

ON my way home from work by bus, I get off a block away from my apartment. This is my daily routine. For a few days now, I have been noticing an Armenian woman sitting on the stairs of one of the apartment buildings. She is probably in her seventies. One day our eyes meet as I pass. She smiles. Not to be impolite, I nod and smile.

Two weeks go by. Then one day, with a big smile and a warm voice, I say 'good evening' to her. She mutters something. No Angleren (word for English in Armenian). But she opens her toothless mouth to give me a big smile.

That open-mouthed smile solves the mystery for me, as to why I was smiling at her. I suddenly realise that her smile reminds me of my aai (mother), Annapoornabai Vasudeo Gokhale. It sounds the same as the 'aai' we say when we trip over something or get hurt. In times of difficulty, we, Marathi speaking people, remember our mothers even before God, by expressing pain in the word 'Aai'.

Like any son, I shared a lot of memories with my Aai. But in my youth, I had no time for her and no interest in her memories because I had my own dreams to follow. But Shrikant, the youngest of her four surviving sons, was always interested in her memories. After we came to the US in 1977, I started thinking of Aai's stories of my childhood.

Aai joined us in New Jersey in 1978. She lived with Shrikant and his family in Montclair. Shrikant used to say, "Aai is not living with us. We live with Aai." After my move to California, the phone calls began. There were times when I would remember a certain incident but with some tidbits missing. I would call Aai and she would give me a two paragraph answer. At Shrikant's urging, she was writing down her memories.

My Unique Aai

D.V. Gokhale



During every annual visit to Montclair, she would hand me the pages to read whether I had time or not. After she put the pages in my hand, I had to read them, there and then. Looking back, I think I should have made more time for her memories.

Aai never went to school and yet once she became a mother, she learned the entire alphabet not only in Marathi but also in English, just so she could teach us. Though she grew up in a small village without any electricity, and water drawn from a well, she had to settle in the heart of Mumbai after her marriage. But city life and its challenges did not weigh her down. She rose to the challenge and did not let any of us lag behind. At that time

Mumbai was a hotbed of political and social activity; we witnessed the demonstrations, the unrest, the violence, the police firings, and the arrests that followed. Great leaders like Nehru and Gandhi walked in protests in front of our apartment building.

After graduation I got a job in the Reserve Bank of India. One day something happened and I got upset with Aai, left my breakfast unfinished and walked out to work in a huff, leaving behind the lunch box Aai used to prepare for me. Around noon, in my office, I heard people calling my name. My back was to the door. I turned around to see Aai standing with the lunch box in her hand. She didn't know my office address. I never told her what bus to take.

All she knew was that I work in some building called White House and it is in a certain area of Mumbai. That was enough for her to take the right bus to arrive at noon at the door of my office. I was ashamed of my behaviour. I went to the door and asked her to come in. I said I wanted to introduce her to everybody. With a mischievous smile, she said, "No. I am sure they think I am your maid. Your position will be damned if they find out I am your mother." All this was, of course, in Marathi. I had to control my laughter. I couldn't persuade her to come in. She may have been uneducated but her sophistication was written all over her. When I returned home, she said, "They say if someone leaves a meal

unfinished in anger, you never see them again. I couldn't let the day pass without seeing you. What if something happened to you and I never saw you again? Don't ever do this again." She sulked for quite some time. I had to coax her into forgiving me.

I was never an obedient son. That honour went to Shrikant, our youngest brother. I was a rebel. But she included all of us in her jokes and tricks. She didn't speak any language except Marathi. In the outside world, you had to know either Hindi or English. But that never stopped her from trying, resulting in multiple murders of both Hindi and English.

She travelled alone to the US in 1976, and stayed with my eldest brother, Dada, for four months. On her return, I poked fun at her, Aai, Dada must have taken care of your language problem but how did you manage on the plane?" She had a pat answer. With a mischievous smile, she said, "I spoke perfect English. I travelled the seven seas with only three English words: 'Yes, no and bathroom.'"

