

INDIA IN FOCUS

Camera Chronicles *of* HOMAI VYARAWALLA

Sabeena Gadihoke

© Mapin Publishing

Mapin Publishing

in association with



Parzor Foundation



Alkazi Foundation for
the Arts





The President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, greeting Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister of Britain, as Homai and other photographers capture them on camera, 1958. "President Radhakrishnan called me 'Princess', General Cariappa called me 'Energy' and Rajaji said I was 'A new phenomenon'. People called me all sorts of names. They used to be happy when they saw me."

THE BIRTH OF A PRINCESS

"I hadn't the slightest clue that I would be a photographer. I wanted to be a doctor but that was the only time in my life that my mother refused to let me do something. She had seen doctors on late night shifts and didn't want me in a profession like that. Little did she realize that Press photography would be far worse! I also wanted to be a Girl Guide but she didn't want that either. In those days Girl Guides had to wear uniforms and coming from an orthodox Parsi family, that was a problem for me. As a child, I once saw a photograph of another child lying on its stomach. I was told that it was taken by a woman and wondered if I would ever get a chance like that."

Homai Vyarawalla



Shaking hands with Dorothy Macmillan, the wife of the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, in 1958.

On the 9th of December 1913, a baby girl was born to Dossabhai Hathiram and Soonamai. When she turned two, an astrologer in Navsari predicted, “*Raj Rajwade mein ghoomegi*”—“She is destined to walk among royalty and important people.” This forecast seemed incredible to a family that had always been faced with hardship. Dossabhai led an uncertain life as an actor-director in a travelling Parsi theatre company when he married Soonamai, twenty years his junior. It was the second time that both had married. Dossabhai was not to live to see India turn Independent. He was also not to see his only daughter, Homai Vyarawalla, become its first woman press photographer.

Homai’s father, popularly known as “*bade mian*”, had originally trained himself to be an artist and painted on glass. In those days painting was not a paying profession and so he left home at an early age, to become an actor instead. Urdu Parsi theatre had been very popular from the mid-nineteenth



With the Canadian Prime Minister, Mr. John Diefenbaker.

century, but by the early thirties it had to contend with the talkies in cinema.¹ Dossabhai was known to be very handsome and would often play female roles. Homai recalls a story about a wealthy Nawab being quite infatuated with him. Watching their rehearsals, she soon became fluent in Urdu and once did a perfect rendition of a part in which a Muslim actress was having difficulty. A fellow Parsi watching this warned Dossabhai of the influence of the theatre on his daughter. From that day, Homai was banned from attending their rehearsals. Acting was not an option then for Parsi women from “respectable” homes. Dossabhai had directed some plays and even acted in the cinema. One of Homai’s earliest memories of the Khatau Company, where he worked, was playing with brushes and canvas among gigantic sets; “Those were my toys.” The Parsi theatre was known then for its spectacular and innovative sets and its technical wizardry.² “I remember a grand set of a street scene that had houses on two sides of the road. One of the balconies was on fire and had a woman shouting for help. My father had to throw a rope across and swing through the air to rescue his love. It was all very elaborate and to me as a child looked startlingly real!”

Life was fairly nomadic for Homai in the early years of her childhood. As a baby she had travelled with her father’s troupe, performing all over the country as well as in Singapore, Ceylon, Malaysia and Burma. Due to the uncertainty of their home life, her two brothers were sent to live with their grandparents in Bombay. When Homai turned seven, Soonamai shifted to a Parsi *mohalla* in Tardeo, Bombay, with all the three children. Homai’s parents came from priestly families in Navsari and Surat. As a child, she did not have much contact with her father’s side of the family, but every year they would visit

Soonamai’s sister, Khorshedbanu’s home in Navsari where Homai’s uncle, Dastoor Kaikobad Mehrjirana, was the Head Priest. Here they would perform the annual rituals for their dead relatives in the days before Pateti and the Parsi New Year. Soonamai would help her sister make the food and sweets for the daily offering. Three of Soonamai’s brothers were also *panthakis* of fire temples. The family celebrity then was Dossabhai’s nephew, Gustad M. Hathiram, who had set out to cycle around the world in the early twenties with four other friends. He never returned to tell his story and so there was always a mystery around Gustad. According to some sources he was killed by robbers in the U.S.A. Others claimed that he was alive but ashamed to return to India, as he had not completed his journey. It was an intriguing story for Homai, which was finally laid to rest recently when his cousin, Kety Maneck Chena, in Bombay clarified that he passed away in Florida in 1973.

A Westernized community, middle class Parsis eagerly sought English education. Dossabhai and Soonamai had not studied much but they were keen that their daughter learn English. Since Homai knew only Urdu, she was enrolled in the Grant Road High School run by Rustomji Bhesania. Despite its Gujarati antecedents, the school was cosmopolitan. Here Homai studied with Hindus, Muslims and other Parsis. The English language was compulsory and anyone caught speaking in Gujarati was punished and asked to write: “I will not speak in Gujarati, I must speak in English,” a hundred times. When rents in Tardeo soared, the family had to shift further away to Andheri. The children travelled to school now by steam train. Homai recalls carrying her return fare of two *annas* between the pages of her books. Fountain pens had yet to make an entry and so they

had to carry a cumbersome inkstand for their pens to be dipped in ink. It took almost an hour to travel from the Andheri station to Grant Road. All the compartments of the train had long benches and as children they would walk up and down buying fresh food from travelling vendors. They specially loved adventures in the monsoons when the tracks would get flooded, and the train would be stranded for hours.

Homai learnt to be comfortable in male company very early in life. There were just six or seven girls at her school and by the time she reached her Matriculation, she was the only girl in a class of thirty-five boys. Unlike other more affluent fellow students who came in dresses, Homai would attend school dressed in a sari with a *mathubanu* covering her hair.³ Of course, she would pull it off as soon as she climbed down the stairs of her mother’s flat. “I was thirteen and going out with the *mathubanu* made me feel like an old woman! All the other girls at school would come in frocks and skirts and I was the only one in a sari. Every Parsi woman who wore the sari had to have a *mathubanu* as that was one way of keeping the head covered. My mother said, if I wanted to go out anywhere, I would have to wear it. We used to live on the second floor in Wadia Street in Tardeo. As I went down the stairs, I would remove my *mathubanu* and put it in my bag. The other thing that I hid was the *sudreh*.⁴ We all wore the *sudreh* and *kusti*.⁵ To make a distinction between the Parsis and the Hindus, all Parsi women had to show their *sudreh* from under the blouse and so net *sudrehs* and other decorated ones were in fashion. While going down I would also fold up my *sudreh* into my blouse. I had to remember to let both these items show when I got back home. If I ever teased my elder brother, he would say, ‘*Mummy ko keh doonga ki yeh sudreh andar*