

Reminiscences

Kuch Baatein – Kuch Yaadein with Bimla Poddar



Authored & Curated by
Supriya Newar



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Boundless blessings

FOREWORD

I was not born to her, but she was more than a mother to me – my *taiji* or elder aunt by relation; my mother in every other way. From the moment I arrived in this world, I was enveloped in her loving gaze. She nurtured, protected and loved me in ways that only a mother can. And so much more.

As wonderful a mother as she was, Bimla Poddar, whom we lovingly called *Bari Ma*, was a woman of many stellar parts. She came into our family at the tender age of thirteen as a young bride, pursued and completed her education after marriage, devoted herself to the well-being of every member of the family, travelled the world, faced adversities with grace and reinvented the autumn of her life in Banaras through her labour of love, *Jnana Pravaha*.

With quiet perseverance, she educated herself. A disciple of *Appaji* - Girija Devi, she brought music into our home and our lives. Together, they gave birth to *Gulab Bari*, the annual musical soiree at our home that has become a tradition cherished by many.

A life as extraordinary and purposeful as hers will continue to inspire not only our forthcoming generations but countless friends and associates whose paths crossed with hers. Whilst she will remain with us through her blessings and her fragrance of love, I also wanted to capture her exceptional journey of nearly nine decades, through its many trials and tribulations, its learnings and lessons, all in her very own voice, tone and tenor.

Contained therefore in this book, titled *Reminiscences*, are chapters from her entire life, right from her birth to her final days. It is in her voice that you will navigate the many chapters of a family, society and country that she saw evolve and adapted to with effortless elan, humour and intelligence.

When we lost our dear *Bari Ma*, Bimla Poddar, in May 2025, I had said at the prayer meeting:

“Hers was a life of purpose, grace, and gentle strength. A life that left behind not just memories, but a legacy – one that we privileged to inherit and promise to uphold.

Maa, you now rest in peace with your maker. But your laughter still echoes in our hearts, your warmth still lives in our homes, and the fragrance of your love and grace continues to linger - like incense in the quiet hours of dawn.

Your loving gaze will forever be upon us. And we will carry your essence within us, always.

Goodbye, Maa. Sleep peacefully.”

May her words and voice within these pages speak to you as they have spoken to all whose lives she touched.

Harshavardhan Neotia



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Reminiscences, are chapters from her entire life, right
from her birth to her final days.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE



A couple of years ago, Harsh Neotia - *who to me has been HVN for over two decades* - approached me with a daunting task. He noted that the matriarch of the *Poddar-Neotia* family, Smt. Bimla Devi Poddar, was advancing in her years. The older male members of the family, after having carved memorable and noteworthy innings - including his uncle, the Late

Suresh Neotia, a Padma Bhushan awardee and his father, the much-loved Vinod Neotia - had already bid adieu. Their legacy continues to be richly recognized and celebrated, both in corporate board rooms as well as in the annals of various social and cultural organisations that they had helmed and steered.

But Bimla Poddar or *Bari Ma* as she was affectionately called, had a legacy that was uniquely special to him and to his kith and kin. It needed, nay, deserved to be preserved. For hers was an innings where she had started off in the family as a daughter-in-law, a *babu*, but surely and steadily evolved into that of the family's axis – the orbit around which the family lived, loved, laughed and harmoniously blossomed.

And HVN wanted that heirloom to be preserved. And passed on. Not merely through certificates of achievements or mute photographs, but through her own voice – in her stories, her memories and her *reminiscences*.

He asked whether I would attempt penning her chronicle.

Having had the privilege of knowing her well and of spending many memorable days together on multiple occasions at her institute in Banaras, I knew that what HVN was asking for was both a rare privilege and a worthy challenge. I knew that *Badi Ma* had a treasure trove of memories that would no doubt be as delightful as they were valuable.

Without hesitation, I agreed to give her narrative my most sincere shot.

And soon, our sessions started. *Badi Ma* took me on a glorious rewind that was in many ways, as much about her own family and upbringing, as it was an

anthropological and Indic gem. Through her, I traced the *Marwari* migration story, the nation's colonized years, the struggles of girlhood, and so much more. I also dipped into her many conversations which she had had with her colleagues at *Jnana Pravaha* in Banaras, each of which they had fortunately recorded and preserved.

Every recount of hers was incisive, deep and signature in its subtlety. Her memory for dates was uncanny. To my amazement, I found that despite the many seasons she had weathered, she had not allowed even the most testing of times to make her cynical. Time had not dulled her tact, her ability to stand her ground or her conviction to look at life optimistically, with ceaseless gratitude.

My sessions with her that lasted long would also be dotted with some silent zones. Sometimes, I needed to give her the space, the pause to reflect, particularly after more probing questions. But throughout our dialogue, she remained remarkably unflappable, recounting distressing chapters, not with sentimentality but with acceptance and quiet, determined assimilation.

Conversations with her revealed a sense of spirituality that may have been drawn from books but was applied and clothed in precious practicality.

It has been my sincere endeavour to keep every ounce of her *Reminiscences* as authentic as possible. In doing so, I have retained hundreds of Hindi and *Marwari* terms and expressions in the text. Some of her very trade mark ones that over time, I learnt to decode - *taqleef* – short for severe challenges; *tamasha* or *kebani* for long, sometimes unsavoury experiences; *Bhagwan ke ghar* for those who'd passed away and many others, each equally delightful.

Above all, I have tried to preserve the banter that coloured our tete-e-tetes, so that after turning these pages, the reader might feel that they've shared an evening of a captivating and intimate conversation with Bimla Poddar herself.

It would be impossible for a single book to capture every remarkable contour of her life. Yet, I hope that in these pages you find precious glimpses of a spirit that may have physically bid the world a farewell in May 2025 but, whose legacy and luminescence will continue to inspire and endure.

Supriya Newar



Do pal ke jeevan se
Ek umr churani hae
Zindagi aur kuch bhi nahi
Teri meri kahani hae



From the song *Ek pyaar ka nagma hae* by Santosh Anand



When I was Bimla Sekhsaria

My dramatic birth

My first moments in Calcutta, far from home

Main babut taqleef se hui. I was a difficult delivery. You see, my *Nanihal*, that is my mother's side of the family was in Calcutta. In those days, girls who were married outstation, did not visit their fathers' homes too frequently after marriage, but when they did, they stayed for a couple of months. My mother too would come to Calcutta from Chidawa in *Shekhabati* - Rajasthan by train, once every two years or so.

It just so happened that in one of her visits, my mother was pregnant. Though my *Naniji* (*mother's mother*) had borne fourteen children - *kachhe-pake milake chaudah bachche* - only my mother and my *Mamaji* (*mother's brother*) had survived. My *Mamaji* was elder to my mother and had been married for a few years but didn't have any children till then. So, learning that my mother was expecting, my *Nanaji* (*mother's father*), stubbornly refused to let her return to Chidawa.

This was quite unusual as the general practice was for the *babu*, the daughter-in-law, to have the child at her in-law's place. People even made vitriolic comments - *jaapo karaan layak hi koni boye* - they weren't good enough to see the mother through her pregnancy. But despite my *Babaji* (*paternal grandfather* - *Basantlal ji Sekhsaria*) being furious, my *Nanaji* put his foot down and wouldn't let her leave! And of course, there being no telephone in those days, all this transpired between the two of them via wires and letters written in *Mudiya* script.

Thus, I was born in Calcutta in 1936. But from all that I've heard, I was a very difficult delivery and it was quite a miracle that my mother, Ginni Devi, and I both survived. Since there was no cesarean in those days, the child birth took all day from morning until evening, all at home. There was no electricity and they were dependent on the power of ten odd torch lights that they collected, in order to manage everything. All very rudimentary and unimaginable today!

Anyway, after I survived, my *Babaji* was really relieved. He ecstatically told my *Nanaji*, *'Thaare mein to Bhagwan badgo. Bu aur poti, dono bachga* - It seems you were the very Lord incarnate. Both my granddaughter and her mother have miraculously survived! I stayed with my mother for about two and a half months in Calcutta, after which she left for Rajasthan but my *Nanaji* would not part with me! So, *Maa*, returned home without her new born, *'khabali god'* as they say.

It was only about two and a half years or so after my birth when my *Nanaji* passed away and my mother came to Calcutta, that she took me back with her. One of the consequences of his *zid*, his insistence, was that I missed out on being breast fed on mother's milk. I suppose they must have fed me cow's milk instead. And I landed up spending the first two and a half years of my life in Calcutta, under the care of my *Naniji* and *Mamiji*.



Growing up in Chidawa, Rajasthan

Childhood, family, and the rhythms of simple village life

When I first came to Chidawa in Rajasthan after my birth in Calcutta, I used to fear the sand and would not step on it! Moreover, my *Chote Bhaji*, my uncle's younger son, convinced me that there were snakes in the sand that would bite me. 'Unke maine saanp rabehe; tanne kaat lesi!' Later of course, I came to absolutely love Chidawa.

We were a big family; my *Dadaji* and *Dadiji*, (paternal grandparents) two *Bhuas*, (paternal aunts) my *Tauji-Taiji*, (paternal uncle and aunt), their two sons and respective wives, and kids. My *Tauji* was about twenty years older to my father and so both his sons whom I called *Bhaji*, though a generation younger, turned out to be older than my father! My *Dadiji* was particularly affectionate towards me; *bahut laad karti thi*. My father's name was Satyanarayan *ji* Sekhsaria.

We were an old family of the village and had been there for several generations, right from my *Dada-par-Dada's* time. My grandfather were three brothers and along with the first ancestral home - *Purani Haveli*, had added two more *havelis* for the family. Every *Babu* (daughter-in-law) had two rooms for herself; one like a living room on the ground floor and the other like a bedroom on the first floor.

We spoke with everybody in *Marwari*. There was a *bageecha*, a garden, within our premises which was filled with *neem* tress. *Wahan jhule dal jaate the aur hum sab kboob geet gaate the*; all the children would swing merrily, singing songs together.

There was a girl's school in the village by the name of *Dalmia Kanya Vidyalaya*. It still exists. I was admitted there for my initial schooling. Along with that *vidyalaya*, I also attended a *paathshala* that was conducted by Harnarayan *guruji*. It was quite big and was called *guru ka Nobra*. A very simple affair really, where we carried our own *aasans, patti, barta* – seats and slates, and sat down. There weren't any tables or anything. I was the only girl there; all the other students were boys. There, we were taught counting, tables and basic arithmetic. I had memorized the tables, the *pabada* as we called them well; all the way from 2x2 to 40! The family hung out together in the *chowk* – the courtyard area and all the meals too were had together in the kitchen in rows, *kyaris*. There was no practice of eating separately in rooms. We had about 20-25 cows at home and so consumed a glass of milk, *ghar ka doodh*, every morning and night!

I remember that my *Taiji* was somewhat tempestuous and had a profane tongue. There were days when she'd say something unkind to my mother, who wouldn't reply to her but instead took it out on me. *Bina matlab ke mujhe thappad pad jaate the* - I'd be doled out a beating without any rhyme or reason! My father would say to her, *Dhobi ko dhoan par to bas chaale koni; gadhere ko kaan koote* – the washerman unable to control his wife, takes it out on his poor donkey! My mother had exceptionally skilled hands and did remarkable *baath ka kaam*, including *bel-booti* – embroidery and *salma-sitara* – sequin work

and so on. Back in those days, we all made intricate *rakhis* by hand. There was no system of purchasing *rakhis*. She had a natural grace, a *saleeqa*. Unlike my father, she had a bevy of friends and was *shaukeen* – enjoyed dressing up, going to the movies.

My father never ever raised his hand at me. I don't remember him ever being angry at me. At the very most, when he disapproved of something, his admonishment would be 'I'm sorry *Bima bai!*' He never went beyond that. He called me *Bima* affectionately. He was an extremely simple person, a *seedha insaan*, who did not have any bad habits or vices. Later, for years together his routine in Bombay was the same – he would get ready in the morning, donning his typical white *kameez* and *dboti*, a coat and a *topi* on his head and head for *dukaan* or office and in the evenings, after shutting shop would come back straight home. I even remember him tying his own *pagdi* before he switched to *topis*.

Curiously, despite his simplicity, he had developed a very keen eye for precious stones, diamonds and pearls and could not be fooled. He could easily tell between *Basra moti* and cultured pearls or between real diamonds and American diamonds that had just come into the market then. He addressed Maa as 'Aap or They' in *Marmari* – never in 'Tu.' One

of his defining qualities was his sense of forbearance, his tolerance, his *sebensheelta*. He was also a great story teller and we enjoyed listening to his stories from Gita, Ramayan and so on. Though his dexterity with English was limited, he was very well adept at Gujrati and would read the *Mumbai Samachar* daily.

There were other typical village episodes as well. There used to be a big *neem* tree just behind a house and rumour had it that a *bhootni* – an evil spirit, lived there. I was about eight or nine years old and very curious.

One particular nightfall, I decided to discover the spirit for myself but my *Dadiji*, my grandmother, caught me sneaking out and enquired why. I made up a story and she let me go after giving me a small *chakku*, a pocket knife, for protection. I went and diligently sat under the neem tree waiting for the elusive *bhootni* to show up! Sometime later, somebody was sent to look for me and bring me back despite my feeble protests that I was yet to encounter the spirit!

Till today, there is a college in Chidawa that runs in the name of my mother, called *Ginni bai Sekhsaria College for Girls*. I last went to Chidawa about four years ago and spent a few very nice days there. It is my *matrubhoomi*. It is special.



“I attended a *paathshala* that was a very simple affair. We carried our own *aasans*, *patti*, *barta* – seats and slates, and sat down. I was the only girl there; all the other students were boys.”



With my cousins



Chidawa days



Coming of age

My early days in Bombay

Childhood, school amidst war, partition, and independence

My childhood was divided between Chidawa in Rajasthan and Bombay. In fact, I have even stayed in Karachi for six months when I was four years old. We had our own house there of whose *naksba*, façade, I still have a clear impression though I can't recollect the name of our *muhalla*, our neighborhood. The family had a cotton ginning press in a small town called *Jhol* near Karachi. The cotton would be sourced from Bhatinda in Punjab and our produce would get exported to Japan and supplied to the mills in Bombay. This was in 1940. In fact, my father, *Babuji* had even travelled to Japan a couple of times for work.

Post partition, the link with Karachi got snapped. The family managed to make a narrow escape from Karachi to Bombay, first with the women and children being sent by train and later, my cousin brother, *bhaiji* rescued with great difficulty via a chartered flight that was somehow arranged by my father. The story goes that the flight's engine was kept running as they were hauled up into the craft!

