

“... I must have been about five years old at that time. I was awakened by the mixture of wordless sounds and expressions of pain by one, and angry words by the other. I saw through my sleep-laden eyes that my father was hitting my mother with a cord of the mosquito net while also lashing out at her verbally. Mother was weeping. I could never find out what caused this incident. Father was like Durvasa temperamentally ; mother was tender and tolerant. I do not know why, but even today, 43 years after the incident, I have an impression that underlying that late night conflict was some problem related to sex.”

—**Bhagwatikumar Sharma (novelist, editor of a daily)**

“My father did not have a son before I was born so I was raised with much affection and indulgence. The entire household was under grandfather’s reign so my mother could hold me or spend time with me only when time was granted to her by grandfather...I used to spend most of the day with him, even slept on his bed...perhaps this will not sound good but I too shared with grandfather a certain dislike for my mother and sister:

—**Narottam Palan (critic, historian)**

“...And yet, Indubhai was always very dear to Ba (mother). She was openly partial to him. Elder brother (Indubhai) would waste money, loaf around, drink liquor and bring the family into disrepute. At times, he would scream and shout loud enough to wake the whole neighbourhood and would raise his hand against her, demanding money...forgiving all his faults and misdeeds, Ba continued to love him, not only love him but be unjust to the rest of us...”

—**Ajit Sheth (composer, producer of cultural programmes)**

“...In my adolescence and early youth, I felt that Ma’s lifestyle was indicative of backwardness...when I saw some jeans clad girl speaking flippantly and fast in fluent English in my college, I used to curse my inferior culture and native

Remembering Mother

Gujarati women in the early twentieth century, seen through their children’s eyes

by **Sonal Shukla**

heritage.— my mother’s culture—no end. But today, in order to recollect my identity through that same mother’s words, her songs, her anecdotes, her phrases and language, her humour and jokes, I am writing Dalit poetry.”

—**Nirav Patel (poet, activist)**

These statements are made by some of the prominent persons in Gujarati literature and culture. They are extracts from longer pieces written by these and others in *Matru Vandana*, a two part collection of reminiscences in Gujarati, edited by Deepak Mehta in homage to his own mother.

I had to overcome some mental reservations before deciding to read *Matru Vandana*. The title somehow suggested to me the usual exercise of famous people glorifying their mothers, especially a mother’s sacrifices for the sake of her son. This book turns out to be quite different.

It is an attempt to reconstruct the mother rather than to eulogise her. As a result, it is one of the rare accounts that gives glimpses into the lives of ordinary women in Gujarat towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

Most of the 46 women whose life stories are featured in the collection are uppercaste Hindu women. A majority of them are Nagars and other Brahmins, Jains or Vaishnav Banias. There are five women among the writers and only two Muslims and two Dalits. The two articles by Dalit writers, Nirav Patel and Joseph Macwan, in *Matru Vandana* Part II, 1985, are perhaps the first ever inclusion of Dalit literature in any major anthology in the Gujarati language.

Yet, most of the women described in the collection are not really privileged women. In no way are they comparable to today’s upper caste and upper class urban women. Most of these women were born in the last century. With a few exceptions, their families were not rich and famous. Often, the mothers bore the burden of supporting their sons through college education. Often, they were heartbroken when the sons took to new ways that upset the traditional values of the family and caste, or joined the nationalist struggle and did not make money. Sometimes, the sons moved out because, they claimed, their wives and their mothers could not get along with each other, but probably also because the mother did not fit into



Ninu Mazumdar's mother, Rasagna, as a bride. She died, aged 24, of TB

their new scheme of things. It is not difficult to understand the conflicts felt by these men and to empathise with them. Besides, it seems unfair to be judgmental about people who volunteer to share their private lives.

Novelist and popular columnist Chandrakant Bakshi says that his mother was often selfish ; he himself was too rebellious and they did not speak to each other for months. He says this with the confidence of a loving and well loved son and goes on to reminisce about his mother affectionately and indulgently. Darshak, a writer and Gandhian thinker known for his work in education and rural reconstruction, says that while his poverty stricken mother had to support his widowed sisters and

their children, he could help out only marginally: "That was the time when I realised that public life and community work are a bed of nails." His mother did not let him feel that he was letting her down. "Bhai is serving the nation", she would say. "Would we ever be able to do that ? We should not cause him distress." When she breathed her last, he was attending a public meeting with Jayprakash Narayan. By the time he reached, she had already been taken to the crematorium. Darshak says : "I kept on chanting *Kshamaswa Kshamaswa !* (Oh ! Supreme Being, forgive me, forgive me)"

