

Fatima Ansari- Chalking out Her Path.

I was keen to meet Fatima Ansari , a women in her eighties who lives by herself in the Umerkhadi area of Mohommed Ali Road and who had been the first woman in her family to complete her post graduation nearly sixty years ago! So ,I took an appointment and went to meet her in her in her flat in Victoria Building.

Fatima Ansari is slim with dark bright eyes and a dignified expression .Her world now is encompassed in a one room flat which functions as drawing -cum -bedroom -cum - kitchen in the Victoria Building which is next to Hanfi Guest House and the Jewish prayer hall. But unlike the other tenants of the building, she has a separate toilet."My son had it built." Her son and his family are in Sweden .Their photographs adorn the walls .

Fatima who retired as Vice principal of Anjuman Islam High school, Belasis Road, has come a long way from the time she arrived as a four year old with her family to Kurla from a village called Mau Aima near Allahabad. Her grandfather had set up a general store in Kurla, selling a variety of products.They were quite well off but after his death they had some monetary problems with money lenders and lost all their property.

At this juncture her mother's uncle who resided with his family in Rawalpindi House in the Mohammed Ali Road area ,asked them to stay with his family .At that time her elder sister was about 12 and her younger brother about three .Soon her sister married her cousin Abdul Latif Ansari who was then 18 years old .Fatima's eyes brighten up when she mentions her cousin and brother- in- law .It seems he was very enlightened and progressive for his time and had strongly supported her aspirations in acquiring education .

Fatima was first admitted at the Imambada Municipal School and then went to Anjuman Islam at Belasis Road. She remembers being very good at dramatics but was forbidden by her grandmother from participating."If ever I see you on the stage, you will not be allowed to continue your education." She was warned. Her grandmother made it a point to attend the school functions to check whether her instructions were followed. When she completed her school education she moved on to college and took up Science at Yusuf Ismail College as she wanted to become a doctor. But her grandmother objected: she considered it a deterrent in her getting married. "Who will marry her if she becomes a doctor?" She therefore had to give up science ".In any case my health was also not good; I was anemic, She admits . She completed her Masters in history in 1953.

. I was curious to know how many Muslims girls were there in the college during her time."There were only seven, but there were only two of us from this area, me and one Ms Banglorewalla who also completed her Masters from Yusuf Ismail College.Ms

Banglorewalla was from the Memon community, she resided in the Masjid Bunder area and she did her post graduation in Persian.”

When I inquired about the reaction of her family when she completed her post graduation, she said that they were very proud but she gives full credit for her achievement to her bother -in -law who also ensured that she was not made to wear the burqa .He felt it was not good for her health .It was quite revolutionary in those times for women in her family to go out without it and she felt grateful for having this freedom to do so mainly due to her brother- in-law’s support.

“He was also proactive in politics He was with the Congress and used to participate in the Prabhat Pheris.” Her grandfather’s family had been pro -Congress since 1885. Talking about the political activities in the area, she said that the erstwhile Dongri jail which is located at a short distance away and now functions as a remand home for juvenile delinquents , had some important visitors since Bal Gangadhar Tilak had once been incarcerated there. Among noted visitors to the area she remembers Nehru, Krishna Hutheesingh, and Pandit Sunderlal - Gandhi’s secretary. She still remembers the speech given by Pandit Sunderlal in flawless Urdu – where he high and lighted Hindu- Muslim unity. .

But what impacted her most during her childhood was the personality and work done by the freedom fighter and social activist, Kulsum Sayani .Kulsum Sayani organised the yearly Muharram Ishtema (gathering) in the large compound behind the Khoja Graveyard which was attended by well known personalities like Sarojini Naidu. .Kulsum Sayani also went around the Mohammed Ali Road area with her group , going from door to door, persuading women to learn and organized literacy classes for them .As a result of her efforts, many women were able to read the Urdu newspapers .She laments that at present we do not find such dedicated women in the Muslim Community.

After completing her Masters in History she had joined as a teacher in Anjuman Islam and after just 12 years she became a supervisor and worked as a supervisor for 18 years, after which she became the Vice Principal. She had loved her work and the teachers there were really dedicated .She remembered that even the non Muslim teachers there appreciated Urdu and there were three of them who had studied Urdu : Miss Samson who taught English, Mrs. Parulkar , the Mathematics teacher and the Parslady i Ms. Bharucha.

However due to her ill health, Fatima decided to take retirement two years earlier than the date of superannuation .The Anjuman Board members –like Zarina Currimbhoy and Kamila Tyabji tried hard to persuade her to continue but she was determined to resign and did.

“Do you not feel that having had the opportunity of acquiring such high qualifications, you should do something for the women of the community?” I asked

“Yes .I had wanted and had also tried .I had requested some of the retired teachers from the area to help start classes in the Madrassa during the day time (as the Madrassa functioned only in the morning and evening) for dropout children , to initiate them in various skill building courses and thereby divert them to constructive activities .Not only did I not get any response, on the contrary these people started avoiding me .Moreover the Umarkhadi area is a very backward, there is lot of poverty here . There are now less Muslims here – mostly lower-class Maharashtrians who work as domestic help .There are quite a few Christians and they have their own educational facilities” .”

I was curious to learn how she managed to stay alone in this predominantly low class backward locality . How was the situation during the riots of 1992 ?Was it different from the Partition days ? Things were different it seems during the Partition and in 1992.

“During the partition time, though there were disturbances, the women and children were never attacked. As against this ,in the 1992 riots, women were also targeted. My own room was looted -she lost gold and silver, and even cooking vessels. The Hanafi house opposite the building was burnt.. However Rawalpindi House was safe but not this area, so I and my family had moved to Airoli during that time. .”

Reminiscing about the partition days she remembered that her grandfather had saved many Hindus during the Partition riots. She remembers an instance when they protected one Hindu man by dressing him as a Muslim and in this way saved him. Out of gratitude the man presented her grandfather with a sack of rice – which he did not accept .He told the man that God had saved him and not they .

She sighed remembering the good old days...However despite the attacks, she still feels secure here and considers it her home. Her sister’s granddaughter sometimes comes to look after her.

When I inquired about her family ,I learnt another remarkable facet of her life .She had single handedly brought up her son who had been only 11months when her marriage broke up .It was a tough life and though financially she had enough , their life was restricted .Though she was a Vice Principal she continued to travel to school in the school bus as she had done when she was a student .As a single parent without social support she could not go for outings , cinema or other entertainment . But she was able to provide her son with a good education and get him married to a nice educated girl .He has done well in life .He is an executive in an advertising agency and has been living in Sweden since the last eight years or so.

“Do you not feel lonely? “I asked eying the photo-frames of her son and his family.

“No not really .I am blessed as I was educated and spend my time reading .My health though never really good is not bad . I do not suffer from any major illness .I am still physically active .My only regret is of not being able to do some welfare activity for the under privileged .But then ,It was not as if I had not tried .”

“It is unfortunate .But whatever you have achieved is remarkable: path breaking.” I assure her .

She smiles wryly at my praise as I get up to take her leave .