Though we lost the house, fortunately every member, including our house helps and all the *babi-basta*, the paperwork, made it safely to this side. Though my father and his brothers had separated their businesses by then, we still had our firm that went by the name of *Basantlal-Banarasilal*. One of my

cousins also got a Bombay share market card. *Babuji* continued his cotton trade. He was exceptionally strong when it came to *bisaab-kitaab* and had a great head for numbers and arithmetic.

Anyway, coming back to Bombay. We would frequently be in Bombay as the family had business there. We lived on Sandhurst Road which went all the way to *Chowpatty*. All the freedom processions of that time went past Sandhurst Road, with passionate cries of *Jai Hind!* Sometimes, we would participate in *Prabhat Pheris*, early morning rounds, loudly voicing *Inquilab Zindabad*. Every other day, we would see the senanis, freedom fighters, ransacking a ration shop and carving *Jai Hind* and *Vande Mataram* out of sugar! We'd also frequently see the nation's tallest leaders like *Gandhiji*, *Nehruji* and *Patelji* driving past. The only leader we did not see was *Netaji* Subhash Chandra Bose. *Hamaare liye roz ke tamaashe the!* These were everyday scenes for us. I can clearly recall how the *Angrez* would fire tear gas and cannon balls, goli, sometimes at the processions.

In Bombay, initially I went to *Marwari* Vidyalaya which was very close to our home. Although it was a boy's school, girls were allowed till class 2. So, I studied there till then. A *darwaan*, whom we called *Bhaiyaji*, would drop us in the morning and later come to fetch us from school and take us home. We

carried our school bags and tiffin which had *tawa ki puri and meetha aam ka achar*; some *puris* and sweet mango pickles. I would get two *annas* every day except on Sundays, of which I would buy *amrud*, guavas, that were sliced and pickled from a vendor who sat outside school and save the other *anna*! Every week, on Sundays, we had a feast of *pani puris* from those six *annas* saved!

Later I studied at Sitaram Poddar Balika Vidyalaya, a Hindi medium school which had a majority of Punjabi students since this was post partition. I remember going to this school either by bus or tram. Back then, Bombay still had trams and they were less crowded than the buses. I studied in this school till class 8. But by that time, I had turned 12 and as was the accepted tradition, I was considered to be too old to be still going to school and was taken out of it! A *masterji* continued to give us some informal lessons at home.

We did not have *Bijli* – electricity. Everything was carried out with the help of lanterns. The family had just one car that served everyone.

So, if my mother, *Maa* had to go out to the *bazaar* for some work or otherwise, she would go in a *ghoda-gaadi* or a phaeton.

In fact, I even have memories of World War II. Once, when we were studying in *Marwari Vidyalaya*, a Japanese *pandoobi* or submarine which was filled with ammunition attacked us. The jolt was felt even in school and we all fell off our chairs! There was an immediate panic and everyone started saying that Bombay had been bombarded. School was immediately closed and our *darmaan* was sent to quickly fetch us from school. I remember the docks being ablaze for nearly a month!

In 1947, when we finally won our Independence against the British, it seemed that all of Bombay was out on the streets at midnight. Throughout the night, people clanged *thalis* and *bartan* and burst firecrackers as they drove past honking loudly. Ships hooted and blew their sirens! All *mandirs* opened their gates and performed *aartis*, blowing conch shells and beating *nagadas*, drums. It was a *jashn*, a big celebratory night!



“Every other day, we would see the *senanis*, freedom fighters, ransacking a ration shop and carving *Jai Hind* and *Vande Mataram* out of sugar! We’d also frequently see the nation’s tallest leaders like Gandhiji, Nehruji and Patelji driving past - *Hamaare liye roz ke tamaashe the!*”

My betrothal and wedding

Entering a new world

Meri sagaai aath baras ki ho gayi. I was eight years old when I was engaged in 1945. As unbelievable as it may sound today, it was quite normal for that time. It so happened that my *Mamaji* was fond of playing billiards at Hindustan Club in Calcutta and my-to-be father-in-law, Janki Prasad Poddar, whom we called *Kakaji*, would also play there. They were acquainted with each other and one day, casually chanced upon a discussion that each family had an eligible girl and a boy.

The prospective family decided to 'see me' in Calcutta at a place called Bengal Store. I was dressed up in a frock. They asked me how many siblings we were and without any hesitation, I hand counted all my cousins and confidently gave them a number. I even included other family members. My innocence won their hearts but *Kakaji* wanted to meet my father.

At that time, the *lena-dena*, the dowry practice, had just about started in the *Marwari* society. It was called *kbol both* and was a new trend. I remember sitting in the back of the car, quietly listening, as my father voiced his apprehensions to my mother that if the boy's side got into any such discussion, he would refuse the engagement. He said he was in no position to match the affluence of a formidable trading firm such as Tarachand – Ghanshyamdass, a *sath-peedhiya seth*, a family that had been affluent for seven generations.

But Janki Prasad *ji*, that is, *Kakaji* had two entirely different and unexpected conditions. The first was, that my education would have to continue till I was married and the second was that there was to be no practice of keeping a veil, a *pardah*, at home. Both these conditions were very progressive for that time. My father accepted both.

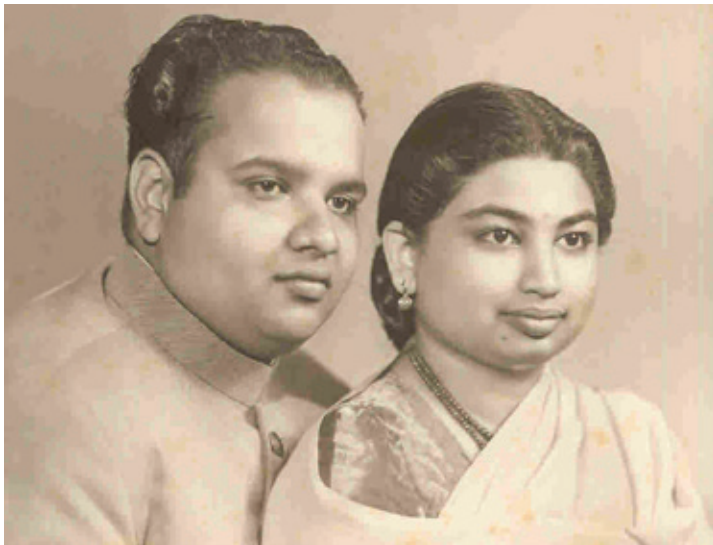
So as per the agreed terms, my studies continued. In fact, once the male members of the household left for office, I would go through the Gujarati newspaper, *Bambai Samachar*, that we got daily and gradually started picking up Gujarati as well. We would chat with our neighbours in Gujarati and I could also more or less understand and read Marathi as the script was *Devnagiri*. Besides all this, my mother got me to do *kadhai-bunai-silayi* – embroidery, knitting and stitching.

I remember my wedding clearly. My whole family, except my *Babaji* (*paternal grandfather*) who had passed away by then, had come by train from Chidawa to Calcutta for the wedding. Obviously, I couldn't really comprehend the proceedings but I remember who came and went and that we all stayed at *Tibreval Dharamsabala* which was very close to our residence, *Poddar House* on Central Avenue in Calcutta. The entire lodging, *dharamsbala*, was booked for the wedding. The *baraat* came on foot. Only the *doolah*, the groom, came in a car. This was way back in 1949 and I had just about turned 13.

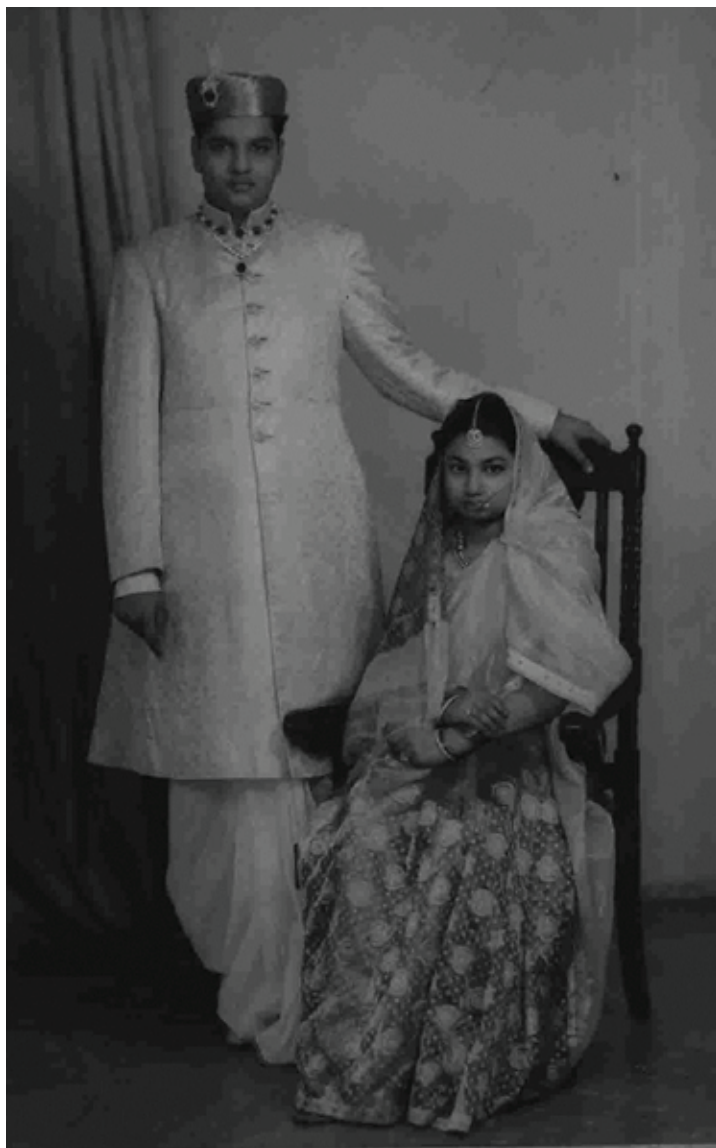




A young bride



Bimla and Bimal Poddar



Bimal weds Bimla



Togetherness



Coming into the Poddar-Neotia family



Discovering a new world

Discovering a whole new world

Migrating from peebar to sasural

The atmosphere of the two homes was completely different. I should say, *zameen aasmaan ka farq tha!* It was in Calcutta, that I first saw and tasted something as ordinary and every day as bread! We had never had it before in Rajasthan.

We had two homes that were interconnected and stood across each other, just about ten feet apart. 119B, Central Avenue which was the Poddar House, where I stayed with my husband, Bimal Kumar Poddar, my mother-in-law, Manni Devi and *Kakaji* – Janki Prasad Poddar. Right behind us was the Neotia household on 54, Jakaria Street which housed my husband Bimal's two brothers, Suresh and Vinod Neotia, Bhagirathi *bai* and Babulalji Neotia, whom we called *Bhauji*.

You must understand that my husband, Bimal, who was the eldest of the three brothers, was adopted by his *Nana*, Janki Prasad Poddar. This was because he had only one daughter and in those days the inheritance laws necessitated a son. So, he 'became a Poddar' and since I married him, I became a Poddar too. We shifted from Central Avenue to Queen's Park, Ballygunje, in July 1951 and have been maintaining Poddar-Neotia households within the common compound since then.

Right from my early days as a bride, I was told not to worry about the kitchen - *chauka-chulha*. My mother-in-law made it very clearly to me that she would look after the kitchen affairs and that I should concentrate on my studies. And that I was expected to sit for and clear exams! The atmosphere at my in-laws, which was now home, was liberal and progressive. Back in those conservative days too, we had no major dos and don'ts – no *ankush*, no *pardab* or *ghoongat*. I was always treated like a daughter of the family.

My father -in-law, *Kakaji* was so understanding that he got a phone installed for me on my floor so that I could speak to my parents regularly. They never called me *Beenani*, which was a common, generic term for a daughter-in-law; instead, they always called me by my name and the two brothers, Suresh and Vinod, called me *Bhabiji*. Such was the mould of the family, that we were taught not to fear each other; rather our interpersonal equations and relations were based on love and respect. *Prem ka bandhan tha, dar ka nabi*.

It was soon clear to me that this was my home and Chidawa was my mother's place, my *peebar*.





Joyous togetherness

“Back in those conservative days too, we had no major dos and don’ts – no *ankush*, no *pardah* or *gboongat*. I was always treated like a daughter of the family.”

Family holidays in India and overseas





My yearning for learning

Pursuing studies, clearing exams and balancing responsibilities

My yearning for learning was encouraged and supported by the family. Can you imagine that in 1949, just after my marriage, *Maaji*, my mother-in-law appointed a ‘Guardian Teacher’ for my education with the firm mandate, ‘*Kal se aap Bimla ko padhayenge*’ – You will start teaching Bimla from tomorrow. His name was Jogesh Chandra Pal. We sat on the carpet in my room and studied whilst a domestic help *Shaanti* sat vigil at the doorstep of the room. He used to come from *Bara Bazar* and would teach us all the time. For example, if we went out of town, he would also accompany us. Thus, the learning went on unabated. *Maaji* was very clear that I should pursue my studies and sit for my metric exams. This kind of a forward attitude was unheard of in those days.

It so happened that in 1951, I had to undergo an appendix operation and so I could not fill out the form for my Metric examination for which I was due to appear. Also, the family had suffered a terrible loss earlier; Bimal’s younger brother Aditya had lost his life while undergoing a hernia operation in Calcutta. He must have been around fifteen or so. Hence, the family was paranoid about surgical operations and *Kakaji* insisted that I be sent to Bombay for my surgery.

My wailing and crying, *rona-dhona*, started immediately as I felt that this would be the end of my education. My mother-in-law

would affectionately admonish me to stop my wailing and crying, her pet expression being *kaljo khaigi mero* – which basically meant that I was bothering her to no end. She took me to Gyan *bai* Lath of Abhinav Bharti School who called up Sitaramji Seksaria, a noted social worker and someone who was passionate about social reforms and education for girls. He managed to get me a seat for a selection test at *Marwari* Balika Vidyalaya. I sat and cleared the selection test and could then appear for the exam.

Interestingly, my examination centre happened to be Bethune Collegiate School. The atmosphere there was 100% Bengali. There were only two non-Bengali students, my sister-in-law, Krishna’s elder sister Indira, and me. Of course, back then Krishna had still not come into the family and it was purely accidental. When the other students tried chatting with me, much to my embarrassment, I could not converse with them at all. It was even more embarrassing because my name, Bimla, was very Bengali and I was sent to the examination centre, draped in a typical red bordered, *lal-paad* saree. So, though I was round faced and had a Bengali look, I could not understand a word of the language. The very next day I went to my Master *sa’ab* and requested him to teach me Bengali. It was no longer enough for me to know only *Marwari* and Hindi and some Gujrati and Marathi. He looked at me to

check if I was serious and once convinced, our lessons started.

