



A Conservative Rebel Memories of an Unusual Mother

○ Ira Pande

Shivani was the pseudonym of my mother, Gaura Pant, one of the most popular Hindi writers of her time. She was born on October 17, 1923, in Rajkot, Gujarat, where her father, was a guardian tutor at the Princes' College. The family later moved to Rampur and Orchha where her father held prominent positions in these princely states. However, Shivani was placed, along with her two older siblings, in the care of her grandfather, a renowned Sanskrit scholar and one of the founding members of the Banaras Hindu Vishwavidyalaya. Later, the three were sent to Shantiniketan and studied in Tagore's famous institute for almost a decade, until she graduated in 1943. Both her grandfather and Tagore were to have a lasting impact on Shivani's world-view and her literary style.

Although her first short story, written while she was still a student, was in Bengali, her fame rests on her large body of Hindi writings. This covers a wide range—short stories, novels, travelogues, newspaper articles and her memoirs. She took to writing seriously in the early fifties and by the late sixties, she had become one of the country's most eagerly read novelists. Magazines vied with each other to procure her serials as sales rose by several thousands each time a Shivani novel was serialized. She was awarded the Padma Sri in 1981 and was decorated with honorary doctorates by many universities. She wrote almost to the end of her life.

Shivani passed away in March 2003, just a few months short of her eightieth birthday.

We called her *Diddi*, elder sister, and that is perhaps why she was more a friend, a sibling to us, than a mother. Certainly, she was not the kind of mother that my friends had when we were small. I don't remember her packing my trunk before I went to the hostel, she never came to see us off and receive us when we came home. She just presumed that we were strong like her, and knew how to handle our own lives.

That she was also the most popular Hindi writer of her times was an aspect of *Diddi's* personality that we were both proud of and embarrassed by. She was too proud to mention how hurt she was by my casual acceptance of her literary reputation. It must have pained her

deeply that the very children who had once never tired of hearing her fascinating stories had now outgrown her kind of writing. Almost always her stories and novels had beautiful heroines who lived in Kumaon. Almora and Bengal were the two territories that *Diddi* wrote about constantly.

It took me years to realize why *Diddi* remained so attached to Almora and her childhood memories. When we were growing up, *Diddi's* mother, whom we called *Ama*, was to us a figure larger than life. Her house dominated every aspect of our childhood and each one of us twenty-odd grandchildren remember her as an intimidating, often despotic, matriarch who laid the law in the family home, Kasoon, and was both

feared and admired across the town. For a person who broke tradition and gave as good as she got to the snooty Kumaoni Brahmin community, *Ama* was also responsible for breeding in all those she brought up a respect for tradition and patriarchal laws. She was unashamedly partial to the boys of the family and gave them a latitude that her grand-daughters were never allowed. Laughing loudly, whistling and talking out of turn were some of the 'no-no's' for us girls. However, she was also proud of what her girls achieved and the first to write to us when any of us girls did well.

Ama always referred to husbands as '*malik*' (owner) for that is how she perceived the man-woman relationship in an ideal marriage. So she ordered the universe around her

in the image of a morality that she believed had stood the test of time. Any subversion of the traditional domestic hierarchy earned her severe displeasure. Thus, although she was inordinately proud of *Diddi*, she was equally afraid that her success as a writer would make her more important than her husband and that would never do. *Diddi*'s need for a strong male presence and a defined boundary within which to operate, I am reasonably sure, had their roots in the laws her mother had taught her to trust.

This curious dichotomy would create a life-long tussle in *Diddi*'s life as she struggled to reconcile her naturally liberal personality with the strict patriarchal morality of her mother's Brahmanical world. *Diddi* disapproved loudly of what she saw as threats to a 'moral' way of living—marriages outside the community, divorces, live-in relationships, back-chatting elders, questioning unfair traditions. Yet, paradoxically, she wrote novels and stories that had strong women characters who rebelled against all such values and social inequalities. This also accounted for her lifelong fascination with those who lived on the margins—mendicants, lunatics and lepers. Time and again, she returns in her short stories and novels to characters drawn from those to whom rigid social values cannot be applied.

