

# 100 YEARS OF MARQUEE MAGIC

The Dubash family behind Paradise, Mahim's iconic single screen, celebrates a century in cinema



ASHISH FAJE

Niloufer Dubash-Dastur and sister Meherzin's grandfather bought Paradise in the 1950s

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Imagine enjoying a Mahim traffic jam. That's how it was for me sometimes before the Sea Link rose. I waited for the car crawling along L.J. Road to slow down at specific spots. One such spot was where I leaned to admire lurid posters announcing Paradise Theatre's latest change. Muscled Mithun Chakraborty grimaced "in and as *Boxer*" on a hoarding I was once stuck staring at till startled by bell clangs from Sitladevi Temple across the street.

Years later that fascination got a family connection. My cousin married Niloufer Dubash, whose grandfather Shavaksha decided to buy Paradise in the mid-1950s from Sorabji Bhathena who built it in 1939-1940.

But the Dubashes had begun creating movie magic much before. Engineer and doctor by training respectively, Shavaksha and his brother Bapuji became film exhibitors. They erected Royal Cinema (holding Licence No. 1) in 1914 in the Play House theatre district. Assisting their venture was Pirojshaw Arya, a Lamington Road neighbour as close as family. The company's surviving partners — Niloufer Dubash Dastur, sister Meherzin and mother Alloo — are set to mark the Dubash centenary in showbiz and 75 years of Paradise.

Still standing, Royal, then a tin shed with a hand-cranked projector, even provided a zenana section for women wanting seclusion from a diverse clientele. Leading lawyers and chartered accountants Niloufer meets today confess Shavaksha thoroughly indulged young Parsi patrons. "As school children, we saw films there for free every week, on displaying a bit of our sudrehs (Parsi vest) to the Pathan doorman who

was instructed to let us in." Faced with a post-war slump, Shavaksha won back viewers with schemes that included a wristwatch lottery.

Next, the brothers built Krishna at Grant Road. It was renamed Dreamland on being bought by the Kukas. Coincidentally, now Dreamland is associated with E-Square, the Pune chain which joined hands with the Dubashes in 2008 for a revamped Paradise holding steady as a single screen theatre in the age of multiplexes. Despite equity infusion of 2 crores affording a turnaround for the 502-seater with upgraded technology, the rigours of running it weigh heavy. "Single screens are like neglected senior citizens left to die in agony," Niloufer says. "Passion alone has kept Paradise going."

Passion and integrity were qualities Shavaksha passed on in spades to his sons Framroze (Fali) and Jamshed (Jemi) for the business, while daughter Alloo became principal of Young Ladies High School at Fort. They carved so clean a reputation that government authorities never checked statements submitted. The biggest success playing at Paradise was the Prasad production *Dadima* of 1966.

Niloufer and Meherzin would rush here after school with excited friends on Fridays, crackling wafer packets in the cool



Framroze and Jamshed Dubash and Pirozeshah Arya (with garlands) in photo soon after the family bought Paradise



Meherzin with mum Alloo

dark. "When I started working for Air India, Jemi Mama teased, 'You're doing the same as my booking clerk — selling tickets.' And Fali Mama encouraged me to visit regularly to learn the ropes," the niece recalls. "He made us promise to celebrate our 100-year journey grandly with loyalists who travelled the distance with us."

The Dubash ladies know their theatre's location is an asset to the trade, middle-class Mahim an accurate barometer of public taste. The snack counters registered how many people didn't move out in the interval of the engrossing *Paa*. For the most, though, it's whistling and whooping as the marbled interiors shake with very vocal responses. Songs are mouthed and dance matched to screen stars in the aisles. An Ajay Devgan fan just jumped onto a POP ceiling decoration to ape the impossible *Singham* pull-up.

But the Khan sending Paradise customers of both sexes in a swoon is Salman. A full-wall mirror on the stairs leading to the Balcony never fails to make men whip out pocket combs to copy his style. Cut to the hit *Tere Naam* packing the hall with frenzied audiences.

A boy perched on the parapet begged for an unavailable ticket. Having already seen the film twice, he wore his hair straight-flicked yet slanted the way his hero famously had in that hit. Niloufer consoled him saying he looked like Salmanbhai himself. The compliment thrilled him enough to tell her canteen staff, "Madam ko meri taraf se ek Mangola pila do!"