I cleared my Metric in 1952, in 3rd Division, which we jokingly called the Royal Division! Though my family responsibilities were on the rise and I also lost *Maaji*, my mother-in-law in 1955, I resumed my studies and later in 1958, I secured 1st Division in my IA exams, which were equivalent to Higher Secondary. I had cleared these exams in English medium. Although I did not sit for my *visbarad*, which was equivalent to let's say a Master's degree, I would go through its text books informally.

I was also fortunate to have received the tuitions of two fantastic academicians - Prof. Neto and Prof. Purushottam Lal. Prof. Neto was a South-Indian teacher who taught at St.

Xavier's. He used to come home five times a week and taught us all subjects except languages. Under him, we learnt economics, history, geography, political science and so on. Prof. Lal who came twice a week, taught us English. We were indeed very lucky to have got the tutelage of someone like him. He was truly a *vidvaan*, a great scholar. It is thanks to him that I can converse in English today.

I was keen to study even after clearing my Inter or IA. But that was not to be. One of the reasons for that was also because my husband Bimal, had only studied till Inter. How could I, his wife, be academically more qualified than him! Some things in the *Marwari* society, *samaj*, continued to be out of question!



“My yearning for learning was encouraged and supported by the family. I was fortunate to have received the tuitions of two fantastic academicians”
- Prof. Neto and Prof. Purushottam Lal.



*A rare photograph of Henri Cartier Bresson with film personality,
Basanta Choudhury at our residence*



With my dear brother, Narotam



With our dear friends Bal Govind and Chanda Lobia



With our dear friend Poornima Toolsidaas



Travelling the world

My blossoming into a world of passions

Learning, listening and living in a liberal atmosphere

The real catalyst was the liberal atmosphere at home. Can you imagine that in those days *Kakaji* would take me to the cinemas with him and encourage me to use a fork and knife! *Ajooba thi yeh* family! Our family was one of its kind. We would also go regularly to the Rowing Club with him.

Also, when I came into the family, my brothers-in-law, Suresh and Vinod were still students. Suresh and I were both thirteen years old; my husband Bimal was eighteen and Vinod was ten. Suresh, Vinod and I would study together and gradually developed a sweet bond.

My husband, Bimal, was very fond of poetry, *shayari* and poetry symposiums. We would often go to attend live sessions and concerts. Our friend, Bal Govind Lohia would accompany us with his wife, Chanda. He too was very fond of both *sangeet* and *shairi*. We were all young and it was almost like we were fuelling each other's passions. I must have attended so many music conferences, even those held overnight. Later, after losing my husband, the three of us continued to attend concerts. I would carry a tape recorder in my purse and would secretly record the artist's recital! The thing was that many of the gems they performed were simply not available on records. Later, we would sit together and listen to those recordings at home.

In those days, there was like a trend in *Marwari* families for the *babus* to learn sitar. I too started learning in that flow. Initially, a Bengali girl used to come home to teach me. Her fees was 35/- a month. She was younger than me and couldn't speak a word of Hindi and I think she was a bit scared of me! That was another reason for me to pick up Bengali. My sitar lessons were interrupted when my mother-in-law fell seriously ill. Later I resumed sitar under Renuka Saha who was Inayat Khan's disciple and Ustad Vilayat Khan's *guru-behen* and even later, was introduced to Kalyani Roy by a friend, Sushila Khaitan. I had to leave playing the sitar in 1974 because of a bad shoulder pain but continued to learn Rabindra Sangeet. The thing was, one way or the other, I wanted to remain connected to music.

Sangeet chahiye tha...

Through Kalyani Roy, I was introduced to *Saurabh*, a music school on Lansdowne Road. We had the most wonderful experience of composing and recording *Ramcharit Manas* on cassettes, a project that took nearly four years but was creatively very satisfying. The recording used to be held in *Moulali*, in Central Calcutta at Adrijanath Mukherjee's residence, who happened to be Kalyani *di's* *Mama*. We all called him *Adrija mama*. Path breaking people like Gyan *bai* Lath and Sitaramji Seksaria too left strong impressions on me.

I was also exposed to the various collectibles *Kakaji* had acquired and preserved over the years. Much later, when Suresh started collecting art, it would be my responsibility to take care of his prized pieces; I would oversee the safekeeping - *dhoop dikhana - hawa dikhana* - airing the art pieces or pulling them out for some sun and then properly arranging, cataloguing, and keeping them back safely. Very often, there'd be learned scholars, guests and foreigners who would come home casually and I would freely interact with them and listen to them, all along unknowingly learning by osmosis. Their detailed discussion on the art began to interest me - *shauq hone laga, phir thoda-thoda samajh bhi aane laga* – it started off as a pastime but gradually I began to appreciate it better. *Rujhan ke saath saath gyan hone laga* – As my interest deepened, my understanding got better.

The other area of interest that blossomed was of *baaghbaani* or gardening. I initially

started enjoying gardening when I spent time with *Kakaji* in Chitrakoot. There were some lovely mango trees and different types of fruits we had there including some beautiful roses. Inspired, I tried my hand in our green patch in Calcutta too. By then, we were living in Queens Park in Ballygunje. We had a wonderful *maali* called *Bansi* who was with us for nearly 50 years. He retired after *Kakaji* passed away. Soon, our garden not only blossomed and became bountiful but also started winning prizes! We would be awarded the prizes by the Governor at Horticultural Society in Calcutta. Through gardening we also befriended some good people in the city, including Mehta ji.

All these were fantastic windows of learning and helped me develop an eye towards things. *Karte karte sab cheez aa jaati hae...* you learn things as you go along.

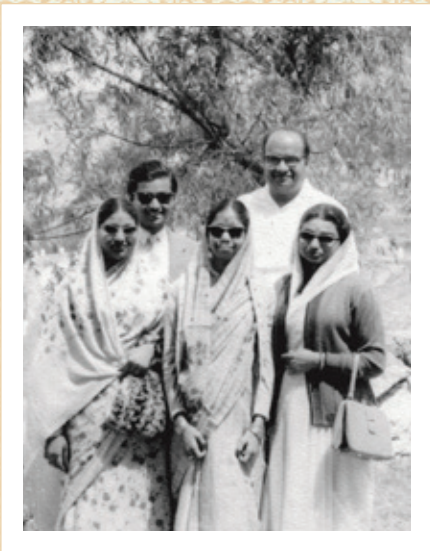


“The real catalyst was the liberal atmosphere at home.”

Travelling the world and making memories



Broadening of horizons



Globetrotting and broadening horizons

People, places, adventures

I've been fortunate enough to travel the world, everywhere from America and Europe down to Egypt, Singapore, London and beyond. My first trip overseas was in 1956, at the age of twenty. We were scheduled to go in 1955 but could not as my mother-in-law fell unwell. And though she had faith in me and was sure that I would return to India, she harboured a doubt that her son Bimal, might stay back if he liked it overseas! To repose more faith in the *babu* than her own son, wasn't a small thing!

Anyway, we then went in 1956 to London and stayed for a good twenty odd days. We were given 250 pounds each which meant that we were on a really tight budget. I also felt that at that time, the English did not really have regard or respected *Bharatiya*, Indians. After all, it had just been a decade or so of them having left our land as colonizers.

After that, *Kakaji* and I embarked on a whirlwind tour in 1969, travelling for about two and a half months across Europe, the USA and Singapore. My husband had passed away in '68 and it was felt that the change would do me good. Incidentally, it was also the year that marked man's first landing on the moon.

We visited all the prominent museums including The Louvre in France, Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Metropolitan Art Museum in New York and other museums in Cleveland and Brooklyn.

Travelling to different countries was eye-opening in its own way. In Switzerland for

example, I first experienced their sense of Swiss pride and discipline as well as their societal equality. I was amazed to notice that the waitresses who served us in the hotel during working hours, would be enjoying the swimming pool by the evenings. Such equality was inconceivable back home.

Israel and Egypt were both fascinating. It was an experience to be in Jerusalem, the city that birthed three faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I still remember, that we were pleasantly surprised to learn that the keys of one of the most significant churches there, were kept in the custody of a Muslim person. On Sundays, the entire town enjoyed a complete holiday. They did no work at all – for example hotels had no service even for a cup of hot tea, the lifts did not operate and no taxis plied!

In Egypt, we took the Nile Cruise and went into the Pyramids. For the first time, we ate fresh *khajur* – dates, plucked straight off the trees along the Nile! It was amazing to take that long flight of steps down to the tombs where the mummies were kept, shrouded in *malmal* or fine muslin that was sent from India!

Our trip to Iran was a different story. They practiced strict purdah. When I ordered tea in my room, a female attendant had to accompany the male waiter, a man was not allowed to enter my room since I was alone. Can you imagine that my simple attire was considered to be obscene as my hands and feet were exposed in them! When touring

Russia, I remember our car being stopped by the local cops for no rhyme or reason and pulled aside. We could not understand a word of what they were saying and were finally released after fulfilling their demand for a handful of dollars!

We also made friends from all over the world. Again, that was partly because of Suresh's network with art lovers and scholars from all over. Once, we had the art historian Robert Skelton over at our home in Calcutta. He was most intrigued by the statue of *Karthike* we had. In those days, it was kept outdoors. It happened to be a rainy day when he was visiting and yet, he went out holding a torch and an umbrella in his hand, inspecting the statue deeply. After having taken a look, he came back to both of us with the advice that *Karthike* should be brought indoors. 'He has sneezed enough' he quipped. On one occasion, directors from eight or ten

museums gathered for a 'Museum Purchase Committee' meeting. They sat in a half-moon around *Karthike*, admiring the statue.

Through art, we also got connected to Krishna Roy, an expert Indian historian and art collector who hailed from the Tagore family. She later married Jean Riboud who had a meteoric rise in the world of international business and finance. Jean would come in a private jet from Paris to Bombay where he used to be received by no less than Ratan Tata! But such was his humility that he took the Indian Airlines from Bombay to Calcutta as he wanted to maintain the standards followed by his in-laws in the city. Jean's simple demeanour was striking—we would never have imagined his stature or that he owned a 14th-century chateau in one of the most beautiful parts of France, to which we were fortunate enough to be invited.



“Travelling to different countries was eye-opening in its own way. We also made friends from all over the world.”



In Kashmir



Vacationing with Vinod, Krishna and Gayatri

My dear and most respected *Kakaji*, Janki Prasad Poddar

A hundred years of guidance, learning, and love

I would say that my father-in-law, whom we called *Kakaji*, was no less than a saint. One reads of great men in books, but if you ask me, he was a *mahapurush*, a great soul, whom I was fortunate to have seen and known in flesh and blood, in *pratyaksh*.

It wasn't that he adorned saffron, *bhagwa vastra*, or any special kind of attire or behaved in an unworldly way. In fact, he was fond of all kinds of activities, be it playing cards, mainly bridge, or taking us to the cinemas. I remember he had a lawyer friend who would drop in on Sundays regularly. Together, we would sit and watch all the Uttam-Suchitra classics!

He was particularly fond of billiards and would often go to play at Hindustan Club or Rowing Club. He enjoyed watching lawn tennis too and had taken us to watch the grand slam when Ramanathan Krishnan won! *Bajar bhi jaane ko taiyar rehne the* - He would readily go to the market or for a holiday in the hill stations. *Vilayat bhi gaye*; he had travelled abroad too – all over Europe, to America and Australia. He loved reading English newspapers, including *The Statesman* and *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, from front page to back and had taught himself a working level of English. Photography was another one of his hobbies. He possessed a Rolex camera and would make multiple trips to 'Bombay Photo' to get the film washed and photos correctly developed.

But it was his thinking, his mindfulness that was exceptional. He really lived and breathed *The Bhagwad Geeta*. He was very fond of reading and going through our scriptures. Revising and studying *Geeta*, *Valmiki Ramayan* and *Tulsi Krit Ramayan* was a daily practice. When in Chitrakoot, he had a fixed practice of assembling everyone, including servants, drivers, staff, house help *et al*, after dinner and reading the *Ramcharit Manas* to them. He felt that unless they were introduced to it, how would they develop a *bhaav*, a feeling for the values these texts espoused? It was thanks to him that I developed a keen interest in Sanskrit. There was so much I learnt from him.

Fortunately for us, he lived to be a hundred years old. And he saw five generations of the family; one before him and four after. How rare is that! I have been lucky to have spent a long innings with him from 1949-1996. His learning and grace affected and inspired not just me, but each one of us. Suresh, Vinod, Krishna and even our children, particularly Harsh and Smriti were all greatly influenced by him. He was very affectionate towards his grandchildren, and they lovingly called him *Dadu*. We looked up to him naturally and genuinely; there was no need for him to be authoritative or do any *rok-tok*.

I remember *Kakaji* staying up until the wee hours of the morning, waiting for me to return from my musical concerts. He could

have easily asked me not to go, but never did so. He was a great *parkhi*, a connoisseur of saffron, of natural perfumes - *itr*, and of gems and jewellery. The Yellow Sapphire, *pukhraj*, that I wear everyday was selected by him for me. He knew how to tell between real gems and fake ones, between real *pashmina* and *toosh* shawls and discouraged us from adopting cultured pearls. *Unki jobri ki nazarthi*, he had a very fine eye. He was also very knowledgeable about *Ayurveda* and his servant would regularly be mixing and grinding something or the other on a *hamam-dasta*, a mortar and pestle.

Though he was born and married in Mathura, he had been sent to Calcutta along with his brothers since their business was here. They were six brothers in all - four were own and two were cousins. When the time came for the businesses to be divided, for some strange reason we were allotted a very small share – just 5 of 436 trading agencies. When my husband Bimal was justifiably unhappy with the decision and expressed to *Kakaji* that he would take the matter to court, *Kakaji* very patiently dissuaded him from doing so, saying ‘It never pays to fight with your brothers.’ That one counsel from him saved us from getting embroiled in unending *kachehri*, court battles.

He did not bother too much about what people would say; he was unafraid of

the *samaj* or wagging tongues. He had no tolerance for prevalent practices of untouchability, of *chua-chooth*. He was also strictly against the idea that I should be draped in white or that my living should be restricted in any way when I was widowed. As hard as it may be to believe, he offered to get me re-married after I lost my husband when I was only 32. Of course, as far as I went, I was sure that the idea was out of question since I could never get a family as loving and caring as this one. You know my father, never called him *Sahji* or *Bhai sahab* which is how a daughter’s father-in-law is usually addressed. Out of respect, even he always called him *Kakaji*. In many ways, he was more supportive towards me than my own father.

