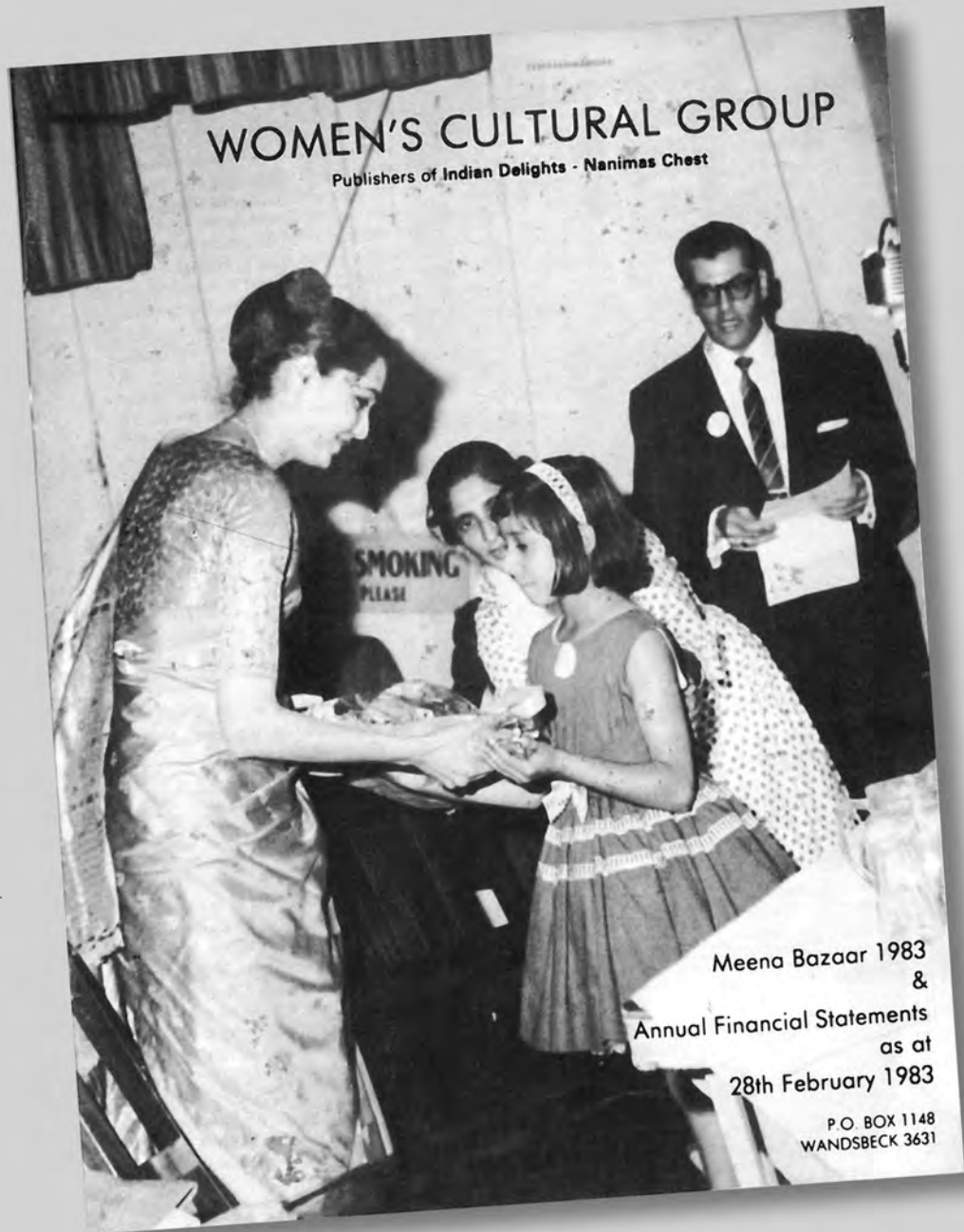


WOMEN'S CULTURAL GROUP

Publishers of Indian Delights - Nanimas Chest



Meena Bazaar 1983
&
Annual Financial Statements
as at
28th February 1983

P.O. BOX 1148
WANDSBECK 3631

There are many ways of telling the story of the Women's Cultural Group. Over more than five decades and to mark various anniversaries, the Group has produced several pamphlets publicising its organisational life and its many achievements. Its founding leader, Zuleikha Mayat, is the author of most of these texts and an accomplished chronicler of the past.¹ So when, as academic historians, we were approached to write the Group's story, we interpreted this as a request to bring our critical and analytical capacities into the mix. A scholarly approach requires that we locate the Group within a broad social and theoretical framework, steer clear of hagiography and interrogate concepts that 'insiders' might take for granted.

