was utterly unconventional. “I mean I can’t think of any other woman of her age with those attributes. I just can’t. I’m not saying that there aren’t any talented women of her age working in film. But I’m saying with her combination, I can’t think of anyone else. I think on some level, given the time, she was crossing borders and crossing cultures before the world was acknowledge as a global place. So I do think that there are very few of her vintage, who span the issues and thought process that she spans.”

History, for Habibullah, is not historical facts but the raw material with which to build a spirit of possibility, rather than one of despair. She says, “I think history is a misunderstood subject. To me, it is literally the ability to question a fact of the past. Therefore, it is groundwork for the rational understanding of what is happening in front of you. It is not always political. While what most people would look at is the politics and economic front, I would look at it much more in terms of social history. I would be much more in tune with the subaltern. My own interest was in how much is omitted in the narrative we

have all been fed. We learn from our past and unless we reinsert the omissions, we cannot make sense of the issues of today.”

As Mirai Chatterjee, Director of Social Security for The Self-employed Women’s Association (SEWA) and the other sibling of the Chatterjee household puts it; Habibullah always had ideas of how media could be used for development, for people’s well-being and social change. Although Chatterjee was only nine when she first met her, Habibullah had left a big impression. “She became family so she was a very important figure in our lives. Age-wise she was in between my mother and me. We could share secrets in a way. She was very encouraging.

“We didn’t realise her contribution then as we were too young. But by the time I was sixteen or seventeen, I understood that she was a path-breaker. In those days, was this young woman who was highly intelligent, very qualified, vivacious, coming into a field that was just opening up. So there was lots of alternative cinema, alternative media and the use of media for social change and communications for development. So in some ways, those were heady times and Shama was at the forefront of it all.”

Habibullah soon ventured into advertising filmmaking and went on to become one of the first women to freelance as a director in India. She made films for the biggest agencies including J Walter Thompson, FCB-Ulka, Lowe Lintas, McCann-Erickson and Ogilvy & Mather. This was also because documentary filmmakers in India were under strict government control. The Indian Documentary Producers Association (IDPA), founded by eminent documentary producers including Ezra Mir,

Atma Ram (Guru Dutt's brother) Clem Baptista and Vijayakar, was set up so that filmmakers could market their own films but it was not very effective. There were multiple constraints. Habibullah recalls Fali Bilimoria (who was nominated for an Oscar for his 1968 documentary, *The House that Ananda Built*) telling her "We were controlled by the equipment and the resources at our disposal. We weren't allowed the same stock as feature filmmakers. For instance, if we went to the Ministry, the man in charge knew very little about it. We were talking about the negative and said that we'd like to use Eastman colour. 'Can we use it?,' we asked him. He said, 'Why are you people talking about negative, negative, negative...say something positive!' That was how much he knew about film."

Always interested in communications, Habibullah met Gira Sarabhai, co-founder of the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad. "I had gone to Gira to ask if I could join NID as a student—a kind of Research Scholar. Because I wanted to learn more about India and that would be a way of learning. The idea of communication is what interested me, it wasn't film itself. I was brought up with a good Cambridge way of questioning everything. So if someone said something to me, my first question was to ask why. You have to question. You have to speak. You have to learn. Then you can apply what you know. Unless you absorb it and make it yours, you don't know how to respond."

Gira didn't like Habibullah's way of questioning too much. But the person seated in the room adjoining Gira's office was Vikram Sarabhai, then chairman of the Indian Space

Research Organisation (ISRO) who is regarded as the Father of the Indian Space Programme. With warmth, Habibullah recollects her encounter with Vikram Sarabhai.

“He called me and asked, ‘Would you listen to something I have to say? You won’t make money as you would in an advertising agency but will you consider doing something for what I’m working on?’”

Habibullah was curious. Sarabhai had been talking about the NASA Satellite Television Program which later became the Satellite Communications Project, and wanted her to come onboard as a programme consultant for the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment or SITE.

“He said...here is the prototype for a television satellite. How can we programme for social and development purposes? I was all of 28 years old. I was looking at him in total shock. I said, ‘Why me?’ He said, ‘Because your generation will be the ones to use television.’ Now that was India. That was my India. Who would say a thing like that to a twenty-eight year old today?”

Habibullah took up the project. It wasn’t easy; the sociologists and other scholars had written reams of academic jargon. “I said, ‘None of this is going to work. We actually have to make some programmes.’ And we did. We had no equipment. We had no studio. I gathered a small team: Hamid Sayani, Govind Nihalani and Apurba Kishore Bir. We had to hire the video studio Western Outdoor Advertising, owned by Suresh Nanavati to make prototypes for television programs.”