I feel that he was as much as a man of his roots as he was of his flight; *jitney us zamane ke the, utne hi is zamane ke bhi the* - He belonged to his time, yet was ahead of his time. Thirty years ago, when his daughter *Bhagirathi bai*, passed away in 1991, he agreed for her body to be electrically cremated in a *bijli* pyre as opposed to a traditional pyre, since the electric one was far more ecological. That has been our family’s practice since then. This is how forward his outlook was.

Unke baare mein jitna kahein, kam hae. I do not have the requisite words to describe him.



“*Unke baare mein jitna kahein, kam hae*. I do not have the requisite words to describe him.”



Our families – Poddars and Neotias with Kakaji



At our Queen's Park residence in Calcutta (Photo by Henri C Bresson)



The brothers with their wives and Kakaji



In Banaras



With Kakaji and Krishna

Our unmistakable Bhagirathi *bai*

Marching forward together

Bhagirathi *bai* Neotia, *Kakaji's* daughter, was a force to be reckoned with — a woman of authority and grit who held the family together. Though she wasn't formally educated at all, she knew how to keep the family together.

During the course of our business, when we received the five petroleum agencies to manage, my husband Bimal suggested that his two younger brothers handle the work. He felt he needn't get involved. But she put her foot down, saying that whatever work they got into, they would run it together, even if it was running a *paan* shop - *Paan ki dukaan bhi karoge to saath mein!* The die was cast that no matter what the brothers did, they would do it together. She was also very careful of maintaining a tight ship and never exceeded either her day-to-day budget or the one marked out for occasions such as marriages and so on.

Bold and intelligent, she was like the 'man' amongst *Marwari* women. She was well and widely known all over Calcutta as Bhagirathi *bai*; there was no need to attach Neotia after her first name. Bhagirathi *bai* was enough. Even in all of Queen's Park, our residential area, she was fondly known as *bai*. *Bai* meant only her. She had a vast friend circle that

would frequently visit her at home. In fact, when she fell ill, our younger daughter, Shraddha, had to put up a notice on the door that specified the hours during which she rested and should not be disturbed and the ones during which she could be visited! Such were the number of visitors for her.

Bai would get after me to do her *sindhara*, a common ritual for women in *Marwari* homes till quite recently. Basically, an excuse for the women folk to take time off chores, get together, do some *kbhana-peena* and indulge in banter. She would ask me '*Bimla mera sindhara kad karegi?* – Bimla when will you do my *sindhara?*' After all, I was now her *Bhabi*, since Bimal had been adopted by *Kakaji*. So, I did her *sindhara* and she did mine! I would give her 260/- rupees and a saree. She in turn, would give the three daughters-in-law - Gayatri, Krishna and me, 101/- rupees each. This amount carried on for years.

Finally, when the practice of *sindhara* was discontinued, Harsh came to me ruefully, saying, *Ek sau ek rupaiya saal ka tum se milta tha, who bhi bandh ho gaya;* You're now even depriving me of the one meagre annual pocket money of 101/- rupees that I would receive from you!





With my parents



With Kakaji and Bhagirathi bai



Nammu weds Nilu



With Vinod

The trio of brothers, Bimal, Suresh and Vinod

Unity, vision, and the birth of Gujarat Ambuja

When I came into the Poddar residence, I could see all the three brothers were very close to each other. My husband Bimal (BK) was the eldest followed by Suresh and then Vinod. When I came into the family, Suresh who was my age and Vinod who was younger to me, were both still students. We would study together and effortlessly developed a friendly rapport with each other. In a way, you may say, we practically grew up together. By 1955, Suresh was married to Gayatri who hailed from the Murarka family in Calcutta.

You would recall that back in my *peehar*, I was my mother's only biological child. My younger brother, Narotam, whom I fondly called *Nammu*, was adopted by my father later, once we had moved to Bombay. *Uske aate hi ghar mein babut raunak ho gayi* – his arrival brought a lot of life and joy to our household. *Nammu* called me *bai*, or elder sister. We have spent some unforgettable days full of affection and warmth together. Later, he married Nalini Nopany whom we all lovingly called *Nilu*. *Nilu* took great care of him when he was unwell and battling cancer – *babut sewa ki*. Of course, *Nammu* achieved great success in business – *babut kamyabi paayi*.

Anyhow, coming back to Calcutta. Here, each brother had his own unique quality.

My husband, Bimal who passed away very young in 1968, was particularly brilliant and far-sighted. He was also very hard working. Anytime the family business did well, he would invest the profits to buy land or some kind of property for future use. This practice of his kept the family in good stead and was continued after his demise too. Of course, with me he was rather stingy, never opening up his *muthbi* or allowing me to indulge! I clearly remember that I would have to save to pay the monthly tuition fee of Rs.300/- to the two professors who came to teach us!

Many moons ago, we used to have a *gaddi*, an informal office, at our residence, 7/2 Queen's Park in Ballygunje, Calcutta. That was an office of sorts with precisely two staff members. We had a clerk by the name of Mukherjee and a *munim*, who kept accounts etc., by the name of Chiranjilal Bhausingka. But the *gaddi* had one more unpaid resource – me! I helped the brothers all day providing them with secretarial services such as looking after all correspondence, taking notes, making calls, booking trunk calls on 180, taking short hand dictation and so on. Later, once they moved to Dalhousie on 18, NS Road, the *gaddi* here folded up. By then, even I was consumed by other family responsibilities.

By the mid-1980s, with the launch of Ambuja Cement, both Suresh and Vinod became increasingly busy. They often had to travel to Ahmedabad and devote long hours to the enterprise.

But I must narrate an important episode in the genesis of the enterprise and company, Gujarat Ambuja. When my brother, Narrottam Sekhsaria *aka Nammu*, got the business proposal, my father Satnarayan *ji* Sekhsaria, said only one thing to him. He asked him to consult both Suresh and Vinod and pursue it only if they agreed to come on board as well. You see, my father had great faith in both the brothers. He had seen how they had taken care of the family business, had grown it over time and most importantly, how they made me feel secure and settled in every way after my husband's untimely demise. *Itna dhyan rakhte the mera ki mujhe aanch nahi aa jaye kabin* – they took such care

of me that no harm could come my way. My father was convinced and told *Nammu* in no uncertain terms, *Inka saath hoga tabhi kaamyab hoga* – The enterprise will succeed only if you hold hands with them.

When Suresh and Vinod were mulling over the proposal, I told them to think things through well and proper, knowing that business affairs could often get tricky. As far as I went, I was clear that my loyalty lay firmly with them, over my mother's side of the family, my *peehar*, because whatever I was and whatever my life had been, was because of this family, this home. *Idhar jitna pyar hae, wahan se ikkis hae* - The love I received here was in some ways, a notch higher.

It was their unity, foresight, and care that not only sustained the family but also laid the foundation for ventures that grew far beyond our expectations.



“We would study together and effortlessly developed a friendly rapport with each other. In a way, you may say, we practically grew up together.”



My strength and support – our family.



Becoming a grandma

My affectionate sister-in-law, Krishna

Bonded by laughter, trust, and shared moments

Krishna and I have always gelled naturally. Somehow, our wavelengths tended to meet, and we could adjust to, support, and work with each other effortlessly. *Koi dikkat nahi hoti thi*; we never found it challenging.

Krishna was so utterly innocent when she came in as a young girl that I felt a little protective towards her. Soon after her marriage, one day at breakfast, she was toasting bread for everybody. Once the toasts were done, she nicely buttered hers and started munching. When the others looked at her enquiringly, she replied innocently, *Khao nahi to thanda ho jayega! – Eat yours too before it goes cold.* We all burst out laughing.

Another incident that I can recall is once she wanted *'chooran ki goli'* from my almari - cupboard. When I gave her one, she said she needed six pieces, one for each of her six

sisters. But as soon as I handed her six, she promptly mouthed them all!

Vinod had encouraged her from day one to feel at home. The two of them were a couple that was as much at ease in dining at the posh *Sky Room* as they were in having a packet of *chana-muri* from a roadside vendor. We never really behaved like *jethani-devrani*; like elder and younger sisters-in-law. We could talk to each other quite openly and frankly without either of us minding; *kabhi man-mutaav nahi kiye.*

In fact, I have received a lot of love even from Krishna's parents. Her mother used to take my hands in hers and marvel affectionately at how small and childlike my hands were; *kiyan taabbar jyan chota chota haath hae!*





With Gayatri and Nilu



With Krishna and Gayatri

With Krishna



Our beloved children, Harsh, Smriti and Shraddha

The apple of our eyes

The most remarkable aspect of our next of kin, Harsh, Smriti, and Shraddha, was that although they were biologically Krishna's children, my younger sister-in-law never treated them as her children alone. This attitude of hers was really remarkable. She happily allowed the whole family to share her children, never claiming them as '*mere bachche* – my children.' Instead, all three were always, '*bamaare bachche* – our children.'

This stance benefitted the entire family immensely. Firstly, though I could not bear children myself, after Harsh was born, that emptiness was never felt. Secondly, the children grew up making the most of a joint family, seeing and learning from everyone, as no one person or equation can have or offer all qualities.

All of them used to spend a lot of time with us. Harsh and Smriti whom we lovingly call *Mithu* and *Guddu* to this day, have gone on several holidays with us to Chitrakoot, Nainital and other places. Shraddha came later and wasn't nicknamed though Suresh teasingly called her *Khatta* as opposed to *Mitha!* There are so many fun anecdotes and episodes we have with each one of them.

For many years, I would bake a cake on their birthdays. Sometimes, I would find that the batter that I had readied for baking, had been licked clean by the kids! We would hand knit sweaters for them till they became parents themselves. As a young boy, Harsh was quite the apple of our eyes and we rarely said no to him for anything. It could have gone to his head, but fortunately he has turned out

to be a balanced person and a good boy. We are all very proud of him. I remember how he was recognized with the first *Padma Shri* in the family in 1999, for his contribution in developing a multi-strata housing complex, that included high-, middle- and lower-income groups. Until that time, such a concept was unheard of.

I still remember clearly when Harsh and Madhu got married in the mid-80s. Harsh was in his mid-20's or so and Madhu was so guileless, so young. She had been educated abroad and had entered a fairly different territory and scene. To her credit, she soon got interested in the various ongoingings at home – *saare tamashon mein shamil rehti thi* – she would be curious and involved. It gives us pride to see how far she has come today, securing a name for herself in the arts and heritage and carrying the legacy forward in her own way.

Harsh was also very close to my husband. In those days, Bimal had to travel to Dhanbad for work often. As soon as Harsh would learn of his scheduled tour, he would go and sit on the top of his suitcase, in protest of his departure! He would start chanting, '*Hum bhujiya khayega, tum nabi jayega* - please don't go!'

Harsh would be scared seeing anybody leave and would appeal, 'Please don't stay back with God!' That's because I had explained demise to him by saying those who don't return stay back with God – *Bhagwan ke ghar reh jaate hain*.

More recently, when Suresh was ill but refused hospitalization, Harsh turned one of the rooms into an ICU overnight, sparing no



effort to make sure every care was available.
Ina dekhna - he did so much.

Smriti was born just a few days before *Raksha Bandhan*. We told Harsh that he was going to get a baby sister. All of us were excited as there had been no sisters between the three brothers Bimal, Suresh and Vinod. Harsh went to Paragon, a popular toy shop on Park Street, to buy a gift for her. Seeing the tiny new born, Harsh quizzically remarked, *Tum bola behen ayega; yeh to gudiya hae*; You promised me a sister but she's like a doll! That nickname stuck, and Smriti became *Guddu* for all of us.

When we decided to admit Smriti to Welham Girls' School in Dehradun, the three of us, Vinod, Krishna and I, went to drop her off. While admitting her, I met the principal of the school and made, what seemed to her, to be a strange request. I enquired if any arrangements could be made about Smriti's diet. The principal thought we were wanting something special or extraordinary, but my request to her made her laugh hard, because all I said was that my daughter likes to have *dahi* or curd with her meals! I still remember Smriti used to carry *seka hua jeera* or roasted cumin with her as she liked to add that to curd. That little girl has gone on to be awarded the *Nari Shakti Samman* by President of India for her contributions in handloom. There are so many such sweet memories... One day, Suresh mischievously told Shraddha

who must have been about six at that time, that her *Badi Ma*, that's me, didn't love her and that she loved her elder sister and brother more, which is why she was taking them to Chitrakoot with her.

That day, Shraddha sat on the porch waiting for me to come home from somewhere. As soon as she saw me, she leapt onto me, clinging to me by my throat. I protested, requesting her to come down lest we were to both fall, saying, *Utar beti, kya kar rahi hae, hum dono girenge!* Amidst sobs, she said, you don't love me; you only love *bhaiya and didi!* I will also go with you.

With much difficulty, I got her to unlock herself from me. I was in a fix and looked at Krishna, who immediately said that I should take her as well. Curiously, Shraddha used to carry a little rag of a *gamcha*, a towel sort of a thing with her all the time. She simply wouldn't sleep without that. So, both she and her *gamcha* came along with the rest of us! After that, it was a ritual for all the three kids to travel to Chitrakoot with me.

So, you see, it is not that the three of them have just called me *Maa*; they have never ever felt otherwise and neither have I. Some time ago, in the course of a conversation someone mentioned something about my nephew to me. I was staring at him dumbfounded, wondering who was he referring to until I realized he was talking about 'our son', Harsh!





Birthday celebrations



Pampering our children



With Bimal, Harsh and Smriti



Welcoming Madhu into the family



With my daughter, Smriti



Boat ride down the Hooghly



With Krishna, Madhu and Shraddha



With Smriti in her younger days



Our dear children, Harsh, Smriti and Shraddha



My revered Radha-Krishna ji



Sumita, my caretaker

My clarion call

Embracing Kashi and Ganga

As long as *Kakaji* was alive, my topmost priority was to be in his *sewa*, to look after him. After all, I had received so much of love, affection and guidance from him. Later, the calling was not so much *Kashi* as it was Ganga. Somehow, from somewhere, don't ask me how and where, I had an increasing desire to live by the Ganga in my *uttar jeevan*, that is life after 60. By then *ye bhi chale gaye the*, I had lost my husband too. You can call it a sort of divine inspiration or calling.

I also believe that Ganga is truly the living goddess of India. If you think about it, we learn to perceive the divine in three stages – *nirakar*, that is formless, *narakar* – or in the form of *avtaars* like Ram and Krishna, and many others and finally, *neerakar* – that is in the form of water. I believe that the purest embodiment of that water was Ganga herself. I turned 60 in 1996. Now the question was where could I go to live by the Ganga? There were only a few options. There was Haridwar-Rishikesh, Allahabad-Prayag or Banaras-Kashi. As far as Haridwar went, there was not much to do there except immerse oneself in *bhajan-kirtan*. And I could not see myself spending my remaining days doing only *Jai Siya Ram*; I needed some intellectual stimulation as well. Prayag was also not an option as I didn't know anybody there.

