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### STEPPING OUT



In 1954, Zuleikha Mayat and a number of other Muslim women in Durban participated in a speech contest sponsored by the Arabic Study Circle. The Circle was headed up by Dr Daoud Mall, a medical doctor interested in religious scholarship and modernist interpretations of the Qur'an.<sup>1</sup> His wife, Zuleikha Mayat's sister Bibi, was involved in the practical functioning of the Circle's activities and meetings, drawing upon her friends to help in preparing food, raising funds, and organising events. Shamil Jeppie points out that the Circle drew its panel of judges for the competition from professional and academic institutions, as well as religious leadership, 'reflect[ing] the Circle's attempt to act as a conduit for modernity by looking to the appropriate and modern experts in a particular field as a source of advice and knowledge'.<sup>2</sup>

The speech contest demonstrated another important aspect of the modernist orientation of the men in the Arabic Study Circle: they were advocates of women's civic and intellectual participation. Yet, despite their advertisement in *Indian Views* announcing a competition that was 'open to women', there remained the question of how it would proceed. Bibi Mall and her friends proffered a solution. Zuleikha Mayat recalls that

the contest, which was for men, [also offered] a separate session for women. But now: who would chair the women's sections? At that time there was



*Informal social groups like 'The Bridgeplayers' Wives Club' overlapped with membership of women's voluntary societies. Women such as Zuleikha Mayat (standing, far right) enjoyed the companionship of the wives of professional men, such as Hajra Seedat (seated fourth from left, wife of Dr Kassim Seedat) and Rookani Padayachee (seated far right, wife of Dr Nad Padayachee) as well as with women who were professionals in their own right, such as Dr K Goonam (wearing glasses).*

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no society and so on. So my sister said, 'What do we do?' So we looked around us and [there was] a women's society that was virtually on its last legs, but it still had a name, so we used their name to launch this first [contest]. And immediately after that contest, those of us who had participated formed this [Women's Cultural] Group.

For the participants, the speech contest was a literal and symbolic discovery of a public voice. This entry into public space, even though it was under very controlled circumstances, was revolutionary for the conservative Muslim community of Durban. As far as the women were concerned, this was a moment of exuberance to build upon. Zohra Moosa can clearly remember their spirited enthusiasm and that 'afterwards Mrs Mayat said, "Why don't we form a group where we can have debates and, you know, sort of get visiting lecturers to come and give us a talk, something cultural?" and we decided to form the Group'. They conferred and consulted other friends. Zuby Seedat recalls that first meeting when 'Julu [Zuleikha Mayat] phoned...she got hold of us and we all went and met there one day and we hatched the plot to start this Group'.

Seedat was asked to come to the flat in Foundry Lane where Zuleikha and Dr Mayat had just set up home together as a couple on their own. Seedat brought along her great friend, Tehmina Rustomjee. At the meeting there were also Bibi Mall, Zohra Moosa (née Jhaveri) and her sisters Bilqish and Laila, Khatija Vawda, Zubeida Barmania, Fatima Osman (later Loonat), Sayedah Ansari, Fatima Meer and Devi Bughwan – thirteen women in all. They considered the question of how to use their energy and creativity to make an impact in the community and in the world at large. Seedat remembers, 'We all thought it was a good idea. It would be fun to start something, you know...we thought there was a necessity for it', and so they formed a voluntary association, a women's society. Two years later, Zuleikha Mayat, writing as 'Fahmida' in her *Indian Views* column, summarised what the Group was about:

