

MAPPING MUMBAI

BY MEHER MARFATIA



IN THE CONCLUDING COLUMN OF HER 10-PART SERIES, THE WRITER UNCOVERS LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES BEHIND WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE AND PLACES

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A proud inheritance

RANA CHAKRABORTY



Vijaya and Farrokh Mehta at the writing desk they inherited from Desai

Everyone has an heirloom. Mattering more at times than even the finest family jewels are everyday objects which glow with unmatched worth and value. A book, a portrait, a piece of furniture... attached a silken significance handed down over generations.

Some of my magical interview moments have seen the city's theatre greats share warm stories behind their bequeathed personal treasures.

Vijaya Mehta, who started the dynamic Rangayan movement in the 1950s, recalls how much she owes to the Bhulabhai Desai Institute and to Solibhai Batliwala heading that creative nest on Warden Road. "When the Institute giving us so much freedom and joy could no longer survive, Solibhai gave me two gifts. One, he offered to house Rangayan's pictorial and written records in the basement till they found a home. The second was three pieces from Solibhai's office. A grandfather clock, a wooden sculpture and this lovely desk that was Bhulabhai's very own. It was too large but my husband Farrokh fell in love with it and it has been part of our lives ever since."

Blessed with as meaningful an association, Gerson da Cunha's black carved wooden writing table belonged to his grandfather. Antonio Maria da Cunha was founder editor of Goa's oldest daily, *Heraldo*. In 1920, the spirited newsman wrote an outspoken editorial at this desk. "Those were the days when the administration censored any advocacy of greater independence for Goa from Portugal. He did exactly that," says his grandson. The patriot's bold stance cost him a stint in Aguada jail. Gerson's other prized possession is an inscribed first edition of the seminal work *The Origin of Bombay* by the grand-uncle and renowned historian Jose Gerson da Cunha after whom he has been named.

The iconic horseshoe dining table and rocking chair on which Kulsumbai used to savour her paan continue to grace the Padamsees' ancestral Colaba home where her grand-daughter Raell now lives. Less known, though, is Alyque's father Jafferbhai's jhoola, the focal point of the thespian's living room in a Breach Candy building called Christmas Eve. (To digress slightly — local lore has it that pucca sahib Suleman Omer, the Anglophile landlord of Omer Park and Westfield Estate properties here, ran out of regal Brit names like Balmoral and Windsor Villa; so this block of flats simply got christened by the date it was ready to welcome tenants moving in: December 24, 1936.) Over a century old, the magnificent traditional jhoola from Kathiawad was a wedding gift to Alyque's parents — "I distinctly remember my father swing all day on it smoking, contemplating the universe. Me and my brothers crowded on its arms. Craning over, we'd ask him to draw pictures for us."

I am reminded of another unusual inheritance passed on to an appreciative son: Tom Alter's father's beautiful Urdu Bible occupying pride of place in the actor's Bombay Central apartment. Once on a windy morning he brewed me fragrant herbal tea before reciting lyrical couplets from *Ghazal-ul-Ghazalat* (the Song of Songs). The son of American Presbyterian missionary parents spoke of his grandfather Emmett reaching Rawalpindi in 1916. "My father James received this cherished Bible on being ordained into the United Church of North India, at Jamuna Church in Allahabad. My earliest impression, at the age of four, was of it lying on his bedside table. I especially loved the Christmas story. My passion for the Urdu language came from here. After 1947 the country was faithful to Hindustani, in which morning devotions were read at our ashram. But our hearts remained in the Urdu version."

Tom's handsome face wreathed in smiles, he recited, "Yehi hai ibaadat, yehi deen o imaan/ ki kaam aaye duniya mein insaan ke insaan (This is prayer, this is religion, this is truth/ that in this world man lives to help man)."