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trip, she dressed for their secret wedding from a hostel room on the top floor of Mani Bhavan.

Four years after that clandestine ceremony, the official 1955 marriage (when Urmila Vashi became Pushpa Shah) was blessed by a now mollified family. The Shahs split the rent in Ghelabhai Mansion at Chowpatty and shared a clinic round the corner at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. Their prem kahani kept blooming through 70 summers. The city lost Dr Pushpa Shah at a grand 92 years.

Their student years similarly bonded architect, maverick parliamentarian and co-founder of the liberal Swatantra Party, Pilo Mody of Bombay, and Lavina (Vina) Colgan of Nebraska. Studying architecture at Berkeley, in studios in that University of California department fitted with long tables to accommodate drawings, she “straightaway sidled up right beside him. There was a vacant space next to Pilo, where I parked myself. Simple as that.”

Back in Bombay, the couple set up Mody and Colgan in 1953. Vina opened Contemporary Arts and Crafts (CAC), possibly the first shop of its kind, on November 29, 1962. It was a significant date—the birthday of her mother-in-law Jerbai Mody (Pilo was industrialist Sir Homi Mody’s youngest son, after Russi and Kali). As she put it, “Pilo felt restless, convinced that designing pretty buildings wasn’t satisfying when the whole country was going to the dogs via the socialistic road. In 1959-60, he became a founder member of the Swatantra Party, working for it until he died in 1983.”

Vina designed for the firm alongside making Indian crafts cool. Tied to the country’s socio-political core, CAC was a shop with a conscience. Soon after its establishment, it proved that handlooms could indeed be heirlooms. With stores like Evans Fraser, Whiteway Laidlaw and Army & Navy shunting out, colonial Bombay was receding. Homes and offices were desperate for a dynamic leap in decor. Four design partners decided to sharpen focus, along with their pencils, to draw a new cultural map. With Vina were furniture makers Shirish Sankalia and Amrital Mistry, proprietors of Interfurn, and Muzaffar Ali Khan, the Nawabzada

of Palanpur.

“We didn’t envision CAC, it was a real need,” she said a few years before her death. “Doing up interiors of flats, restaurants and banks needed textiles, ceramics, floor coverings, all sorts of accessories for our projects. There was nothing available in India at the point when the British finally pulled out.”

Was Vina a temperate foil to her outspoken husband’s fire and ire? (“I am a CIA agent,” he cheekily proclaimed on the tag worn for Lok Sabha sessions to bait Indira Gandhi’s government). “Oh no, I don’t mince my words either!” Vina promptly declared.

A devoted pair of childhood friends-turned-soulmates, Dolly and Bomi Dotiwala charmed three generations of Parsi theatre goers. The singing stars who cherished their association with writer-director Adi Marzban, knew each other for as long as they could remember. As kids, Dolly Kateli of M Block and Bomi of N Block of Navroze Baug in Lalbaug, travelled on the same tram to their respective schools. The trip allowed ample time to exchange a flurry of love notes.

Dolly first went on stage in their baug itself, acting as a local tarkariwali hawking vegetables. “I was called the colony Dev Anand, because my hair puffed exactly the way my hero wore his,” Bomi said. “People gathered in crowds on balconies to watch shows we ‘staged’ in the space between our M and N buildings. My parents’ place was used as the changing room,” Dolly had chimed in when I last interviewed them together. Hardly dreaming she would pass away the morning after the spirited song and dance dress rehearsal of the second season of Laughter in the House, the musical revue at NCPA which followed my book on 20th-century Parsi theatre.

Setting aside such gut-wrenching personal loss, Bomi continued with a crackerjack opening night performance only an hour after Dolly’s uthamna prayers. Ensuring there was no trace of grief in the green room either, he exuded dignity in distress. His audience hardly maintained that composure. There was barely a dry eye in Tata Theatre as the veteran most movingly displayed a time-honoured theatre ethic: tinged by tragedy or not, the show must go on.



Ameen Sayani and Rama Mattu on the balcony of their Cecil Court office in Colaba. PIC COURTESY/RAJIL SAYANI

Off the old block

Part of an illustrious family of writers, activists and artistes, first-time novelist Tathagata Bhattacharya reflects on his literary inheritance, veering away from a middle-class vocabulary and paying homage to the city he knows best



Tathagata Bhattacharya’s first book is a dystopian work on fascism and the power of resistance. PIC/NISHAD ALAM

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

MANUEL Puig, Vasily Grossman, Mikhail Bulgakov, Graham Greene, Yasar Kemal, Dhan Gopal Mukerji, Howard Fast and Carlos Fuentes are just some of the writers Tathagata Bhattacharya grew up reading. There were also Bengali writers like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Troilokyanath Mukhopadhyay, Adwaita Mallabharman and Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay.