Yashwant Shukla, a well known writer and educationist and a former president

of Gujarati Sahitya Parishad, says he and his young widowed mother supported each other in the crisis after his father's death. The mother would get lentils and foodgrains for cleaning on piece wages and earn four annas a day. The children would help out with that as well as with daily chores like fetching water. Shukla, since he was a Brahman boy, could get *dakshina* (alms due to a Brahman) especially as he had learned the rites and rituals. When he was about 12, a match factory was opened in his village. Matchboxes were to be made from materials and ingredients given by the owner. One of the ingredients was glue made from flour. The whole clan including the mother was very upset. It was *uchchihtha*, cooked foodgrains, but Brahmans are forbidden to touch or use food cooked by non Brahmans. Shukla was firm and the mother adjusted to the new product. She then had to face another shock because Shukla gave up the traditional Brahman's way of earning *dakshina* since he felt it was a form of begging, But the worst shock was when he received a scholarship to live in Ahmedabad and to complete his school and college education. Even admitting him originally in an English medium school rather than a vernacular school complemented by a Brahman's *pathshala* type of education had been possible only after a family conflict. The mother could not bear the thought of having to survive economically and emotionally without her son. Shukla had to secretly escape to Ahmedabad. His mother cut off all relations with him. It was only after he fell severely ill that she came to visit him and finally reconciled to his decision.

Life stories of mothers as presented by sons in this anthology reveal certain unrecorded or forgotten facts about the traditional lifestyle of people of Gujarat, women's day to day life and how the process of modernisation affected it. Nagars who consider themselves superior Brahmans were the only Hindu community where women were usually educated as a tradition. Like Parsis, they also went in for an English education earlier than did others

At least eight of the women described in the books are Nagars. Ajit Sheth, for instance, is full of affection and pride when he describes his mother in the earlier and happier phase as a beautiful and cultured woman who initiated him into the Jove of literature.

Another modernising influence was the nationalist movement— Calcutta based writer Shivkumar Joshi recalls how his mother led others in processions and sang nationalist songs. Some mothers joined or became supporters of the freedom struggle because their sons were involved. Not one of the women was a college graduate and only one was a matriculate. Many, including some Brahman women, were illiterate or semiliterate.

Their early life in villages is described by Umashankar Joshi, the Gyanpeeth award winning poet, who describes a day in the life of his mother: “She ground flour, cooked, fed all of us, performed all the tasks needed to maintain domestic animals, performed various agricultural operations in the field, collected and carried fodder. At the end of the winter she would go to the hills and collect bundles of fuel. Throughout the year she would make social calls, entertain guests. She had no assistance. The cruellest thing was that we would all bathe at home but water for the bath had to be fetched from the well by Ba. Our house was at a height in the valley. I cannot forget the sight of my mother slowly climbing up, carrying a pot of water on her head.”

Narottam Palan mentions how, when he was a child, if a woman did not get natural milk easily, she would breastfeed him because he was born on a full moon day. The belief was that if a woman breastfed a child born on that day, her flow would come naturally and well. And these women had a natural right to use a full moon day born child in this manner. Palan remembers having to struggle against it and run away after sucking perfunctorily as a small child. Chandrakant Seth was breastfed by many women in the neighbourhood because his own mother was struck by paralysis after childbirth.

Many other women in the family or neighbourhood acted as nonbiological mothers. A Lilibai here and a Menabai there were village matrons who supported children against the wrath of their own parents. In one case, it was the mother’s elder sister, a child widow. In Christian Dalit writer Joseph Macwan’s case, this role was played by a poor cobbler woman called Ladu. She alone, with her warmth and understanding helped Macwan survive a horrible childhood, and she met a horrible death, that is possible only in the case of a rural Dalit woman.



**Rasagna when she was expecting son
Ninu**

Macwan’s own mother, a TB patient, died of grief (he terms it an *ichhamrityu* or willed death) when she got to know of her husband’s liaison with another woman. Her mother-in-law warned her son (Macwan’s father) that she would die if he married the other woman. In fact, she died the day he set out to bring home that woman as his wife. Ladu, who nurtured the motherless child Joseph, died of shock when her beautiful and vivacious young daughter was raped by upper castes men and had to be married off to an old widower.

