

## Narjis Khatoon: A Spirited Woman in Purdah

Narjis Khatton lives in Millatnagar in the Lokhandwalla complex with her daughter, son-in-law and two granddaughters. A fair, unwrinkled complexion and a row of fine teeth belie her age: she is 88yearsold and has worked for nearly fifty years teaching girls sewing and embroidery!

Meeting Narjis Khatoon and learning about her life can be a life changing experience to all those women raised in Purdah .Born in 1926 in Shahgunj in UP, she came at the age of ten, with her parents, three brothers and sisters to live in a house close to the Zainabiya Imambara which earlier was known as Babbar Ali Imambara . Her father Nazeer Hassan Salamat Ali became the Peshemam in the Khoja Masjid in Palla Galli .He also taught Arabic, the Quran and Deeniyat at the Mulla Qadar Madrassa.

On arrival she was admitted in the Khara Talab Municipal School . Before this she had been thought to read Urdu and the Quran at home. After a year or so she was sent in a Burqa to the Imambara Municipal School where she studied till the fifth standard. In 1942 she was married to her father's cousin, Ali Anwar Jaffri nearly twelve years older to her, who had migrated from Azamgarh and who worked as a weaver of jacquard in a Mill near Saat Rasta. The same year she gave birth to a son who unfortunately did not survive.

After that for years she did not conceive and as time hung heavy on her hands, she decided to do a course in stitching and embroidery .In those days the Mahila Seva Mandal at Parel had a branch at Imambara for conducting a three year comprehensive course in stitching, sewing, embroidery, fabric painting, crochet, knitting etc. She undertook the course from 1947 -1950 at a cost of Rs Three only! And she excelled at it .She of course was not allowed to utilise her skills by taking up employment in any school. Both father and husband were against her working. The women in the family observed Purdah .But Mr Abu Mohommed Zaidi , the trustee of the Imambara Masjid thought that such talent should be utilised in teaching the girls from the community .He therefore opened a class and named it after Bibi Fatima(the Prophet's daughter ) and offered her a job at Rs 50 a month !

Narjis Khatoon's eyes sparkle when she talks about it ."I got a letter of appointment offering me the job and my pay was nearly the same what my husband earned: Rs 50.And that too for just three hours a day. "Since the class was in the precincts of the Masjid and it did not interfere with her Purdah, she was given permission to teach. The year was 1951. She would daily go to this class from Hyderi Manzil in Yakub Galli where they were staying. She loved the work .Her passion for teaching and her desire to build the skills of the girls made her class very popular and the girls took keen interest .Most of them went off to become accomplished seam mistresses and some also started their own business .Among the students, there were some dumb and deaf students too and Narjis felt particular pride in imparting them the skills.

She also feels happy that with the additional income for with it she was able to help their more needy relatives back home specially her sister's family who continue to feel grateful for the assistance...

In 1955, she was blessed with a girl child and three years later with another daughter .But this did not deter her from continuing her work. She was able to meet the demands of home and work and

was able to bring up the girls in the established traditions of her family and community .Both the girls studied at the Anjuman Islam Girls High school at Byculla which they attended in a burqua .While the girls were still studying, tragedy befell. In 1972 her husband passed away and she was left the sole bread earner .But undaunted she decided to educate her daughters and make them self reliant .Besides teaching in the class she took up tuitions in stitching and sewing , visiting the homes of the girls .She also undertook, tailoring orders .And all this she did while observing purdah .

Fortunately, her eldest daughter Sajeda married her sister's son Ghulam Abbas Zaidi . Though a post graduate Sajeda preferred staying at home. She has three children: two daughters and a son .All three are well settled and it is with them that Narjis now resides .Her son-in-law is retired as principal of Rizvi College. The younger one Saleha after completing her post graduation became a lecturer in Yusuf Ismail College and married Ghulam Abbas Rizvi who retired as circulation manager of Asian Age. They have two sons, one of them is an engineer and the younger one is at Film Institute in Pune.

Narjis is very happy that her daughters and grandchildren are doing well in life .She does not work now : she had to discontinue teaching in 1992 when it became difficult to commute from Bandra to Mohammed Ali Road .A new teacher was appointed but she could not bring the same pride and dedication to her work . Narjis says despondently "The class has now closed down: it now remains in my memory and the gratitude of my students. And it was because of it that I was able to get my daughter's settled."

When I ask her what does she look forward to as she still enjoys good health and has a zest for life – she is going for outings , seeing movies, meeting family and attending functions- her reply surprises me :

"Now I want to meet my Maker." she says .The calmness in her tone and the brightness in her eyes are indicative of a fulfilled life . "Perhaps you are eager to join your husband."

She smiles."He was a good husband .There was a great bonding between us and we were very interdependent on each other because for a long time we had no children .We spent considerable time in each other's company .We saw movies together .It was a good life .He was a very good looking man too. So I have a lot to thank the Almighty."

Yes .I suppose she did .But she had also striven for creating this little haven for herself .She had not given up on life after his death .She was a courageous woman , a woman who could be a role model to many women who have to bring up their children without male support .