Whilst there is no religious or age bar, the present members are practically all Muslim girls in the younger age group. It is the aim of this society to promote cultural activities amongst the community and entertain them with plays, debates etc. Amongst themselves, the members try to discuss and understand various problems that confront the community and to have an intellectual appreciation of religious culture and art.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of a women's society was not a new or original one. By this time, Indian women had, for almost half a century already, been forming associations with an eye to helping to shape their world and improve life for 'the community' in Durban. Women's societies had been a part of the modernist imagination that shaped reformist colonial politics in India and in South Africa – functioning in liberal circles as a sign of progress and civilisation. This meant that there were role models to emulate or reject, and a widespread understanding that, in the absence of formal and customary political authority, voluntary associations could provide women (and other subjugated groups) with a measure of civic and public influence. Access to such power, however, had not gone uncontested. In 1929, *Indian Opinion*, a newspaper which was at the time edited by Mohandas Gandhi's son Manilal and published in Natal, reported that the 'women's enfranchisement movement in this country is daily gaining strength' and chastised 'mothers...crying for political rights while the children are lacking the refinement and character of olden days':

If the mother is to be praised for the greatness of man she is equally to be censured for the degradation of man. Mother is the maker of a man – of a nation. That is why wise men have said 'the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world'. Would that the modern mothers realized their true greatness and retained their lovable femininity and directed it in its right channels, than to seek masculine powers or rather the shadow for the substance.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the quest for civic power was not a claim to a 'masculine' privilege or identity. Several societies for Indian women sprang up in 20th-century Natal clinging tightly to discourses of feminine respectability. The Durban Indian Women's Association, formed in 1907, initially comprised the wives of educated Tamil-speaking men: Mrs Bryan Gabriel, Mrs Ellen Paul, Mrs KR Nayanah, Mrs VR Moodaly (vice-president), Miss R Goonaruthinummal (secretary) and Miss Cecilia Sigamoney. The Association took a position on many of the issues affecting Indians at the time, speaking specifically to worries about gender morality. In 1909, for example, it passed a resolution regarding the £3 tax imposed on all non-indentured Indians. It was, they argued,

repugnant to British justice to impose a tax upon women and girls to live with their husbands or natural guardians. The law is an immoral one for

it fosters domestic infelicity and leads to evil tendencies. The susceptibilities of the women must be respected. It is earnestly hoped that the tax upon women and girls will be repealed, otherwise, as the case is of a grave nature, it will result in serious consequences.<sup>5</sup>

In 1914, with Kasturba Gandhi, wife of Mohandas Gandhi, as a patron, the Indian Women's Sabha was formed to 'study the Hindu religion and Social Progress'.<sup>6</sup> New energy was given to women's education and civic participation following the Cape Town Agreement of 1927. The upliftment of Indian women was billed as an important measure of Indian social development and wives were again mobilised as a force for change. This included the wives of various Agents-General who took an active hand in forming organisations in which Indian women could be mentored in the gentilities of modern imperial culture. For example, from 1933, Lady Kunwarani Maharaj Singh, wife of the then Agent-General, presided over a refurbished Durban Indian Women's Association with Christian missionary zeal, and promoted Indian women's involvement in areas of social welfare, house hygiene, and 'general improvement'. The Association engaged in charity work, raising funds for soup kitchens and welfare interventions in the Magazine Barracks;<sup>7</sup> they distributed clothing, donated in cash and kind to the Red Cross, sold Christmas Stamps, bought books for schoolchildren, offered sewing classes, made speeches and played music.<sup>8</sup> The office holders in the Association included women from the families of prominent politicians. In 1938, for example, the officials were Mrs Sushila Gandhi, Mrs Ghadija Christopher, Mrs Royeppen and Mrs Halima Jhaveri<sup>9</sup> (aunt to three of the founding members of the Women's Cultural Group).

The Association extended into the community what were deemed to be women's natural proclivities for caregiving labour in the home. European women often served in leadership positions, promoting literacy and charitable sisterhood. From its AGM in 1936, we find that Councillor Edith Benson was chairwoman and that Durban's mayoress, Mrs George Cyrns, presided.<sup>10</sup> In 1934, *Indian Opinion* reported that the Kunwarani delivered an address to the Association for University Women in which she had 'appealed earnestly for European women to come forward and help the Indian woman to improve herself and to turn her into a decent citizen, but pointed out that this was well-nigh impossible until good schools, with free education, were available.'<sup>11</sup> The education of girls was indeed a sticking point. In 1931, the Agent-General, Sir

