India in Focus

Camera Chronicles of Homai Vyarawalla

Sabeena Gadihoke

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With no one to guide me in my formative years I had to depend solely on my own instincts to plan out my future. The credit for all that I was able to achieve goes to my very supportive mother, who despite criticism from the orthodox, as well as financial constraints, allowed me all freedom to do what I thought was best for me. Another very important person in my life—my husband—not only encouraged me to take on the exclusive male dominated profession of press photography, but also shared, on an equal basis, the burden of balancing family with professional life to our entire satisfaction.

I salute them both and dedicate all my life's work to those loving souls.

Homai Vyarawalla
July13th, 2005

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Homai Vyarawalla on a shoot in Chambal Valley.
Photograph taken by her colleague, Amarnath.

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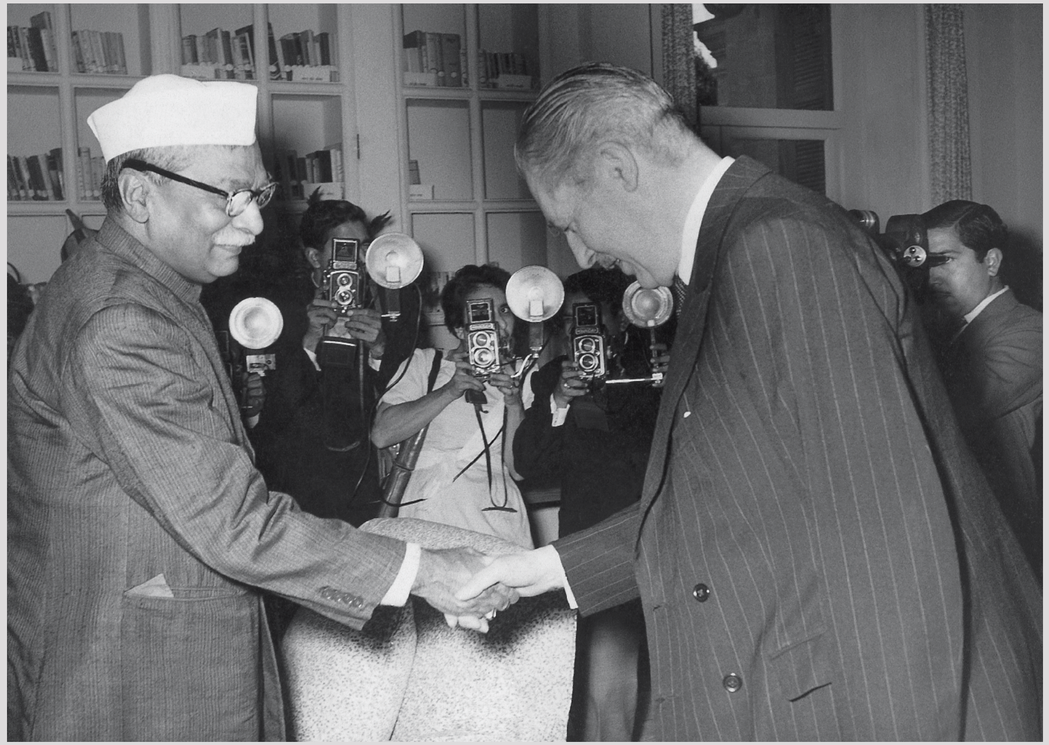


The President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, greeting Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister of Britain, as Homai and other photographers capture them on camera, 1958. "President Radhakrishan called me 'Princess', General Cariappa called me 'Energy' and Rajaji said I was 'A new phenomenon'. People called me all sorts of names. They used to be happy when they saw me."

The Birth of a Princess

"I hadn't the slightest clue that I would be a photographer.
I wanted to be a doctor but that was the only time in my life that
my mother refused to let me do something. She had seen doctors on
late night shifts and didn't want me in a profession like that.
Little did she realize that Press photography would be far worse!
I also wanted to be a Girl Guide but she didn't want that either.
In those days Girl Guides had to wear uniforms and coming from an
orthodox Parsi family, that was a problem for me.
As a child, I once saw a photograph of another child lying on its stomach.
I was told that it was taken by a woman and
wondered if I would ever get a chance like that."

Homai Vyarawalla

Shaking hands with Dorothy Macmillan, the wife of the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, in 1958.

With the Canadian Prime Minister, Mr. John Diefenbaker.

On the 9th of December 1913, a baby girl was born to Dossabhai Hathiram and Soonamai. When she turned two, an astrologer in Navsari predicted, "*Raj Rajwade mein ghoomegi*"—"She is destined to walk among royalty and important people." This forecast seemed incredible to a family that had always been faced with hardship. Dossabhai led an uncertain life as an actor-director in a travelling Parsi theatre company when he married Soonamai, twenty years his junior. It was the second time that both had married. Dossabhai was not to live to see India turn Independent. He was also not to see his only daughter, Homai Vyarawalla, become its first woman press photographer.

Homai's father, popularly known as "*bade mian*", had originally trained himself to be an artist and painted on glass. In those days painting was not a paying profession and so he left home at an early age, to become an actor instead. Urdu Parsi theatre had been very popular from the mid-nineteenth century, but by the early thirties it had to contend with the talkies in cinema.[1] Dossabhai was known to be very handsome and would often play female roles. Homai recalls a story about a wealthy Nawab being quite infatuated with him. Watching their rehearsals, she soon became fluent in Urdu and once did a perfect rendition of a part in which a Muslim actress was having difficulty. A fellow Parsi watching this warned Dossabhai of the influence of the theatre on his daughter. From that day, Homai was banned from attending their rehearsals. Acting was not an option then for Parsi women from "respectable" homes. Dossabhai had directed some plays and even acted in the cinema. One of Homai's earliest memories of the Khatau Company, where he worked, was playing with brushes and canvas among gigantic sets; "Those were my toys." The Parsi theatre was known then for its spectacular and innovative sets and its technical wizardry.[2] "I remember a grand set of a street scene that had houses on two sides of the road. One of the balconies was on fire and had a woman shouting for help. My father had to throw a rope across and swing through the air to rescue his love. It was all very elaborate and to me as a child looked startlingly real!"

Life was fairly nomadic for Homai in the early years of her childhood. As a baby she had travelled with her father's troupe, performing all over the country as well as in Singapore, Ceylon, Malaysia and Burma. Due to the uncertainty of their home life, her two brothers were sent to live with their grand-parents in Bombay. When Homai turned seven, Soonamai shifted to a Parsi *mohalla* in Tardeo, Bombay, with all the three children. Homai's parents came from priestly families in Navsari and Surat. As a child, she did not have much contact with her father's side of the family, but every year they would visit Soonamai's sister, Khorshedbanu's home in Navsari where Homai's uncle, Dastoor Kaikobad Mehrjirana, was the Head Priest. Here they would perform the annual rituals for their dead relatives in the days before Pateti and the Parsi New Year. Soonamai would help her sister make the food and sweets for the daily offering. Three of Soonamai's brothers were also *panthakis* of fire temples. The family celebrity then was Dossabhai's nephew, Gustad M. Hathiram, who had set out to cycle around the world in the early twenties with four other friends. He never returned to tell his story and so there was always a mystery around Gustad. According to some sources he was killed by robbers in the U.S.A. Others claimed that he was alive but ashamed to return to India, as he had not completed his journey. It was an intriguing story for Homai, which was finally laid to rest recently when his cousin, Kety Maneck Chena, in Bombay clarified that he passed away in Florida in 1973.

A Westernized community, middle class Parsis eagerly sought English education. Dossabhai and Soonamai had not studied much but they were keen that their daughter learn English. Since Homai knew only Urdu, she was enrolled in the Grant Road High School run by Rustomji Bhesania. Despite its Gujarati antecedents, the school was cosmopolitan. Here Homai studied with Hindus, Muslims and other Parsis. The English language was compulsory and anyone caught speaking in Gujarati was punished and asked to write: "I will not speak in Gujarati, I must speak in English," a hundred times. When rents in Tardeo soared, the family had to shift further away to Andheri. The children travelled to school now by steam train. Homai recalls carrying her return fare of two *annas* between the pages of her books. Fountain pens had yet to make an entry and so they had to carry a cumbersome inkstand for their pens to be dipped in ink. It took almost an hour to travel from the Andheri station to Grant Road. All the compartments of the train had long benches and as children they would walk up and down buying fresh food from travelling vendors. They specially loved adventures in the monsoons when the tracks would get flooded, and the train would be stranded for hours.