She soon found herself in the middle of a political drama. “It sort of compounded itself,” she says. Habibullah was told that questions were being raised in Parliament about her being part of the project. But she refused to leave until the

report had been completed—settling for a salary of one rupee per day to ensure that she completed the programs. “I couldn’t have cared less for a position of fame or name or whatever. No one would ever know I did it. The fun was in doing it. And what a privilege. What an honour for me!”

She wasn’t allowed to write a report but maintains that hers would have outlined the failures of authority figures and would have proposed the localisation of programmes. In India back then, according to Habibullah, all messages were being delivered by authority figures. She adds, “The authority figure in those days had to be someone with actual formal authority, who usually was someone outside the village. It’s like making Shah Rukh Khan tell you how to till a field. The only way to go forward, that occurred to me was if people built their own community centres. So, you have someone from within the community to be that authority figure. And people could watch whatever they wanted to.”

For Habibullah, it is not the technology, not the hardware, but the message that is paramount. As she wrote in an article for *Science Today*, a magazine, now defunct, that came out of the Bennett Coleman group, “For those involved in communications and media planning, the possibilities are as great as our resourcefulness and inventiveness—given that we can turn concepts into action. And that will come only with a flexible, accessible media policy.”

But other opportunities presented themselves. Habibullah was one of the first women to get an opportunity to work in the Gulf in 1974. Habibullah was commissioned to make

a film for the Ministry of Education after she won a competition, beating Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens who was a filmmaker who had worked for the Shell Film Unit, and who Shama had much admired.

She recalls, “Little was known about Oman at the time following the accession of Sultan Qabus after the deposition of his father, the old Sultan, Said bin Taimur. Many Omanis had not travelled through the ‘Empty Quarter’ in the centre. So I spent hours at the Asiatic Library in Mumbai, tracing its history. Oman had strong enduring trade links with India. Until recently the dhows from Oman came into Mumbai harbour; there were Indian merchants trading goods from Surat to the Coromandel Coast. And one of the islands in the harbour is called Al-Omanis Island, corrupted by British tongues to ‘Old Woman’s Island’.”

Oman being a seafaring nation, her film, *Today We Learn, Tomorrow We Grow*, begins with an old man, his grandson, and a fisherman on a boat. “The boy is teaching his grandfather to read, and the grandfather is telling him more about the Omani sailors who had travelled to China, India and as far as Zanzibar. So I didn’t make a film only about education. I made a film about the growth of a country through the sea,” she says.

But initially, it seemed working in Oman would not be easy. “I arrived at the airport in Oman and it was this dusty airstrip, far from any town, with the last plane leaving. I was standing there thinking, ‘Oh my God, where am I?’ A man came up to me and asked, ‘Are you from India?’ I said I was. ‘Your name is Shama Habibullah?’ he asked. He seemed uncertain. I said that was indeed my name. ‘And you’re a woman!’ he said. He had obviously had a bit of a shock. Here I was a woman,

planning to travel alone for a recce, from North to South, in what was often a war zone, with only an interpreter as companion.”

She remembers one particular incident. “In the North, there were few or no roads still. We travelled eastwards from Muscat and went to a place where the road seemed to peter out. And when we got there no one had told them we were coming so no arrangements had been made for us to stay. The men were all sent to a school-house. And they were sending me to some place where the Egyptian teachers were. I refused to go because I wanted to stay with the team. They still wouldn’t let me stay with the men but I stood my ground. One young man, Mohammed, was intrigued. He brought his wife out to meet me. I said, ‘Why did you do that, Mohammed? Why did you bring your wife here?’ He replied, ‘I saw you were the only woman with all the men and you were giving them orders. So I thought my wife could come down and watch it.’ It was the first time she had been out of seclusion. Today, not even fifty years later, the Minister of Education is a woman.”

But if shooting in Oman was difficult, returning to India didn’t prove easy. Customs clearance was a nightmare. Habibullah and her crew were under tight scrutiny while processing the film. She remembers taking out the film stock during the security check only to be told that it would be confiscated. “They said that I had taken it out unexposed, now it’s exposed. It would have to be confiscated. I argued that since it’s not even processed, its nature had not changed. So they said, ‘We will have to watch while it is changing its nature, we want to be in the laboratory...’ But surely they couldn’t stand in the dark watching film being processed so then they locked me up in the edit room. I had to edit the whole of that, going into customs every day to ask them to come and take out the roll of

film. Because they'd lock up everything. Sometimes the rats had got there first. But the film finally did get edited and was well-received."