Having been there several times with my husband, I was better acquainted with Banaras. He had work and a full-fledged

office there and our stays there often lasted twenty to twenty-five long days. Plus, Girija Devi, *Appa*, used to be in Banaras and I had would stay with her at her home. By then, I was also well acquainted with the Director of Indian Museum in Calcutta, Prof. R.C. Sharma who had joined Bharat Kala Bhawan at Banaras Hindu University.

Now, if one looks at Kashi only from the point of view of what meets the eye, then there are several problems – it is messy and unorganized, crowded, and chaotic. But if you go to its depth then the picture changes completely. Kashi has been a cradle of human knowledge and realization. At one point of time, every third household of Kashi had a *gurukul*; a seat of learning. Even today, it is believed that if you breathe your last in Kashi, you attain *moksha*, salvation. So, Kashi it was!

There's a song, a *bhajan* that would explain my sentiment well:

*Jin charanan se nikat sursari, Shankar jata samaaye
Jata shankari naam bhayo hae, jagat udharan aaye.*

It is a sort of ode to *Maa Ganga* who it is believed, flowed from the *jata*, the matted tresses of Lord Shiva and is considered a divine purifier.

When we started scouting for a plot of land on which to build our place, we zeroed into a piece of land on *Saamne Ghat*. Though cut off from the city and fairly *veeran*, deserted, the



location still seemed beautiful as the Ganga flowed right in front of us. However, when we had finalized the plot, the entire land was under water due to a heavy flood. In fact, we had reached the spot by boat!

It was only when the water cleared up that we realized how severe the sinkage was. As a result, the piling of the house had to be very deep and we faced some challenges during its construction as well. Also, the plot of land seemed very large. I was only looking for a simple two bed room house. What would we do with such a big parcel of land? Suresh opined that later we could sell half of it off. Initially, the plan they had put together for the house was very different. The staircase was circular, which I got changed to suit my

advancing years. My room was supposed to be in a different space with barely any view of the Ganga. When I was shown the plan, I flatly stated to Suresh that I refused to live in such a house! My *raison d'être* to live in Kashi was to be proximate to the Ganga and enjoy her *darshan* and this layout was compromising that very idea.

Anyway, plans were altered and thanks to the family's support, my dream was fulfilled. Thereafter, one thing seemed to be leading to another - *kadi se kadi judti gayi*. First the house was built, then the *sanstha*, the institution, *Jnana Pravaha* started taking shape and so on. It seemed that there was a celestial conspiracy of sorts at play.



“It seemed that there was a celestial conspiracy
of sorts at play.”



With Morari Bapu in Banaras



With Pt. Jasraj in Banaras



Receiving Shankaracharya ji's blessings



With Appa, Girija Devi



Appa at Gulab Bari

My most revered *guru*, Girija Devi

Sur, serendipity and sargam

I started learning singing from Girija Devi or *Appa* who became my *guru* when I was as old as 44! Such were the sequence of events that I firmly believe it was all pure *sanjog*, pure serendipity. But let me rewind and narrate how it all fell into place.

I was always very fond of music. From singing *bhajans* on the harmonium which I had learnt to play in my childhood, to learning Sitar and Rabindra Sangeet post marriage to listening to hours of live music, both classical instrumental and vocal, to being mesmerized by *ghazals*, you can say that music has been more of a *sanak* than a *shauq*; more of an obsession than a pastime.

Now, we would often go back stage after live concerts to meet the performing artists and by then had developed a rapport with some stalwarts such as Pt. Gyan Prakash Ghosh, Vijay Kichlu and others. We had also been hosting small, intimate *baitbaks* or musical soirees at our residence which were well attended by listeners and artists.

Suresh too was very fond of music and had been particularly smitten by a typical Banarasi evening of music, called *Gulab Bari* in one of his visits there. He had possibly heard it at Banaras Hindu University with Murari *babu* Kedia whom he had befriended in Banaras. The artist performing that evening was none other than Shehnai *Nawaz*, Ustad Bismillah Khan. Ever since then, he had been harbouring a desire to host *Gulab Bari* in Calcutta. At one point in time, he wanted to

get a bunch of different artists from Mirzapur and other places and host a similar program.

I felt that the only person who could create such an evening for us was none other than Girija Devi. She was someone who could sing every form – *thumri*, *kajri*, *chaiti*, *bori* and *kbayal*. The trouble was, though we had approached her a few times, she had always declined saying she did not perform at private residences. She offered to sing at platforms like Anamika Kala Sangma or Padatik, where Suresh was the Chairman but that was not what we were after. We wanted her to weave the magic of Banaras and perform *Gulab Bari* at home.

It so happened that once for Suresh's birthday, we had Pt. Birju Maharaj performing *bhaav* or expressions, and Girija Devi was one of our esteemed guests of the evening. That day, *Appa ji* took a keen note of our household, the kind of audience we had, the way we had conducted the program, how we had treated the artists and so on. I suppose that day, as a family and household we received her unvoiced approval.

One fine day, during the holidays of Durga Puja, I received a visitor at home. It was the noted musicologist, Sunil Satpathy, who had dropped in. As we conversed, he said to me that *guruji* was sitting in the car. When I asked who's *guruji*, he said it was Girija Devi! Almost in disbelief, I ran out and warmly invited her inside.

Once we got chatting, I expressed our heartfelt desire to her - that we would love for her to perform at our house. She declined, explaining that she performed either at music festivals or at temples but not in private homes. I looked hopelessly crestfallen.

And then she said something that was completely serendipitous - She said that she could host *Gulab Bari* at my place if I learnt *sangeet* from her, that is if I became her disciple, as she would have no qualms about singing at her own disciples' residence.

I was utterly baffled! *Woh mujhe gaana sikhayengi* - Girija Devi would teach me music? 'Why not' she said, but she wanted a few things to conduct a small *puja*, a token ceremony - an idol of *Bhagwan ji*, a tanpura, a harmonium, fresh sweets to offer to God and some flowers. Not only did we have everything easily available, right from my Radha-Krishna idol to flowers from our own garden, a *handi* of *rasgullas* had just arrived for us and was entirely untouched. I even found a new saree to give to her, one that I had purchased for myself but hadn't worn yet.

Considering the sequence of events, is why I say that it was truly *sanjog*, the almighty's doing and his blessings that I become her *shishya*.

There are hundreds of episodes that I can recount about her. Over time, our relationship expanded and blossomed; she was both a *guru* and a mother to me and showered not just me, but our entire family with a lot of *sneh*, a lot of affection. In my early days of having been anointed her disciple, I went to Banaras and stayed with her at her residence. In the mornings, she would instruct me to do my *riyaz*. As I sat on the harmonium, practising my sargam - *sa re ga ma*, I would hear her voice correcting me from the bathroom, *Pancham nahi laga* - Your fifth note is off key!

Once done with her bath, she would busy herself in the kitchen and soon emerge with a bowl of *halwa* freshly cooked for me. Any objection from me on my inability to consume so much sweet would be cast aside with the declaration, *'khaogi nahi to gaogi kaise* - How will you sing without eating properly?'

When our daughter Smriti was getting married, *Appa* performed the entire *bhaat-nootna* (a celebratory wedding ritual) along with long hours of merry singing with a bunch of women whom she had gathered. In fact, Kelucharan Mohapatra performed for the first time with Sanjukta Panigrahi for Smriti's wedding. Later, after a few years, when it was time for Harsh's wedding, we

expressed to her that we wanted to keep it simple as Smriti's wedding had been a grand affair.

When we said we wanted *saadgi*, a simple affair, her response was 'nothing doing.' She picked up the telephone and asked our operator to dial a phone number. It turned out, that she was calling Ustad Bismillah Khan *sa'ab!* Picking up the telephone, she just told him, '*Girija bolat hae. Hamar naati ko byaah hae. Kalkatta aana hae aur bajaana hae* – This is Girija speaking. It is my grand son's wedding. You need to come to Calcutta and play!' Can you imagine! And such was her humour, that before leaving the line she added, '*Paisa nahi milet'* to which he too responded in the same

spirit – '*Khaana milbe kari?*' – Will I at least get food? On the day of the reception, when Ustad Bismillah Khan played, none of the guests wanted to leave! His recital went on till midnight!

On the occasion of *Guru Purnima*, I would do her *puja*. Sometimes, she landed up at home in Banaras along with a bevy of her students. She had a great liking for our homemade pickles. Sometimes, she would enquire about any fresh *achar* and upon learning about the latest bottling, she would ask for a bottle to be packed for her! All of this was out of a sense of belonging, a sense of *adbikar* that she felt for us. As far as we went, she was a just like an elder family member to all of us.



“Considering the sequence of events, is why I say that it was truly *sanjog*, the almighty's doing and his blessings that I become her *shishya*.”



Taking the stage at Gulab Bari with Appa



Appa with Pt. Birju Maharaj



My opening act at Gulab Bari under Appa's tutelage



Suresh welcoming Appa



Padma Subrahmanyam and Girija Devi



At Gulab Bari



Kelucharan Mohapatra ji with Appa at Gulab Bari



With Pt. Jasraj at home

The magic of *Gulab Bari* in Calcutta

Bringing Banaras to Ballygunje

The first *Gulab Bari*, a musical soiree under Appa ji's expert guidance and direction, was held in 1981 on our lawns – an evening that brought Banaras to Ballygunje. It was attended by about a hundred odd people.

Just a few days before it was to be held, she threw a stumper at me. She had taught me *Ganesh Vandana*, *Gaaiye ganjpati jag vandan* in Raag Bhupali and said that I was to open the evening with it. Nervously, I told Suresh that Appa wanted me to sing *Ganesh Vandana* first. He egged me on saying if Appa ji was suggesting it, there must be a reason behind it and I should go ahead. The reason unveiled itself to me later. Who would have believed that I was really her disciple had I not sung or shared the stage with her? Hence her insistence. I still remember her student Putul was on the harmonium and Lakhi guruji played the tabla.

In the second or perhaps the third year of *Gulab Bari*, we had an absolute gate crash with over 1,500 people coming for it! The word around it had grown. But we simply did not have the arrangements to host such a large gathering! Somehow, our *munim* at the time, Sushil Bhausingka, managed to arrange for tea and *kachori* helping us avert the crisis. Since that year, we have had to introduce and retain a line on the invitation card of *Gulab Bari* that says, 'Present the card at the gate.'

In the years that followed, I conducted *guru puja* for her on the occasion of *Guru Purnima* in Banaras for many years. Even in Banaras, when we held our first concert in 1996 in our

lawns, despite my protests, she had the same condition: that I should sing first. There too, the reason was the same.

Under her expert guidance and care, *Gulab Bari* became an annual date that hundreds of music lovers of Calcutta began to look forward to. We have been blessed to have absolute legends and stalwarts from the field of Indian Classical music, come and perform here.

One year we had not one, not two, but three stages built for *Gulab Bari*. In the middle stage sat Girija Devi, singing, with Pt. Kishan Maharaj on the tabla. On one side of it was the duo of Pt. Birju Maharaj and his disciple Saswati Sen and on the other, were Pt. Kelucharan Mohapatra and his disciple Sanjukta Panigrahi. All performing together! Can one ever envisage such programs anymore?

Kaun nabi aya? Who hasn't graced the *Gulab Bari* stage? From Bhimsein ji, Jasraj ji, Balamuralikrishnan ji, Kishori Amonkar, Jog sahab, Pt. Kelucharan Mohapatra, Ustad Bismillah Khan, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Ustad Zakir Hussain, Ustad Vilayat Khan, Pt. Shiv Kr Sharma, Pt. Hariprasad ji...the only two artists of that time we could not host were Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and Pt. Ravi Shankar. Everybody else has come and performed, blessed us and graced *Gulab Bari*. *Dekhte dekhte Gulab Bari ko 40 saal se zyada ho gaye...* How time has passed! What seems to have started only yesterday, is now more than a forty-year-old family tradition.





Showering rose petals – with Madhu and Krishna



With Pt. Vijay Kichlu



Ustad Anjad Ali Khan at home



With Pt. Bhimsein Joshi



With shebnai navaaz – Ustad Bismillah Khan



With Pt. Jasraj and Narotam



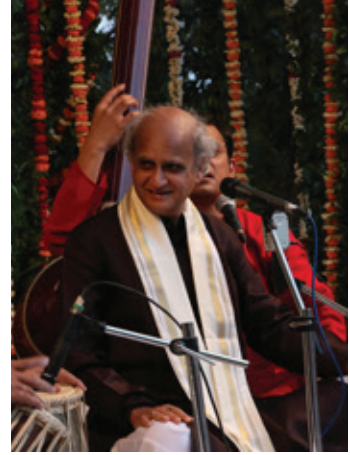
Hon'ble. Governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi graced Gulab Bari



With Parthiv and Paroma



Girija Devi and with Kisbori Amonkar



Ulhas Kashalkar ji



With Pt. Shiv Kumar Sharma



Performance by Appa



Jnana Pravaha campus



Ma Ganga as seen from Jnana Pravaha



*Main akela hi chala tha
Jaanib-e-manzil magar
Log saath aate gaye
Aur kaarwaan banta gaya*

मैं अकेला ही चला था जानिब-ए-मंज़िल मगर
लोग साथ आते गए और कारवाँ बनता गया



Jnana Pravaha - a story of Baba Vishwanath's blessings

Providence, purpose, passion, people

Jnana Pravaha, (pronounced *Gyan Pravaha*) our institute in Banaras owes much of its inception, conception and success to Suresh. *Uska bhaari yogdaan tha* - his role was pivotal. The fact is that I had moved to Banaras to spend a retired life, but as they say, man proposes and God disposes.

In the first year or so of being in Banaras, I wasn't doing much. Spending some time with our *mali*, our gardener Nayak, maybe reading a bit, whiling away time. Suresh and Vinod discussed amongst each other that I needed to get occupied with something or else *mera dimaag sathiya jayega*; I would intellectually becoming vegetative!

The other person who was really the heart, soul and the pillar behind *Jnana Pravaha* was Dr RC Sharma, our first Director and *Acharya*. Once I started living in Banaras, we had become acquainted with each other because of our interest in art and so on. He had come home for some programs and I had visited him also.

It so happened, that the gentleman who was in charge earlier, K N Mishra, couldn't quite take matters forward. Though he was a Sanskrit scholar and started off with lectures on *Ram Katha* by Pandurang ji, the institute did not really take off under him. Dr Sharma was retiring from his post as Director, Kala Bhawan, Banaras. He was both qualified and respected.