The written word fascinated her—she read voraciously and in many languages, all the time. Every time she visited us, one of our most onerous duties was to supply her with a book a day. As long as she had a book in her hand, she was quiet. Her concentration on the book was so total that the house could burn down and she would not notice. *Diddi* could write, sing, cook, swear, say her prayers—all at



Diddi as a little girl

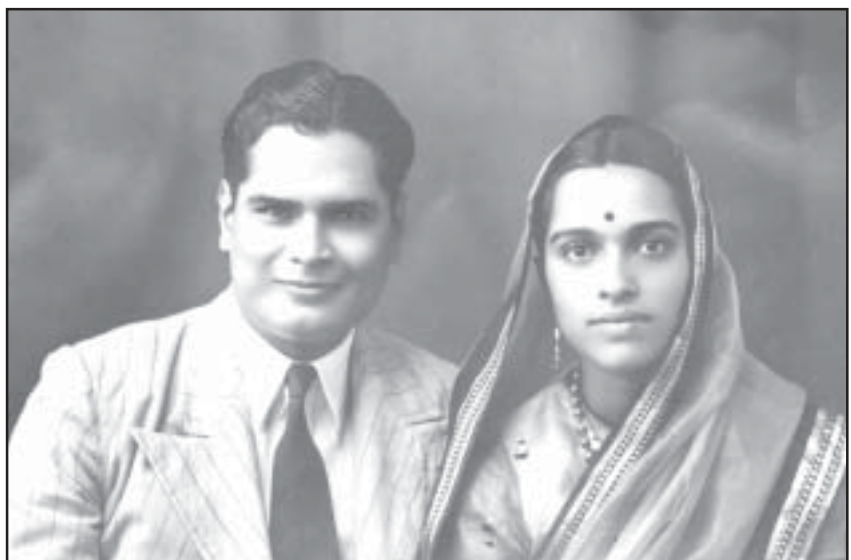
the same time. My earliest memories are of waking up to the sound of her loudly chanting in her *puja* room, breaking off to yell at the servants in the kitchen (or one of us) and going back to chanting again. Few know that she had a beautiful voice and that she gave up singing for the radio when she married because my grandfather disapproved of daughters-in-law who earned money by singing. So she used her perfect

ear to catch every nuance of the human voice, and used a pseudonym "Shivani" in case he objected to her earning by writing as well.

She could read and write Bengali, Gujarati, English and Hindi, of course, was her natural medium of expression. Sanskrit, learnt from her scholar-grandfather as a child, had sharpened her memory so that she could quote reams without pausing to look for references. Some years ago when asked by the AIR to deliver the National Talk, she had to be coaxed into writing down what she was going to say because the AIR wanted the script for their archives. She

was quite prepared to speak extempore for an hour, when well in her seventies.

I am often asked what it was like to grow up with a writer for a mother. Such people imagine that *Diddi* locked herself away in a room and wrote furiously all the time. The truth is that none of us ever saw her write – she made time for herself whenever she got the chance to. Bringing up a noisy family of four children and two



Diddi with her husband Sukhdeo Pant soon after her marriage

nephews on a small income was work enough. And yet, her most prolific period was the years when we all lived at home. To her writing was something she loved to do—she never cared whether she won plaudits from critics.

She was happy to scribble whenever a story came to her. Anything would do when the urge to write came to her—our old notebooks, *dhobi* diaries, whatever. She wrote in long hand and never kept any copies of manuscripts. And once she had told a story, she went on to write the next one. My sister Mrinal says that very often, she would sit and insert the punctuation marks in *Diddi's* hastily scribbled novels and that was her first lesson in editing.

In trying to unravel the enigma that *Diddi* was, I had to contend with the mystery of her pseudonym, Shivani. 'Shivani' at first seemed a mask that gave her an assurance because of its anonymity but it was much, much more. I realized that *Diddi* was actually two people, and she used the dual persona as identical twins do: to confuse and confound. Like them, she had mastered the art of switching from one to the other so seamlessly that even she did not know any more who she was. So the person she was, the person she wanted to be and the person that unknown to all of us, she really was, was someone called Gaura, *Diddi*, *Nani*, *Dadi*, *Bahuji*, and Shivani.

