

**M**y cousin, Surabhi, wants to age gracefully like her. My sister-in-law, Anjani, considers her to be the role model to follow. For my friend, Manju, she is an example of courage and dignity, one she wants to emulate. Anybody who meets her, adores her and respects her. She is an inspiration to the people around her. For me, she is an extraordinary woman with an indomitable spirit and an amazing grace. She is my mother, Sharada, also known as Kumudini.

My mother's family are Desais from South Gujarat. Her father, VasANJI, and mother, Parvati, had three sons, and their life was joyful. My mother, the only daughter, was the youngest child. In 1918, a terrible Asian flu swept the country. Three months after giving birth to Sharada, tragedy struck and Parvati fell victim. Devastated, VasANJI was left to take care of four children all on his own. Fortunately, help came from Parvati's sister, Amba, who volunteered to bring up baby Sharada. After VasANJI decided to remarry, Sharada, at age one-and-a-half years, was brought back home. Although her father adored her, life with the new stepmother was not easy. When she was hardly nine years of age, tragedy struck again, and she lost her dear father as well. A few years later, Sharada's eldest brother and his wife decided to take her along with them to Larkana, Sindh, where her brother was working as an engineer. It was from her brother that Sharada learned the basics of the English language. Unfortunately, her formal education was disrupted so many times that she managed to study only until the seventh grade.

At age fourteen, Sharada was married to Amritlal. Her name was changed to Kumudini upon marriage. Twenty-six years of age at the time, Amritlal was 12 years older than

## Tribute to a Mother

○ Puloma Shah



**Sharada (Kumudini) with her daughter Puloma and grand-daughter Rima.**

Sharada. Whereas he was a serious, quiet, and aloof young man, Sharada was lively and vivacious. No two people could be as different as were my parents in their temperaments and outlooks on life. Tall and fair with long, luxurious hair, Sharada was always cheerful and enthusiastic. She also had an amazing capacity to work, but her mother-in-law was never satisfied, being a difficult woman to please in general. For a young girl without parents who longed for love and affection, her mother-in-law's attitude was painful for Sharada. More so, as Amritlal never took his wife's side against his mother. Amritlal's serious temperament scared Sharada, and, given the age difference, she could hardly communicate with him. Therefore, she always felt distant from him.

Educated in politics and history and a voracious reader, Amritlal was a scholarly person with an incredible

knowledge of Sanskrit and palmistry. Although he wanted to be a journalist, he, instead, went to Indonesia to learn about sugar technology. Upon his return, he became the chief chemist at a sugar factory. Although he earned a handsome salary, he was not happy as his temperament just did not suit the factory environment. He repeatedly changed jobs. He would often resign suddenly, without having thought through the financial consequences of his actions, forcing Sharada to live with her in-laws until Amritlal could find another job. Jobs, however, were not easy to come by. In the meantime, their savings would be consumed. Amritlal changed jobs so often that his actions proved to be economically ruinous for the family. Many times, Sharada had to stay with her mother-in-law in Valsad, where she was not welcome, for months on end. Even as she worked tirelessly doing household chores, her work was never

appreciated. Her self-respect was hurt when neighbours would mutter taunting remarks about her repeated returns to Valsad. For Sharada the experience was painful, and it was not the kind of life she wanted. To make matters worse, Amritlal never talked about the issue, and his silence bothered her. Amritlal himself was very frustrated and did not know what to do.

Sharada was always short of money, which made life very difficult as she had to raise two school-age children. She was 34 years old and my brother and I were nine and thirteen years old, respectively, when she made the decision to become economically independent. The question was, however, how could she attempt this when she did not have more than a rudimentary education? Also, she was in a peculiar situation, as she had married into one of the most well known families in the community and, that, too, to a highly-educated husband. Would it be proper for her to work outside of the home? It was the most agonising and tormenting period of her life. Her dream of giving the best education to her children was crumbling right in front of her eyes and, along with it, their future. Deciding that she would have to take charge of her own destiny, she resolved that she would never depend on anybody but herself, for no condition was more despicable than dependence.

We were in Vadodara visiting my maternal uncle and his family when, hearing of my mother's plight and her desire to be independent, my aunt brought up the topic of a one-year Montessori teacher's training course for which reading and writing in Gujarati were the only required skills. Mother had those skills, and she was sharp and intelligent. A self-taught person, she loved children. She joined the course, completed it with flying

colours. She topped the class. That was the beginning of a new life for her.

With that qualification in hand, my mother decided to settle in Vadodara. She told father about her plans to start a nursery school in Vadodara and to concentrate on the children's education. My father was very upset, and her mother-in-law was shocked. "Rao Saheb's daughter-in-law will run a nursery school to earn money? That would bring shame to the family," she said to mother. My mother, however, had made up her mind.

Soon, she rented a small apartment with two rooms and a



**Kumudini in younger days.**

kitchen, and we moved in. To save money on rent, she decided to start a nursery school in the very apartment in which we lived. The nursery school opened without fanfare, but, within the very first week she had enrolled twenty children. The word spread, and, in a year's time, the school was on a firm footing. That was the turning point in mother's life. Thereafter, she never looked back.