But soon after this, Habibullah's friend and colleague Hamid Sayani passed away. He had 'apprenticed' his daughter Ayesha to Habibullah when Ayesha was in her teens. Their relationship soon evolved and Sayani became like a godchild to her. Sayani remembers working with Habibullah on a commercial for Ponds Dreamflower Talc. Zeenat Aman was to be the model and at the last minute the star had to back out because she was shooting a feature film.

"After being incredibly angry for some time, Shama turned to me and said, 'You can do it.' I replied, 'What do you mean I can do it?' She looked at me and said, 'Yeah, you can be my model.' So the next thing I know is that I am in some ridiculous Ponds commercial because Zeenat Aman has dropped out. There was a stage when I would walk down the street and people would say, 'Five at Bombelli's?' because in the commercial I am on the phone chatting to some guy called Nico and I say I am going to meet him at five at Bombelli's. It is something that I will have to live with for the rest of my life." She now has what she describes as a 'love-hate relationship' with Habibullah.

When Hamid Sayani died, Shama Habibullah realized that his daughter needed room to grow. Ayesha Sayani says, "In a sense, my whole career had been gifted to me by Shama. She refused to do any more advertising work [at Hamid's company] because I was doing it here. She wouldn't compete with me. So we had a very strange relationship."

Sayani also credits Habibullah for giving her the opportunity to work on a feature film. "She (Habibullah) had

been asked to direct a children's film and it was based on a play written by [theatre personality] Pearl Padamsee and [renowned author and playwright] Ratnakar Matkari. And she had decided that I was going to do it. My father had just died and she felt it wasn't her style. And so I directed the film. I have a whole feature film to thank her for." The film was *Hungama Bombay Ishtyle* (1978) and it became one of the most popular children's films.

Habibullah's work in advertising helped her build a network within the industry and she started to work in feature film production. When she came back from England, one of the first people Habibullah met was prominent film producer and director, Chetan Anand. "He took me to Gaylord's at Churchgate for dinner. Afterwards, he asked, 'What do you want to do?' I said I wanted to work in films. He stopped the car and said, 'Oh God, don't,'" she says. Anand was, in fact, the second person to tell her that. The first was British director, Richard Attenborough, whom she would work with later.

"It was around 1961 in Cambridge that I had interviewed Richard Attenborough about his film *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*. I had a little baby tape recorder and it broke down, and I couldn't record anything. He asked me, 'What you want to do when you finish university?' I said, 'I want to make films.' He laughed and said, 'Don't!'"

Attenborough won an Academy Award for *Gandhi* in 1983. The film was nominated in eleven categories, winning eight. Shama Habibullah was the production manager of the film. That story began in Bangalore.

“I was sitting with my father. Suddenly I get a call from someone who said, ‘Do you want to work on the film *Gandhi*? My immediate reaction was, ‘What?’ He said, ‘Will you come and have dinner with us tonight?’ I said I would. I thought they were in Bangalore. In fact, they were in Delhi. How was I to get from Bangalore to Delhi? In the 1980s there were very few flights. You couldn’t get seats on planes even if there were. I thought, ‘If I get a seat, I’ll go’ and I got there, and I got the job.”

Habibullah maintains that she was never a production person and credits Terence Clegg, production in-charge for *Gandhi*, for being her teacher. In an e-mail interview, Clegg talks of her easy transition into feature film production. He says, “I was impressed by her straightforward approach towards a monumental task that required a huge amount of teamwork. She was strongly recommended by associate producer Suresh Jindal¹⁸. Her personal experience didn't matter too much as few members of our team had had the experience of working on a project of this size and scale. A few minutes of conversation were enough to convince me I could work with this woman and she would be smart enough to fit in. I can be ruthless when necessary and I would have had no hesitation in firing her if she wasn't up to the job. Shama is an intelligent person whom I instinctively trusted. Instinct matters much to me and has served me very well over the years. She looks you in the eye and you immediately have a sense of integrity.”

According to Clegg, Habibullah absolutely conquered the Indian Railway system. “One of Shama's main tasks was dealing with Indian Railways which was a vital part of the movie. It required skill, good negotiating powers and

¹⁸ He was associate producer on *Gandhi* and among his numerous credits, Habibullah reminds us, was producer of Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khilari*.

determination. She was always on the ball and never shirked the difficult moments that occur on every movie and she had the ability to remain calm even in the middle of crisis.”

The railways, Habibullah points out, are central to the Gandhi story. “In the film, Gandhiji is located in space and time on the railways, across continents and countries. That was why the railways as a device were so important.”

