

ZENANA SHOW 1

INTERVIEWS OF WOMEN SPECTATORS



ANISA, NEELU, FARIDA. BETWEEN 45 AND 60 YEARS OF AGE. HOME MAKERS. KHOJA SUNNI MUSLIMS, KUTCHI, MIDDLE-LEVEL TRADERS' COMMUNITY. HAVE LIVED IN THE NULL BAZAAR AREA ALL THEIR LIVES. PRIMARY LANGUAGES: BAMBAYI HINDI AND KUTCHI. CURRENT RESIDENCE: BHIMRI BUILDING, NULL BAZAAR.

FARIDA Say it was Eid and we wanted to screen a film in the building courtyard. A reel would cost some thousand rupees to rent. So the children would calculate the cost and collect small donations from everyone to hire the reel. Then, when the film was being projected, everyone would just sit in the portion of the corridor outside their rooms, get their chairs out or place some mats there, and watch the film ...

ANISA They sometimes even sat at their doorways and the *purdah* [curtain or large screen used for open-air film shows] would be visible. You see the courtyard there ... the screen would be put up there, large and visible from all floors of the building.

You know those projectors used to screen films, big ones with film rolled around ... my father-in-law was in that business. Earlier, during Ganapati and other festivals, a lot of films used to be shown in the localities. Sometimes, when we rented out the projector to someone they would give us their reel after their screening was over ...

so that way too, we got to see a lot of films. And all the films would have four to five reels, so when others finished watching the first reel they would pass it on to us and by the time we finished with that, the second one would come ... the kids here would run across to get the reels from the other party. The other buildings didn't have this privilege, only we did. But they would screen films on the streets for Ganapati and ...

FARIDA ... and for Eid too. They would make enclosures with cloth on the street and people had to buy a ticket for one or two rupees to go in and watch the film. This was when I was little. Sometimes they never even screened the whole film, maybe just about half an hour of a movie, even ten minutes. But we used to enjoy even that.

ANISA Ever since these VCR cassettes all those screenings have stopped, haven't they? But when the VCR system first came we all went a bit crazy. We used to hire four cassettes at a time for 100 rupees and we had to return them in the morning – so we would sit up all night and see all the films! That kind of fun is not there anymore. Now, even if we try hard to gather a crowd to show a film nobody comes. Earlier, when all this was not there, we would run out to the street to watch even a little bit of a film.

NEELU Also, earlier there were so many nice small theatres all around; now, there are only these multiplexes and we can't afford to go to them too often. These days, when people like us are stuck at home, I am sure they must be remembering the old *purdah* system and how we were able to watch films on large screens ... just like that.

NALINI DIXIT. 83 YEARS OLD. HINDU MAHARASHTRIAN, SERVICE-BASED, MIDDLE-CLASS BRAHMAN FAMILY. GREW UP IN MIRAJ, KOLHAPUR AND PUNE, CAME TO BOMBAY AFTER MARRIAGE. HAS WORKED AS ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF IN THE SECRETARIAT. PRIMARY LANGUAGE: MARATHI. CURRENT RESIDENCE: SHIVAJI PARK, DADAR.

The first TV we bought was after Madhu completed her SSC [Secondary School Certificate, school-leaving examination]. We bought it on the 16th of May, I remember – it was our wedding anniversary. We were firmly against buying a TV till then. But we never went to the neighbours' to watch TV. Only when Indira Gandhi was defeated in the election after the Emergency, we went to Manda Aaji's to watch the election results. The Gujarati ladies used to go there to watch *Chhaya Geet* [a popular film

song-based television programme, first aired on the national radio channel Vividh Bharati, and then on the national television channel, Doordarshan, till 1982].