Homai learnt to be comfortable in male company very early in life. There were just six or seven girls at her school and by the time she reached her Matriculation, she was the only girl in a class of thirty-five boys. Unlike other more affluent fellow students who came in dresses, Homai would attend school dressed in a sari with a *mathubanu* covering her hair.[3] Of course, she would pull it off as soon as she climbed down the stairs of her mother's flat. "I was thirteen and going out with the *mathubanu* made me feel like an old woman! All the other girls at school would come in frocks and skirts and I was the only one in a sari. Every Parsi woman who wore the sari had to have a *mathubanu* as that was one way of keeping the head covered. My mother said, if I wanted to go out anywhere, I would have to wear it. We used to live on the second floor in Wadia Street in Tardeo. As I went down the stairs, I would remove my *mathubanu* and put it in my bag. The other thing that I hid was the *sudreh*.[4] We all wore the *sudreh* and *kusti*.[5] To make a distinction between the Parsis and the Hindus, all Parsi women had to show their *sudreh* from under the blouse and so net *sudrehs* and other decorated ones were in fashion. While going down I would also fold up my *sudreh* into my blouse. I had to remember to let both these items show when I got back home. If I ever teased my elder brother, he would say, *'Mummy ko keh doonga ki yeh sudreh andar*

The Parsi presence in Bombay. At the Hormarjee Bomanjee Wadia Atash Behram (Fire Temple), set up in 1830 at Dhobi Talao, near Marine Drive.

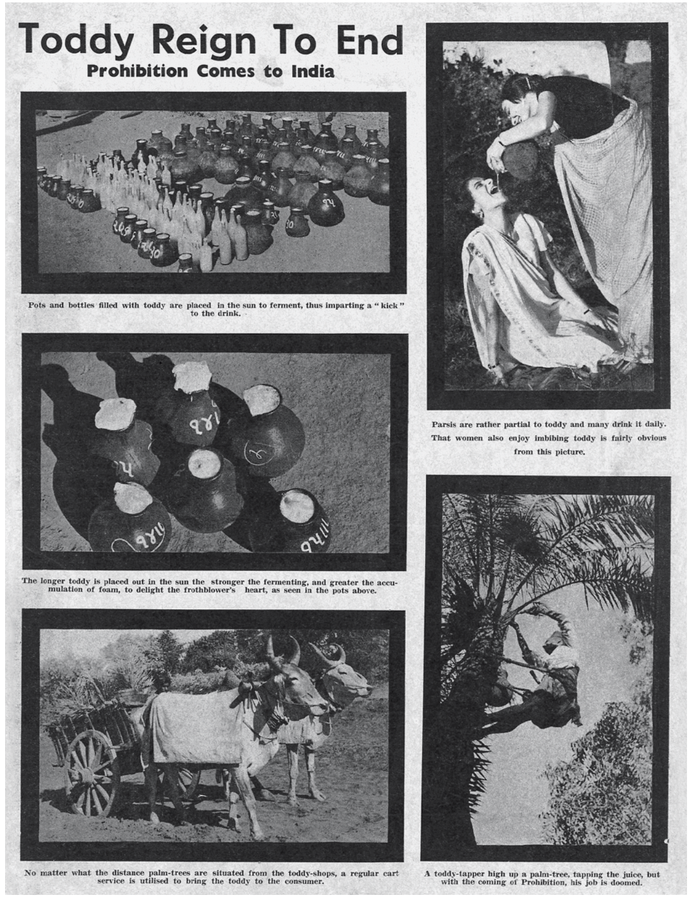
"Bombay, the Beautiful"

"While in school, I used to read about the movement for Independence and about Panditji [Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru] and the other leaders visiting Bombay for meetings at the Azad Maidan. It all sounded so exciting, but Parsi schools didn't want their students to be involved with politics. I wished that I would be able to see all those great leaders one day."

Homai Vyarawalla

One of Homai and Maneckshaw's favourite weekend escapes in the mid-thirties was Navsari, where they photographed the cultivation and tapping of toddy. Those were the days of the undivided Bombay Presidency and the state of Gujarat was yet to be carved out. A getaway to Navsari was also pleasurable because of the joys of drinking toddy: "It would bring out all the perspiration and toxins from our body. We would feel so nice and light in the evening." Toddy was either drunk raw from the *khajoor* trees, or boiled with garlic and jaggery, like tea in the evenings. "It was very healthy and full of vitamins," according to Homai. This was soon to stop. The problem was that fermented toddy was, after all, an intoxicant. The Prohibition movement initiated by Gandhi was gathering momentum, and the same images of toddy cultivation taken by Homai and Maneckshaw were now published in the *Orient Illustrated Weekly* to illustrate this campaign. As Homai recalls, it was her community that was adversely affected by Prohibition. The rich Parsis of Navsari, Surat and Valsad had their breweries and toddy shops locked. "Worse, after Gandhi's strictures against drinking, no worker would venture into their fields to harvest the crop and many families became impoverished overnight."

This seemingly isolated development draws attention to the rather complicated relationship that the Parsi community had with pre-Independence India. Ironically, it was Dadabhai Naoroji, the Parsi President of the Indian National Congress, who had first demanded Swaraj or complete Independence for India.[1] Bhikaiji Cama's fiery speech in favour of Independence at the Second International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1907 was also well known. Other famous Parsis, like Sir Dinshaw Vatcha and Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, had been prominently



Toddy Reign To End

Prohibition Comes to India

Pots and bottles filled with toddy are placed in the sun to ferment, thus imparting a "kick" to the drink.

Parsis are rather partial to toddy and many drink it daily. That women also enjoy imbibing toddy is fairly obvious from this picture.

The longer toddy is placed out in the sun the stronger the fermenting, and greater the accumulation of foam, to delight the frothblower's heart, as seen in the pots above.

No matter what the distance palm-trees are situated from the toddy-shops, a regular cart service is utilised to bring the toddy to the consumer.

A toddy-tapper high up a palm-tree, tapping the juice, but with the coming of Prohibition, his job is doomed.

A spread on Prohibition in the *Orient Illustrated Weekly* dated August 7th, 1938. "Gandhiji's insistence on the question of Prohibition was like holding to ransom the whole country for the misdeeds of a few addicted to drinking. It created a new breed of bootleggers and mafia gangs brewing illicit liquor in unhealthy surroundings. If at all, banning of manufacturing and drinking of liquor would have served the purpose, but why ban toddy that was a healthy natural beverage? When toddy was banned, people turned to drinking the harmful bootleggers' concoction."

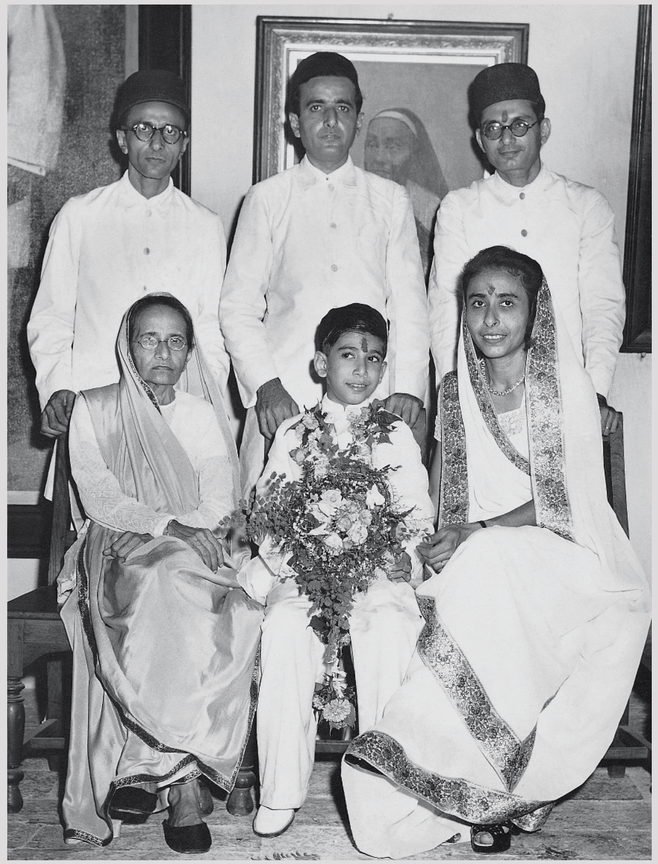
This photograph of people enjoying toddy in Navsari was taken by Maneckshaw in 1937. We know that because Homai is in the picture drinking toddy!

associated with not just the freedom struggle, but also with the history of local self-government and reform in Bombay. Landing in Diu as refugees in the tenth century, the community was determined to mingle easily with the Indians. As the popular story went, they had promised the Hindu ruler of Sanjan, Jadhav Rana, that they would be like sugar, which dissolved in milk and yet sweetened it permanently.[2]

There was also another history of the community and this was the story of Parsi entrepreneurship in Bombay.[3] The city had become the commercial capital of India because of Parsis like Sir Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy, Sir Dinshaw Manekji Petit, Sir Cowasji Jehangir and Jamsetji Tata. These men and their families did not just represent big business and industry, but were deeply enmeshed in culture and philanthropy in Bombay. Hospitals, schools, colleges, roads, colonies and charities still bear their names. Many in the community identified with this part of their history, a history of *sethias* and traders who had strong links with the colonizers of India.[4] In those days all persons born in Bombay became natural subjects of England. "They called the Parsis the royal community in Bombay."[5] With this widely divergent sense of identification, some in the Parsi community approached Indian politics with ambivalence. Despite their admiration for Dadabhai Naoroji, average Parsis found themselves in a bind over how to react to the nationalist movement. There was a certain distaste for street politics. Growing up in a middle class Parsi home in Bombay, Homai had never worn a cotton sari because of its associations with the nationalist movement. "In those days it was specially mentioned in our Parsi schools that children should not take part in politics. They wouldn't allow us to wear cotton." The popular perception about the Parsis—"friendly to the Indians, loyal to the British"—was obviously inaccurate, but the rumour soon spread that the Parsis didn't want the British to leave India.

