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# Old-time jeweller unlocks his treasury of memories

By Meher Marfatia

**Mumbai:** You name the celebrity, he knows a sparkling story to match each. A luminous line-up of personalities, from the maharajas of Palitana and Patiala to Jawaharlal Nehru, from Margaret Thatcher to Gregory Peck in his Hollywood heyday, has patronised the reputed jewellery store for which he's managed sales for 55 years.

A spry 80 today, Noshir Dotivala is synonymous with Gazdar's at the Taj Mahal Hotel, which is celebrating its centenary this year.

In 1933, Gazdar's—elite jewellers to the finest families in the country—became the first commercial outlet to open at the Taj. To Mr Dotivala, fresh from Sydenham College in 1947, goes the distinction of being the oldest employee still at work in the building (with the possible exception of Meherwanji Chinoy, a Gazdar's director two years his senior).

Mr Dotivala sits behind gleaming glass displays, benignly bespectacled, dapper in a conservative suit, surrounded by breathtaking collections of gem-studded sets, silver-crafted pieces arrayed row upon glittering row beside showcases glinting with hookahs, carved boxes, delicate cutlery and Ganesha statues.

Volumes of 'The Art of Carl Faberge' and 'Sotheby's World Guide to Antiques and their Prices' loom high on his tidy desk.

On a warm afternoon not so long ago, a pair of middle-aged Parsi matrons swished into the shop, bejewelled, hot and bothered. Mr Dotivala stood at attention, then, as they exchanged smiles, the women relaxed and one turned to tell no one in particular, "Just can't imagine this place without Doti." Her remark succinctly echoed the sentiment of legions of loyalists.

Mr Dotivala is a store of lore. Before Independence, the Taj hosted regular meetings of maharajas at the Princes' Room, he said. This meant that the royal heads of Palitana, Travancore and Golconda, the Gaikwad of Baroda and Jaamsaheb of Nawanagar would sashay down to Gazdar's once every three months to clean its shelves of jewels for their wives, buy silver artifacts, cuff links and cigarette cases. (Their secretaries would settle the bills later.) Mr Dotivala was especially struck by Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner's elaborate epaulets, swaggeringly sported at banquets held in his honour.

The hotel's look now is quite different from the time it introduced ballroom dancing and jazz

music to Mumbai in the 1920s. While Gazdar's remains in position, the area around the store has changed dramatically, where the swimming pool shimmers now was a palm-treed courtyard with archways through which horse carriages smartly drew in, the facade on that side being closest to the neighbouring Wellington Mews.

The corridors continue to resound with memories for Mr Dotivala. Once, on his way to a meeting, Jawaharlal Nehru shimmied nimbly up the grand staircase, leaving his entourage trailing breathless from bounding after the energetic Panditji. Another time, philanthropist Bapsy Sabavala rode a horse up the same staircase en route to a Crystal Room fundraiser event.

When Gregory Peck, the late great matinee idol, shopped there, Mr Dotivala handed the ac-

Hemant Shirodkar



Noshir Dotivala of Gazdar's has sold precious gifts to such celebrities as Gregory Peck and Margaret Thatcher

tor a pen to sign autographs. Towards the evening, he was pleasantly surprised to see Peck stride in again, waving the pen he'd forgotten to return. "Imagine, apologising for being remiss, bringing it in person. He could have stayed in his room and sent it with someone." The Rotary sessions traditionally held every Tuesday at the Taj resulted in a steady trickle of customers to the jewellery counters—a practice that continues. When Queen Elizabeth was presented a fashion show at Raj Bhavan in 1961, it was jewels by Gazdar's that adorned evening-gowned or Kanjeevaram-clad Anglo-Indian and Parsi models.

Mr Dotivala said that the Smithsonian in Washington possesses a jade vase from Gazdar's. He pointed proudly to another feather in their cap—a Sotheby's catalogue featuring a gorgeous necklace for the Nizam of Hyderabad's daughter, Princess Muffakam Jah, created by Gazdar's from the actual impress of an ostrich plume, set with circular-cut diamond lines.