The scale of production for Gandhi was monumental. Even the slightest glance at the call sheet for the funeral scene is enough to justify this statement.

“You’ll faint if you see it,” she says and while adding “I do feel like showing it to you just to see...”

A call sheet details a daily schedule for cast and crew that informs them of the shooting schedule and reporting timings. Habibullah pulls out a copy of *Gandhi’s* Call Sheet Number 55 which was prepared for the funeral sequence that included over 1,000 servicemen, 250,000 spectators, and a police force 3,000-strong for crowd control. “Look at what we organised! It took us three months. And on the day of the shooting, I wasn’t there, I was here. It’s the biggest call sheet ever made and we didn’t have computer-generated imagery back then.”

In the 1980s, in what she reminds us was the pre-digital age, Habibullah had established herself as the go-to woman for foreign films being made in India. She worked with celebrated directors and producers including John Brabourne and Richard Goodwin on David Lean’s *Passage to India*; on the Bond film *Octopussy* (1983), an episode of the *Young Indiana Jones* series for George Lucas; Eddie Murphy’s *The Golden Child*, Merchant Ivory’s *Heat and Dust* (1983) amongst others.

“When Gandhi was being made, Suresh Jindal and I had to create, almost from scratch, a pattern for interaction with foreign units. But a blueprint was laid down, and over time, the system got honed, improving with each film I did.”

In these days when nations and their tourism corporations fall over backwards to accommodate filmmakers, things can happen quickly. But this was a time when there were multiple arenas and any number of chances for everything to go sour. Shama Habibullah had to learn fast how to negotiate with a number of bodies including with all the Motion Picture Association of America (which represented companies such as 20th Century Fox and Paramount) as well as the Indian filmmaking federations. At the time there were also very strict foreign exchange, tax and visa regulations, and multiple ministries of the Indian government to approach, together with quite separate state permissions to be acquired. She and Robert Watts, who was associated with direction and production of *Star Wars* with Kathleen Kennedy, wrote out a blueprint for a single-window policy in the 1990s. “I believe the policy is being put into place now!” she says.

But at the time each film was a logistical nightmare. All work had to be precise, script-related and based on an immutable number of man hours. All the material that came into the country had to go back or else it could incur customs charges; this included broken glass and unused film stock. There were individual contracts for each crew member, whether s/he was a carpenter or a cast member. There had to be a medical doctor and ambulance on set and insurance for all, including the stuntmen, unheard of almost half a century ago.

“And there was no instant digital backup. Film negative rushes had to be couriered out and print rushes had to

be shipped back. We lived on lab reports,” she reminds us. “You had to rely on telephones and those services were also pretty basic. There was the infamous ‘lightning call’ through an operator which took its own sweet time. But first you had to have a land line; that took seven years. I think my application for a telex—which had to be approved by the government—is still pending!”

Around the same time, Stanley Kubrick was working on *Full Metal Jacket*—the legendary director’s take on the Vietnam War that follows young men on their quest to become Marines under a tyrannical sergeant. Habibullah received a call to take over the production management. She says she was petrified.

“I said ‘Why me? I don’t even know to do a full budget properly!’ and they told me, ‘Because we’ve watched *Gandhi* and he won’t fight with you. He’ll get on with you.’”

The other plus point was that Habibullah knew every one of Kubrick’s films inside out and backwards, analyzing the minute details, in a very non-mechanical way.

‘I couldn’t go because in those days you need a tax clearance before you went out of the country and that would’ve taken a week and they needed me the next day,’ she remembers.

She spent time negotiating the filming of George Lucas’s film, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, director Steven Spielberg (which was eventually shot in Sri Lanka). “Spielberg was adamant no one should see the script, not even the actors who were auditioning. So we had to use a Betacam tape to send him. We had no idea how to audition scores of actors who *might* be suitable. So I asked my mother to write a page of dialogue. It started with an even-toned and rational voice, but by the end of the page, it was the voice of a psychotic

madman! There was an English version and a Hindi version. A huge range of theatre and film people auditioned—I remember Alyque Padamsee and Om Puri taking one look and running off! But Amrish Puri made up his own language, and got the part!”

Even though the experience was interesting, she says she was never a feature film person. She explains, ‘Sometimes I didn’t always like the films I was working on or the people I was working with. But we had a phenomenally adaptable Indian crew who had been inducted into a new way of working and that’s how I set up my selected units, project by project with just a core of ‘old’ hands, who had grown along with me. And what I love is that those people have gone all the way and they’re not on Page 3 or whatever. They’re the technicians and others, from electricians to art directors who have changed the way they work and the units around them. And I love it when one of them comes back and is a big person now.”