Homai recalls that the community was also affected very adversely by the, *"Khede ooski zamin"*—Land To The Tiller Movement—that originated during the nationalist struggle. Most Parsis in Gujarat were agriculturists with large landholdings that they had carved from wastelands. These had been turned into fertile fields that were now taken away and distributed among the labourers who worked for them. "There was no compensation for the owners of the land who lost their means of livelihood and were turned into paupers overnight. My husband's maternal grandmother, who owned large fields in the villages surrounding Vyara, with teak and sandalwood trees, was reduced to abject poverty. After the death of her husband she supported her daughter's family and, with her fields gone, she died with no money, leaving the family financially stranded."

The campaign for Prohibition led by Gandhi added to the toll on the community as women were already picketing against liquor licenses in Bombay.[6] The Parsis were to survive these misfortunes and in the early thirties, Bombay still very much belonged to them.



At Farouq's Navjote ceremony at the Wadiaji Fire Temple in Bombay. Sitting from left to right are Homai's mother, Soonamai, Farouq and Homai. Standing from left to right are her brothers, Homi and Siavak, and her husband, Maneckshaw.

"Parsi kya cheez hai?" —"What is a Parsi?"

"In spite of the law and order in those days [post Independence Delhi], women were afraid to go to Chandni Chowk and other parts of the city. 'Pehle ki yaad rahi thi...*dacoity and all that'. There were memories of the violence of Partition. It was still an orthodox time for Hindu women to be roaming in bazaars on their own though I do remember a Maharashtrian woman with a nine yards sari driving the biggest of motorbikes! Muslim women were hardly seen outside except in groups and they would travel in* purdah *in cars with curtains on the windows. Of course, Parsi women would venture anywhere. The community was very progressive, you know. As soon as I came to Delhi, I started mixing with others, as I wanted a 'photographer's view of things'. I told the person I was staying with as a paying guest in Connaught Place that I was going to Chandni Chowk. He said, 'Don't go there alone.' I went to Chandni Chowk and nothing happened. Only, because I was wearing a Parsi-style sari with the border, people started gathering around me, wondering who I was and where I had come from because I looked so different from the others. So they started asking,* 'Yeh kahan se aayee hai? Yeh kaun hai?'— *'Who is she? Where has she come from?' I said,* 'Mein Parsi hoon'—*'I am a Parsi'. They said,* 'Parsi kya cheez hai?'—*'What is a Parsi?' Nobody in Delhi at that time knew who the Parsis were."*

Homai Vyarawalla

An event during the Second World War had an important bearing on the life of Homai and Maneckshaw Vyarawalla. In February 1942, Japan invaded Singapore forcing the Far Eastern Bureau (F.E.B.) of the British Publicity Office to shift its headquarters to India. Maneckshaw, who had been offered a job with the F.E.B., moved to Delhi leaving a seven months' pregnant Homai to follow him. On a cold Christmas evening in 1942, Homai landed at the Delhi railway station with a three-month-old baby. Like Maneckshaw, she too had been employed by the newly constituted British Information Services (B.I.S.) and was to remain associated with them for twenty-seven years.[1] Suddenly photography changed for both of them, as some of the most momentous political events in India were to happen before their eyes. In the five years leading to Independence, life in Delhi was tumultuous. The Quit India Movement and the I.N.A. trials at the Red Fort had roused great passions and the leaders of the nationalist movement were involved in consultations with the government about the final transfer of power. This was also Delhi against the background of the gathering momentum for Partition.

In contrast to the turmoil of public life around them, the Vyarawallas' home life remained largely peaceful. Looking after the baby took up most of their time and they were like any other middle class family in Connaught Place, except that being an unescorted Parsi woman was a bit of an oddity then in Delhi. While Maneckshaw was given the responsibility of the darkroom, Homai, as Press Photographer for the B.I.S., had to be out shooting everyday. It was a difficult and unconventional profession for a woman who had just become a mother. Life in those years was a mad rush between Homai's personal and professional spaces. "We lived in F Block in Connaught Place. My office was next door, where the Indian Airlines office came up later. I just went down one staircase and up through another to my office. Our darkroom was situated on the second floor and so was my house. So my mother-in-law could signal to me from the kitchen window and shout, 'Farouq wants you to come over' [For breast-feeding]." Homai never had another child as Maneckshaw had a deep fear that she would die during pregnancy. Farouq grew up a sunny-tempered child who inherited his mother's curiosity


UNITED KINGDOM PUBLICITY OFFICE

This is to certify that MRS. HOMAI M. VYARAWALLA is the Official Photographer attached to the office of the HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR THE U. K.

Administrative Officer
United Kingdom Publicity Office.

United Kingdom 23 MAY 1947 Publicity Office.

UNITED KINGDOM PUBLICITY OFFICE

This is to certify that MANECKSHAW J. VYARAWALLA is the Official Photographer attached to the office of the HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR THE U. K.

Administrative Officer
United Kingdom Publicity Office.

United Kingdom 23 MAY 1947 Publicity Office.

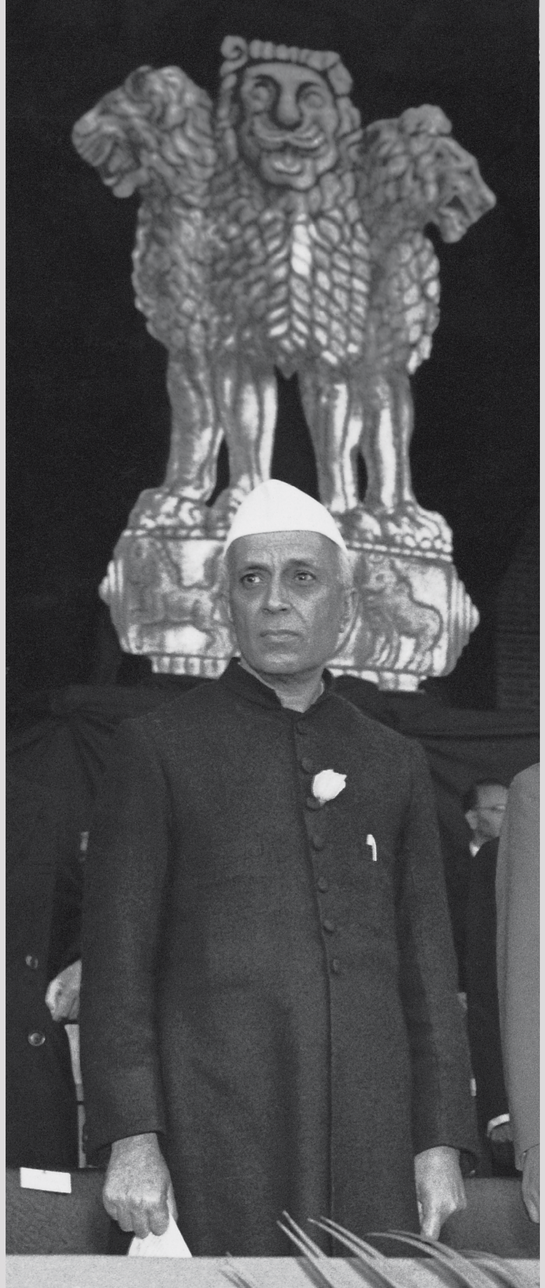
Identity cards belonging to Homai and Maneckshaw.

about the world around him. Mother and son would cook and knit together and go for walks along the Inner Circle in Connaught Place, where he became the darling of the shopkeepers.

Even though Maneckshaw helped with household chores, the major responsibility of running the house fell on Homai. Professionally too, they didn't have an assistant, so every bit of darkroom work like developing, printing, enlarging, or even typing out things and sending them by post was done by Homai. Her day would start at 4.30 a.m., when she woke up to get the milk, and ended well past midnight, when she would get home after shooting a social event, often at the Delhi Gymkhana Club. Life was a constant rush between photography and the home. This pressure carried over in her domestic life as

Farouq with his paternal grandmother, Shirinbai Mulla.

Farouq as a baby in Delhi.



The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru,
at a function commemorating Independence.