And yet, there was a core of *Diddi* that remained inviolate and secret all her life. She hid her fears and pain from everyone: even herself. Her writing was for her a way of recording people and events that she could not bear to speak about. *Diddi* was a master in the art of hiding her grief. Some of it she buried in her writing, the rest she buried inside her. Her writing was thus a huge ruse to keep her pain away from those whose



With her daughters – Mrinal, Veena and Ira

pity she did not want yet she left this pain for some of us to discover.

So if her story assembled here has any theme it is that of a born watcher. She did and said many things but her deepest instinct, her most trusted reflex, her favourite occupation was to watch other people's lives and take part in them. Other people's lives absorbed her totally because she was deeply—often morbidly—interested in the politics of human relationships. Once her reputation as a writer was established, she got letters from unknown readers who wanted her to write of their tragedy, their lives. For someone who had such a low threshold of attention for everyday news, she was stilled by the promise of a story and people often confided in her because when her interest was aroused, *Diddi* was a rapt listener. Some of these confidences were refracted into narratives for her short stories and novels, others became stories to regale us with. Sheetal's wife is cruel to her mother-in-law, Jhumman was drinking every day, and Mrs. Ahmad next-door suspected her husband had a mistress, or, Mrs. Sharma's son was spotted slyly

smoking pot behind their garage and his father beat him with his leather belt.

Diddi was bored with ordinary lives, ordinary concerns but her mind was instantly stimulated into activity when she heard of something extraordinary, never mind if it was a disaster. So every morning, after her walk, she sat with the newspapers and read out disaster news to the servants. A woman had given birth to a three-headed child, someone had risen from the dead, gory details of accidents—she loved to hear their responses to these. Her eye went unerringly to the odd feature, the false note, the glimmer that promised a tale. 'Look for a long time at what pleases you, and longer still at what pains you...' Colette once said to a young writer. She could have been talking to *Diddi*.

But like most of us, *Diddi* knew that sooner or later, we must lose the innocence we are born with, and that thereafter we can only glimpse it from afar, in children and in the world that is preserved in our memories. This is perhaps why she loved children and understood them in a way that was

envious. Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, she charmed them with her stories and eccentricities and had infinite patience when they pestered her for yet more stories. Somewhere she always retained the innocence of children: like them, she could not keep secrets. Like them, she could store truth until she could understand it one day. It is from her that I learnt to memorize details and remember the past by repeating stories and embroider them on each telling. She loved going to the past—her mind always preserved the child’s trick of sanitizing pain and so even as traumatic an event as a death, became a funny episode when she narrated it. Yet what seemed an embarrassing eccentricity in her when she was alive, appears something else to me now with the distance of words and memories.

I know of no other person who could laugh at herself (and others) with such openness and who had such a perfect crap detector. I like to think this is a gift that *Didi* passed on to all of us, even my children. My son tells me that he remembers her mean comments about people who were displayed on TV screens in the Lost Persons programme. Where most grandmothers would shed a tear for those poor lost persons, Nani would say “*Yeh to khoya hi acchha hai.*” (This one is better lost). She once commented after seeing a well-known minister on the screen that either his mother or father must have been a rabbit. Needless to say, she was hugely popular with the grandchildren and the servants. She swore freely and encouraged them to be bad. My niece, Radhika, once brought a form for eye donation and asked my mother to sign up. “Nonsense!” *Didi* replied. “If I die and go sightless to heaven, how on earth will I find your grandfather? Suppose I cosy up to the wrong *buddha!*”

The servants in her home were never taught to serve tea correctly but were encouraged to be sassy and exit with perfect lines from a room. Ramrati, my mother’s maid of many years, was celebrated with an article on her when she died and her daughter Kiran and her children were my mother’s constant companions for the last many years. They ate with her, slept in the other bedroom and called her *Didi* or *Nani*, just as we did. Fittingly, it was Kiran’s face that was displayed in all her last pictures because she sat cradling my mother’s head on her lap before they took her away. When a pesky photographer was contorting his body to get the most poignant picture of *Didi* at her funeral, Kiran told me, “When Amritlal Nagar died, I went with *Didi*. A photographer toppled off and almost fell on Nagarji’s body. *Didi* asked him loudly, “*Kyon bhai, Nagarji ke sath upar jaane ka irada hai?*” (Do you wish to go up there with Nagarji?). Then, trained perfectly by my mother, Kiran walked up to the photographer and said, “*Ab aap jaiyey.*” (Now leave).