One of Habibullah’s last projects was George Lucas’ television series *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, an episode of which was being directed by Deepa Mehta in Varanasi. For her, setting up a film, was a mechanical task, intricate, demanding, but mechanical nonetheless. What she cherishes is being absorbed in the tiny details. The end shot of the film was tricky as it was a funeral scene. There was a whole crowd of people and Habibullah had gotten tired by this time. With the sun beating down, she went up to the roof. Looking down, she saw the little boys circling around the funeral pyre. “Well, if you think about it, no one has been able to film that kind of scene successfully in Benares. This was just before the Babri Masjid dispute. It was getting to five o’clock, the ‘magic hour’ of evening light. And I thought there’d be trouble coming. We were all getting lulled by the heat and when the shot was taken, the two

little boys went around the pyre. People had lined up around the ghats the whole way. Behind me, at that moment, I heard the *aazaan*. In front of me, the shot was ending. All the people on the ghats shouted, '*Jai Shri Ram!*' What a moment! These things will remain with you. I thought 'Now I can retire!' But of course I didn't!"

According to her nephew Iqbal Kidwai, Habibullah and her brother Waris were always by way of being family celebrities. Little did he know that he would go on to become a filmmaker himself. He says, "I wanted to become a pilot and she would always encourage me to become an aeronautical engineer. Film was never discussed as a career option. I kind of walked into films by chance. I was twenty-five, sick of my job and looking out for something. Along came this Bruce Beresford's *Last Dance*¹⁹ in 1995 and suddenly I was working with her as an assistant. Even then I didn't look at it as a career option. She kind of got me into it."

Kidwai has been in the film industry for twenty-five years, his credits include *Gandhi My Father* (2007, Feroze Abbas Khan) and *Monsoon Wedding* (2001, Mira Nair). He credits Shama with teaching him everything he knows. He adds, "I'm living a fairly good retired life now and I don't make films now but I used to get a lot of work. And that was because I learnt to make films the way she taught us. It was very organised. At that time, in India, people hadn't even heard of this way of working in pictures.

Kidwai adds: "She expected a 110 per cent and you had to give 110 per cent. Back then we used to get fired and it

¹⁹ A film about a convict on death row (Sharon Stone) and the clemency lawyer (Rob Morrow) who works to save her and the friendship that grows up between them.

would hurt but looking back, that was how we learned to be professional. What I can do and achieve is purely because of the training with Shama. And it is not like she would sit back and say, 'You work.' She would be working as hard. When she was doing it, she expected you to do it."

Among other things, Kidwai especially admired her sense of location and attention to detail. Her crew was not allowed to be casual about anything. On his role as a location assistant, Kidwai always needed to be fully prepared. He describes it, "If I went for a location recce, I had to come back with each and every bit of information. She had to know from me and my location report in one page--the access to the location, where the toilets and make-up areas would be, who would do the catering. This was planned thirty days before the shooting even started. We had files for each location. Two days before shooting started, every driver from the shooting company would be called, put on a bus and taken on a location recce and told the routes they had to take. There were very orderly ways of working. Can you imagine handling people without mobile phones?"

Shama's well-rounded education contributed to her role, and so did the extensive reading. Kidwai himself developed a love for architecture by going on location scouts with Habibullah. But he admires her extensive knowledge bank. "Today you have Google to tell you things about places. Those days, there was Shama," he says.

Shikha Makan, filmmaker and successful ad filmmaker, director of the documentary *Bachelor Girls*²⁰(2016) started out as a production assistant with Habibullah. "I had no

²⁰ A documentary shown on Netflix which describes the difficulties young professional women have finding places to live in Mumbai.

exposure to how feature films were planned and I was overwhelmed with how organised she was. Today we have specific software programmes like Movie Magic to handle tasks like budgeting and scheduling. But back then, everything was analog. So she was doing some really meticulous work. I've never seen anyone as organised as she is. She is probably one of the best producers in Indian cinema."

Speaking of Habibullah's meticulousness in the production process, Makan says, "I remember strips of coloured paper all around the room in which she worked. She would look at the script and see what scenes could be combined. So for instance, a yellow strip might stand for day, a blue strip for night, the black for interior and the white for exterior. And we would try these various permutations and combinations to see what scenes can be clubbed together. At that time, she pioneered the process here before we could use Movie Magic."