Another remarkable phenomenon is that of women building deep emotional ties with relatives other than their immediate

family. Palan’s having been closer to his grandfather than to his own mother is a not very uncommon instance of joint family life. More remarkable is the way some of the women related to some of the members of their husbands’ families. Sopan writes about his mother’s extreme attachment to her husband’s younger brother who was very handsome and bright. He says the brother-in-law was more dear to his mother than even her own children. She fainted when she heard about this brother-in-law’s death and herself died five days, later. On the other hand, editor Deepak Mehta and his brother Prakash Mehta talk in detail about how their own mother could survive, especially after her widowhood, because of her husband’s nephew’s deep commitment to her. They called this elder cousin Bhai. Deepak goes to the extent of saying that he had two mothers—one his natural mother and the other was Bhai. Prakash Mehta says: “The affectionate relationship between ‘Ma’ and ‘Bhai’ was so deep and specific that it can-not be described in words”, and adds that considering their lifelong togetherness it was not surprising that Bhai passed away the twelfth day after the death of their mother (see page 18).

Another characteristic is that either the mother died young or she was widowed young. Hardly half a dozen women in these accounts had a long married life. This was because of the customary taboo against widow remarriage in these communities. Time and again, a writer tells you that his mother was his father’s second wife because male widowers did remarry. They married very young girls since women were married off early in those days. It was natural that these women survived their husbands and lived a miserable life as widows. Or else they died in childbirth or of tuberculosis.

Women writers are in a different class. They belong to more advanced families, a factor which gave them a headstart so that they could make it, up to a point, despite being women. Three of the five women

contributors, social worker Pushpaben Mehta, short story writer Minal Dixit, and popular novelist Varsha Adulja, belong to the Nagar Brahman community and the other two are mother and daughter. Of the five of them it appears only Labhuben's mother had originally led a very traditional rustic life in her earlier phase. Being a famous nationalist's wife, she also had to keep open house and provide hospitality to freedom fighters, and a variety of others. Of the five women, Labhuben alone feels a distance from her mother's way of life. Others seem to have a closer relationship and sometimes an easier identification and sense of continuity with their mothers. Women's accounts seem brief and detached compared to those of the male writers who tend to feel guilt and remorse and sadness when writing about their mothers. One reason for this may be that men are expected to make it in the world and set things right for the women in their families. When they cannot do so or when the mothers are too old to enjoy the benefits of the sons' material success, they feel sad. Also, unlike their sisters they are expected to continue living with their parents after their own marriages. So the clash of values between generations or individuals is more likely to take place in mother and son relationships. As mentioned earlier, the women writers come from families whose breakaway points from rural and traditional set ups took place relatively earlier. Their mothers had already been exposed to modernising influences. That lessens the distance between two generations, Minal Dixit is in her mid-fifties and has never married. She lives with her mother who handles all bank accounts and investments. She says this is appreciated by outsiders but sometimes resented by men in the family. Varsha Adulja's mother used to write skits and plays for children in the neighbourhood. Today, she lives alone in Rajkot, Saurashtra, and has a rich social life of her own. She is very religious and organises trips and pilgrimages for women who have less confidence than her-self.

In contrast, men indulgently describe their mothers as quaint remnants of a feudal society, from which the sons are



Rukshmaniben, mother of Labhuben Mehta, grandmother of Varsha Das (Jatin Das' exwife), and wife of Amrutlal Sheth, founder of national-list journalism in Gujarati.

cut off, but for which they also crave. Only Rasik Mehta, Ninu Mazumdar, Hasit Buch and a few others happen to have mothers who were well read, well informed and had a say in decision making in domestic matters. These writers are conscious that this is an unusual state of affairs for women in the second and third decades of this century. Mazumdar's memory of his mother is that of a playmate. She was young and had this third child while still

in her teens. Her first two children had died soon after birth and she herself died of tuberculosis while still in her twenties. But her natal and matrimonial families had already entered the phase where home and children were considered a woman's sphere and the husband had a somewhat chivalrous attitude to his beautiful and accomplished wife. These mothers are a rarity in that period and often these male writers are affectionately proud of them because they have had this exceptional heritage. A more common feature, though, is most writers' amazement that their mothers can think and deduce, count and remember and generally manage their life with dignity. They naively seem to think that these abilities can only be developed with a formal education. Only short story writer Gulabdas Broker says that as a child he always used to accompany his widowed mother everywhere and was greatly fascinated by her conversations and: chats with her friends. He says that right from that time he has always been certain that to be illiterate is not necessarily to be ignorant.

No matter whose account you are reading, you cannot ignore the images of your own mother that continue slipping between the lines and staring you in the face. It makes you desire to do something about the unfinished business of your own childhood.

(Quotes translated from Gujarati by Sonal Shukla)