I requested him to take over *Jnana Pravaha*. Luckily for us, he agreed to come join in

1999, in an honorary capacity, explaining that since he continued to receive his pension, he would not charge us anything since we were trying to run the institute out of *sewa bhan*, not-for-profit, as well.

Under him *Jnana Pravaha* truly took off, attracting scholars, artists and curious minds alike - *Unke kaaran gaadi chal padi, ache log judte gaye*. As the couplet goes, *main akela bi chala tha...log judte gaye aur karwaan banta gaya* – I had ventured out alone but people started walking with me and soon we were a procession, a karwaan. It can be said that it was Dr. Sharma who truly nurtured the new born and chapter by chapter our story unfolded because of the association and contributions of some very good and erudite people.

We lost Dr Sharma in 2006 but continue to have a Chair for archaeology in his honour and name. Currently, Dr Kamal Giri, a protégé of Dr. Sharma, is now our director and she too discharges her duties in an honorary capacity.

Let me narrate a very interesting incident to you about how Suresh's art collection reached *Jnana Pravaha* from Calcutta. Once he decided to part with his carefully curated art and have it at the museum at *Jnana Pravaha*, we requested Sharma ji to go to Calcutta and select the appropriate pieces. He obliged. After selecting the art pieces, Sharma ji and I caught a train to Banaras, bringing the art collection with us. We had a First-Class AC couple booked. In fact, this was done with

strict security and Sharma *ji* tied his belt to the coupe gate whilst sleeping, to ensure absolute safety!

Once we reached the train station, there were two vehicles awaiting us – we got into one car and the other, a matador was loaded with the art. Our car reached home first and we were awaiting the arrival of the matador that was bringing in the art. But there was no sign of it! Minute after minute weighed long and Sharma *ji* was anxiously parading the veranda in worry. He started reciting the *Vishnu Sabasranam* and asked me to join. But the damn matador was nowhere in sight!

Since that was not the age of mobile phones, we could not trace it anywhere. After two hours or so, the van turned up with our caretaker, Ojha *ji* in it. When we enquired the reason of such delay, he calmly explained that he had stopped in the market to buy ration, vegetables and other kitchen supplies! He neither had a clue about the prized art collection packed in the cartons in the van nor of our palpitations! Anyway, since then, Suresh's art collection has found a home, complete documentation and much admiration at the museum here. *Kalamandapa* at *Jnana Pravaha* has gone beyond the appreciation of an inner circle; it has acquired an international reputation.

Luckily, we were able to add significantly to our coin collection also. This was also because of Sharma *ji's* insistence. He felt that children were attracted to coins and was quite right, because anytime we have school children visiting the museum, they first run towards the coins. Suresh was not that keen on coins.

The coins too, made it to Janan Pravaha most accidentally. One fine evening, I had gone to a jewellery shop on *Assi Ghat* to pick up some simple jewellery for our children.

After showing some items, the shop keeper also showed me a collection of coins, which he suggested could be crafted into earrings or buttons. Even in a single glance I could tell that the coins looked old and valuable. Though I didn't know much about coins, I noted that they were all punch-marked. The shopkeeper was set on melting them all the next day and I had to take a decision immediately. But I was not carrying enough money.

As luck would have it, he agreed to hand over the coins on credit if the money were to be sent to him the next day. Thus, those 100 odd silver punch-marked coins of varying shapes, sizes and antiquity, came to enrich the collection and the museum through sheer serendipity!

Today, at *Jnana Pravaha*, we offer a course on *Brahmi*, a script that stands almost endangered. In fact, that helped us unearth Ashokan inscriptions. *Brahmi lipi nahi jaante to kya bhaata kbodte?* How could we have found anything without knowing the Brahmi script!

Our atelier, *Silpasala*, has also gained a reputation for fine craftsmanship and purity of metals for the kind of work being done there, chiefly Repousse, as well as the casting of metal through the lost wax process.

The *Vidyalaya* that runs under the aegis of *Jnana Pravaha* is housed in our ancestral *kothi* – bungalow. It is a residential tutelage where about thirty young boys are trained to be *purohitis*. It is heartening to see that these young boys not only start earning well within six months of completing their studies, but they continue to enhance their knowledge and learning. This too was an initiative undertaken by Suresh. He had witnessed some *pujaris* in Calcutta carry out some rituals quite poorly and was distressed by their fading knowledge.

He felt we must do something to ensure that our Vedic wisdom is retained and passed on and that the *samaj* is not lacking in the availability of well-versed, knowledgeable *purobits*. Suresh really had great foresight.

Jnana Pravaha has also presented Sanskrit theatre in different parts of the country such as Ujjain and Bhopal as well as overseas, in countries like Indonesia and Thailand to full houses and resounding applause. A sizeable group of 70-80 actors of varying age groups, practices and presents these dramas. This has been going on since 2000.

Our institution has a dedicated *Yagjnashala* for a *prajvalit agni*; an ongoing, continuous flame. A *purobit* comes every day to do *paath* and offer *ahuti*. On Shivratri, we do a *Mahayajna*, an offering for peace and harmony in keeping with rituals that can be traced back to Vedic times.

In 2015, the Government of India decided to bestow the Padma Shri to me. Again, this was because of Suresh's efforts. *Maine kya kiya ki mujhe yeh samman mile, pata nahi* - I have no idea what I had done to receive this honour. In fact, Suresh forewarned me when it came to receiving the award, Phone *ayega* us baare *mein to aap mana mat kar dijiyega!* Don't land up declining the award when you receive the phone call, he warned me. He knew I did the take recognitions very seriously.

It is my sincere belief and submission that none of this has anything to do with me, *per say*. We have just been lucky to be the almighty's chosen instruments. My limited contribution if at all, has been to consider ideas that people put forward and to go ahead with the ideas unless and until I had any serious objections or constraints in carrying them out. But honestly speaking, *Jnana Pravaha ko Bhagwan ne banaya hae*. It has come into being entirely due to *Baba Vishwanath*, due to Shiva's grace.

How do you explain the sheer chance by which we are named *Jnana Pravaha*? Taking a suggestion by Brij Mohan *ji* Lakhotia, we had first named our library *Pravaha*. By chance, over a random discussion with Kashi Poddar *ji*, the pre-fix *Jnana* got added. Just like that, we arrived at the beautiful name and very appropriate name, *Jnana Pravaha*.

How do you explain that our *agni* did not die out even during heavy floods that came a few years ago? *Age bhi, Baba Vishwanath hi sambhalenge*; the future of the institution too is in his hands.

Sometimes I think that perhaps the site where our home is, must have been an auspicious and a blessed place, a *rishi bhoomi*, where we have landed up just by chance!



“We have just been lucky to be the almighty's chosen instruments. *Jnana Pravaha ko Bhagwan ne banaya hae*. It has come into being entirely due to *Baba Vishwanath*, due to Shiva's grace.”



When PM Narendra Modi visited Jnana Pravaha in Banaras



When Shri Amit Shah and Shri Adityanath Yogi visited Jnana Pravaha



Shri Jagmohan at Jnana Pravaha



Mr. and Mrs. Nripendra Misra at Jnana Pravaha



Receiving Shri Arun Jaitley



Shri Shyam Benegal at Jnana Pravaha



Dr. Karan Singh delivering an address



Suresh with Thomas Pritzker and master architect Frank Gehry



Governor of Uttar Pradesh, Smt. Anandiben Patel at Jnana Pravaha



From the Visitors' Diary

Some of the distinguished visitors at *Jnana Pravaha*
and their valuable comments



Arjun Ram Meghwal



S.No.	Date	Name & Address	Phone	Comments
16	16/10/2022	अरजुन राम मेघवाल केन्द्रीय अध्यक्ष अरजुन संसद		अरजुन / केन्द्र में है। उपनि करी अरजुन जाऊंगे या अरजुन के विषय। विषय में या सुनिश्चित होगा। एक जायज - सच। है। आरजुन होगा। है। संरक्षण है। संरक्षण में करे। करे। है, यह है। अरजुन है। अरजुन है। 16/10/2022

B B Tandon, New Delhi

Date	Name & Address	Phone	Place of Visit	Comments
25-11-2022	B. B. Tandon Former Chief Election Commissioner of India New Delhi - 110011 Email: tandbbb@jabar.co.in			Gyan Prakash is a great heavenly institution. A great place for pursuit of learning and promotion of Indian Culture and art. It is making a great contribution towards skill development and employment helping artisans. It will be a grand success in all its promotional activities. B. B. Tandon

Baba Ramdev



मासिक कला, संस्कृति, परम्परा, संगीत
 व विभिन्न कार्यक्रमों, एडवोकेटि
 एवं सामाजिक मुद्दों के लिए
 अहमदाबादवासी निवासी पौड्या
 जीके मार्गदर्शन में प्रकाश सेवा
 प्रदान करने के लिए आभार
 के साथ प्रार्थना की जाती है।
 से कर्मचारी एवं शुभकामनाएं

Baba Ramdev
 14/4/2022
 14/04/2022

Dattatreya Hosabale, Lucknow



S. No.	Date	Name & Address	Phone	Comments
1	18 Aug 20	Dattatreya Hosabale Bharati Bhawan, Rajawada Ngr. Lucknow.		It is a pleasure to visit Prana-Pravah again. A centre of inspiration, a centre of art exhibits, Conservation & promotion this institute has made its mark. The new addition of Shilpa-hala is highly commendable. Best wishes.

Balkrishna Doshi - Sangath, Ahmedabad

29/6/2011	Balkrishna Doshi Sangath, Ahmedabad 380054	- extremely auspicious habitat. IF has, and will be , all the signals of becoming one of the great cultural centres in Benares, UP, INDIA BSh
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Dr. Randeep Guleria

DATE	NAME & ADDRESS	PHONES	COMMENTS & SUGGESTIONS
28/4/2011	Dr Randeep Guleria All India Institute of Medical Sciences New Delhi 110029		I am very impressed with the museum and the good work being done by the organization. My best wishes to everyone and I want that everyone involved continues this excellent effort. The collection in the museum is excellent.

Geeta Mehta, Columbia University

6/1/18	Geeta Mehta Columbia Univ.	THE CONTRIBUTION OF JNANA PRAVAH TO THE SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE ON THE REIGN IS OUTSTANDING. WE ARE SO PROUD TO PARTICI- PATE WITH YOU!!
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Haji Syed Salman Chisty, Ajmer Sharif

Date	Name & Address	Phone	Date of Birth	Comments
08/11/2015	Haji Syed Salman Chisty Gauldi Nashin - Dargah Ajmer Sharif			"Love Towards All, Malice Towards None". Khawaja Ghous Nawaz (RA) We are very happy to receive the warm hospitality of your Center in Varanasi, Bihar. May you all continue to love & serve all and make our blessed Country India very proud of your Center's services. Salman Chisty Ajmer Sharif Duroob always.

Martin Franck, France

16.2.2010 Martin Franck (Canton-Brunn)
198 Rue de Rivoli Paris
75001 France

भारतीय संस्कृतियया प्रसारणेति।
I am overwhelmed by your
hospitality and quality of
your projects that keep alive
the traditions of India. Thank you

Narotam Sekhsaria, Mumbai

Date	Name & Address	Phone	Remarks	Comments
28/3/15	NAROTAM SEKHSARIA 31 B Carmichael Rd. Mumbai 400026			The museum keeps flowing into newer forms. It houses a collection gathered passionately over 60 years. The effort, passion and dedication of Mr. Suresh Mehta and Binu Lodha speaks from every corner of the museum. A rare oasis of Indian culture, art and tradition. The vibrations of the place are very similar to what one experiences in a temple. N.S. Sekhsaria 28/3/15



Prema Pandurang

DATE	NAME & ADDRESS	PHONES	COMMENTS & SUGGESTIONS
12/12/2015	Prema pandurang		I am happy to visit this beautiful temple of art, learning and culture - so fondly reminded by Dada and her team. May make 0



Prof. Partha P. Chakrabarti, Kharagpur

Date	Name & Address	Phone	Comments
6/12/18	Prof Partha P Chakrabarti Director IIT Kharagpur Kharagpur 721302 W.B.		It was a wonderful experience visiting this new temple of knowledge in ancient Kashi. It will be our pleasure to work together to understand and share Indian history, culture, art, science, technology and entrepreneurship. Thank you so much. P.Chakrabarti 6/12/18

S K Manjul, New Delhi

15.11.15	<p>S K Manjul, Director ASI Institute of Archaeology, Redfort, Delhi - 06</p> <p>Email - skmanjul.asi@gmail.com - sanjay_sanyal_asi@yahoo.co.in</p>	<p>जब प्रवाह में आकर मैं सहायता माग्युस कर रहा हूँ। जो कि युवा प्रवास महा डा. नील डा. विनय जैसे सभी जब प्रवाह के सदस्यों के अलावा प्रवाह के पुस्तक एवं संस्कृति के विभिन्न आयामों को दुनिया के सामने लाने का सचिक प्रयास किया जा रहा है। मैं इसी कोशिश को सपोर्ट समुदाय एवं सहायता देता हूँ। सावन 28/11/15</p>
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Sanjeev Sanyal

Date	Name & Address	Phone	Topic	Comments
5/12/17	<p>Sanjeev Sanyal Principal Economic Advisor Govt. of India North Block, New Delhi sanjeev.sanyal@gov.in</p>			<p>This is an absolutely wonderful effort to preserve the memories and crafts of Indian civilization. I am especially impressed by the scholarship and open- mindedness of the scholars and staff here, who have done some excellent work in collecting material as well as exploring the archaeological sites around Varanasi.</p> <p><i>Sanjay</i></p>



A ringside view of the family business

Navigating ups and downs with equanimity

Ab business ki baat karein to kaban se sburu karein aur kaban khatam? Lambi kahani hai, bahut zamane se guzre hain...

When it comes to business, where does one even begin, and where does one end? It's a long story — we've lived through so many eras, seen so many seasons...

Let me start with Janki Prasad Poddar, *Kakaji*, who was a partner in *Tarachand Ghanshyamdas*. *Tarachand Ghanshyamdas* or TG as we called it, was not just another ordinary firm. It was what is known as a *sathpidiya* firm, one that could be traced back to seven generations.

Poddars were basically bankers or those responsible for the treasury. Before the British came, the name was Fotedar, which later got changed to Pothdar and eventually to Poddar. Be that as it may, it is said that the founder of the Poddar family was Bughotee Ram, better known as *Bhagwati Ram*. He started as the treasurer of the Nawab of Fatehpur.

TG had offices in several cities in India such as Bombay, Amritsar, the Malwa region and international offices in Karachi and Shanghai. The head office was in Calcutta on 18, Mallick Street in *Bara Bazaar*. This is where opium or afeem was stored and exported to China. The area is popularly called *Kaligodam* even today.