Habibullah became her mentor and emphasised the role of philosophy over technique. "You were never asked, 'How much screenwriting do you know?' before you started working. It is essential to know it, of course. But Shama wouldn't ask questions like that. Instead she would ask, 'Why are you the person to tell this story?' and this becomes a moment of introspection...I am working on a feature film right now and it is not like, I'll just call her up and ask her for contacts of producers. She will look at the story and tell me who the best people to get in touch with are *in relation to the story*. It is a very positive awareness. She will be the one to remind you of questions like, 'Who is your viewer?' Her approach is holistic. The thing about Shama is that she is up for any challenge. She always has an idea to turn any problem around. Even today she keeps abreast with the times. Ask her about anything current and she'll know about

it. She may be chronologically seventy-plus but her spirit is still sixteen.”

When her brother, Waris Hussein, was adapting Firdaus Kanga’s autobiographical novel *Trying to Grow* into a film called *Sixth Happiness*, one of the producers backed out leaving Habibullah to take the lead as line producer. Until the film had been completed, none of the crew members were aware that Habibullah and Hussein were indeed, siblings. According to Hussein, there was no question of any kind of conflict. “A film is a planned operation. And she is the one who would take charge of my requirements. We had some difficult things to do because it is not easy to make films anyway—things would change, locations suddenly had to be shifted or had to be recreated. It was her job and I particularly couldn’t function without her,” he explains.

It was on the sets of *Sixth Happiness* that Batul Mukhtiar worked with Habibullah as an assistant. (Since then, she has won a National Award for her children’s film, *Kaphal*, 2013.) She says, “Planning production was like planning a war.”

For Mukhtiar, this wasn’t just practical experience and Habibullah was no typical producer talking of money, transport or catering. Neither did she only talk of deals and permissions. “It was much more than that,” Mukhtiar says. “She is thinking about sunrises, sunsets, the weather, angles and what are the possible shots the director might want to take. So when the crew comes we already have a lot of information to give them which an ordinary producer may not be able to do. She strategizes everything from where cars would come to where they would stop and who would be picked up. And she thought about what we would do if the plans didn’t work. She had plans A, B, C, D. She had different ways of handling different

situations. So all that was really a phenomenal experience for me. It was not just practical experience but experience on a very large scale,” she adds.

For someone who was just out of film school, Mukhtiar believes that Shama set an important value system for her—caring for not just her work, but the people she worked with. She says, “It was the little things that she’d do for you that made you feel very special. I am so used to having tea at 4 o’clock in the afternoon and at that time I used to really want that very milky chai. She knew that about me and whatever we were doing, in any part of the city, as soon as it would be 3:30 or 3:45, she would say, ‘Okay, I know it is time for your tea now.’ Often, she would take me to the Taj for tea. So for someone who was young and just out of FTII and of course, not very rich at that time, that was a wonderful memory for me that will always remain—that she cared about so deeply that I should get my four o’clock tea. She treated you like an equal.”

In a note sent to us, documentary filmmaker and researcher Lygia Mathews, mentions her contribution to the advertising industry which in the 1960s was in its nascent stage. “She introduced technical innovation and brought certain skills to the filmmaking process in many departments of film production. Originally trained as an editor working with celluloid she had the ingenuity to usher in the 2.5 second cut in a period where slower lengthier shots were the norm. Quick fast-paced cuts which are common place today were uncommon then. She was able to build a certain momentum and excitement within the pace of the story because of the fast cut and jump-cut editing style she liked to integrate into the film. In the period when she first started work she was also one of the first to use hand-drawn pencil sketches to storyboard her film concepts,

making clear her storyline for every film to her clients before she shot the film. Many of these ideas were later adopted by the advertising community.”

Mathew notes that many of her assistants subsequently became leaders of the ad filmmaking world including Prahlad Kakkar, Siraj-Ayesha Sayani, Mahesh Matthai and many others. Habibullah is also credited with giving actress Zeenat Aman her first break in a commercial for the soft drink, Fanta. Habibullah won several awards including the prestigious Advertising Club Award from the Advertising Club of India in 1972, with Gita Simoes, for a film from Lintas; it was presented to her by the eminent jurist, the late Nani Palkhivala.

Mathew adds, “There were only a handful of advertising agencies which commissioned advertising films. There were very few professional filmmakers making advertising films, and women filmmakers in the field were almost non-existent. She brought an international sensibility and professionalism to her work which struck the right chord within the advertising community as also the documentary film community, propelling achievement and great success.”

Habibullah herself doesn’t think so. For her it was the magic of being in Bombay. “A different time,” she calls it. “If you did your job well, you could do anything. You did not make excuses for doing it badly. You just did it well. You could not have said that about any other place in India. For some reason unknown to me, I got a big reputation as an advertising filmmaker. Because that was part of my bread and butter. I was dealing with three producers at the same time—Fali Billimoria, Hamid Sayani and Durga Khote. It was fun.”

