



FAMILY TIES
From left: Sujay, Minal, Urvashi and Jairaj Thacker with the family matriarch, Kesar, and her grandson Aviraj

LIFE

Class act

Meet the Thackers, a family whose rise dates back to the Swadeshi movement, and whose lows matched the moody stock market. But through it all, they have consistently given back to society by building some of the country's foremost educational institutions, finds **SHEREE GOMES GUPTA**

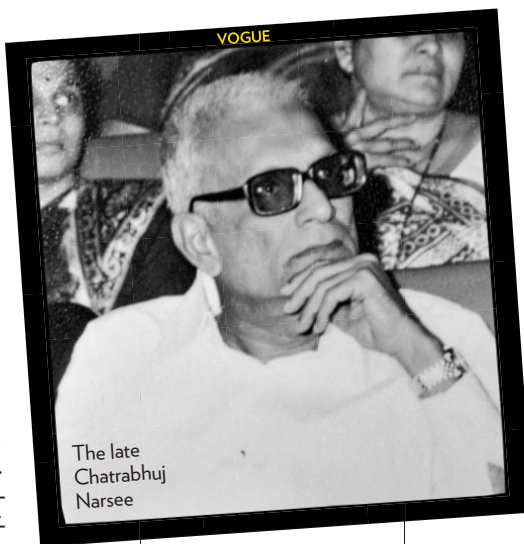
When I first met bonsai artist and author Urvashi Thacker over a decade ago at a friend's home in Mumbai, there was an instant connect despite our 20-year age gap. It was, of course, her warmth and hospitality that drew me in. In the years that followed, I would learn more about her family's past and current accomplishments, and why the Thackers are so well-respected in the field of education. And what upholding a family legacy truly means. >

SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

If you drive around suburban Mumbai, you'll find several educational institutions, and even a road, named after Narsee Monjee Thacker, Urvashi's late grandfather-in-law. Ironically, the autodidact never received a formal education. Instead, he spent hours under streetlights perfecting his mother tongue, Gujarati, and learning English, Hindi and Marathi while prudently mastering accountancy even as he made ends meet as a street hawker selling hats. "He was one of the leading stockbrokers in the city, and even after suffering a severe financial setback he didn't concede defeat," recalls Urvashi during one of our thali lunches at her palatial bungalow, Nirant, in Vile Parle, Mumbai, where the family has been living since 1929. She tells me how the family patriarch went on to join Mahatma Gandhi's Swadeshi movement and subsequently set up successful companies that would take on the British Raj as well as further his philanthropic efforts in the field of education and other humanitarian causes, making him a hero for many.

'Nirant' means 'peace' and their abode comes across as an oasis of sorts in the concrete jungle that is Mumbai. The noise of the crowded commercial lanes and busy traffic outside are drowned almost as soon as you enter their tree-lined gates. Inside, Urvashi's gorgeous bonsais take over, leaving just enough room for a badminton court in the backyard, and offering you a glimpse of the family's love for sports. The interiors are a mix of classic and modern, catering to the needs of the cross-generational members that reside here. Witnessing a thriving joint family is a rare sight these days, especially in a busy megalopolis. A close-knit family, the Thackers share a strong bond, and even today make it a point to have lunches and dinners together.

A large picture of Narsee Monjee's son, the late Chatrabhuj Narsee, finds pride of place in the living room. In many ways, he remains the family's guiding force. Despite the lack of formal tutelage, Chatrabhuj, along with his two younger brothers (they were forced to give up schooling after their father's untimely demise), led the family to prosperity, finally establishing the Narsee Monjee Educational Trust (NMET) in 1970. A year later, he founded the now prestigious co-educational Jamnabai Narsee School (JNS), named after his mother, hiring the best teaching and support staff he could.



The late Chatrabhuj Narsee

"It was my grandfather's (Chatrabhuj Narsee) belief that we should give back to society that propelled me to take his vision forward"

—JAIRAJ THACKER

Speak to old-timers in the area and they will regale you with tales about 'Chatrabhujbhai' and his strict code of ethics. Whether it was losing out on star kids as students to ensure the others did not get disturbed by bodyguards and other fanfare that follows, or turning down admission to kids from influential families if they didn't meet the criteria, nothing could get Chatrabhuj to go against his principles. Even his grandchildren who attended the school were not given preferential treatment. "We had to work doubly hard to prove ourselves," recalls Urvashi's son, Sujay Jairaj.

Despite his strict demeanour, however, Chatrabhuj was, as Sujay puts it, "a fun grandad, who struck just the right balance between his personal and professional life." He strongly believed that children needed to bond with their families and enjoy free play. His was one of the first mainstream schools in the country to take a holistic approach towards education, sowing the seeds for a more progressive mindset.