Besides wholesale trading and commodities, TG also dealt in banking which in those days was called *Hundiyanwan* - *sab kaam Hundi se hi chalte the, des mein bhi, bides mein bhi*. *Hundis* were like a bill of exchange used nationally and internationally for all trade. So just like bankers, we took deposits, gave loans, transferred money for clients to distant cities and so on.

In 1901, TG also became a franchisee of Burmah Shell and distributed petroleum products but that job used to be handled more by our stewards and bookkeepers - *munims* - like *Phoomras*, *Lobias* and others.

After independence, in the 1950's or so, TG was dissolved and the era of RKBK started. RKBK was named after the duo of grandfather and grandson - *dada-pota*, Radhakrishna and Bimal Kumar. *Kakaji* didn't want his name in it. Again, at home, we seldom used the full name, sticking more to the abbreviation RKBK. By the mid 1950's RKBK had more than 400 agencies of Burmah Shell, distributing its petroleum products. The 'Shell company' as we sometimes called it, operated out of several branches in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal.

In the early 1960's, we started facing some financial difficulties with Burmah Shell. Our commissions were drastically reduced as was



our credit period. *Samajh mein nahi aa raha tha kya karein*; we didn't know what to do as those terms were not viable; *posawat nahi thi*. We were facing a close down. BK i.e. Bimal with Suresh consulted the Late Shyamanand ji Jalan, who was our *vakil* and he suggested that we should switch to Indian Oil. The government was trying to promote Indian Oil and had even reduced Burma Shell's quota.

I still remember that we were in Nainital when we received his call to come and sign the papers and make the switch. We took a train the same evening and the next morning, BK was at the Indian Oil office, signing papers, ready to start the work. That one move, that one timely and wise decision and counsel changed the game for us.

Later, after Bimal's death, RKBK under the two brothers expanded quite a bit and got into fertilizers, cement etc. Now of course, with Harsh's many ventures, and myriad commitments, it has become increasingly difficult for him to devote time and attention to RKBK. The firm is now run by Brijen Poddar and family, who are our cousins and partners.

So, there have been all kinds of highs and lows and ups and downs we've seen. There were some misadventures as well. I can cite two as examples. One was an engineering firm that Vinod used to look after which went into insurmountable losses. We had to exit it.

Then there was something called Basanti Cotton which Suresh looked after that was incurring losses. Finally, he handed over Basanti Cotton shares to our cousins at practically zero value. He felt that that way, at least the day-to-day losses would stop. *Usko saltaya*; he took care of it.

As one chapter closed, different ones opened. When we got into hospitals in 2002, we had no idea it would grow and acquire such a name for itself. After the first Bhagirathi Neotia hospital on Rawdon Street in Calcutta, now there is a second one in New Town – Rajarhat, and a big one in Siliguri. Now Parthiv, Harsh's son is keenly involved with the healthcare arm and is trying to expand it in a robust way.

Of, course how can I forget the heydays of Ambuja Cement! What a status it had acquired and what a household name it had become! Again, when that was sold off, it affected the whole family. Harsh was older by then and Smriti was already married. Anytime a situation as large as that develops, it is bound to affect the whole family in different ways.

So, in a business environ, there are all kinds of ups and downs. Even in a running business, there are different kinds of challenges from time to time. In the *Corona kaal* – the pandemic times for example, both hospitality and real estate businesses were

badly hit. *Flats bik nahi rabe they, restaurants kbali gaye* – Flats would not sell; restaurants and hospitality suffered much. When the situation is a larger one, one that is out of your hands, you really cannot do much. *Acha samay aata hae, phir gadbad bhi hota hae; phir Bhagwan usko theek raste pe le aata hae...* You have to try and stay on course, stay resilient to the best of your ability, and wait for the almighty to turn the tide in your favour.

So, you see why I say that we have lived through all kinds of eras – all sorts of zamana. Whilst negotiating the tumults and bends of businesses, we kept a saying in mind, frequently quoted by *Kakaji* -

Ati ko bhalo na barasno, ati ki bhali na dhup

Ati ko bhalo na bolno, ati ki bhali na chup

Its essence is that an excess of anything, be it rain or shine, be it speech or silence was not healthy. The family tried to keep this couplet in mind whilst going through the various motions of life.

One way or the other, I tend to be in the know of things. *Hamesha kbabar rehti hae*. For example, I know Parthiv besides primarily looking after healthcare is also trying to grow Tea Junction, an F&B undertaking. I once told him, *Beta*, please start a Tea Junction at Banaras airport so that I get some good tea there. At the moment, one doesn't get good tea there; *dhang ki chai nahi milti wahan!*





With my brother Narotam



Sharing a moment with Nammu



Family time in Calcutta



Doting on Parthiv and Paroma



Madhu as a young mother

Life goes on

Counting blessings, not burdens

No life is without its challenges. I suppose I've had my share of difficulties, of *taqleef* as well. One constant struggle has been with my health — *kuch na kuch chala*...I had to deal with something or the other at all times.

Ever since my appendix operation in 1951, which in those days wasn't taken lightly, I had to give up playing the sitar due to increasing pain in my shoulders.

I remember I was very fond of taking a dip in the Ganga in Haridwar-Rishikesh. On one such occasion, the water current carried me away and I was recovered with a torn arm ligament. To make matters worse, this had happened in the month of September and the *Jnana Pravaha* building inauguration was due in two months on 1st November in Banaras.

Shri Vishnukant Shastri who was then the Governor of Uttar Pradesh was scheduled to come. I was in tremendous pain but as they say, I had to grin it or rather sling it and bear it! Besides the pain, there were minor irritants like not being able to eat properly or comb your hair or even do *puja* since my arm was in a sling for six weeks.

In 1982, I was diagnosed with Sarcoid, a sort of sister disease of Tuberculosis - TB. The doctors warned me strictly against entering the kitchen or go even go near the gas, the *choolab*. *Babut parbej se rehna tha*; I had to be

very careful. At that time *Guddu* (Smriti) was visiting us and that became an opportunity for her to learn some kitchen work. We used to make *papad* at home until then but after my diagnosis, that practice was discontinued and we switched to the one readily available in shops - *bazaar ka papad*.

Of the one in a million eye operations that go awry, mine had to be the one! As a result, I can't see very well anymore. *Kya kiya jaye* – what can be done!

Today, I can't walk easily and have to move around in a wheelchair. But whatever the challenges, I never let life's course go astray or come to a halt... *jeewan ka raftaar, jeewan ki gaadi ruki nahi*... I kept moving forward despite everything.

Then of course there was the loss of loved ones. Come to think of it, almost everybody I've lived with and have known in my life are now with the almighty; *saare bhagwan ke ghar gaye*. Both on my in-law's side as well as my mother's side. Bimal passed away very young; Vinod too was just 70 and Suresh was the last loss in 2015. But I carry warm, vivid memories of each of them and of course miss them all very much.

However, at the same time, my grandchildren spoil me rotten with their love, their affection.

Harsh's daughter, Paroma refers to me, her *dadi ma* - grandmother, as her baby! The fact that I am almost six decades older to her, does not deter her from pampering me silly. I was most surprised to see how she had picked up a fondness for *sber-o-shayari*, for poetry, though she never took any formal lessons or anything. When I asked her about it, she said she was inspired by yesteryear Hindi films.

Udhar Harsh ke bete Parthiv ke baare mein kya kahun – What do I say about Harsh's son, Parthiv? He has found such a sweet girl for himself – *babut pyaari ladki khoji hae*. Parthiv insisted that I travel to Doha for his wedding there. He genuinely sought my presence and blessings but I was sceptical of travelling because of my health issues. He said, *dadi ma – sab bandobast ho jayega* – everything will be arranged. And so, I travelled for the wedding

on a chartered flight to Doha to be a part of the wedding celebrations of Mallika and Parthiv. It is heartening to see him now fully involved in the family business.

I am also a much doted upon *bhua* – an aunt. *Nammu* and *Nilu's* children, Padmini and Pulkit, and his wife Grishma continue to shower their *sneh-aaadar* – their respect and affection towards me.

Having weathered all the seasons many times over, I am now in the autumn of my life. I am ready for when my time comes. *Sandhya kaal mein aa gaye hain; bistar bandh ke bethe hain!* One day, I too must bow out but there's no need to worry about it – *chinta ki kya baat hae!* I'm lucky to have lived well and lived long and when the time comes, I would like to go with a smile, wrapped in the love of a large, happy family that will carry on our legacy.



I am ready for when my time comes. *Sandhya kaal mein aa gaye hain; bistar bandh ke bethe hain!* One day, I too must bow out but there's no need to worry about it – *chinta ki kya baat hae!*



When Madhu became a proud mother



Paroma, the affectionate granddaughter



The kids spoiling their grandma

With the twins – Parthiv and Paroma





With Narotam and his wife, Nalini



Tying a sacred thread of love to Harsh



With Shraddha, Parthiv and Paroma



Tying a sacred thread of ashirvad to Parthiv

Some concerns

Reflections on values and ways

You know there was a time when a *baniya's* - a merchant's word was enough; there was no need of a signature. *Balki sabi ka woh mol nahi thi jo zabaan ka thi. Woh ab nahi rahi* – in fact, a merchant's word mattered more than his signature. That alas, is increasingly no longer the case. That is indeed unfortunate.

Today, parents want their children to be good, but what kind of an example are we setting for them? Are we disciplined enough ourselves? *Peble khud ko sambhalo*. Children absorb our habits, not our preachings. Instead of constantly preaching, we need to become a living example for them.

Then of course, look at the way we lose our heads over weddings. Everyone from the bride and groom to the entire clan turning up in nothing less than 'designer wear.' I have witnessed the beauty of simplicity in weddings. It is not that keeping it simple meant doing something shabbily; just without too much tamasha or *shoo-sha*, without creating much of a hullabaloo. We need to understand that a wedding is about the nuptial ties between the bride and groom; it is not an occasion to merely display wealth. But I suppose, we will also need to accept some changing trends and traditions.

I do feel that these habits or ideas cannot bring anything positive to a society; In fact, if we continue like this, it is bound to harm

us deeply. *Paison ka ghamand chalta nahi hae*. Decadence is known to destroy a society.

We were a society known for responsibility to our community; philanthropy was ingrained in our values. We didn't do it for applause. Today, however, it seems that even before charity is done, people want a *wah-wah* for it - media coverage, *dhool*, and fanfare. The chatter has become more important than the act itself.

From a lifestyle point of view also, we are moving further and further away from nature. How can that be good? A simple thing I recall is that as a young girl, during our *Gangaur* celebrations, all the village girls would get together to gather flowers for offerings to God. That simple ritual had so much meaning embedded in it. It meant girls from all societies and castes would mingle and go together, perform the ritual together and of course be in the outdoors for hours. Small, everyday practices—like offering water to *Tulsi ji* or to *Suryadev* in the morning—if instilled from early childhood, bring multiple lifelong benefits.

I'm not suggesting that you blindly follow everything prescribed. Not at all. But you should develop the understanding to know what to retain and what to give up; *Kya maana hae aur kya chodna hae yeh samajh honi chahiye – yeh seekhna zaroori hae*.





At my desk in Jnana Pravaha



Family portraits to cherish



With Harsb, Madbu, and my dear grandchildren

The final word

Some principles I swear by

Arval to imandaari boni chahiye - honesty is foremost and key. You can only go a certain distance by being dishonest or cutting corners. There is no substitute for honesty and integrity. Without them, there can be no peace of mind.

Then there is *apas ka vishwas* - trust in each other. Look at the way families and close people are behaving nowadays. This sense of disbelief, this *avishwas*, cannot bring any happiness. *Aur duniya mein behem ki koi dawa nahi hae* - there is no drug in the world for unfounded doubt and suspicion.

You must learn to be supportive. Skirmishes may happen but ultimately if you have faith, they'll be resolved. *Jab do bartan saath honge, to thoda bahut khudkenge*; pots and pans that are kept together tend to clang a bit. One shouldn't worry about those things too much; they happen and get over on their own. The important thing is to support each other and have faith. And to know that your family is your family.

Bhagirathi Bai used to say something interesting:

Hot mein pag upar na karo,

Kasht mein haath upar na karo.

What it means is to not lose your head and composure when facing situations that are either dire or plentiful. The idea is to retain your equanimity in both scarcity as well as abundance.

It is also a simple fact that *raat ke baad din aata hae* - day follows night and so on. I have always been an optimist and someone who has firm belief in one's *karm*. I remember how *Kakaji* was also always optimistic in life. Maybe it is something I have picked up from him.

Without good thoughts and deeds, we aren't *human*; *acche soch aur karm ke bina hum pasbu hi hain*. Remember the immortal lines - *Karmanye Vadhikaraste Ma Phaleshu Kada Chana*...we have the right to perform our duties but should not be obsessed about the fruits of our actions.

And finally, we should know and remember that it is really *eeshwar jo karne wala hae*; that it is all finally in God's hands. Even during times of deep distress, if one quietly introspects, *agar hum dhyan karein*, then we find a way, we find strength.

All that our family has accomplished I would say is entirely due to *eeshwar kripa*...His divine grace.



Welcoming and blessing Mallika into the family





With the newly wed couple, Parthiv and Mallika





*Na jayate mriyate va kadachin
Nayam bhutva bhavita va na bhuyah
Ajo nityah shashvato'yam purano
Na hanyate hanyamane sharire*

*The soul is never born, nor does it ever die
It has neither come into being nor will it cease to be
Unborn, eternal, everlasting — it is not slain when the body is slain.*

- *Bhagavad Gita 2.20*





With deepest condolences





“Padma Shri awardee Smt. Bimla Poddar ji’s life remained dedicated to the preservation of Indian art and culture. Through Jnana Pravaha, the institution established by her, she strengthened the study as well as the promotion and dissemination of Bharatiya cultural traditions.

In my meeting with her, I could clearly see her keenness regarding carrying forward and keeping alive our nation’s rich culture and heritage. I could also tell how committed she was about fulfilling her responsibilities as a social worker.

Although she is no longer physically present in this world, the values she imparted and the traditions she upheld will always continue to guide your family.”

