



Shirt, blazer, both
SHOP STAPLE

Golden girls

Following your heart is a choice to be celebrated at any age. A 100-year-old freedom fighter and an 80-year-old swimming champion prove that dreams come with no expiration date. By VAISHNAVI NAYEL TALAWADEKAR



LOOK AT ME NOW
From left: Swimmer Bakula Patel poses with her medals. A caricature of freedom fighter Libia Lobo Sardesai announcing Goa's liberation

Maya Angelou once said, "Each time a woman stands up for herself, she stands up for all women." In the case of Libia Lobo Sardesai and Bakula Patel, this sentiment rings true many times over. The 100-year-old freedom fighter and the 80-year-old swimming champion have repeatedly stood up for themselves and their countrywomen, creating an inspirational template of audacity, fearlessness and self-reliance for others to follow.

Sardesai and Patel's stories are divided only by time. The recognition Sardesai earned in the 1960s after anonymously running an underground radio station to aid Goa's liberation from the Portuguese, Patel received in the 2000s, when she took up swimming at the age of 58, going on to represent India at tournaments in 12 countries. One woman succeeded in her thirties; the other in her sixties. Yet, neither one let the clock slow them down. In separate conversations, these ageless daredevils tell *Vogue* India about this spirit of resilience and breaking the moulds they were born into.

LIBIA LOBO
SARDESAI

IN NOVEMBER 1955, Libia Lobo Sardesai went missing. There was no letter, no witnesses, no investigation. And yet, nobody worried about her whereabouts. To her credit, Lobo hadn't given anyone reason to worry. She staged her disappearance carefully, fabricating a transfer to Belgaum, adopting a pseudonym and trudging through jungles in the Western Ghats to evade detection. When she surfaced six years later in December 1961, she had earned a new identity as an activist, a freedom fighter and the voice of Goa—although nobody knew her name yet.

Joining the Goan liberation movement was never on the cards for Lobo. "I was a hoity-toity girl so nobody imagined I could live in the forest," laughs the Mumbai-born, Panaji-based veteran, who turned 100 in May this year. "I had a job at All India Radio (AIR) and was studying law. After I graduated, the next step was to start a practice." But Goa was in the thick of the freedom struggle against the Portuguese, and for Lobo, who had participated in India's independence movement, liberating her native state was the final frontier. "Goa was completely starved of food, money and information. No letters were allowed, no newspapers would come, even wedding invitations were censored," she recalls over Zoom, adjusting her owl-rimmed glasses, her crimson earrings glinting in the late evening light.

Vaman Sardesai, who had just joined AIR's External Services Division, was well poised for a life undercover, and he enlisted Lobo, whom he found via a mutual acquaintance, and a third patriot, Nicolau Menezes, to start an underground radio station that would boost Goan morale. "It was illegal, so we had to do it in secret," notes Lobo. She, Sardesai and Menezes christened their radio station Voice of Freedom and slated their first broadcast for 25 November 1955, the same date the Portuguese had conquered Goa 445 years earlier. Over the next several years, they broadcast from the wilderness twice a day—Sardesai in Portuguese and Lobo in Konkani—incognito and incommunicado, with only leeches, venomous snakes and each other for company.

Six years. That's how long it took Lobo and Sardesai to see the light at the

end of the tunnel (and the jungle), working 18-hour days, collecting news through the radio, listening to bulletins, writing ten pages apiece for their own broadcast. "When Goa was liberated, General J N Chaudhuri [then the chief of army staff of the Indian Army] came to us and delivered the news himself. I didn't know how to react. I just took a flower from the garden and gave it to him. He asked me, 'What do you want to do?' I said, 'I want to proclaim it from the skies.'" The next day, at the risk of being shot down even though the Portuguese forces had been curtailed, Lobo and Sardesai boarded a plane and circled the skies, dropping leaflets declaring victory. "We saw people coming out of their homes, picking them up and celebrating. They had never seen a plane this close, this low."

Lobo and Sardesai married exactly three years later, on Liberation Day, announcing it in the newspaper the next day.