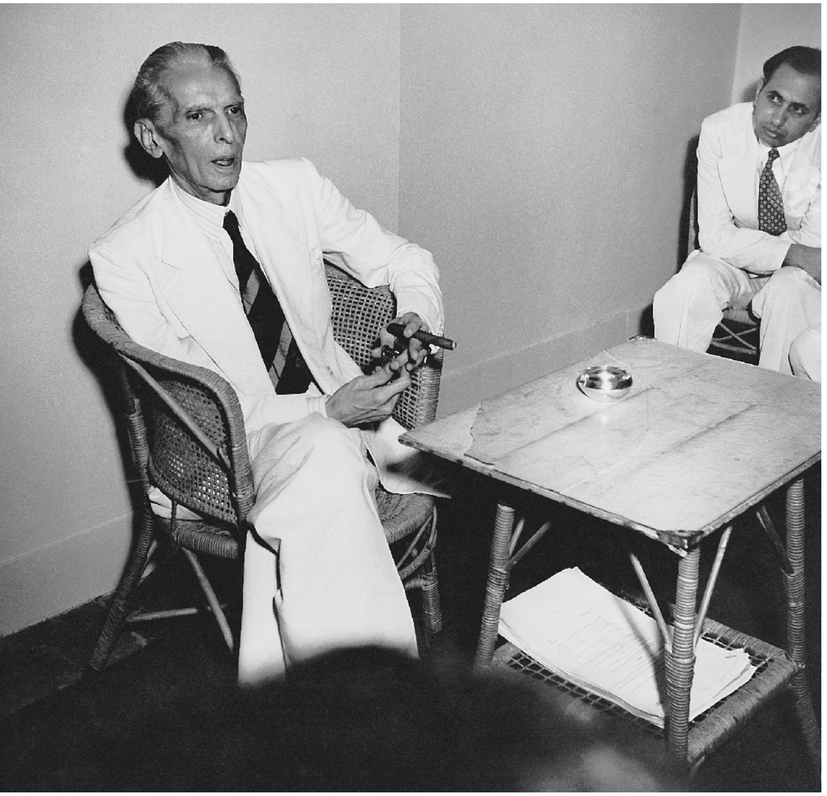
The Birth of a Nation

"At an exhibition of my photographs in Bombay,
somebody started quarrelling with me. He must have been Bengali.
He said, 'I have looked through the whole exhibition.
How is it that there is no picture of Bose there?'
I said, 'I never saw him, so how could I take his pictures.'
'But why have you taken so many of Nehru?' he asked."

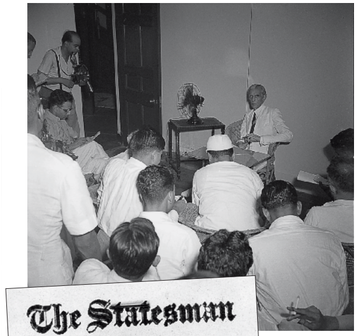
Homai Vyarawalla in an interview

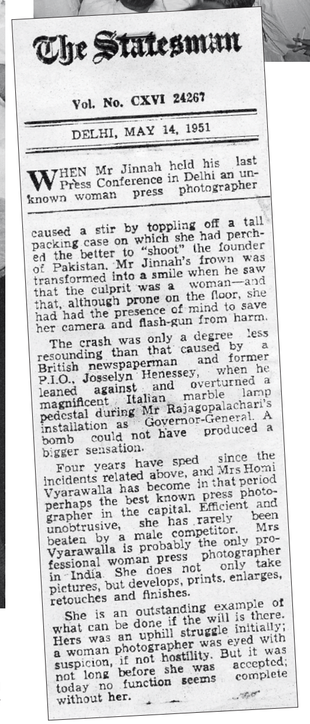
"In the history of a nation, there are times when it produces big leaders,
big writers and big events. That was the time that we were photographing,
but we never realized that we were living in that period.
I must have photographed Nehru hundreds of times but never thought
that I was doing something very fine or that this will go into history
and people will remember these images."

Virender Kumar, photographer and contemporary of Homai Vyarawalla, 1997[1]



These pictures of Mohammad Ali Jinnah are probably the only ones that Homai took on the day before he left for Pakistan. Photographer P.N. Sharma accompanied her for this shoot. The Press Conference was held in a small room at Jinnah's residence on Aurangzeb Road. Homai did not own a wide-angle lens in those days and the best way to get a wider shot with others in the frame was to climb onto some wooden packing cases at the far end of the room. She didn't realize that the cases were empty and came crashing down after clicking just one image to land in front of a bemused Jinnah. "In the beginning he had a frown over the disturbance. But when he saw it was a woman, he asked me, 'I hope you are not hurt!'"





The Statesman

Vol. No. CXVI 24267

DELHI, MAY 14, 1951

WHEN Mr Jinnah held his last Press Conference in Delhi an unknown woman press photographer caused a stir by toppling off a tall packing case on which she had perched the better to "shoot" the founder of Pakistan. Mr Jinnah's frown was transformed into a smile when he saw that the culprit was a woman—and that, although prone on the floor, she had had the presence of mind to save her camera and flash-gun from harm.

The crash was only a degree less resounding than that caused by a British newspaperman and former P.I.O., Josselyn Henessey, when he leaned against and overturned a magnificent Italian marble lamp pedestal during Mr Rajagopalachari's installation as Governor-General. A bomb could not have produced a bigger sensation.

Four years have sped since the incidents related above, and Mrs Homi Vyarawalla has become in that period perhaps the best known press photographer in the capital. Efficient and unobtrusive, she has rarely been beaten by a male competitor. Mrs Vyarawalla is probably the only professional woman press photographer in India She does not only take pictures, but develops, prints, enlarges, retouches and finishes.

She is an outstanding example of what can be done if the will is there. Hers was an uphill struggle initially; a woman photographer was eyed with suspicion, if not hostility. But it was not long before she was accepted; today no function seems complete without her.

An editorial in *The Statesman* dated May 14th, 1951.

The decade before Homai's arrival in Delhi had marked a more dynamic engagement with candid photography. This was, no doubt, aided by changes in technology that posited more portable cameras like the Rolleiflex, Contax and Speed Graphic as alternatives to the cumbersome paraphernalia associated with studio photography. This shift came at a time when the country was in ferment. In the thirties, the colonial state had imposed some restrictions on the printing of images of nationalist leaders in newspapers. Despite these curbs, local freelance photographers continued to document key events of the freedom struggle like the Dandi March and the Civil Disobedience Movement.[2] Early Indian photojournalism and press photography developed around this visibility of public events and important figures during the freedom struggle. Like many of her contemporaries, Homai Vyarawalla was a chronicler of this era, without realizing how significant her images were to become.

Re-visiting this period, it is interesting to note which events and individuals were highlighted by the photographers of the time, and how these images contributed to a certain kind of nationalist iconography.[3] Homai and the other photojournalists of her time were products of a particular historical moment, when their photographic frames became a reflection of a larger consensus about the Nationalist Movement. Their aspirations about the new nation were embodied in "heroic" figures like Nehru and Gandhi, whom, they believed, had led the Indian people to victory. Of all the politicians of the time, the person whom Homai photographed the most was Jawaharlal Nehru. This is not surprising considering that among the other stalwarts of the time, Nehru dominated the early phase of post-Independence politics as Prime Minister for seventeen years.

Pandit Nehru releasing a pigeon at a function at the National Stadium in the mid-fifties.

The fox hunt: one of Homai's favourite pictures, this was taken on a cold and misty morning in Delhi while nearly being mauled by huge hunting hounds. Col. Sahni, Master of the Hunt, leads the hounds.

The World of Black and White

"Have you read about Eastman Kodak deciding to stop the production
of black and white photographic papers? How very sad.
Modern colour technology is all right.
But what about all those like myself who prefer black and white
for its magical beauty. I like black and white because photography for me,
is black and white. It's all about a range of tones.
Besides, it leaves something to the imagination.
When you look at a black and white picture,
there is so much that you can imagine for yourself.
Supposing I had taken colour in those days,
would you have been able to see all those pictures?
They would have faded away.
Even now, I can show you what happened more than fifty years ago!"

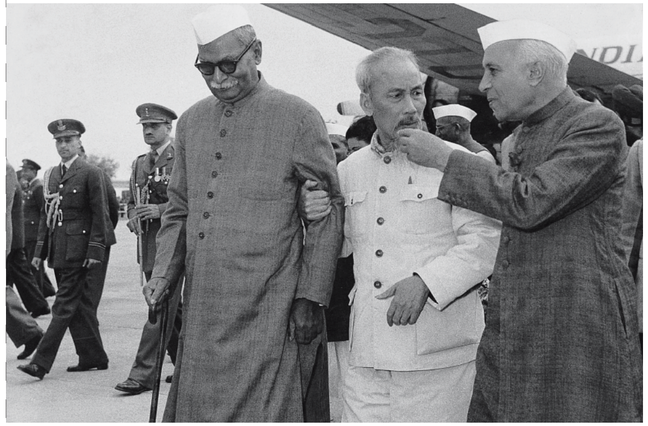
Homai Vyarawalla

For Homai, the world of colour was always a bit excessive. She preferred things that were toned down, "like the blue wash that you can give in painting that subdues." That was probably also why she did not like the more florid and theatrical style of salon photography that was popular in the studios of Bombay and Calcutta at the beginning of the twentieth century. Homai had once visited the studio of Ambalal Patel, where portraits and staged tableaus were shot with huge cameras, complicated paraphernalia and lights. While she admired its technical perfection, there was a stasis about this kind of photography that didn't appeal to her at all. She was lucky because new technological developments in the early twentieth century were fast freeing the camera from the confines of the studio. Heavier plate cameras gave way to film packs and film rolls and cameras became even more compact by the thirties. The change was not just about technology. These developments also heralded an era of candid photography and a reaffirmation of the belief that the camera captured reality. Early photojournalism was built on this preface. It is not surprising that Homai was against any kind of staged pictures and firmly believed in what she called "the split second moment," when her subject was unaware of the camera. "I have never asked anyone to pose for me. I don't like it, because the moment the subjects know that they are being photographed, a change comes over their countenance. The whole atmosphere changes. The body becomes stiff and the eyes open up a bit, which is not natural. When you take a picture, it's always in a split second. You either take it or miss it and that must be the right moment."[1]

Shaking hands with Dr. Radhakrishnan just before he left office. This was a farewell party for him at Rashtrapati Bhawan. "Dr. Radhakrishnan would refer to me as the 'Royal Photographer' or 'Your Royal Highness'. He would also sometimes introduce me to other dignitaries as 'my lady friend'."