According to Ayesha Sayani, Habibullah brought order into the Indian film industry. She explains, “When she was

working, the Indian film industry didn't work on things like scripts and breakdowns." Sayani regards Habibullah's greatest contribution as being ahead of her time, in a crossover sense, which she did so unflinchingly. She says, "All the young people who were working with her on these various cross-cultural projects got trained in dealing with international projects. For instance, in all her foreign productions, she actually got Yash Johar's crew to come and work. So they got a great grounding in how foreign productions work. She set the tone, she set up the systems that were needed for us to work on an international level. She was way ahead of her time, in this whole crossover thing. People forget that those films were made. How the hell were they made? They were made through her diligence. Frankly now cross-cultural things are so easy. Just get on to IMDb and you can get a cameraman from anywhere. She really has been forgotten. I don't think any of the young film students know anything about Shama Habibullah, and really, they owe a hell of a lot to her!"

Mention Yash Johar's crew and Shama's lights up. "He was a gentleman, one of the nicest men I had met. His strong constant support was invaluable and he offered it even when he was going through some difficult times."

Shama had always kept her interest in communications for development, as well as binding together changing technologies "to create different kinds of visual literacy"—so that to communicate becomes a way of being both interactive and also immersive! She was a member of the International Institute of Communications, the Producers' Guilds of both the United Kingdom and India, and a member of the steering committee for the London Film Commission.

Habibullah continued setting up international commercials, especially from the United States, the last for Lucasfilm...“and, most happily of all, became a production consultant and participant in cultural projects such as *Purva Uttara* (2008), a series of films produced by Marg, directed by Zafar Hai and Shyam Benegal; and in appearing as what the makers termed ‘cultural historian’ in a documentary on the Victorian writer Rudyard Kipling. But I was happiest when I worked with the students at the National Institute of Design, the Film and Television Institute of India, or the Mass Communication Centre at Jamia Milia where, to clear my brain, I was sometimes a visiting lecturer and student collaborator!”

According to, Mirai Chatterjee, even though Habibullah wasn’t part of a generation that necessarily called themselves feminist, but “All her actions and thoughts were not only way ahead of her time but also people like you and I would call feminist. She was just in an era which was at the cusp of when the women’s movement was bursting on stage in India when the Mathura Rape Case²¹ happened in the early 1980s. So she fit into that. She came back, I believe, in the 1970s. So maybe it hadn’t hit her or maybe she is just a very individual person. So it didn’t matter to her if she was a man or a woman in that sense. I do think her contribution was definitely, a leader and a woman leader in the whole media movement, if I can call it that, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.”

²¹The rape of Mathura, a teenaged Adivasi girl, by two policemen triggered an anti-rape movement across the country after the accused were acquitted. We would like to record our unease with naming the victim and not the accused but the name and the case has become part of the history of the women’s movement and so we have used it here.

The distinction of being a woman filmmaker had never occurred to Habibullah. “You haven’t heard of me as a documentary filmmaker because I don’t have a label. I never made a point about being a woman film director. And if someone, even a woman said that to me, I would look at her or him with a certain amount of pity. I refuse to be a label.”

She attributes her thinking to the way her mother lived. Home, was always full of conversation even when her mother was ill. She says, “It was about what we could think, what we could absorb, what we could do. You took nothing for granted. I remember saying, ‘Sometimes I don’t know how we get through these things’, and she replied with a quote from *Othello*. Iago says ‘Put money in thy purse’ and he was right, you should. But I have always lived on the capital of my mind.’ We were taught that even if there was no money in the purse, your mind had the capacity to generate capital. I think that is a good lesson.”

Unlike her mother, Habibullah was always an observer. And as Habibullah describes it, it wasn’t a conscious act. “In England, she has written often as if she was sitting behind a glass wall looking out at life. I was outside, on the other side of that glass door, trying to get in,” she says. For her, everything was an exploration. The fun came with the doing. During her time in America, she realised that film was only being used for two purposes: entertainment and propaganda. The idea of film as a tool for development had never really been explored. That is where Habibullah discovered her space. “I didn’t use words. They were my mother’s primary source, not mine. Nor did I use scripted words, which was my brother’s, not mine. If I used words, it was for my own visuals, the words always came after the visual. I would say, yes, that the documentary will

always remain a love for me. But actually it was development communications, it was social communications. It was being a visual communicator.”