She had the same problem with our national language, Hindi. One day Renu, a friend of Aai, left a four-year old boy in Aai's care. Aai was in the kitchen and the boy was playing with his toys in the room outside. Something happened and the boy got upset with his toys, threw them at the wall and walked out. When Aai came out to see the boy missing, she ran out to see him walking away to the stairs, caught him and brought him back. Upset, she searched for words to reprimand him in Hindi. Aai took a breather only for a few seconds and out came a very funny smattering of both the languages, Marathi and Hindi (which sounded like none of the languages) asking the boy to stay put. And, of course, it worked! Because the reprimand was in her tone, not in the language. She looked at us. We



ran to the kitchen, unable to control our laughter. We couldn't laugh at her. She would have slapped us. As funny as her language was, we dared not insult her. She came in with a proud smile and said, "It doesn't matter how I spoke. But it worked, didn't it?" It sure did.

My elder brother Vinny was operated on for his appendix at age fourteen. In the hospital, all the nurses, being Christian, only spoke English or Hindi. Because Aai wanted to look after Vinny's needs, she had to talk to the nurses. Hearing her murder the Hindi language was taxing on Vinny's stitches. He couldn't laugh or his stitches might break. Aai saw his predicament. So every time she talked to the nurse in her broken Hindi, Aai put her hands on Vinny's ears. One day the nurse asked Vinny, "Why does your mother put her hands on your ears?" This time Vinny almost broke the stitches. When he somehow managed to explain, it was the nurse's turn to run off laughing.

My younger brother Shrikant was her favourite son, for not only was he the youngest, he was her most obedient child. Since he was everybody's favourite, we never denied him his position. One day as Shrikant returned from work, I teased her, "Aai, your favourite son is here." She replied, "I have no favourites but it's you I worry about the most." "Why?" I asked. She said, "Datta, you are over-sensitive, short tempered, a loner, opinionated and stubborn. You get hurt fast and brood over little things for too long. I used to tell your father about you. "You can hit any of the other boys to discipline them. I won't say anything. Dada and Shrikant never disobey. If you beat Vinny or Bapu, there will be no sign on their body and no effect on their

minds. Datta's case is different. If you hit him, there will be red fingerprints of your hand on his skin for a week and scars on his mind for a year. Please spare him the rod. And that's why I worry about you". She paused and gave me a stare and continued, "How can I make you understand my child that if you want to see your own success, you have to learn to get along with people? Try to learn the art of winning people's hearts from Shrikant." I laughed with dejection. She had a point and Shrikant was absolutely adored by everyone.

By her happy and humorous disposition, a stranger would never know how much Aai suffered in life. Tragedy dealt many blows. She lost her mother when she was only six. Her only brother, younger to her, a swimming champion, drowned in a lake caught in a whirlpool, in his early thirties. Her only daughter, Shanta, died at eighteen months of age. Her third son, Bapu, died of spleen failure at age nineteen.

The biggest blow of her life unexpectedly came in 1990. Her favourite son, Shrikant, died of diabetes. He was only forty-one. Growing up, we never saw her tears. "I learned to handle grief at a very early age, when my mother died," she used to tell us. But even she could not handle the grief of Shrikant's death. After his death, when I went to India to perform the last rites, Aai, behind closed doors, put her head on my right shoulder and sobbed like a child. That was the first time ever she showed or shared her grief with me.

Aai became quiet after Shrikant's death. In 1993, when I went to visit her, Aai had become very weak. She had just entered her 77th year in January. Diabetes was slowly taking its toll. Talking required great effort as she felt breathless. As far as possible, whenever I was home, I spent time with her. Her hearing was severely impaired. I had to put my arm

around her to talk into her ear so she could hear.

