

MAIDS OF HONOUR

YOU'D be hard put to find two ladies more unlike each other. One was a matronly Goan and staunch Roman Catholic church-goer who gave 32 years of her life to her employers. The younger other is a feisty Bengali Muslim who dedicated 20 years to that family. Fate engineered to even have seasons of overlap between them working under the same roof.

Nataline brought up my mother-in-law's children and just passed away in Vasco. Missed by us all but especially my husband and his sister, who were as much her kids as were they their mother's. Laila looked after my children and has voluntarily retired, to bring up her grandchildren in an ancestral village a bit beyond Kolkata.

Both women of substance as well as drama queens, Nataline was my ma-in-law's age, Laila matches mine. When she and I found this out, her Bong genes properly in place, Laila joked:

"Yeh same-same umar jo hain, phir end mein kaun kisko sambhaaley!" To which shot back the prompt answer *"Main hoon na,"* from a junior Marfatia (which of them is now disputed by brother and sister, each hotly claiming s/he said it).

Where would we — the sisterhood of working mums — be without a Laila of our own? More second mothers than maids, these faithful helpers turned family members so naturally, you couldn't tell when they slipped into this double role. Making us realise that parenthood by proxy isn't to be wracked with guilt about, provided it's through someone with instincts and attitudes as great as Laila's.

We grew up together in motherhood. She taught me many things. Staying positive was the most outstanding lesson. Up for learning at a time the city was at its most insane. The day she walked in past our door, she wiped clean the identity makeover that fear had forced her to don: changing her name to Sunita and pasting a big bindi in the middle of her forehead. "How else will I get a job, memsaab," she said to my mother-in-law, not unreasonably. "You can be Laila here," she was told. "Without the bindi."

That was January 1993. About eight weeks after she was relieved of her posturing,

it was Laila's turn to placate me. Reading next to my napping two-month-old, I saw his swaddled stomach actually jump up and sleepy eyes fly open, startled by the boom of the afternoon blasts nearest us — Worli — in bomb strikes ripping town from stock exchange to suburbs. Dazed and disillusioned like 10 million others then, I sank into an added strange negativity. It seemed suddenly wrong to have kids in an innocent-no-more Mumbai.

"Kyon? Kya keh rahe ho!" Laila chided. Aghast the depression dared me to think of bringing up her beloved baba as a lone child. And then she, always the one who would be more directly plagued by the politics of communalism than I would ever be, softly

quoted Tagore. In chastely cadenced Bengali, but translated the line meant: "Every child comes with the message that God has not yet despaired of man."

That hit me hard. Not just because of the beauty of the

thought. It was also the only serious Bengali to drop from her mouth. Otherwise she spouted jolly rhymes and lilted songs like something that went *"Thap thup jhingayer phool..."* whose thumped beats totally regaled the babies.

Babies. Yes. Laila embraced my next born (a daughter she delighted in calling Rani rather than by name) with her familiar yet unique style of child-rearing. She understood kids at every stage, from helpless infant to pressured school-goer to prickly adolescent. It was that rare gift. Knowing when to push, when to pull, when to protect like a tigress watching her cubs, when to let them lop away in freedom and fun.

So Laila left, yet never left. We call her. She visits us. The relationship between her children and mine continues.

What else could I wish for? A few good women we can all do with. If only every home were warmed by such a presence. Life-affirming. Loving. Lasting.

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