Those were days when security for public figures was relatively unknown and press photographers enjoyed a fair amount of proximity and access to their subjects. Though she had the rare distinction of knowing her subjects fairly intimately, Homai never exploited this relationship. One of the reasons why they trusted her, even in their personal spaces, was due to her belief in the essential dignity of those whom she photographed: "They were comfortable with me because they knew that I would never ridicule them." She had a special rapport with not just

Nehru wearing a cat's mask at Sanjay Gandhi's birthday party. With him are Defence Minister Krishna Menon and Jai Dordi.[2]



Homai did not publish this photograph of President Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam with Nehru for many years, as it appeared to be undignified.

In an age where security wasn't much of an issue for politicians, Homai never really needed a long lens, as there was always the possibility of getting close to her subjects. "Things started to change with Mrs. Gandhi though." Shooting Indira Gandhi are Homai and T. Mathra.

Lord Mountbatten taking the salute at the Guard of Honour, Rashtrapati Bhawan, when leaving office as Governor-General on June 21st , 1948. "I was at the airport when he left the country for the last time. Before boarding the plane he turned and walked towards me. Shaking my hand he said, 'Thank-you and good bye.' "

Euphoria and Undelivered Promises

"I'm a sucker for building these big dams—Bhakra's a real challenge.
The Indians want it and need it more than any one thing
on their long list of dreams.
I'm just sentimental enough to want to help
them make it come true."

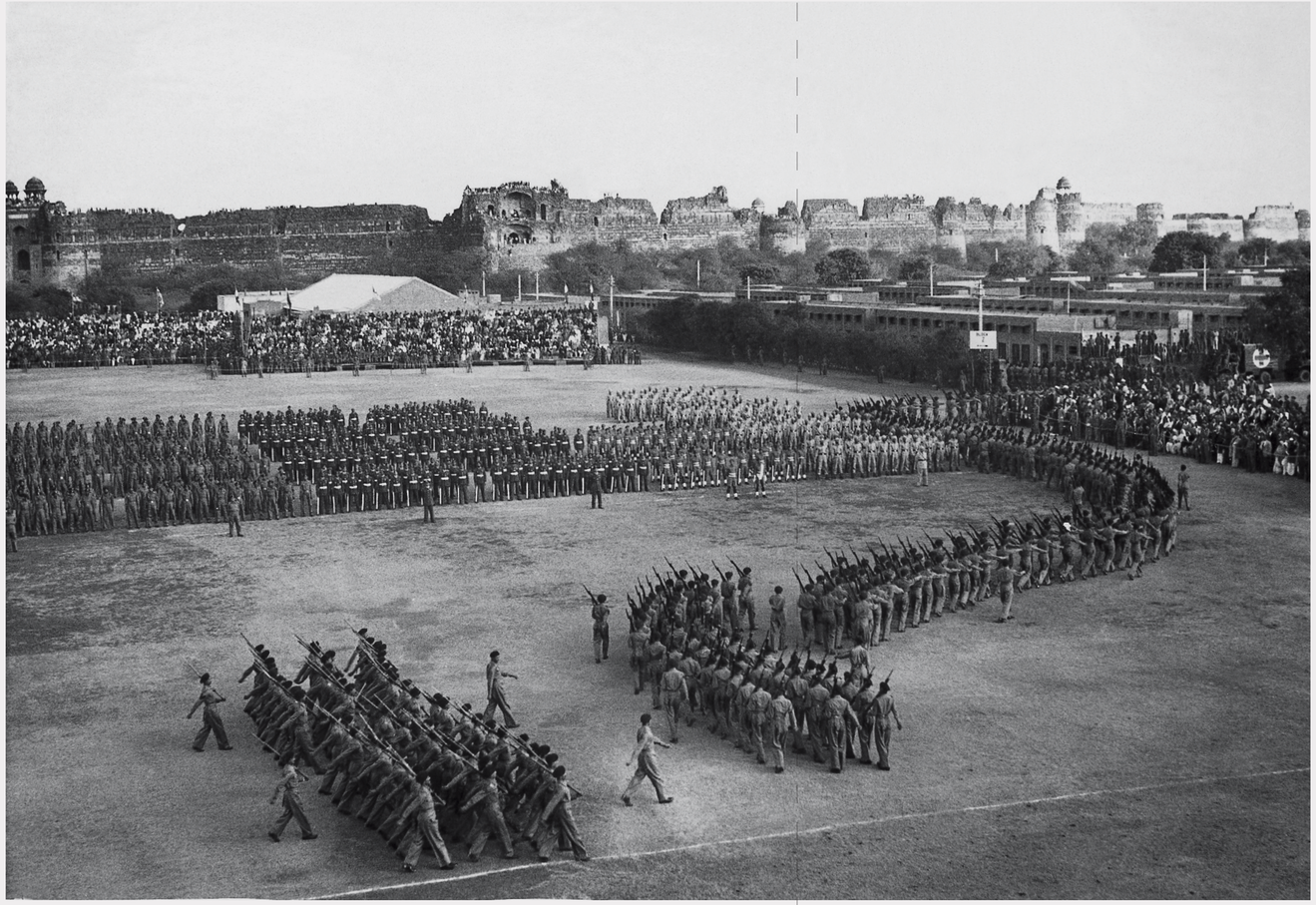
Harvey Slocam, the Chief American Advisor,
who supervised the construction of the Bhakra Nangal Dam, 1956

"To my mind, small is not only beautiful but is
more manageable and efficient.
It is also less dangerous in times of man made or natural disasters.
Any project that disrupts the lives of people, especially the poor,
is not worth executing. Sitting at a table and thinking about larger
and more glamorous projects without considering
how it is going to affect the lives of people,
specially the poor, is a sign of ignorance on the part of planners.
Big dams have always been a source of anxiety
for people living around them. It is the same with nuclear tests.
There is nothing like the peaceful uses of nuclear weapons.
They are weapons of mass destruction.
Nuclear tests only degrade the environment
and promote hatred and rivalry among nations."

Homai Vyarawalla, 2005

As a significant chronicler of the Nehruvian era, Homai's camera reflected both trajectories of this period: the euphoria around the new nation state, and the beginnings of unresolved issues within it. Some of these contradictions were to erupt in the seventies when she laid down her camera, disillusioned with photography as well as the deterioration of a post-Independence India.

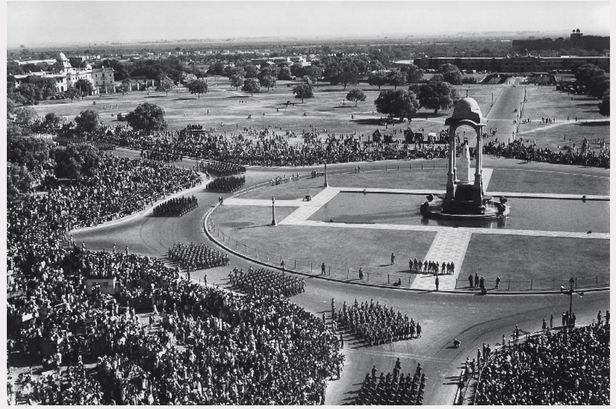
Her photographs in the intervening years trace the graph of the new nation as it soared and fell in these two decades. The fifties and the sixties were years of nation building. This vision of Nehruvian modernity was reflected in centralized Five Year Plans, the Green Revolution and huge structures of concrete: steel plants, dams and nuclear reactors, the "temples of modern India". The new nation was also defined by those who came visiting and gave recognition to its independent status. Homai's photographs in the years immediately following Independence reflected all these concerns as she documented ceremonial occasions, arrivals and departures, receptions and banquets, and visits to dams, steel plants and memorial sites. It was a fractured modernity, as the old and the new were to coexist. If images of India's investment in the scientific and the modern were one face of the decades after Independence, then there were others as well. Mass hysteria around the deaths of national heroes, for instance, that converted funerals into spectacles, and later national rituals. Beginning with the frenzy of Gandhi's funeral, Homai was to document the emotions of millions of Indians, as well as the private grief of the Nehru and Shastri families. The following photo essay encapsulates milestones of these two decades seen through the lens of Homai Vyarawalla.



The first Republic Day Parade on January 26th, 1950, was held at the ground where the National Stadium stands today with the Purana Quila in the background.[1] It was only after this that its venue shifted to India Gate. The picture shows Dr. Rajendra Prasad taking the salute without any security surrounding him.

The Birth of a Nation

On January 26th, 1950, India became a sovereign Democratic Republic and its birth was marked by pageantry and spectacle. Homai documented the first Republic Day celebrations against the backdrop of the Purana Quila, as well as the ceremony where Dr. Rajendra Prasad became the first President of Independent India.