It was 2007 and Shamil Jeppie's fine book *Language, Identity, Modernity: The Arabic Study Circle of Durban* had just been published. At the Durban launch, with characteristic directness, Zuleikha Mayat commented on a glaring absence: women had been left almost entirely out of the account! The Women's Cultural Group, she explained, had

coursed through the same terrain as the Circle, suffering public attitudes, criticisms... We worked closely with the Circle in those programmes that interested us. We publicised their functions, participating in the events as far as was allowed, helping behind the scenes, mutually allowing lecturers in our houses. In retrospect, I find that the outreach from the Circle's

side was not far reaching. This conclusion is endorsed as I read through *Language, Identity, Modernity*. We seem to have been airbrushed from the Circle's minutes and deleted from the memories of the officials that had been interviewed by the author.²

The 'airbrush' treatment was not simply applied to the wives who hosted Circle members at house meetings or who were the invisible hands and organisational prowess behind public dinners, fundraisers and other major events. Zubeida Barmania, another founding member of the Women's Cultural Group, informed us that she had been part of the Circle in its early years:

I used to go to the Arabic Study Circle – they've never mentioned it but I was there as well. Nobody's ever mentioned it...I was the only woman in the Arabic Study Circle when it started...and if anybody's alive that was there they'll tell you, no, that's true!

Also missing from Jeppie's book was an acknowledgement of the Women's Cultural Group itself, which – if the gender identity of Arabic Study Circle membership had been approached as a field of inquiry rather than as a given trait – could certainly have been a fruitful focus within that work. And these women were often the fundraisers for educational bursaries that Jeppie credited to the Circle.

Our interest in writing this history of the Women's Cultural Group may at first appear to be an attempt to 'balance out' Jeppie's scholarship, or to provide a 'companion piece' that parallels in text the gender partitioning commonly attributed to things Islamic. Such a disservice to both works is emphatically not our intention. The Women's Cultural Group suggests its own themes and categories for historical inquiry. However, in important ways the studies may indeed be considered complementary, as suggested by the linkages between the two organisations. More pertinently, the early- to mid-20th century rise of civic associations and cultural societies in segregated Durban, as spaces in which residents crafted modern forms of self and collective identity, brings these two studies into a similar analytical frame, as does their concern with Islam as a foundation for social and intellectual engagement.

This story also – we think, inevitably – brings into focus the individual figure of Zuleikha Mayat, her role as the Group's founding leader and – to the

extent that the trajectory of the Group is bound up with it – her biography. Yet we are also aware that a special focus on any individual seems to go against the grain of the Group’s own ideal of a collective spirit. This ethic so impressed itself on historian Joan Wardorp, who interviewed members about *Indian Delights* in 2005, that she did not name the women she interviewed, choosing rather to ‘intertwine and complicate the boundaries of the individual and the collective’.³ We have chosen to identify individual women and to draw upon the personal narratives that they shared with us. Zuleikha Mayat’s biographical details and her connections with other social circles and political networks help explain some of the Group’s early aims and the directions they took. Her story, and those of other members, also help to deepen the collective portrait and to bring alive social patterns and historical trends that we believe to be thematic. Detailed accounts of the lives of ordinary individuals reveal not only the complexity of the national and local structures at play, but also acquaint the reader with the diversity of personal experience and family background represented among the Group’s protagonists.