Kurma Reddi, made a speech at the Mitchell Crescent Indian Girls School, complaining that the 'girls' school is staffed by three teachers, but there are only nineteen pupils in the whole school, which means less than seven for each teacher. You probably know that the Education Department expects a minimum number of thirty pupils to each class.' Addressing the males in the crowd, he appealed to politics and duty:

You know that under the terms of the Cape Town Agreement we have agreed that we will maintain a western standard of civilization amongst our people. I would ask you if this is possible if our girls are not given a better education than at present? Are we not failing in our duty in this respect in not responding to the authorities when they have given us a good school and with it a good chance? The only burden the authorities ask us to shoulder is to send our girls to school.<sup>12</sup>

Sir Kurma Reddi expressed his disappointment 'not to find a single Mahomedan girl attend[ing] this school' and warned of the consequences for the Muslim community more broadly:

Just think what this means. I know there is the purdah system that may be the difficulty, though it should not be for there are only girls in the school, and there are lady teachers. Where is the trouble?...Let our Mahomedan friends bring their children to school in their closed cars if they like or send them in closed carriages...I address the Mahomedan parents and ask if you are going to be left behind other sections of the community? If your girls are not educated you will find yourselves in the background. You have amongst your community some of our Indian leaders; you are the wealthiest section therein, for you are mostly traders and you are in a position to educate your girls, for you are rich. But if you remain apathetic, if you choose to neglect your children's education you will find yourselves in difficulties. Your boys are being educated; they will grow up and they will some day look about for an educated girl to marry. What will happen? Do you think they will want to take uneducated girls as their wives?

In the context of the region, the opening up of educational opportunities for girls was a general trend in both mission stations and government schools. African Christian converts were beginning to hold aspirations for their daughters

as well as their sons, as the nursing and teaching professions became more accessible. A growth in educational opportunities accompanied the labour stabilisation strategies engineered by the Durban Corporation, as literate African clerks and civil servants were in demand to manage urban population growth in the interwar period.

Societies and voluntary organisations promoting learning, cultural values, languages and community service were ubiquitous, vehicles both of an emerging bourgeois vision and of its moral and intellectual management. Football clubs in the Durban and district areas provided opportunities for future leaders like Albert Luthuli to cut their political teeth; associations like the YMCA became prominent. In 1932, the Bantu Social Centre was created to keep male African labourers off the streets during leisure hours, but participants were quick to use the space for political organising; snooker, draughts, ballroom dancing and beauty contests commingled with meetings of the Zulu Society and, later, the African National Congress. The growth of welfare and charity organisations, some with a religious basis, such as the McCord Zulu Hospital or the Bantu Welfare Association, emerged in the momentum of progressivist idealism, sometimes with the patronage of liberal intellectuals or missionaries. The city of Durban was laden with societies that sprouted up in communitarian silos.<sup>13</sup>

Many women's organisations formed around this time were religious, or specific to ethnic or language groups. For example, the Durban Women's Zionist League was founded in 1933 by Helena Lieberman, described as a 'dynamic and idealistic personality', for the 'preservation of Jewish Identity and the fostering of Jewish education',<sup>14</sup> as well as to support Jewish refugees from the Second World War and the state of Israel. Among the League's activities were sewing groups, dramatic performances and fêtes. The Union of Jewish Women of South Africa had a Durban branch that was active from 1937. They engaged in community works, such as the 'meals on wheels programme' which served hot food to elderly and frail people in their own homes, and helped to establish the Ekuthuleni Nursery School in 1958, first in Cato Manor and later (when Cato Manor residents were forcibly removed) in KwaMashu township.<sup>15</sup> A group known as the Gujarati Mahila Mandal was established in Durban in 1930 by Zaverben Patel, reputedly the first Gujarati woman to get a driver's licence in Durban. The organisation's focus was on promoting the Gujarati language and



