

MAPPING MUMBAI

BY MEHER MARFATIA



IN A 10-PART SERIES, THE WRITER UNCOVERS LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES BEHIND WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE AND PLACES

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Laughter in the café

SOONI TARAPOREVALA



Theatrewallahs Sam Kerawalla, Shireen Heerjee and Villoo Panthaky sharing a laugh at Café Universal

Where it stands says a lot about a café. Built to hug Bombay's busiest street corners, iconic restaurants still gracing a few such prime plots were once considered inauspicious by Hindus. The enterprising Iranis, taking it to mean twice the trade at a junction, looked towards Mount Damavand in their ancestral land, chanted, "Numo khodu" (Touchwood, in the Dari dialect) and moved in to serve the cup that cheers.

But 95-year-old Café Universal's plum location at Ballard Estate is barely its only boast. A theatrical thread ties it firmly to the talent and times of a genius of the Parsi Gujarati and English stage. Look out from airy south-side French windows and you see a sign announcing the name of the lane: Adi Marzban Path.

This was indeed a charmed spot where the doyen who regaled generations of fans with wickedly witty Wodehousian farces popped in to think, to write and to audition. Editor of the *Jam-e-Jamshed*, Asia's second oldest newspaper whose office was right next door, Marzban was a most welcome customer. Besides comic play scripts, he sat here scribbling notes for *Avo Mari Sathe*—the popular serial that launched on October 2, 1972, the day television first beamed into Indian homes.

"Adi Saab's usual order was mint tea on a tray with jam puffs or chicken patties and Rogers raspberry fizz," recalls Basudev Rajak, a waiter from Jharkhand and Café Universal's veritable mascot. Now close to completing 40 years of service, he joined as a boy of 10 in the home of Behram Irani, the original owner partnering Sarosh Mojgani. The Dehmiri family running the restaurant today inherited Basu as a kid. Back then, they were unaware would prove a bit of a walking history book.

Basu remembers British officers residing on the floor above, their horses tethered downstairs. The stables transformed to a toyshop before becoming the bun-maskadda. A beer bar in the 1970s, the café was renovated in 2002 to its current spruce avatar which retains wooden rafters, buttresses and high ceilings. The clientele has changed. "Our regulars were once rough men dropping in from the nearby docks but now we are a family place," Basu points out with pride. Pipe smoking Marzban who kept all the city's Gujarati-speaking communities in splits with sparkling hits like *Choopo Rustam*, *Kataryu Gap* and *Gustadji Ghore Charya*, often kidded with young Basu. "In the middle of showing actors their moves between chairs he rearranged as if they were on stage, Saab would give me a lollipop teasing, 'Ghelo, aayle!'" Basu laughs.

Writer Govind Saraiya, well known as the National Award winning director of the film *Saraswatichandra*, was thrilled to share a couple of drinks across the table with Marzban. "He was a fabulous funny man, very fond of me and I was a staunch admirer after seeing his *Mota Dil Na Mota Bawa* and *Maathe Parela Mafatlal*," Saraiya says, smiling.

Fittingly, 36 Adi Marzban Path was the venue I chose to release *Laughter in the House*, my book chronicling Parsi theatre of the last century. Shooting zany exchanges between our fifty-odd thespians at Café Universal, Sooni Taraporevala captured some special sepia moments that Sunday afternoon three years ago. It was the happiest reunion, with veteran actors and technicians meeting after 40 years. Bachi Karkaria inimitably described the vintage gathering as "soggy with nostalgia as a khari biscuit dunked in chai". The warmth of that launch lunch had the restaurant resound with back slapping, "Kem Sala"-ing, Kingfisher swigging and dhansak gorging.

Yet, Bachi also found herself brooding on a tragic triple exit: of the quaint Irani café, of the Parsis' hilarious brand of theatre, of the community's ability to laugh at itself. The first two could be ready for a requiem each. May the third never ever come to pass. Heaven help (*Ovaaryoo!*) if mad Parsi humour loses its lustre in the dangerously dour times we live in.