Our main entertainment used to be to go to Shivaji Park [the public ground in Dadar for political rallies, cricket matches, religious and cultural functions] to listen to public lectures. We've stopped going there now, though ... places like that have become too crowded. We've heard Vajpayee speaking there. It was a wonderful experience! I have also been to Indira Gandhi's rallies. The hordes of women who were brought to attend those rallies used to start fleeing as soon as she started talking – they used to create such a commotion! There used to be a whole lot of them, filling up the place. But I really loved listening to her 15th August speech. I didn't always agree with her, but I sure liked her speeches. Sonia doesn't have the same charisma, though she too is quite intelligent. But the person we really admired was Savarkar [a nationalist leader, an active member of the Hindu Maha Sabha and a close associate of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); he was arrested for the assassination of Gandhi but released later for lack of evidence]. We attended his lectures whenever we could. That was some experience ... the kind of ideas he used to put forward! I haven't heard anyone speak like that! We even heard Atre's lectures, many of them at Shivaji Park. I travelled from Girgaum – I was then living in a chawl with Akka – to Shivaji Park to listen to Nehru when he unfurled the flag of independent India for the first time, in 1947 ... or was it 1945? I was working in the Secretariat those days and I got a pass to attend the celebration. But it was so crowded that we couldn't enter.

We also watched a lot of plays, at Shivaji Mandir, Birla Kreeda Kendra ... The head clerk of our office once asked me to go to a film show – that's when I watched a movie at Opera House, and then another one at Roxy. I prefer watching Marathi movies ... at Plaza, Hindmata, Broadway. ... Recently I saw Natarang. And another one – Me Shivajiraje Bhosale Boltoy, I think – I saw with Leelatai. Also the one in Plaza about a joint family – I can't recollect the name. The movie was alright, but the sound was too loud. I've been to Plaza a couple of times. I think I saw that movie based on Phalke's life at Plaza – Harishchandrachi Factory [a Marathi bio-pic on Dadasaheb Phalke, made by Paresh Mokashi in 2009]. Yes, we went in a big group to watch a night show. Earlier we used to go to Kohinoor, but now it has been converted into a shopping centre, Nakshatra. It's all too big – picture, sound, everything ... my eyes and ears hurt.

SONAL SHUKLA. 68 YEARS OLD. HINDU GUJARATI. FEMINIST ACTIVIST, EDUCATIONIST, DIRECTOR OF VACHA – WOMEN'S LIBRARY AND CULTURAL CENTRE. HAS LIVED ALL HER LIFE IN BOMBAY. PRIMARY LANGUAGES: ENGLISH AND GUJARATI. CURRENT RESIDENCE: VILE PARLE WEST.

The earliest films I've seen in this city are in two areas. One was for the classy ones and you went to premiere shows like going on family outings – those were on Lamington Road. And the others were in tin-shed theatres. There was one in Vile Parle East. It was called Vyankatesh Talkies, then it became a fancy theatre called Shaan, and then it declined. The advertising for Vyankatesh ... a man used to come in a bullock-cart dressed in some fancy costume and he would announce, 'Vyankatesh Talkies Parla, first you come to our talkies then we will come to yours' – whatever that meant! And we would run after him. This was a standard way to advertise; there were very few posters, maybe at the railway station or some place like that.

Tin-shed cinemas – 5 annas [old currency denomination; 16 annas made 1 rupee] for front row benches without backs; 10.5 annas, middle seats; and 1 rupee 5 annas, seats with back rests. The films we were allowed to see were the ones my father chose, which were boring, or the ones we saw with our maid, which were religious. The films we were not allowed to see but always wanted to see were the ones our neighbour went to. She had connections and she used to get tickets for all the spicy films.

Then the Liberty Theatre opened. For the first time a Hindi film was released in an air-conditioned theatre which, we heard, had push-back seats. My parents went with my sister all the way to the Town area to see the film. Liberty Theatre itself was such an important place and much talked about – plus that film had Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar and Nargis, and Lata Mangeshkar's first hit song. I wanted so much to see that film ... till this day I haven't seen it ... I haven't seen *Andaz!* In those days, no one ever saw a film a second time. It was considered too much of an indulgence. Going to see a film meant travelling. I remember, when we went to Lamington Road it was in a horse-cart. I even remember the driver; he had a long Turkish cap. And when you went out to eat, it was mostly to those Parsi restaurants – so you had pudding or something. Of course when you went to religious films locally you would get just peanuts. The only thing I remember of *Anmol Ghadi*, for instance, is the salted pistachios and chocolate ice cream. Pakistan had not been partitioned in those days, so pistachio was common and in the good theatres you would get packets of pistachio. The fancy theatres we went to generally had men sitting in the front seats, and families in the middle and back seats.