“We always had books around,” the journalist and first-time author tells us. “During our time, there wasn’t much else to do. You either played outside or read a book. There was no internet and the television wasn’t switched on till six in the evening. I think we were also quite lucky because as children we got to read a lot of world classics translated into Bengali.”

General Firebrand shines a light on the author’s special interest in warcraft and defence strategy, which manifests in his precise descriptions of military operations

Bhattacharya’s first novel, *General Firebrand and His Red Atlas* (Seagull Books), a dystopian work on fascism and the power of resistance, replete with talking animals, ghosts of historical figures, magic and the supernatural, is slated for release this month.

The son of cult Bengali writer Nabarun Bhattacharya and the grandson of playwright and actor Bijon Bhattacharya and writer and activist Mahasweta Devi, Bhattacharya admits that as a child, one doesn’t really realise that one is living with very famous people.

“They had no airs about them,” he tells us. “I grew up in a very normal household.” His prolific and multiple award-winning writer grandmother was a compulsive buyer of books and would send him things to read all the time. “She was a voracious reader of ‘trash books,’” he chuckles. “She said they helped her unwind. She had a huge collection, I mean hundreds

and hundreds of these potboilers. I was always into serious fiction but there was a time, when I was about 18, when I was staying with her at her place in Ballygunge and took seriously to the James Hadley Chases, the Modesty Blaise books and Wilbur Smith.”

He adds, “When you’ve grown up in a family like that, you tend to have the same aspirations. [Besides], my father had told me a long time ago that I was going to write fiction too.”

The writing of the book, he recalls, was almost cathartic. “I lost my father in 2014, my grandmother in 2016, and then my mother in 2017. And since I am an only child like my father, we have been a small, close unit. [In that time of grief], I had no confidence and I became very insecure. I felt everybody was leaving me. I was a wreck and this book kind of saved me. I had this strange sense that I had to write this, otherwise I would be finished, that this was my only way.”

General Firebrand follows a frantic story with multiple narrative threads and characters, which include a despotic government head, a brave and troubled resistance leader, a wildlife photographer documenting birds, a 15,000-dollar cognac-sipping Black Panther, fantastic figures in communion with powerful natural forces and historical characters like World War II Soviet sniper Lyudmila Pavlichenko, nicknamed Lady Death and credited with killing 309 enemy combatants, or prominent Red Army commander Konstantin Rokossovsky.

The book also shines a light on the author’s special interest in warcraft and defence strategy, which manifests in his precise descriptions of military operations. “I have been interested in military history ever since I was in high school, not just modern military history but going back a couple of thousand years. I have studied military strategy

extensively, which includes war college journals and research papers on manoeuvre warfare. During my journalistic years, I also covered the defence beat,” reveals the author. “What a lot of liberals don’t understand,” he adds, “is that this world has actually been shaped by wars—the technology, the science, everything has been shaped, from penicillin to the world wide web. Everything has come out of defence research, and today’s geopolitics is shaped by war. It is a very important determinant in human history.”

Bhattacharya agrees that there are unwitting similarities the novel bears with his father’s work, given that it too was often described as belonging to the dystopian fiction and magic realism genres. “Also, I have tried in my own way to write in a sort of language that is not very polished. I didn’t want the words to come as a breeze to the reader, so that he or she is not very comfortable. I wanted the words to be jagged, to be like a dagger that hurt. I didn’t want a very safe, middle-class vocabulary. I’ve tried to maintain an irreverence that was also there in my father’s writing, although he wrote in Bengali. There is no similarity between, for example, the ‘Rabindrik Bangla’ followed by a lot of writers, and my father’s Bengali, which had a very different kind of strength, zing and bite. I wanted the same with my language.”

There are also characters from Nabarun Bhattacharya’s works that populate Tathagata’s novel, like Marshal Bhodi, Bechamoni, Raven or Dondobayosh, Civet Cat or Bonberal and Begum Johnson. “When my father died in 2014, he couldn’t finish his last novel. The Bengali publisher who published it left 20 blank pages towards the end of the book for readers to finish it themselves. So, I used some characters from that novel so as to give them a sense of closure,” says Tathagata. But while the element of political satire is present in the works of both father and son, Bhattacharya is careful to point out where they differ. “He wrote in Bengali and his satire was centred on Bengali society and the politics in Bengal. The political reality that I live in is very different.”

In a novel full of places with made-up names, Calcutta is the only real-world city used as a prominent setting—as the rebel forces’ self-declared capital. “There is obviously your familiarity with the city,” says the writer. “It’s a city I know better than any other city. I have walked every stretch it. I’ve been stranded in the most horrendous rains there. I’ve been part of its political processions. I know what the dark underbelly of that city is like. That city has built my character; it’s a city that lives in me. I wanted to pay my dues to it.”

He adds that there is something about its history that warranted its inclusion. “Calcutta is known for its culture of politics and protest, its culture of putting up a human barricade against [abusive power], because the state which the people are fighting against in the novel is a fascist state. Calcutta was an obvious choice.”

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