If there was one grace that *Didi* lacked, it was accepting help from anyone – even her children. Any hint of pity, a note of compassion in someone’s voice made her curl up her lip and bare her fangs. This often pushed those whom she loved the most very far from her. Worse, in her last years, when she wanted someone to take her in, warts and all, she only succeeded in pushing them away. *Didi* had always been fiercely independent, so she chose to live alone rather than seek help or a shelter from those she could not live comfortably with.

Eventually, this independence developed into an almost destructive streak. Despite many pleas from all of us to wind up her Lucknow house and move in with one of us, *Didi* refused to budge from her crumbling



flat in Gulistan Colony. Life had taught her never to trust anyone but herself and her fragile sense of dignity was quick to take slight. She also knew that she could not inflict her laws on her children.

Didi lived alone in Lucknow, occasionally condescending to stay with one of us. Even when her doctors warned her she was very ill, she refused to move in with one of us. She could not, and would not, submit to a life-style that did not have her sanction. The word compromise had no place in her vocabulary—she lived on her terms and when she could not no longer do so, she preferred to die rather than become an appendage to someone else’s life. Asking for help, as I have said earlier, was the one grace that she lacked.

So when my sister Mrinal called her Queen Lear, she put her finger on the aura of an almost destructive independence that emanated from *Didi*.

Her life in Lucknow fulfilled *Didi* in a way that I can now understand for it gave her a strength she lost when she was in a boring, normal, domestic situation. Like a Samson shorn of his locks, *Didi* lost her energy when surrounded by placid people. Unfortunately for her, we were all married into normal households

where things ran smoothly and kitchens and store cupboards were neatly arranged. Ever since I can remember, *Diddi* generated noise and excitement wherever she was and in whatever she did. When she went into the kitchen, she had to have at least two people in attendance to fetch and run for her and she banged lids, cursed bottles that she could not open and yelled when she could not find a ladle or spoon or whatever. Mrinal used to say that if *Diddi* ever stubbed her toe, she slapped the first child she met. But at the end of this drama, she produced delicious, finger-licking food although the kitchen looked as if a tornado had swept through it. She always left the debris to be cleared by those who put store by neatness and orderliness: her job was to create the meal.

In Lucknow, installed in her lively court, she was surrounded by those who looked upon her as their saviour and this encouraged her to become more and more eccentric as she grew older. She was the source of the strength and succour of her staff—outside Lucknow, she felt this identity was erased and she became an appendage to the lives of her children. Nothing was more difficult for her to accept than this secondary status: she was accustomed to being the centre of her universe, so to become a mere satellite in other lives was an unacceptable alternative. She would have dearly loved for us to visit Lucknow regularly but when we started to visit her less and less, she accepted that it was time to let us go.

Thus it was that for nearly thirty years, *Diddi* became a fixture in Lucknow's Gulistan Colony: every child and resident there knew who she was. She hardly ever visited her neighbours: but she always knew that when the need arose, she could depend on them. In a sense, they became her surrogate family. A daughter-in-law from a nearby flat

would come to *Diddi* to complain about her mother-in-law and a little later, the mother-in-law would follow with her tale of woes.

Every *Holi*, the entire colony would come to her to wish her and she made huge quantities of *gujiyas* specially for them. The vendors and workers came to her for loans, for a rest and a cup of tea. Their lives nourished her and dispelled the loneliness of a mother too proud to tell her children she was tired of living alone. Over time, we all began to believe that she actually preferred to stay in her crumbling flat—or perhaps it suited us to believe this myth of the fearless matriarch who preferred to live alone. She often joked that a new neighbour once asked her, 'Shivaniji, are you childless?' because we started visiting her less and less. Instead, she would dutifully come and spend time with each one of us.

There was another reason for *Diddi's* withdrawal from us as we grew older. This stemmed from her inability to confront adult problems. She always had a special affinity with children – whether her own or those that were attracted to her warmth and lively personality. Yet when they grew

up and developed into difficult adolescents and adults, *Diddi* ran away from their problems. 'Don't tell me,' she often said when one of us embarked on a particular problem in our lives. 'I can't bear to hear of your unhappiness.' She hated being exposed to the pain of the ones she loved the most and several times I had to almost drag her to visit an ailing cousin or aunt. In her own life, as in her writing, *Diddi* was the quintessential escapist.