Pila House, the Falkland Road theatres – they appear terrible now, but they used to be fancy earlier. Their upkeep was good ... Super, Alfred, all those. I saw *Bhuvan Shome* there. The *patrani machhi* [fish wrapped in green leaves and baked, a Parsi delicacy] there was to die for. The first juice place one saw was on Lamington Road. Because of Naaz Cinema, Krishna Theatre, Imperial, in place of Apsara there was something else ... you used to get lovely food there. Wafers – you know this actor Boman Irani, he used to have a wafer shop there. There was also this restaurant called Merwan, it is half its size now, but Daisy Irani and Honey Irani are daughters of the owner. So everything was related to each other. You also had lots of Gujarati type or Muslim or North Indian restaurants. Those dishes have disappeared now from everybody's menu. Those days when you went out to eat, unless you went to very westernized hotels like Gordo, Green's next to Taj, you always ate Parsi food. And where you have Udipi restaurants now, they had little Marathi restaurants – Tambe, Karve. So when you went to Lamington Road you got very good food. There used to be those *attarwalas* too; people would buy *attar* and apply it behind their ears. And shoes ... you went to Lamington Road to either watch a film or to buy shoes.

Oh, the foyers – have you seen the foyer of Metro Cinema? It was so huge and lovely and such plush seats! New Empire, which is a relatively newer theatre, even had a governess to look after your children. Nursing mothers or mothers with crying babies could be there and they could listen to the dialogues even if they couldn't watch the film – the ladies' bathrooms had these facilities where you could keep the child and catch up with the movie while the child was being pacified. Excelsior Theatre, next to it you used to get scotch broth soup – till very recently. I saw *La Dolce Vita* there. Next to it was a restaurant with a full Parsi-westernised menu. Lovely soups, lovely meat. Liberty Cinema had Liberty Restaurant in its basement. If you went to New Empire

Cinema there were so many places in VT where you could eat out and talk about the film. Then Ambar, Oscar, Minor, on S.V. Road at Andheri. Minor had boring films, like Basu Chatterjee ... not that his films were boring ... but that kind. Oscar had a very good restaurant and we would often have dinner there. Sterling had Caravan, which was a Taj restaurant. Those theatres always had spaces like that where you could go to see films with friends, sit and have coffee later and discuss the film.

PERVIN DORDIA. 50 YEARS OLD. PARSI HOUSEWIFE. LIVED NEAR FALKLAND ROAD BEFORE MARRIAGE, NOW LIVES IN A PARSI COLONY IN ANDHERI EAST. PRIMARY LANGUAGES: ENGLISH AND PARSI-GUJARATI.

I grew up at the corner of Faras Road, in Nav Jeevan Society. Many of us who were from middle-class, salaried Parsi families lived there and all the children would walk to school. Some of us studied in St. Mary's nearby, others in Sacred Heart's, some in St. Joseph's ... all at walking distance. And people keep saying Falkland Road, Falkland Road – but what's the big deal? I walked past that road every day on my way to school. In the mornings we would see 'those women' washing their clothes or cleaning their rooms, and when we were walking back from school or after we'd finished playing in the evenings, they would be hanging around all decked up in gaudy dresses, soliciting. But we didn't really think too much of it or discuss it with our families or even with each other; it was just something we routinely saw around us. I remember once, when I was a little older – maybe in the ninth or tenth standard, my brother and I decided to go see a movie. I walked down to Silver Talkies and was standing outside waiting for him when a half-drunk fellow boldly walked right up to me and pinched my chest. As you can see, I'm quite large and that chap apparently mistook me for one of the ladies of Falkland Road. I was aghast, I couldn't believe his guts! I created a bit of a commotion and by then my brother also came and we took him to the police station. But since he had made a genuine error in judgment, we let him go.