Aerial views of the Republic Day Parade, taken from the top of India Gate in 1951, and of the *chhatri* before the statute of King George V was removed. Also see overleaf.

"A New Phenomenon among This Rough Crowd"

"A very young girl, wearing a practical sari and with a very becoming hairstyle...."

Amita Malik about Homai in *The Statesman*

"I didn't like those flimsy sort of saris flying around in the wind and always used a safety pin to hold my sari in place. I wore white and cream khaddar *saris for work and silk saris for evening functions at the Gymkhana Club or at Rashtrapati Bhawan. The silk ones would often spread out, getting caught in the legs of the photographers and tear. I always carried safety pins with me to tack them up in case that happened. It was my emergency service! I will tell you a funny story. I had to cover a big function at Rashtrapati Bhawan, so I made a blouse for myself. I hand stitched the sleeves with ordinary thread but forgot to put them through the machine. While shooting in the banquet hall, I raised my arms to take a top angle view and found the stitches giving way! One or two ladies sitting there even saw me and started to laugh. You know what I did? I pulled out the sleeve that had come off, pulled out the other too, put them in my bag and started working again!"*

Homai Vyarawalla in an interview

Despite the cumbersome nature of a sari, Homai insisted on wearing one for a major part of her career and would even cycle to work wearing a sari. When asked why, she said, "It is important to keep one's identity as a woman. For centuries we have been taken for granted and people think we are incapable of doing anything. When we do a man's job we must show them that it is a woman doing it."[1] She was also the first Parsi in Delhi to wear the *punjabi* or the *salwar kameez*. "Some Parsis were critical of that and suggested that I wear western clothing instead," but for Homai, Indian clothes were the most dignified attire for formal functions.

Being the only woman Press photographer was not easy. Many found it difficult to relate to her. While women had always marked Homai as different, men too were hesitant to come and talk to her. "They were admiring of me but made it clear that they did not see their own wives and daughters doing the same." Her work was a bit lonely as a result: "A certain distance was necessary because I was doing 'high society' magazine work for *The Onlooker*, and they were all very dignified and important people whom I was shooting. There were big officials, Ambassadors and diplomatic staff. If I became too friendly, everybody would want me to take their picture and put them in *The Onlooker* and that frightened me. I created more enemies than friends as a result."

"But that was not true of your colleagues?"

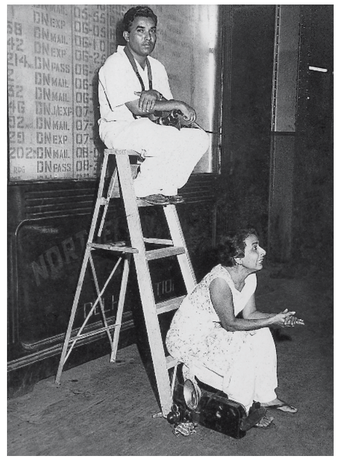
"Not them. My colleagues took me as one of them. There was no feeling of being men or women with them. I think that was because of my behaviour. I was never shy and coy with them like women are supposed to be!"

Homai with her smaller Speed Graphic camera on her shoulder.

Right: With Kenturo Hiro, a Japanese correspondent. Homai holds her Rolleiflex camera.

Being the only woman among men came easily to Homai as she had been through a similar time during her education. If Homai was unlucky with women friends, she more than made up with warm and fun filled relationships with colleagues like Amarnath, N. Thiagarajan, Kulwant Roy, R. Satakopan and Captain Arjun. "All of us helped each other. If someone was changing film, he would request another photographer to take an extra picture for him. We even traded negatives so that no one missed out on a good picture." This was all the more surprising because they actually worked for different agencies. Satakopan for instance worked for the Associated Press of America

"I had gone to take pictures of women cadets and borrowed their rifle for a bit of fun in this photograph."



Left: With Mast Ram, who spent the night under Homai's bed in Sikkim. "The 'moviewallas' used to carry their ladder and I carried my wooden tripod."

and was eight years older than Homai. He once introduced her to an American correspondent as, "My Mummy". To which the correspondent said, "But you look old enough to be her father." Satakopan retorted, "Yes, but she is my posthumous mother!" A nickname given to her first by N. Thiagarajan, most of her other colleagues, the security personnel, the police and even politicians started to call her "Mummy". Satakopan would keep Homai informed about important events. He owned a car and would often give her a ride for assignments that they were covering together. In return, Homai would develop and print his films when he had large consignments to send. "We were gentlemen journalists," adds N. Thiagarajan.

"Amarnath worked for the *Indian Express* and looked like Rhett Butler—Clark Gable in *Gone With the Wind*. He was tall and walked in a leisurely American style. He would just stride into my house and if something was smelling good in the kitchen demand to eat it immediately." In 1955, when Homai acquired a car, she noticed a young man furiously peddling his cycle from Connaught Circus to Palam airport. He had arrived in Delhi a year earlier as the photographer representing *The Hindu*. She said to him, "From tomorrow onwards you are going with me in the car." That was N. Thiagarajan's first introduction to Homai. Twenty years younger than her, when President Radhakrishan enquired about him, she replied, "He is my sonny boy."

Kulwant Roy, who ran an agency called Associated Press Photos from Mori Gate in Delhi, stayed a bachelor. "He represented a paper called *The Muslim* in Aligarh, while I worked for *The Hindu*. Naturally there were many jokes floating around about us," recalls N. Thiagarajan. Roy left India to travel all over the world, sending Homai regular postcards from all the places that he photographed and visited. Before returning to India in the sixties, he put ten years of his work abroad into a trunk and mailed it to his own address in Delhi. The trunk never arrived. He spent the last years of his life hunting through the garbage of the streets of Delhi, but it was never to be found again.[2]

Homai was an employee of the B.I.S. for eight years after which she freelanced for them till the end of her career. She was also a stringer

A fancy dress party at the Delhi Gymkhana.

A Home Away from Home

''As a little girl, one of my greatest desires was to come to Delhi. My father had given me an album of commercial photographs of Delhi. It looked so exciting with all those monuments that I would always say to myself, 'I wish I could go to Delhi.' When I finally did, it was like all those wishes coming true."

Homai Vyarawalla

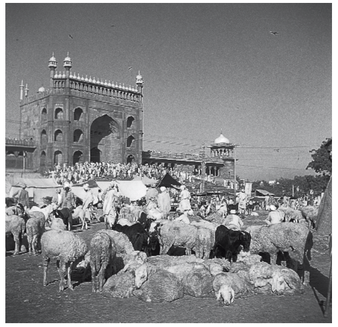
The Purana Quila.

The "pearl necklace", Connaught Place.

Jantar Mantar.

Right: The *chhatri* at India Gate with the statue of King George V.

Far right: Jama Masjid during Eid.

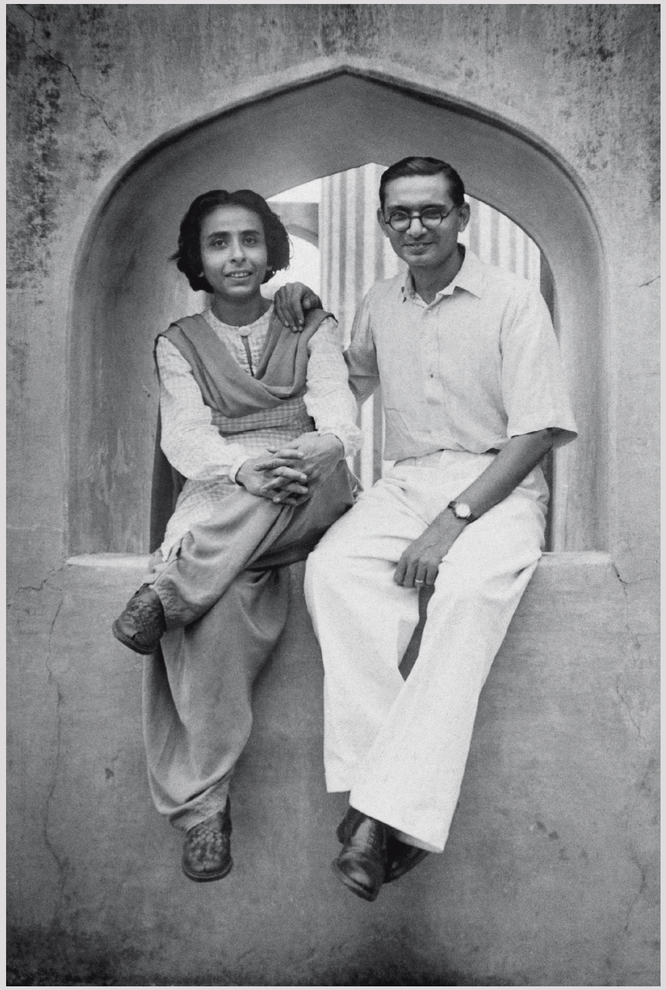


Making one's way through honking cars, weaving through the rubble of the Metro construction in Connaught Place, to pick up Homai's prints of Delhi in the fifties, it is difficult to imagine that the Delhi of 2005 bears any resemblance to her Delhi. Homai arrived at the Old Delhi station by the Frontier Mail on the 25th of December 1942 and it was love at first sight.