while membership was theoretically open to all women, they overwhelmingly attracted Hindu membership. Over the years they raised funds for various social welfare and educational projects.<sup>16</sup> Gujarati women from Kathiawad formed the Kathiawad Hindu Mahila Samaj in 1950. Its members appeared on the local radio station to explain different aspects of their religion and participated in educational projects.<sup>17</sup> Among Tamil-speaking women, TD Pillay formed the Mathar Sangam (Women's Group) in Clairwood in 1928. This was a mainly religious group that remained active until 1960.<sup>18</sup> Thandroyen Subramani and Rukmani Naidoo formed the Cato Manor Mathar Sangam in 1947, an organisation of Tamil women that focused mainly on promoting the Tamil language and religion.<sup>19</sup>

An Indian Women's Reading and Education Circle was formed in February 1935. Through the newspapers, they invited interested parties to join, informing them that the annual subscription was one shilling per year, the 'rules were few', and that meetings were held monthly. Already, in the first year, there had been

some very enjoyable and interesting meetings and discussions on varied topics, such as the lives of famous women, including Helen Keller, Florence Nightingale, Annie Besant and some of the Greek heroines. There have been also interesting talks given by various speakers – Miss English, on the Natal Writers' Club; Miss Thelma Whitcutt, on her travels in Russia; Miss Alice Acutt, on Greece; Mrs Moore, on the work of the Christmas Stamp Fund; and Sister Pratt on the subject, 'Nursing and the Training of Nurses'.<sup>20</sup>

Towards the end of the decade, the Indian Women's Association came under fire for its conservative vision of women's advancement and its upper-class orientation. The Agents-General and their wives were accused in a newspaper commentary of having favoured one particular sector of the Indian community at a time when the community was in need of unification and more attention had to be given to the poor. A newspaper article in 1938 pronounced that 'the present Indian Women's Association, which was formed by Lady Kunwarani Singh, is a farce. The mere drinking of tea in one's home will not uplift Indian women.'<sup>21</sup> Although Mrs J Lawrence, the Association's secretary, replied with a long list of charitable achievements undertaken by members (adding also that 'the best societies drink tea'),<sup>22</sup> the criticism continued. Goonam Naidoo

of Pietermaritzburg accused the Association of being 'too much on the aristocratic side' and 'an inactive body with sparse attendances'. She went on to level further accusations of tea-quaffing futility, alleging that the Association 'did nothing but attend receptions and tea parties. If this is what [they call] working for the poor, then they have certainly done something.'<sup>23</sup> Another fierce objection was to the composition of leadership in the hands mainly of European ladies. R Govindamah complained that 'the Indian Women's Association is more or less composed of the well-to-do and its prominent officials are Europeans; surely we have capable persons who can occupy these positions comfortably with distinction.'<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, that same year, Edinburgh University-educated Dr K Goonam, the first Indian woman doctor in Natal, petitioned the Natal Indian Congress for the representation of women and was allegedly informed that women were 'not sufficiently advanced to receive representation'. Although this response was later denied by the organisation's leadership, the controversy generated a spate of letters to the press in support of women's inclusion in politics. Several months later, Goonam and others formed a women's group independent of the Indian Women's Association, both in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. In Durban, the first meeting was held at the Tamil Institute with Mrs VRR Moodley, one of the first Indian women schoolteachers, presiding. Their aims were more radical in terms of transforming the gendered and class-based status quo. Among their objectives, which sought the emancipation of Indian girls and women, they proposed to work for the political and social advancement of women; to encourage women to enter professions, trades and occupations; and to educate women to organise into trade unions to fight for better rates of pay and conditions of employment.<sup>25</sup> At the end of the year, *Indian Opinion* again weighed in on the matter of women's status, declaring it 'madness' for a woman to seek equality with a man, arguing that, indeed, she was 'lowering her dignity in doing so'.