We saw movies every now and then in all those theatres in the area. We would go for a walk, then suddenly decide to watch a film and pop into a theatre. During Ganapati, Holi and other such occasions, people screened films on the road. The children, the bhaiyyas (people from up north), people from the mohallas [neighbourhood] nearby, 'those women' too – everyone used to gather there. But going out on the road to watch films, my father had strictly forbidden. Even if it was literally behind our house he would say, 'a no is a no ... go to bed.' Disappointed, I would lie wide awake in bed and comfort myself by listening to the film's dialogues through the night. But my father was always game to take us to Gujarati comedy plays. On our birthdays or Navroze, we would go to Tejpal or Sophia as a family, all dressed up, and laugh our hearts out. On the one hand we read Shakespeare in school, and then we watched these hilarious parodies full of sexual innuendos: Much Bhonu about Nothing, Rumi and Juliet ... and Moby Dikra, Mota Dil na Mota Bawa. In later years when I got married and moved to this Parsi colony here in Andheri (Salsette Colony) it felt like I didn't live in Bombay any more.

POCHUTAI. 55 YEARS OLD. MATANG CASTE. DOMESTIC WORKER. HAS LIVED ALL HER LIFE IN KUNCHIKARVE SLUM, KALINA, MUMBAI. PRIMARY LANGUAGE: MARATHI-HINDI. This is our village. I was born and brought up here. My father, mother, brother, the whole clan is here and nowhere else – in this Kalina. I went to school till the fourth

standard, after that I was married off. That's when I got to see pictures in the nearby theatres – Kalpana Talkies, Sheetal Talkies, Bharat Talkies ... I went to each and every one of them. It's just that I can't recall all the names now. I used to go out with friends, only girls, in a gang. We used to load brooms on our head and roam around the galis selling them. With the extra money we made we went to see pictures and munched on goodies before coming back home. The ticket in black cost four rupees ... if you bought it normally (off the counter) it was three rupees. Three rupees but not in our currency – have you ever seen those coins with holes in the middle, the English currency? One anna, two annas, five paise – that kind of money. I always had money in hand. I never went out with my husband. I used to manage everything, right from buying provisions for the house. He was a total vagabond.

Did you watch Marathi films?

We watch only Hindi ones. Amitabh Bachchan never acted in any Marathi picture. Marathi pictures like the Dada Kondke ones?

Oh yes, I've seen the Dada Kondke pictures... I've also seen Pinjra. I don't remember the hero's name. But who can remember all that? If you'd told me beforehand, I would have written it all down with the help of my son and read it out to you properly.

In earlier days those people possessed a TV box and they used to make us pay one rupee for our children to watch movies that came on TV or even Chhaya Geet. Then my son-in-law gifted me a TV, but it was washed away in the big flood [of 2005]. Everything was washed away – clothes, TV, utensils, everything. My sister too lost everything; there was enough water to drown a grown-up person. After that for two years I had no TV. Then I saved money bit by bit and brought home a new TV box. You know Kalpana Talkies? That too got flooded. They tore down some parts, did a few repairs, cleaned it here and there ... and then advertised it as a new theatre.

Now we have everything at home. We watch whatever comes on TV, eat our food and stay home. That's all we do. Those who are still working go to work, but there's nothing left for us to do. I sometimes meet someone from our old gang when I go to the latrine and we just ask each other about our health – what else is there to chat about... I am married, I have children, and my children too are married. Now nobody lets me go out of the house. Once in a way, when a wedding or some such mela happens, we dance ... I love to imitate Salman Khan. Would you like to see my Salman act?

In earlier days, when somebody died in the neighbourhood the whole gang used to go to the funeral ... and I would imitate the women crying. We used to argue and swear at each other a lot. Even now whenever we meet, we fool around: how awfully this person dresses, what a squint that woman has, things like that. If my son finds out he drags me back home. He tells me not to be angry with him, but what should I do – tell me! I just go upstairs, lie down and relax under the fan. I don't have any complaints though. When I'm not feeling well my son takes me to the doctor. He has even forbidden me from chewing tobacco. So I keep hiding my tobacco ... like this (takes out a pouch hidden under her blouse). He was sleeping, so I managed to sneak it out.

You've had such fun roaming around with friends. Does your daughter-in-law go out too?

No, no! That's not allowed in our community. What I used to do, she shouldn't do. You can go out as husband and wife with the children. I myself will give them money for that. They do go out every Sunday, to the garden, to Juhu Beach. Not like us ... roaming around the street in a gang. That's not done!