"I can never forget the first time I stepped in to Connaught Place. It was so elegant and clean. Connaught Place looked like a pearl necklace because it was whitewashed every two years. The shops had twenty feet high ceilings. There were famous sari and shoe shops and those that sold biscuits and pastries. The shops were like a posh mall and not like the bazaar that you see today. In the winters some shopkeepers would take their tables and chairs and set their wares outside. I would take Farouq for a walk along the open corridors. The corner shops had dried fruits and other wares. They were owned mostly by Muslim shopkeepers and Farouq was a great favourite with them. Delhi was such a gorgeous place in those days."

A *taziya* procession being taken out on the occasion of Muharrum, in Old Delhi.

Below, left and right: Muslim women in Old Delhi, voting in the general elections.



Maneckshaw and Homai shared forty-three years of companionship and friendship.

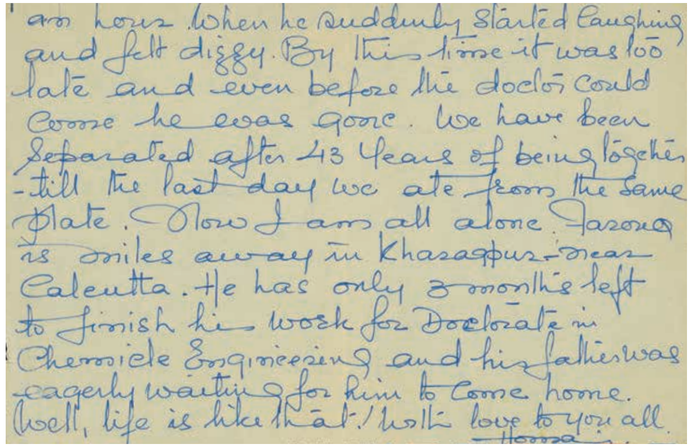
Moving on

"When my son was about three years or so, I once scolded him and he got very angry and said, 'Well, I am the one who is obliging you while you scold me.' So I asked him, how 'he' was obliging me.
'When we were with God one day, he asked all of us children to look down on earth where several women were standing and to select our mothers for ourselves. All the children selected one or the other woman to be their mother and you were the only one left alone, standing in a corner looking dejected. I took pity on you and selected you for my mother.'
I said, 'How can you prove all of this?' He replied triumphantly, 'Has anyone ever selected you after that to be their mother, except for me?'"

Homai Vyarawalla in an interview

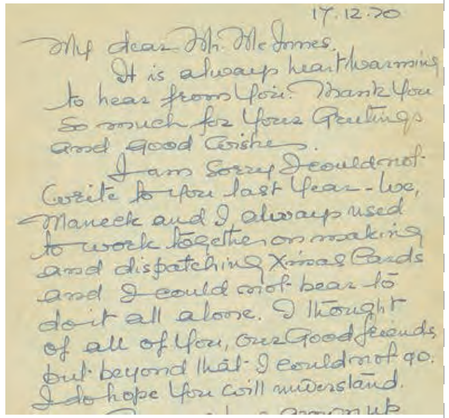
Homai's family life was to change very suddenly and dramatically on May 26th, 1969. When she returned home from shopping, she found Maneckshaw, who had retired a year earlier, in great distress. He said that the medicine he had taken had made him feel worse. When Homai looked at the bottle, she was horrified to discover that it was an anti-termite solution. He had not been able to smell or taste it as he had polyps in his nose. Before she could call for a doctor, Maneckshaw's eyes started to turn blue and he began to convulse violently. None of Homai's neighbours were at home. She ran frantically to the office upstairs to call for help but there was only an errand boy there and by then it was too late. Farouq was away in Kharagpur. A grieving Homai sat alone with Maneckshaw's body for a few hours before she realized that she had to make the arrangements for his funeral.

Parsis believe that in death, the body must return to nature. The last act of charity that a Parsi can do is to offer his or her body to the birds. Delhi did not have a *dakhma*.[1] It had an *aramgah*[2] but Maneckshaw had always said that he did not want a burial. He had told Homai that in the event of his death in Delhi, he should be cremated with the help of his Hindu friends in case other Parsis objected to it. It was a difficult decision for Homai but she was determined to carry out his wishes. The electric crematorium at Nigambodh Ghat had just opened in those days. She arranged for him to be taken there. She also requested Ervad Darius Bagli, who was the priest at the Delhi Parsi Anjuman, for some prayers. This later caused a stir in some Bombay Parsi households but that didn't bother Homai. Farouq was able to arrive only the next day when the cremation was over. Maneckshaw had always loved the Agra Fort overlooking the Taj Mahal and she decided to carry some



an hour. When he suddenly started laughing and felt diggy. By this time it was too late and even before the doctor could come he was gone. We have been separated after 43 years of being together - till the last day we ate from the same plate. Now I am all alone. Farouq is miles away in Kharagpur - near Calcutta. He has only 3 months left to finish his work for Doctorate in Chemicle Engineering and his father was eagerly waiting for him to come home. Well, life is like that. With love to you all.

A letter from Homai to Hugh McInnes dated June 30th, 1969, informing him of Maneckshaw's death.



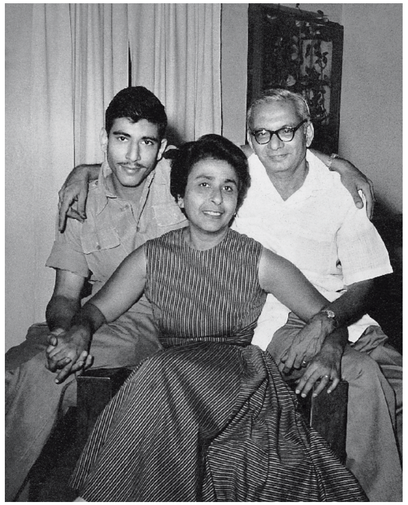
17.12.70

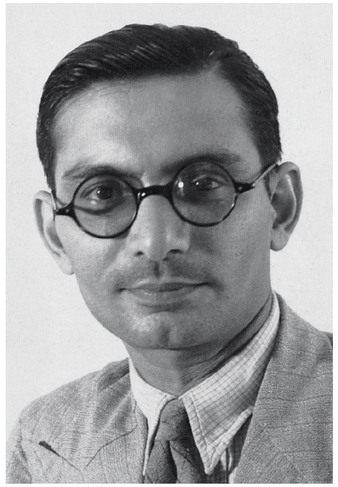
My dear Mr. McInnes.
It is always heartwarming to hear from you. Thank you so much for your Greetings and good wishes.
I am sorry I could not write to you last year - we, Maneck and I always used to work together on making and dispatching Xmas Cards and I could not bear to do it all alone. I thought of all of you, our Good friends but beyond that I could not go. I do hope you will understand.

A paragraph from a letter written by Homai to McInnes, dated December 17th, 1970.

of his ashes there. When Homai and Farouq arrived near the monument, they found the area surrounding the riverbed dirty. They scattered part of his ashes among thick growing vegetation and small crevices in the stonework where they would rest undisturbed. Homai went back to work after a few days. Few knew that her husband had passed on. Her grief was private and she shared it with no one.

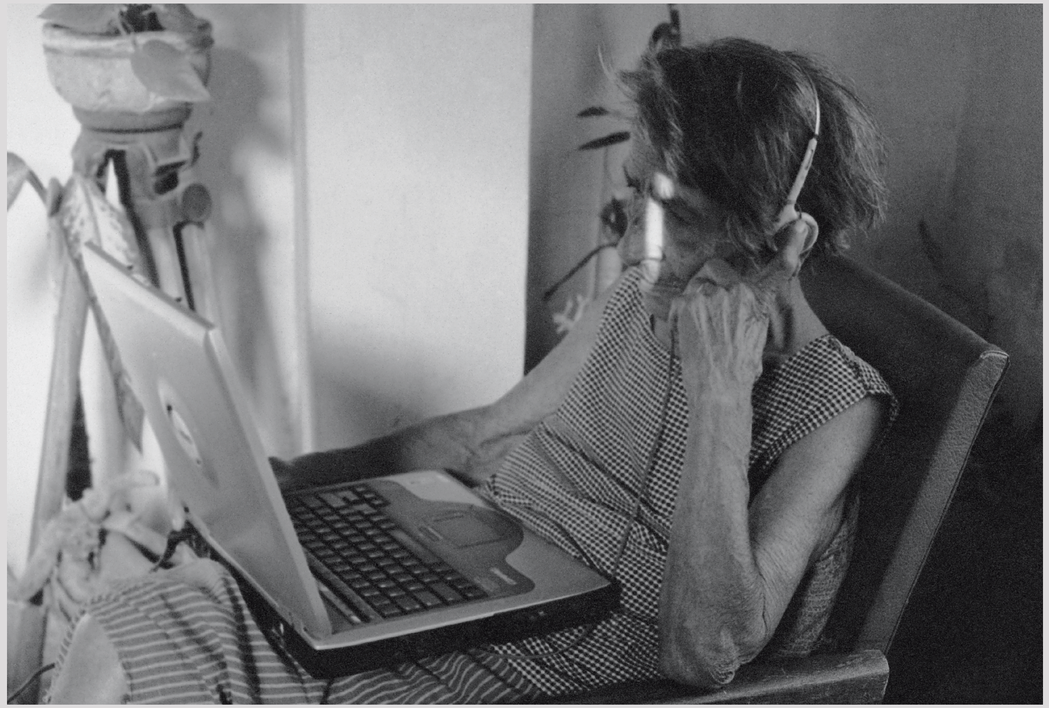
Maneckshaw's death brought to an end an era in Homai's life. It was a close friendship and companionship that had lasted for forty-three years. Homai owed her choice of profession to him, as well as some of the directions that her life had taken. Like all bonded couples they had their differences too. Homai would have liked to do a lot more street photography, but it was Maneckshaw who felt that she should concentrate on political photographs. Maneckshaw tended to play safe most of the time, while Homai





