



# Square piece of history

Serendipity would be the word to describe the Gandhi family's foray into framing.

It all began after a chance encounter with Belgian businessman Roger Van Damme. The two families encountered each other in Bombay by accident. It was actually, friends of the Gandhys who pulled out Van Damme's car from the sands at Marve beach where it got stuck on one occasion. As they got chatting, he introduced himself as managing director of the trading firm, Sepulchre Brothers.

Receiving news of the incident, Minocher Gandhi (father of late art doyen, Kekoo and his younger brother Russy) and his brother, Tehmuras were keen to meet Van Damme. They discovered that back in Brussels, his father restored paintings of the Flemish masters and scope for manufacturing chemical mouldings. India presented an ideal



market with the phalanx of images of gods and goddesses revered in Hindu homes. Wartime had brought a shortage of previously imported supplies of frame mouldings.

The plan was laid — a 50:50 venture would see the Gandhys contribute family land owned by Tehmuras and factory buildings in Marol, with Van Damme providing the technical know-how for picture framing. "Not only a collaboration, it was a beautiful friendship they had, my father and Papa (Minocher) Gandhi," de-

clares Isla Loulou, the chic designer daughter of Roger Van Damme, speaking from the Kodaikanal hotel she runs in her birthplace. Though the paterfamilias she refers to harboured hopes of his elder son joining the Civil Services, the War broke out. On vacation from Cambridge, Kekoo could not return to study and joined the family business.

The Chemould Moulding Manufacturing Company was set up at the Marol factory in 1941, and frame shop on Princess Street where it still stands. Though visitors sometimes mispronounce the name with a French-like "Sh", the name in fact, was simply a combination of the words 'chemical' and 'moulding'.

Kekoo's son Adil, who later took, explains the process. Their moulded frames first used an amalgam of chemicals and rabbit skin glue. Plaster ornamentation made up of this composition was impregnated in

the wood through dye moulding. Then came brewing, melting and kneading in a bhatti. "The most amazing smells of chemicals arose from there," laughs Loulou.

Frames were considered luxury. The government gave the brothers no support in procuring their main requirement, wood. This problem was solved by roping in Italian prisoners of war near the factory. Not really soldiers, they were conscripted into the Italian army. Many among them — actually, artists — created paintings for canteen walls and contacted the Gandhys to make frames. They supplied packing cases whose nails were stripped and the wood, used for mouldings, sold by the running foot to shops at Abdul Rehman Street. This continued till Independence when wood was easily available.

Kekoo looked after orders and the flow of material while Russy was in

charge of the factory's operations. Their land around a bungalow that belonged to Shapoorji Bharucha, where the Leela Hotel is today, stretched across jungle acres. Mango and chickoo trees grew on Shapoor Baug farm. The brothers travelled by train from their home in Bandra. A ride in Mohammed Miya's tonga from Andheri railway station led to the wadi.

Recalling that routine with their regular ghora-gaari walla, Russy Gandhi, now 88, reveals Chemould employed 80-odd staffers. Half of them were women — an interesting fact for those early 1940s. Sixteen girls worked in the sandpapering department, about 20 in the finishing department, four in measuring and packing, and a couple in the godown for finished goods. "The women were sent by the parish priest of Marol village, who I was friendly with. He was teaching them to sing hymns, so he requested me to let them practise during lunch hour. I gave them a small room and we'd be regaled by a variety of hymns. We were successful, being the only ones selling mouldings. Plastic frames came in later," says Russy.