One afternoon, we were sitting in front of each other, she in her bed and me on a sofa opposite her. She stared at me and muttered something I couldn't hear. I went and sat beside her and asked her what she said. She repeated, "What can I give you?" I said, "Aai, you don't have to give me anything. You have given us a lot, not only birth but a very good upbringing

and, most of all, a special sense of humour." She smiled faintly.

That year, 1993, on August 7, as I was leaving for the airport, I put my arms around her to say "I was leaving" in her ear. Suddenly, to my surprise, she put both her arms around me in a hug. I didn't say "I'll see you next year" and she didn't say "This is our last meeting". It was as if we both knew what was coming.

After her passing away, there

have been many occasions when I would suddenly realise "oh, this memory went with her. I forgot to ask her about this" and cursed myself for not showing more interest in her writings, her memories. Now there was no one to give me a two paragraph answer. It's been three years now. But when I think of her, I don't break down. Instead a smile comes on my face. That was my Aai. She was funny and unique.

THE sage, Bhringi, was a great devotee of Lord Shiva and pleased this god very much with his intense worship. Bhringi, however, refused to acknowledge the divinity of Shiva's consort Parvati and would not include her in his ritual of worship*.

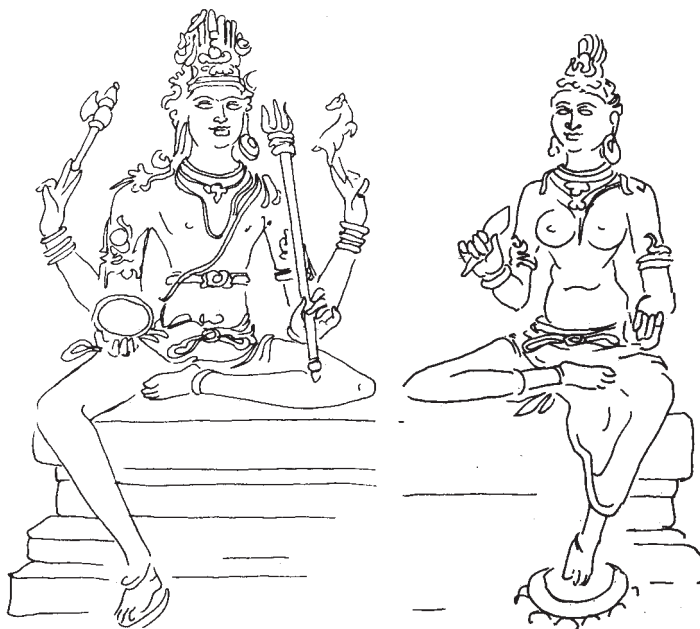
Parvati was angry. She was, as we all know, Shiva's female energy (*shakti*), and really a part of him. Therefore, she expected to be honoured along with him. She protested but Bhringi ignored her.

So, to teach him a lesson, she removed her *shakti* of power from the *rishi*. Deprived of her support he became thin and weak. Soon he became a bundle of bones and could hardly stand. Still, he refused to change his ways, venerating Shiva faithfully and ignoring Parvati just as faithfully.

Shiva, touched at what he perceived to be true devotion, felt sorry for the *rishi* and provided him with a third leg as a prop.

When Parvati found out about this she was angrier than ever at both Bhringi and Shiva, particularly because *rishi* continued to circumambulate only Shiva, still not acknowledging the status of the goddess. To force him to include her in worship, Parvati merged her body with that of Shiva, in an outward expression of what always is.

A Sage with a Narrow Vision



Shiv and Parvati

End of story?

Not quite.

Bhringi proved more crafty than Parvati had expected (or more unseeing than you or I would have expected a seer to be). He turned himself into a wasp and came out of their joined navels and again managed to curcumambulate Shiva alone.

Bhringi has been held up to us

Indians as the epitome of true devotion.

Is it any wonder we continue to emulate this poor creature whose narrow vision could encompass only a partial reality?

M. S. Theophil

(There are many versions of this story; this one is from "Legends Around Shiva" by S.M. Gupta) □