SPARK NOTES

Most of Chatrabhuj's kin remain closely connected to education in one way or the other—his two daughters married into families that founded the DJ Sanghvi College of Engineering and the Jitendra Chauhan College of Law in Mumbai, while several other relatives are on the board of trustees at NMET. His son, Jairaj C Thacker, took on the baton after his passing in 1998. "It was his belief that we should give back to society that propelled me to take his vision forward," says Jairaj, who deftly juggles his responsibilities at the school as well as at his family-run business.

We're in Jairaj's office at JNS, once occupied by his father. Like most days, he has just finished a meeting with the principal and on his schedule are interactions with his teaching staff as well as parents. His management style is hands-on, and that has made him quite popular among parents and teachers alike. "My doors are always open to anyone who has a problem—we try our best to solve it if we can. Our policy, right from my father's time till date, is to keep everything clean and transparent," adds Jairaj, who will soon complete 20 years as the managing trustee of NMET. Under his reign, JNS has grown from strength to strength, offering both the Indian as well as an international curriculum (IB), besides being one of the biggest donors to various >

institutions in the area, such as the Kamla Dharamshi Narsee Shruti School for the hearing impaired.

Like his father, Jairaj too strongly believes in giving students a holistic education, which is why, besides academics, the school also focuses on sports and co-curricular activities. “The overall development of a child is extremely important, especially in today’s day and age, to achieve your dreams and goals. For us the kids always come first,” he adds.

GEN NOW

The last few years have seen a giant surge in the JNS brand, mainly because of the presence of Sujay, who not only works side by side with his dad, Jairaj, at Golden Chemicals, but is also a trustee at NMET and a chairperson at Chatrabhuj Narsee School, Kandivali. “I wanted to get out to explore the world a bit, since I was in such a protected environment in Mumbai, and that year really changed me, widening my vision,” adds Sujay. So, after completing his graduation from the NM College of Commerce and Economics, this sports enthusiast (he is an advanced-level skier; founder of India’s largest cycling group, Mumbai Cycling Enthusiasts; a former national badminton player; an aspiring shooter and an avid producer of sports-based films) went on to pursue a Master’s in International Management at the University of Strathclyde, UK. Upon his return, Sujay immersed himself in upgrading the structure and technology at JNS, soon acquiring the decision-making authority from the board of trustees in all major areas as well as the expansion of the educational institute. “I am not an architect, but I realised fairly early that architecture, design and technology are what I love best.”

For Sujay, like the rest of his family, education is not a business. Besides the school in Mumbai, which he continues upgrading, he has played a major role in NMET, winning the bid by the then CM of Gujarat and now Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, and launching the world-class JNS in Gandhinagar. He has also founded other schools even as he’s actively involved in operations and management across various institutes in India. All this, and he’s just 36. “When I travel abroad, I ensure I visit at least one school, if not more. Even on my honeymoon in Singapore I remember visiting four schools. My wife was quite shocked, but for me it has been, and will always be, all about learning and bringing back to In-

“When I travel abroad, I ensure I visit at least one school... For me it has always been about learning and bringing back to India and our schools”

—SUJAY JAIRAJ

dia and our schools,” he says.

Currently, Sujay is also busy working on his passion project—the Urvashi Foundation, named after his mother. “The idea of this foundation is to help underprivileged kids complete their education by sponsoring schools that need help. It’s sad that even today, when you go to the interiors of India, you’ll find children who don’t even have shoes to wear to school or tables and chairs to study,” he says. His goal is to help a thousand students this year, and at least a lakh in five years. “I’m more involved in the strategising, monitoring and ensuring that the money is being used in the right places,” adds the father of two-year-old Aviraj.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

The women in the Thacker family are equally invested in their family legacy. When her husband, Jairaj, took over as managing trustee, Urvashi was quick to offer her own ideas to further her late great-grandfather-in-law’s philanthropic endeavours after she was appointed a trustee at NMET. She started organising bonsai fundraising exhibitions in the school, which were, and are still, attended by many of the area’s famous residents (actor Amitabh Bachchan is on their impressive guestlist), and proceeds from which are given to various charities. “I also teach a bonsai class for our teachers. It’s therapeutic and de-stressing,” she adds. Her proudest achievement, of course, is her idea of starting sports day for the mentally and physically challenged children in Mumbai. “We have a gala event for the children from special schools in the city. We ensure we get a celebrity because the kids love it. It’s a big day for them, and they look forward to it for months,” she says.

And then there’s Minal Thacker, Sujay’s wife. Inspired by her husband’s family, the young hotelier joined hands with him to start what is now Mumbai’s largest IGCSE school—the Chatrabhuj Narsee School (CNS) in Kandivali, backed by her own family’s trust, the Methibhai Devraj Gundecha Foundation (MDGF). “We built the school from scratch. And today, we are completely involved in its day-to-day functioning,” says the 32-year-old, who takes a break from work and her mommy duties to be at CNS at least thrice a week. Minal, like the rest of her kin, has several other plans in the pipeline, most of which align in furthering this storied family’s philanthropic goals. ■



Urvashi with her daughter-in-law, Minal