Shri Narendra Modi

Prime Minister, India

15th May 2025





सत्यमेव जयते

प्रधान मंत्री
Prime Minister

नई दिल्ली
वैशाख 25, शक संवत् 1947
15 मई, 2025

श्री हर्षवर्धन नेवटिया जी,

आपकी माता श्रीमती विमला पोद्दार जी के निधन का दुःखद समाचार प्राप्त हुआ। इस कठिन समय में मेरी संवेदनाएं परिवार के साथ हैं।

पद्मश्री से सम्मानित श्रीमती विमला पोद्दार जी का जीवन भारतीय कला एवं संस्कृति के संरक्षण के लिए समर्पित रहा। ज्ञान प्रवाह की संस्थापिका के रूप में उन्होंने सांस्कृतिक धरोहरों से जुड़े शोध एवं उनके प्रचार-प्रसार को बढ़ावा दिया।

उनके साथ हुई मुलाकात में देश की सांस्कृतिक विरासत को आगे ले जाने की ललक, उनमें स्पष्ट दिखी। एक सामाजिक कार्यकर्ता के रूप में अपनी जिम्मेदारियों को लेकर भी वह उत्साहित रहा करती थीं।

श्रीमती विमला पोद्दार जी परिवार के लिए एक सशक्त आधार और प्रेरणास्रोत थीं। उन्होंने अपने जीवन में सभी दायित्वों का निर्वहन पूरे समर्पण भाव के साथ किया।

आज वह सशरीर इस संसार में नहीं हैं, पर उनके द्वारा दी गई शिक्षा और संस्कार सदैव परिवार का मार्गदर्शन करते रहेंगे।

ईश्वर से प्रार्थना करता हूँ कि वह इस अपूरणीय क्षति की घड़ी में शोक संतप्त परिवार और शुभचिंतकों को यह दुःख सहन करने का धैर्य और संबल प्रदान करें।

ॐ शान्ति!

(नरेन्द्र मोदी)

श्री हर्षवर्धन नेवटिया



“Smt. Bima ji was a well-known social worker and philanthropist who devoted her life to the preservation and promotion of India’s art, culture and heritage. Her selfless dedication not only safeguarded invaluable treasures of our civilization but also inspired generations of scholars, artists and students.”

*Shri Om Birla
Speaker – Lok Sabha
16th May 2025*





अध्यक्ष, लोक सभा
SPEAKER, LOK SABHA
INDIA

16 May, 2025

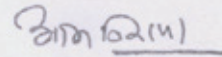
Dear Shri Harsha Vardhana Neotia ji,

I am deeply saddened to learn about the passing away of your mother, Shrimati Bimla Poddar, Padma Shri awardee and founder of Jñāna Pravāha.

Smt. Bimla ji was well known social worker and philanthropist who devoted her life to the preservation and promotion of India's art, culture and heritage. Through Jñāna Pravāha – Centre for Cultural Studies and Research in Varanasi – she supported scholars and artisans, nurtured cultural values among the youth and encouraged deeper engagement with India's civilizational knowledge. She also meticulously curated a distinguished museum of ancient manuscripts, artifacts, textiles and folk relics which has contributed meaningfully to national cultural consciousness. Her selfless dedication not only safeguarded invaluable treasures of our civilisation but also inspired generations of scholars, artists and students. Her passing away is a great loss to the nation and she will be remembered with deep respect and admiration for her contributions.

In this hour of grief, I extend my sincere condolences to the bereaved family and all her well-wishers. May the departed soul attain salvation and may God give you the strength and fortitude to bear this irreparable loss.

Om Shanti!



(Om Birla)

Shri Harsha Vardhana Neotia
Chairman, Jñāna Pravāha
(Centre for Cultural Studies & Research)
South of Samne Ghat,
Varanasi – 221 005, Uttar Pradesh



“I was deeply saddened to learn of the passing of your revered mother, Padma Shri, Smt. Vimala Poddar ji. In this moment of irreparable loss, I along with all my karyakartas of the Bharatiya Janata Party express our heartfelt condolences to you and your family.

In this hour of grief, I pray to the Almighty that he grants the departed soul a place at his divine feet and gives you and your family the strength to bear this sorrow.

With prayers for peace to the noble departed soul, I offer my respectful homage.

Om Shanti: Shanti: Shanti:

*Shri J P Nadda
National President, BJP
20th May 2025*



जगत प्रकाश नड्डा
राष्ट्रीय अध्यक्ष



भारतीय जनता पार्टी

दिनांक: 20 मई, 2025

श्री हर्षवर्धन नेवटिया जी

आपकी पूजनीय माताजी पद्म श्री श्रीमती विमला पोद्दार जी के देहांत के बारे में जानकर अत्यंत दुःख हुआ। इस अपूरणीय क्षति के समय में मैं और मेरी भारतीय जनता पार्टी के सभी कार्यकर्ताओं की संवेदनाएं आपके और परिजनों के साथ हैं।

इस दुःख की घड़ी में मैं परमेश्वर से प्रार्थना करता हूँ कि वे दिवंगत आत्मा को अपने श्री चरणों में स्थान प्रदान करें, साथ ही आपको एवं आपके परिवारजनों को इस दुःख से उबरने की शक्ति प्रदान करें।

दिवंगत आत्मा की शांति की कामना के साथ विनम्र श्रद्धांजलि।

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

आपका

(जगत प्रकाश नड्डा)

श्री हर्षवर्धन नेवटिया
अध्यक्ष ज्ञान- प्रवाह (सांस्कृतिक अध्ययन एवं अनुसंधान केंद्र)
साउथ सामने घाट वाराणसी- 221005
उत्तर प्रदेश



*Tum chale jaoge to sochenge
Humne kya khoya
Humne kya paaya
Zindagi dhoop
Tum ghana saaya*

*The mother. The grandmother. The matriarch.
The void.*



From the song *Tumko dekha to yeh khayal aaya* by Javed Akhtar



To me, she was Maa. Simply Maa.

“My story, my equation with her has been slightly different from that of my siblings, because I was officially adopted by her and became Smriti Poddar from Smriti Neotia. When I look back, I realize that that was one thing on paper and another in actuality; a kind of dual identity that I took time to come to terms with.

But it was *Maa* who was the game changer.

It so happened, that I had switched schools and was admitted to Welham Girls’ boarding school in Dehradun. *Mummy-Papa* (Krishna and Vinod Neotia) and *Maa* had come to drop me off.

Will you believe it when I tell you, that *Maa* wrote to me every single day! A letter from her reached me every single day, though I must confess that I hardly ever wrote back to her. That one unwavering, quiet practice of hers, had a profound impact on me. It won me over entirely as a person with the effect, that when I returned to Calcutta, I was completely hers!

Cut to the present times too, *Maa* and I would speak on the phone every day. Perhaps which is why, when she said to me, *‘Mujhe lagta hae ki main Kalkatte chali jaun – I think I*





should go to Calcutta,’ I could sense that she was not quite sounding herself and I immediately alerted *bhaiya*. Perhaps it was her premonition speaking, because within a few days of that phone call, she was gone.

Maa was trusting, sometimes even to a fault. She could love completely and evenly. She was someone who lived entirely by example. Such was her discipline, that she maintained exactly one and a half cupboards throughout her life. And yet, when it came to her perspective, it was unbound, free and far from restricted.

Just some time back, I had requested her for a *Tolia shawl* from the *shawwallabs* who visited home. It so happened, that I also liked another *Kani* shawl that was shown over a videocall to me, but I limited myself to the *Tolia*. I soon found that both the shawls reached my residence in Delhi. When I tried to reprimand her on the additional purchase, she explained to me that with the fading away of *raaje-rajwade* - royalty, it was up to those who could afford it, to support Indian *karigari* - craftsmanship or lose it forever. This coming from someone who never added any hangers in her cupboard!

Maa chose me. She harnessed my potential fully without ever making me feel stifled.”

- *Smriti Morarka*





Hers was a presence so full of dynamism that one naturally gravitated towards it.

“*Bari Ma* was someone who was as knowledgeable as she was loving; as fair as she was disciplined; as dynamic as she was grounded. She was someone who exuded command and confidence and someone I went to if I ever needed any advice. She would listen and explain patiently, without ever taking any sides - *Bahut ache se samjhati thi. Unke upar ek bahut alag sa bharosa tha* - she was someone one could greatly rely on, depend on. And she was so without any expectations, in a matter-of-fact fashion.

I remember how both *Badi Ma* and *Tauji* (Suresh Neotia) brought in tremendous art and culture in the household, be it with *Gulab Bari* or with the arts. It was at her behest that I too became a disciple of *Girija Devi ji*.

She was also someone who was very fastidious about punctuality and was innately disciplined. I remember an episode, when I got a sharp ticking-off from her and cried buckets right after. It wasn't anything monumental as an incident but it became a catalyst for me to realise that I needed to add value to myself and to the family. And since





then, I was like a sponge – hungrily absorbing all that went on, reading up on art, taking responsibility and bit by bit, coming of age and much to everyone’s delight, learning to hold my own. Later, I shared with her how that one reprimand from her had altered my direction and vision. And we had a good laugh about it!

Bari Ma was someone who drew admiration from all quarters. I remember her poise, her gait - her well starched, crisp cotton sarees, making as much of a quiet, solid statement as she did.”

- *Madhu Neotia*





Some emotions don't go away even when they do...

“I do not have the words to express what *Bari Ma* meant to me. She was easily one of the strongest women I’ve ever known – resilient in the face of tragedy, unbreakable in spirit, and yet someone who had the softest, most nurturing heart.

My relationship with her was different from the one she had with my siblings – Harsh *bhaiya* and Smriti *di*, as they had a more day-to-day access to her and I moved to the USA after my marriage. And yet, she continued to love me like I was her very own; fully, deeply and selflessly.

She was also someone you learnt so much from. All my love for culture and language comes from her. Though *Bari Ma* endured so many trials, she never allowed any sort of darkness to seep in or corrode her perspective. In many ways, she was an iron lady, always confident, admirably commanding the office she sat in. That was the other thing about her that was hugely inspiring – she never had to ask for something twice. There was something about her grace, her manner, that ensured that any of her asks, were honoured in the very first go.





My mum, Krishna Neotia and *Bari Ma* had the sweetest bond one could have ever found – a bond that was shaped with love, respect and understanding; a bond that was a two-way-street. One of my most abiding images of the two of them, was to see how after dinner, the two would sit together and have vanilla ice-cream as they perhaps chatted or watched some TV, before calling it a day.

Bari Ma achieved what she did because she was a forever learner; a constant student of life. And that is perhaps one of her most signature attributes, that I have tried to emulate as well.

I will simply love her forever.”

- *Shraddha Neotia*





*Dadi Ma was a wellspring of wisdom and quite easily,
the final word..*

“When I think of *Dadi Ma*, the image that comes to my mind foremost is her almost monk like aura, an aura that made us feel safe, gave us a silent kind of strength and could be magically philosophical and funny in the same breath!

Despite all her achievements and her stature as the head of the family, she had a huge capacity for respecting views and staying open-minded to all kinds of voices. Perhaps this is why she commanded a sort of *darbar*, an assembly, every evening whenever she was in Calcutta, where each of us would go and have a chat with her, talk to her about various things, personal or worldly.

One of the things that she loved sharing with me was taking me back to our roots through story-telling, deploying her incredible memory and pulling out interesting episodes from the family’s annals. She was quite easily the custodian of our narrative history. *Dadi Ma* would also make it a point to take me inside the *Kalamandapa*, the museum at *Jnana Pravaha*, with the intention and faith of passing on the valuable legacy personally. She was also my gateway to Indian mythology, to our cultural and spiritual ethos.





As an individual, she had a reservoir of will power. Even though she had become wheel-chair bound, she had come for my graduation ceremony to USA. She was also very widely travelled, both within and outside India.

Another thing that will always stay with me was how warmly she received my wife Mallika when we were still courting and went to visit her together in Banaras in the summer of 2022. She was very happy to meet her and of course, immediately spoilt her by showering her with love and blessings, gifting her sarees and stuff, as only she could. Given that *Dadi Ma* had been to most international destinations and lived so fully, Mallika would often say, that she'd probably had more fun in her days than us today! And though she was quite unwell during the time of our wedding, quite miraculously, her health improved and she could be there in person to bless us.”

- *Parthiv Neotia*





Dadi Ma was my definition of unconditional love.

“Even the thought of *Dadi Ma* feels like a warm hug. With her, I just knew that no matter what happens, if I were to bungle up terribly, her love, her affection would be the same.

My bond with her was unique and fascinatingly inexplicable. She was the eldest in the family, and I was the youngest. And yet, somehow the tables between us had turned so much that she was my baby, rather than the other way around! Even when we spoke on the phone, she would refer to herself as ‘baby’ and in a playful manner, say things like, ‘*Aaj baby ka tabeeyat theek nahi hae* - Baby isn’t feeling too well today’ or something like that, nudging me to scold her.

Back in 2018, when I was studying in New York, we had the most wonderful time together. I had given her my apartment keys and would come back home to find her lazily sprawled on my bed. Whilst mom would be busy organising my stuff or something, *Dadi Ma* and I would land up having a picnic!

Even though we were decades apart, our ideologies never seemed to clash. I never felt misunderstood or judged by her, which is particularly remarkable in traditional families, where obedience is often regarded as love.





In more recent years, I've often reflected how in many ways she led a rather difficult and lonely life. Yet, she never gave way to bitterness or resentment. In fact, brittle experiences only made her softer, warmer and more understanding.

A Diwali ritual with her was how each year, she would painstakingly tinker with the *boondi-bhujia*, by adding some mysterious ingredient to it, that gave it special fragrance, a *roob*.

Dadi Ma may have left us but I'll always carry that special fragrance of hers, in my heart."

- *Paroma Neotia*





*“You – you alone will have the stars
as no one else has them...
In one of the stars, I shall be living.*

In one of them I shall be laughing.”



BIMLA PODDAR

(1936 – 2025)

‘She was the captain of the ship.

Her calm steady presence resolved our dilemmas, healed our divides
and reminded us of our values.

She was our final word because she was fair, wise, generous and
deeply kind.

Her laughter continues to echo in our heart;

Her warmth lives in our home and the fragrance of her love
continues to linger...

Her loving gaze will forever be upon us,
And we will carry her essence within us always.’

- *The Neotia family*



Padma Shri



D.Litt





Bimla Poddar (28 August 1936 - 14 May 2025) was a social worker and philanthropist, and the founder of *Jnana Pravaha*, a Varanasi based centre for cultural studies, engaged in the efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of India. Under the aegis of the organization, Poddar was involved in activities related to explorations of India's culture and maintained a heritage museum housing artifacts from ancient India. She was married into a business family to late Bimal Kumar Poddar. She was honoured by the Government of India in 2015 with Padma Shri and was conferred with a D.Litt from Kashi Vidyapeeth University.

- *Wikipedia*



Supriya Newar is a multi-lingual writer, poet and noted communications consultant with several widely acclaimed titles to her name. Born and brought up in Calcutta, she is a music aficionado, an avid traveller, and deeply passionate about Indic culture.

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