Her impulse was to change things and she says, film was the way she changed things. “You would learn, every time. You can get into impossible situations but you can make it work. You learned how to love the things you were doing. To observe more clearly and more cleanly what you were looking at, whether it was a documentary or a feature. You learned to be part of something. We attempt to classify ourselves too much. If you simply use the term communication, you’re on a wonderful journey. Communication gives you access to so many other areas. So, documentary is a constriction to me, the label ‘short film’ is a constriction to me. Instead, treat them all as part of communication.”

Again and again, she returns to the idea of the context in which she worked as being not just the backdrop of her success, not just the place where she made good but the reason why she could make good. “India became this incredible place where a group of people dreamt of doing something and those things happened. We all met and knew each other.” Bombay, being the city of dreams had worked its charm. Regardless of her time in England, Bombay has always been Habibullah’s city and she knows it backwards. “It was the city of dreams because we all felt that there was going to be a new beginning here. And it was. I bless this city for what it gave me and the friends it gave me. They’re still my friends. And also that, I really could do almost anything and if I did it, it would happen, even with all the restrictions.”

Many of her friends are legends now. Charles Correa, for instance. Or Satyajit Ray. “They were my friends,” she

explains, recalling the moment she met Satyajit Ray. "It wasn't like I was meeting God. We just had fun, talking about cinema. We became very good friends. I didn't treat him as God. But I learnt things from people. For example, I knew very little about lighting and there was not a technical director in that sense. Subrata Mitra who was also Ray's cameraman didn't know about lighting when he started. He was a still photographer. So Subrata literally took candles to measure densities of light. I said, "I do not know how to use the light meter." He answered, "Forget about all of that. Never use the colour scale, always use the grey scale." Because that is how he learnt. And he invented bounce lighting. Where would I have done this if I had been sitting in England?"

Other than the learning, it also helped to have a disciplined mind but Habibullah also suffered from numeric dyslexia. When given a phone number, she'd often write it backwards. "I was very disordered. I used to have a person carrying my papers because I would lose my papers and therefore God must've punished me, by making me do production. For then I had to keep all the papers and keep them meticulously. There I was doing this enormous budget. I would do the budgets and I would get it all in and then someone would say, 'We don't have the budget for this,' and I would say something like, 'Well, if you look at the third page on the left-hand side, about four lines down you'll find some money you can use' And I would be right."

A photographic mind proved to be an advantage, and perhaps, it is where she draws her visual sense from. She proceeds to explain this with great technical detail, using the theory of the motion picture. "When you look at a still image, and actually it's moving, it becomes a moving image. Your

perception rate is about 1/10th of a second and that is the perception which gives you the reality of an image. And that's a good life to me. The still image is always moving."

For Waris Hussein, his sister will always remain a unique person who hides her talent as one hides their light under a bushel and unfortunately, it is something they now laugh about. He explains, "She and I both come from a culture that says, '*Pehle aap.*' [After you.] We stood at a doorway and everyone else went through. We didn't. We do not push ourselves forward. And as a result of that, we're not as universally acknowledged as the other people are. So Shama doesn't go around promoting herself. It's a question of how you want to judge that. Do you want to say it's a handicap or do you want to say it's an advantage? Because then life goes on and you can live it in some kind of privacy without being constantly intruded on. There are some people who live in the limelight and that is what they want. But the limelight is always going to go out in the end. And then you realise what it means to be in the dark. It is better not to be in the dark and just fade into a kind twilight."

Never have the walls of a room been able to speak so much about a person as they do about Shama Habibullah. There is a strange silence that is almost mystical to the apartment and as light enters through the grand balcony—often welcoming the frenzied lashing of the wind, that is sometimes somber—it reflects a complex history or the many lives, of Shama Habibullah. "I love this flat. A large part of it was built on what I earned, doing difficult things," she says, shortly after mentioning that the advertising award is now collecting dust in one of the other rooms. Owing to a sum total of many conversations ranging from smart speakers to her collection of cookbooks to her favourite film — Truffaut's *Jules et Jim*, one begins to wonder of the time Habibullah refers to as being, "another time."

Looking back through seventy-eight years of her life, time appears to be non-linear in the hands of the magician with a photographic mind. “I think if I called my life anything, it would be, the persistence of vision,” she says.

With Amrita Rajput

Lives of the Women, Volume III follows lives of four women who are inspirational figures and have made a lasting impact in their fields. We follow lives of child artiste and screenwriter Honey Irani; filmmaker, author and curator, Madhusree Dutta; actor and theatre director, the late Rekha Sabnis and the communicator and innovator, Shama Habibullah.

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