God has created woman as the gentler sex and man is only honouring her by treating her as such...In moral and spiritual strength woman is far superior to man and if she only develops that...she will rule him and be the moulder of a nation. The present tendency of the woman in the West...will, we fear, bring about her own downfall and with it the downfall of humanity.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, women were taking an interest in politics for many reasons. In March of 1939, Dr Goonam's Women's League met at the Tamil Institute and passed a unanimous resolution against proposed segregation measures.<sup>27</sup> And pressures for gender liberalisation were also building in the commonwealth. When Lord Clarendon met local (mainly Muslim) Indian VIPs at the all-male Orient Club in Isipingo, he pointedly expressed 'regret' that he had 'not had the pleasure of meeting some of the wives and daughters of the prominent members of the club. If opportunity occurs, as I hope it will before we leave these shores, once again to visit the Orient Club, I hope...that the omission will be rectified.'<sup>28</sup>

The new Agent-General's wife, Mrs Rama Rau, arriving in 1938, moved into this contested terrain when she, like her predecessor, advocated voluntary associations as a means for women's upliftment. The *Cape Times* introduced her as an advocate of women's progress and an experienced advocate of social clubs, having served as a member in no less than twenty societies, including the Students' Union of the Indian YMCA, the 'Indian Section' of the Overseas League, the Board of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, and the British Commonwealth League.<sup>29</sup> In an appeal published in the *Natal Mercury*, Mrs Rama Rau called upon South African Indian women to emulate their Indian counterparts:

There are some social customs that belong to an older period of Indian life which my sisters in this country cling to and which retard their progress considerably. If they could have lived in their own motherland during the last fifteen years perhaps they would be more willing to throw aside hampering customs and adopt a more progressive mode of life. In India today women are taking their rightful place in public affairs by the side of men and playing important parts with great credit.<sup>30</sup>

In Durban, Mrs Rau urged the Indian Women's Association into more concerted action in recruiting members, expressing disappointment 'to see that of the eighty thousand Indians in Durban only forty-five of them are members of this association'.<sup>31</sup> She petitioned for land to be assigned by the municipality adjacent to Durban Girls' Secondary School in Dartnell Crescent in order to build a Women's Club. The Club, stated the Agent-General's secretary to the Town Clerk, would have 'a fourfold object – educational, cultural, recreational and social'. It would offer:

a lending library, and a room in which lectures could be given on subjects like Girl Guides, First-Aid, Home-Nursing, Child Welfare, trained Social Service, and topics of general interest...Arrangements would also be made for cultural activities – music, singing and play-acting, also sewing and fancywork. It is proposed to have a tennis court at the Club, and also to make provisions for healthy games like tenni-quoits, badminton, ping-pong, croquet...In short, the Club will function in much the same way as the YWCA.<sup>32</sup>

The same letter expressed the concern that ‘the backwardness of Indian women in South Africa has repeatedly been commented on by high authorities’ and proposed that a women’s club would do much to ‘help to counteract the prejudice against the education of girls and the purdah system itself’.

Within the heavy divisions of class and identity that framed the aims and composition of voluntary organisations, a gendered ideal of progressivism was thick in the humid Durban air during this period. Prominent male figures in the Indian community could showcase their willingness to be trendsetters of a diasporic modernism by sending their daughters to school; their wives and female dependents could join women’s clubs and organisations.

The women who founded the Women’s Cultural Group in 1954 were, overwhelmingly, daughters and wives within Gujarati-speaking families of trader class, and a few were from very prominent families indeed. Many of these women brought broad professional and business associations to the Group, along with progressive outlooks and a family history of involvements in charitable trusts, clubs and women’s societies. Yet the experiences and personal backgrounds that these women brought with them into the Group, and which helped to shape its aims and outlooks, still varied considerably. What it meant to be a Muslim woman in Durban at this time was by no means uniform. The short personal histories that follow demonstrate just how varied it could be.