The thrill of economic independence gave her tremendous confidence. With her radiant personality, she endeared herself to people in the neighbourhood. When I recall those days, I remember how impressive she looked while talking to parents. Running the school gave

her an opportunity to discover herself, to realise her potential. Although the school did not bring loads of money, it was enough, and our life was comfortable as father sent us money whenever he could. Mother used her money-managing skills, her organising abilities and competence to run both the school and our home. Whenever father came home, he would be impressed with the way mother conducted the school and the house.

Mother worked tirelessly all those years trying to save money in whichever way possible. Since the house doubled as the school, she not only had to finish all of the household chores before the school opened for the day, but she also had to tend to my brother and me when we fell ill. It was an extremely tough life, but she was always upbeat and optimistic. I do not ever remember her complaining or grumbling about problems. "Talk of solutions and not problems," she constantly reminded us.

Her children were her driving force. Having never experienced a mother's love, my mother became an extremely protective and anxious mother whose only mission in life was to provide the best education for her two children, and she pursued this goal with single-minded devotion and zeal. She pushed us to excel in our studies and encouraged us to participate in extracurricular activities. She always urged us to persist when we faltered, saying, "Education and economic independence are the two most important factors in life for a woman."

I broke my mother's heart when I left medical college after one year. It simply did not interest me. Mother was very keen to see her daughter become a medical doctor. So, when I almost refused to go to Delhi even after being selected for a Ph. D. programme in Delhi's prestigious

agriculture research institute she scolded me, “For me, your M.Sc. is not enough. Go and get your Ph.D.” She almost ordered me to go to Delhi. Today, I am grateful to her for her tough stand.

Mother had always nurtured the dream of having a place she could call her own. Timely help came from our neighbours, who urged us to buy a plot next to theirs in a new residential complex in Vadodara. Mother immediately agreed, filling out the necessary documents and paying the initial instalment. She did not even consult father. She and my brother oversaw the entire construction; a beautiful home awaited my father when he came back on his break.

My brother completed his engineering degree and was keen to continue studies in the U.S. With a lot of trepidation, he mentioned it to my parents. Father said he had very little savings, but mother surprised us when she took out all of her hard-earned savings. When even that was not enough, without a second thought, she sold off all of the silver items which she had painstakingly collected over the years and asked my brother to proceed to the U.S. for his studies.

After the completion of his studies in USA, my brother started working, and soon after that, he urged mother to close down the school. When she refused because she wanted her economic independence to remain intact, he reminded her of the promise that he had made to her, when she had given away all her savings. He told her, “it is time for me to take care of my parents.” Finally, after fifteen years of hard work, mother very reluctantly closed down her school.

When I look back, I often wonder how difficult it must have been for

my fiercely independent mother to spend those early years in fear, obedience, and submission!

Some time later, my brother got married and settled down in Chicago and I moved to New York with my husband. My parents moved to their new house. It was time to relax and enjoy ourselves. During that time, a very interesting incident happened when mother battled against the municipal corporation single-handedly to stop an obstructive construction next to their house. It was her fearlessness, grit and determination that left everybody in awe.

Father, although away quite often, played his role in his own way,



**Tending her own garden.**

but it was our mother who moulded us, counselled us, guided us and made us what we are today. Nine years ago, my father passed away when my mother was 75 years old. Refusing to follow archaic customs, she continued to wear a *bindi* despite living in a conservative, middle-class colony. Today, at the age of 84, she lives alone. As always, she manages everything by herself, whether there is a problem with the water pump, water faucet, or light bulb. Her house is simple, meticulously organised, and tastefully done, reflecting her flair for beauty and art. She excelled in everything she did, whether it was knitting, sewing, embroidery, or

drawing *rangoli*. Her wonderful collection of over two hundred popular Gujarati songs, *bhajans* and *garbas*, written in 1937 in her exquisite handwriting, is a reference book for me today!

At home, her typical day starts at 6 AM. As gardening is one of her passions, she spends two hours every morning tending to her own delightful garden, which is a visual treat for every visitor. Then it is time for her to do the daily crossword puzzle and go through the newspaper. Since she became economically independent, she has been following market trends and successfully investing money in the stock market. When my father passed away, she asked my husband, an extremely business-savvy executive in a Wall Street investment house, to look into her portfolio for suggestions. He was stunned when he saw her meticulously planned, safety-oriented, and diversified investment portfolio! “I never thought a woman who had so little education could be so good at money management at the ripe old age of 75!”, he remarked. Mother’s evenings are spent visiting friends and neighbours, young and old, chatting, laughing and joking, listening to their problems, and helping them find direction and purpose in life. Her zest for life and her priceless sense of humour keep her happy and in good health. Today, her greatest satisfaction and pride lie in her three grandchildren, who are doing well in their respective fields.

It was a very special day for the family when five years back, recognising her remarkable courage and spirit, the Desai Community of Vadodara felicitated my mother by honouring her with the “Woman of Substance” Award. □