In writing this history we relied on three sources of information. Many a file, folder and box laden with documents and memorabilia came from the Women’s Cultural Group’s archives. A second source was the personal records of Zuleikha Mayat, including relevant correspondence, clippings from her newspaper column ‘Fahmida’s World’, radio essays she recorded for the South African Broadcasting Corporation and a variety of materials pertaining to dinners, lectures, celebrations and events sponsored by the Group. A third, very rich well of information comes from the memories of current and one-time Group members and affiliates who spoke to us in formal interviews.⁴

In keeping with her request for an objective account, Zuleikha Mayat encouraged us to pursue as many perspectives as possible and took special trouble to point out those documents that revealed mistakes and disagreements related to her own leadership and within the Group as a whole. Considering that voluntary work so often depends upon close inter-personal ties and hierarchies that are mediated as much through strong personalities as through friendship, it would be extraordinary for any organisation to exist for fifty years without fallouts and setbacks! We have not tried to avoid documenting internal conflicts. However, what can appear to be a crisis between insiders can seem far less consequential in the broader lens of historical

perspective. From an analytical angle, it is not inter-personal tensions but structural realities that demand greater focus. For example, the inter-generational composition of the Group – one of its crucial strengths – also signals the complexities of a changing world with changing views about family, public life, community, work, marriage and society. Additionally, the Group's positioning relative to the social and economic landscape of Durban has ensured that the themes of class, gender, ethnicity, language and race thread their way through this book.

This research has been a particularly engaging experience for us as co-authors because it so frequently invited floods of our own memories: recollections of family, the role of food, and the many women (mothers, aunts, grandmothers) whose activities make fluid the spaces between home and community, between domestic and civic life. Our processes of thinking and writing also benefited greatly from continuous dialogue with one another, exchanges in which flashes of deeply rooted personal reflection sometimes guided our thinking about gendered labour, social networks and economic class. For example, Goolam wrote:

the morning e-mail got me thinking (nostalgically).

my mother was a fabulous cook and i still keep hearing 'she was a...'.
she did a lot of cooking. we had table boarders (all the transvaal students) who came home for breakfast, then took lunch that my mother prepared for each one, then came for supper. it was lunch and supper on the weekends. the present minister of justice, enver surtee, was one of them.

she also cooked a pot lunch for a storeowner and his family from monday to friday.

she made rotis daily for khyber restaurants.

on saturdays she made kebab/rotis which my father sold at the indian market.

almost every day of the week we had one or other visitor from out of town who would come for their shopping. they would use our house as the base as we lived in pine street; and have lunch, of course.

on friday, a number of staff from the shop where my dad worked would come for lunch.

on friday, a number of staff from the shop where my dad worked would come for lunch.

and she was a dressmaker for a number of people.
 all this because my father was an underpaid retail assistant in grey street.
 and they said that our mothers were 'housewives'.
 my mother never used a cookbook.

These reflexive moments in our own research process contribute to our hope that this story will engage the imaginations of many different kinds of readings and readers. We have endeavoured to write an account that will capture both scholarly and local interest, one that will provoke debate as well as celebrate achievements. We are aware that some readers will wish for more detail precisely where others would prefer a more rounded summary, and we take responsibility for our own choices of emphases, angles of analysis and any inadvertent omissions.

We would like to express our gratitude to all the members and affiliates, past and present, of the Women's Cultural Group. We are particularly indebted to those who shared their experiences and perspectives in interviews: Laila Ally, Sayedah Ansari, Zubeida Barmania, Virginia Gcabashe, Mary Grice, Mariam Jeewa, Nafisa Jeewa, Shairbanu Lockhat, Fatima Mayat, Shameema Mayat, Zuleikha Mayat, Fatima Mayet, Fatima Meer, Siko Mji, Safoura Mohammed, Zarina Moolla, Zohra Moosa, Mariam Motala, Yusuf Motala, Hajira Omar, Fatima Patel, Gori Patel, Zubeida Patel, Mariam Rajah, Fatima Randeree, Zarina Rawat, Zubeida Seedat, Sara Simjee, Khatija Vawda and Ayesha Vorajee. Thembisa was invited to experience work behind the scenes during meetings and fundraising events and so witnessed the Group ethos in practice – an ethos that combines hard work, laughter, resourcefulness, friendship and a roll-up-the-sleeves efficiency, honed through decades of working as a team.

We are grateful to our colleagues in the History Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal who, in seminars and through dialogue, expressed enthusiasm for this local 'hidden' history and the broader questions it evokes. At the HSRC Press, Roshan Cader and freelancers Mary Ralphs and Jenny Young have exercised creativity and vision in producing this book. Finally, our special thanks to Zuleikha Mayat, for whom the Women's Cultural Group has been a life's work and whose deep faith in its membership shines through every one of the many interview hours she gave to us.



Sayedah Ansari with the trophy she won at the speech contest in 1954, the event that sparked the formation of the Women's Cultural Group.