Sardesai became Goa's first director of panchayats, and later an IAS officer, the co-convenor of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and the Ambassador of India to Angola. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1992 for his contribution to public affairs. Lobo too blazed her own trail, becoming Goa's first director of tourism, although she gave up the job a few years later to start her law practice and became the first lady lawyer to work in the courts of Goa.

Since Sardesai's passing in 1994, Lobo has lived alone. "I have a helper who does the cleaning, but I cook for myself. She does not even peel an onion for me," she asserts. I ask her about the mural emblazoned on the wall across the street from her house: an artwork of her younger self by the street artist Solomon Souza, the grandson of her friend, the late artist FN Souza. Does she like it? "I think I look too tame," she declares. I believe her.



TIME CAPSULE

Above: A photo-laden shelf in Lobo Sardesai's home. Occupying pride of place is a photograph of her with her husband, Vaman Sardesai. *Opposite:* Lobo Sardesai is all smiles as she recounts her life story



Dress, INJIRI

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TRAINING SEASON
Patel looks sharp in a blazer paired with her swimsuit



SHOW AND TELL
Above: Patel displays her certificates and medals collected over the years.
Right: The lapel of the 80-year-old's blazer is crowded with pins



PHOTOS: SANJAY TOMAR (BAKULA); ALI MONIS NAQVI (LIBIA); STYLING: MANGLIEN GANGTE, BOOKINGS EDITOR: ALIZA FATMA, ASSISTED BY: SALONI SALECHA, HEENA SHAIKH (STYLING); SPECIAL MENTION: KHUSHALI GANDANI, ALLAN PINTO

BAKULA PATEL

MOST PEOPLE WITH a phobia would tie themselves in knots to avoid the trigger that causes it. Bakula Patel isn't like most people. The 80-year-old swimming champion was once an aquaphobe. As for what prompted her to dip her toes—and the rest of her body—in the water, she reveals it was a bid to rediscover joy and a more authentic version of herself. “I was into sports and athletics from a young age, but I lost my parents early, was married off at thirteen and became a widow when my children were still young. I felt all alone,” she shares over the phone from her Surat home. When her children flew the nest several years later, she didn't know what to do, she recalls, her voice laced with melancholy. “So I thought I would distract myself with a sport.” She picked swimming, as much to overcome her fear as to numb her heartache. A month later, she nearly drowned.

Her near-death experience in the Tapi River was enough for her to stash her

costume and vow never to swim again. The promise was premature. A few months later, at the age of 58, she found the courage to return to the water, and began, as she calls it, “the very prime of my life”. Why, pray, does she count these as her golden years? “I was born in a small village and realised early on that I was a round peg in a square hole,” she murmurs. Losing her loved ones, painful as it was, led her to discover herself.

It's evident that Patel channels a curious Benjamin Button energy. “My grandson sometimes makes fun of me, but I swim ten kilometres a day. How can I feel old?” she responds when asked if she thinks she started too late. “You're only old once you cross ninety,” she stoically adds a moment later. If her achievements are anything to go by, she isn't wrong. She began competing nationally at 59, has represented India at tournaments in 12 countries across North America, Europe, Asia and Australasia and has

nine international medals and over 500 certificates to her name. “I realised that there's no right age if you really want to develop a skill,” she says.

Patel rises before the sun, runs fourteen kilometres and performs eleven surya namaskars and shirshasanas before diving into her daily grind, all without enlisting anyone's help. If that isn't impressive enough, she is also earning her MA in Bharatanatyam. “I don't like being lazy, so I keep myself on my toes,” she insists. She doesn't nap and rarely rests, preferring to spend her evenings deep in the Tapi, the river that almost took her life.

That there is quiet disapproval from naysayers who'd rather see her wearing reading glasses than swimming goggles isn't lost on Patel. “I'm unaffected by it,” she shrugs. Next on her wish list is a Rashtrapati Award from the prime minister. “It's my biggest dream to make this nation proud,” she says. Little does she know, she already has.