And so, in her final days, she was determined to go down with the mask in place. Her jokes were a ploy to keep us from becoming sentimental and weepy – something she hated – as much as they were a wish to go when all of us were laughing together. She spent time with each one of us alone, and together. And all the while when we joked, or remembered the old days, we could hear the hours that were ticking away. 'You will be fine,' her doctor told her one day. 'I just had a patient who was over ninety and he went smiling from here.'

Diddi smiled at him, 'I am prepared to die, doctor,' she replied. 'I have had a good life—I have four wonderful



Photo of Padma Sri award to Shivani



With former Prime Minister Vajpayee on her grandson's marriage

children and I am so proud of what they have achieved. I have eight grandchildren and have seen and played with my great-grandchild. I have lived life on my terms and will pay for my own funeral. Why should I want anything more?’

Sadly, although her spirit was high to the end, her body could no longer carry on: first her liver, then lungs and finally her kidneys started to give way. She had to be moved to the Intensive Care Unit and was taken away from a private room. For almost a week, she was kept there, unaware of the time or whether it was day or night. Worse, all around her were people in terminal conditions and in fact at least five people died in the week she was there. Her mind, sharp and alert to the end, registered all this and she no longer asked me restlessly when she was going to be released from the hospital. It was no longer possible for us to ignore the truth: *Didi* had just a few more days left. She must have seen our sorrow when we were allowed to visit her for a few minutes at a time, and that snapped her out of her own depression. One day, while she was still in the ICU, she told me, ‘I know why I’m not getting better. The person in front of me is ugly as sin—if he were at least

worth looking at, I might have tried getting better. As for my neighbour in the next bed...’ at this point, I looked furtively at the comatose patient in the next bed, tied to tubes and instruments his stentorian breathing through a ventilator shaking the bed, ‘That one?’ I asked. She nodded, ‘All of last night he kept singing ‘*Chalo man Kanpur ke teere, Kanpur ke teere....*’ First, he can’t sing to save his life, he was disgustingly off-key throughout, and then,’ she smiled at me, ‘he got on my nerves. Finally, when I could take it no more, I pulled off my oxygen mask and said, ‘Bhai sahib, drop me off at Lucknow on the way there.’

We both laughed and a passing nurse smiled—*Didi* could not bear to see long faces around her and so to the end she kept the nurses and us amused with jokes and risqué comments about other patients. The nurses came to her for a break, ‘Shivaniji, today your Keshto,’ (another patient who had alcoholic cirrhosis and she had named Keshto after the famous actor who played drunks to perfection in Hindi movies), they would tell her, ‘is making all of us really run.’

‘Hasn’t he died yet?’ She asked them, quite aware that she herself had cirrhosis and would very soon probably be in the same hepatic coma he was in.

I have seen many die but no one went like *Didi*. She had slipped into a coma in the last few days and I hope she was spared the pain that her body registered as one organ after another shut down. Her vital organs had collapsed: all that beat steadily to the end was her extraordinary heart. When it became apparent that nothing would save her now, we decided to pull out all the tubes and leave her with just the ones that fed her vital fluids. We also insisted she be moved out of the ICU and brought back into her room. All of us were there: all her children and their spouses and Kiran, her faithful shadow. I do not know whether she could hear us but we said all her favourite prayers and transmitted all our love. We were all standing around when the end came, looking at the monitor that showed her pulse slowly winding down. I saw a tear trickle from her left eye and then a flutter on her breast as the last heartbeat signalled the end. And she was gone. It was just getting on to five in the morning of March 21.

She went as she had wanted to, with all her children and their families at her bedside, at the *Brahma Muhurta*, that magical hour before dawn, when a balmy spring breeze was blowing. As we returned from the hospital, the *azaan* was calling the faithful to the mosque, *shabads* floated out of the nearby *gurudwara* and temple bells were ringing. It was exactly the kind of closing chapter that my mother with her strong preference for dramatic endings when writing her books, would have scripted. □