was the impatient one. He was the one who kept the accounts and managed the money, but he was also unwilling to take any risks and wasn't adventurous like Homai. "Life would have been suffocating if I didn't have the option of doing outdoor photography most of the time. Maneckshaw had a sense of humour but he was not willing to make too much of an effort to meet other people. We lived a rather isolated life as a result. Even the house at Hauz Khas was my doing. I said we must have a place for ourselves if we are going to live in Delhi and he agreed. For everything he said, 'this is beyond us.' He didn't desire any adventure. He wouldn't join a club or anything. From home to office and office to home and that was it. That meant I had to be like that too. I couldn't make any friends in Delhi. I couldn't go to places because I couldn't go alone. I couldn't go to Parsi houses in Delhi to meet people because he wouldn't go...When he fell very ill, he said

Maneckshaw and Homai shared forty-three years of companionship and friendship.



Reading the manuscript for the book in Baroda, April 2005.
Photograph by Sabeena Gadihoke.

Homai *Kabadiwala* and Friendly Ghosts

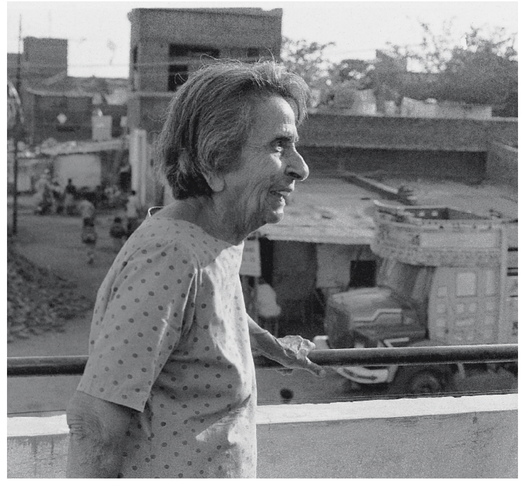
"I am just like Robinson Crusoe on an island except that I live in a city! If I were to be left on an island, I think I would be able to look after myself. After Farouq's death, I started living alone in Baroda. I couldn't say that it's a lonely life because I like it this way. It's yet another change in my life. Once again I am a bachelor woman! How many phases I have passed through. And they have always been interesting, all of them. I think that God has been extremely nice to me, giving me all that I ever wanted without craving for it. Once in a while I would say, 'Ha, I would like to do this!'—and forget about it, and there it was in front of me!"

Homai Vyarawalla in an interview, 2004

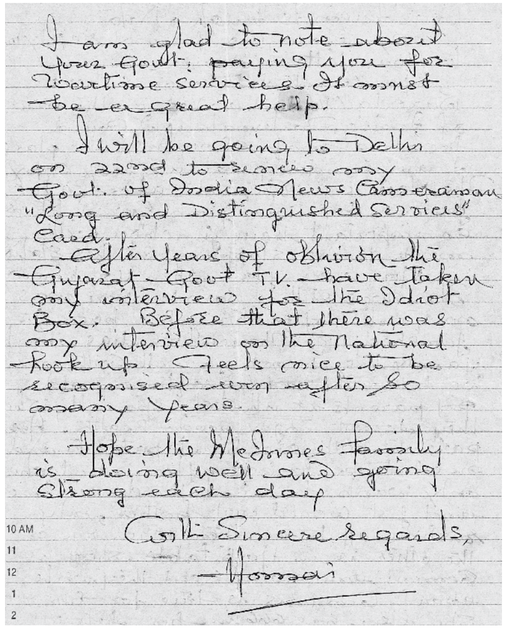
Homai Vyarawalla never planned to spend the rest of her life in Baroda but that was the way it turned out to be. She has since spent twenty-three years there. I met Homai first in 1997 when I started to make a documentary on three women photographers. She seemed a bit stern when I began filming, but that reserve was to break down quickly. I was to meet her almost every few months for nine years after that, to get to know her better, and later to chronicle her amazing life.

Homai's home is located in a mixed neighbourhood in Nizampura, Baroda, opposite Chistia Nagar. It has a predominantly Muslim population who are mostly vegetable sellers. A large number of Sikhs migrated here from Punjab and built a *gurdwara* close to her house. The locality also has a section of more affluent Hindu families and there was considerable tension in the area during the Gujarat violence in 2002.[1] It is ironic that Homai showed me her photographs of the *taziya* procession in Bombay of the thirties, on the eve of Muharram, March 2nd, 2004, in Baroda when the procession was going to be called off for the fourth year in succession. It had not been allowed in 2001 because of the earthquake, in 2002 due to the genocide in Gujarat and in 2003 due to continued tensions and stone pelting. In 2004, Muslim leaders shaken by sporadic riots in Baroda a week earlier had decided to call off the Qatl ki Raat programme and the *taziya* procession yet again. This time the reason was the possible provocation of communal riots in Baroda.[2] Other processions were allowed and on the day of my arrival in Baroda earlier that week I found all roads blocked with massive processions for a major *puja*.

Homai will turn ninety-two this December and she has lived on her own for the last sixteen years. She says her life has come a full circle and calls herself a "bachelor girl". Homai often chuckles about a magazine article, published a few years ago, which stated that



Homai on her terrace in Nizampura.
Photograph by Sabeena Gadihoke.



I am glad to note about your Govt. paying you for overtime services. It must be a great help.

I will be going to Delhi on 22nd to receive my Govt. of India News Cameraman "Long and Distinguished Services" Card.

After years of oblivion the Gujarat Govt T.V. have taken my interview for the Idiot Box. Before that there was my interview on the National Hook up. Feels nice to be recognised even after so many years.

Hope the McInnes family is doing well and going strong each day

With Sincere regards,

Homai

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An excerpt from a letter written by Homai to Hugh McInnes in the early nineties after the first few interviews with her appeared on Indian television, twenty-three years after her retirement from photography.

she had to knit sweaters to earn a living. On the contrary, she has given away almost all her earnings to charity and continues to do so. "Poverty teaches you so many things, among them that you don't need much money to make you happy. I believe God has given me whatever I have as a trustee and not for my own pleasure alone. I would feel guilty if I wasted it on myself."

Homai manages everything on her own. She cooks, cleans, drives, shops and creates wonderful things with her hands. She is also a carpenter, plumber, electrician, architect and general handyperson. In all these skills she is her own inventor, designer and a collector of things. Homai *"Kabadiwala"* as she calls herself, never throws anything of use. It could be a bit of string, a banana peel, egg shells, or broken antenna wires that she used to make her nameplate. Most objects and furniture in her house have been fashioned by her. She makes her own clothes, repairs her own slippers and cuts her own hair. At one point of time she used to make her own slippers. She can upholster sofas, paint walls and make furniture. One of the maids in Pilani observed her building walls and told the neighbours, *"Yeh to apna ghar bhi bana legi apne haath se"*—"She is even capable of building her own house." This wasn't absolutely untrue because in 1964, Homai actually designed the blueprint of their house in Hauz Khas, Delhi. The house was planned according to the direction of the wind. Homai checked this with the meteorological department so it wouldn't need fans all the time. She even instructed the mason about how to make the staircase. People used to ask her, *"Tum itne paise ekatha kar ke kya karogi, jab sab cheez tum apne haath se hi kar logi?"*—"What will you do with all the money you collect when you do everything with your own hands?" Her response: "There comes a time when you don't get anything. When there are no people to do things for you. Then you must be able to stand on your own legs. Find some other way of doing it, something different and something useful."

In some ways Homai does live on an island. Her home at sleepy Chhani Jakat Naka in Baroda is far removed from all her friends and acquaintances in Delhi. She doesn't have too many people visiting her. When she was very sick in August 2003, she couldn't step out to buy provisions. She refused to see a doctor or take medication either. Instead she cured herself with balm, Ayurvedic cough tablets, coconut water and lots of patience. Yet again the friendly spirits came to her rescue. The papaya tree in Homai's garden suddenly started to bear fruit and she survived on it. She holds that my coming at that time to be with her was another manifestation of "spiritual" intervention. *"Apna haath jagannaath jaante ho na"*—"Depend upon the strength of your own hands," she tells me.

Mostly confined to the home at the age of ninety-one she observes the construction site on the dusty street outside her window and

Most letters and envelopes sent by Homai are on recycled paper.

Surrounded by images from the past.

Left: With her fifty-year-old car. Its original registration number was Homai's lucky number thirteen. "It has misbehaved ever since I changed the registration number in Baroda."
Photographs courtesy: Hemant Mehta, UNESCO-Parzor.