### **Inheritances and new directions**

In the early half of the century, prominent businessman AI Kajee headed an enormously wealthy household and feared few social consequences for bucking conventions: everyone was entitled to associate with whoever they wished. Kajee ran two homes, one headed by his wife Amina in Mansfield (where his

immediate neighbour was Sorabjee Rustomjee, prominent businessman and political leader and father of Group founder-member, Tehmini Rustomjee), and another in Ryde Avenue in the then predominantly white area of Glenwood, where his alleged mistress, Pauline Morrell, the principal of the Durban Girls' Secondary School in Dartnell Crescent, hosted his many guests. These, according to his granddaughter Zubeida Barmania, included 'people like Chief Luthuli and other people [who] stayed with him – my grandmother wouldn't have been comfortable with that'. The widely read Kajee had one of the finest private libraries in Durban, and even his political opponents on the left, like IC Meer, HA Naidoo, Pauline Podbrey and Dawood Seedat, would frequent his home to access his books. Pauline Podbrey, who attended some of Kajee's parties, writes of his luxurious house:

His candle-lit dinner parties were posh affairs, with damask tablecloths, sparkling wine glasses, polished silver. One dressed up to go there and the men behaved with courtesy and charm. Of course the men far outnumbered the women; the only two females apart from me were Dorothy Naylor and Dr Goonam.<sup>33</sup>

Such a household incubated a cosmopolitan and confident eccentricity in a parochial locale. Reflecting on her girlhood and adolescence in this environment, Zubeida Barmania recognises that, in comparison with many of her contemporaries, she herself



*Al Kajee with his eleven-year-old granddaughter, Zubeida Barmania, in 1944.*



*Zubeida Barmania and her mother, Fatima, pushed the edges of a variety of social conventions.*

was not a conformist. I think they knew that – that I was out doing my thing and, you know, I was young and running around the world while they got married to proper cousins and had their children...they sort of saw me as this liberated woman...[and] one or two of my friends confided and told me actually that, you know, our mothers wondered if you were a good influence on us. *[laughs]*

Barmania's mother, Fatima, was a divorcee – quite a rare identity at this time – who had been broad in her personal associations. As her daughter remembers, 'women who were kind of shunned by society because they were second wives, or they were not Muslim, my mother would welcome them into the home, you know, she was very much for this underdog type of thing'. Her mother was also an especially close friend of Bibi Mall and Dr K Goonam, the latter who, ironically, was AI Kaje's great political foe. Barmania describes her mother, who ran her own clothing company, as 'very strong':

When we went to functions, weddings or whatever, I remember the men used to make her come and sit there, and she had great business relationships, formal relationships with a number of men in our community – Mahomedys, Lockhats, Paruks, all of them. They talked to her on a very

equal basis because she had established herself in business. My mother wearing a sari and having her own business – of course she was an exception.

Barmania's mother was indeed unusual in a community that practised strict *purdah*. Fatima Kajee, Bibi Mall, the cigarette-smoking Dr Goonam and another of their friends, Mrs Nad Padayachee, were also among a handful of women who dared to attend the cinema, which was seen as a largely male preserve, especially among Muslims. When Bibi's husband, Daoud Mall, started the Arabic Study Circle, Zubeida Barmania (who would later qualify as a barrister, move to Canada and, after 1994, return to South Africa, where she has served the new government led by the African National Congress in several capacities) attended their meetings and, a few years later, was among the first members of the Women's Cultural Group.

Another of the founding members, Zubeida Seedat, was the granddaughter of Mahomed Seedat, who, with his three brothers, was part of one of the earliest and most influential trading families in the town of Newcastle in northern Natal. Mahomed was the oldest of the brothers and was the first to settle in Newcastle in the late 1880s. His business did very well and he opened branches at Harrismith and Estcourt and built shops that were let out to tenants. He was involved in the Natal Indian Congress, and elected to chair the Newcastle Passive Resistance Committee during the 1913 coal miners' strike, initiated by Gandhi. Mahomed's son, Kassim, was born in Newcastle in 1897, educated at the New-castle Convent School, then in Aligarh in North India, Grant Medical School in Bombay and London University. He qualified as a medical doctor and practised for several years in India before returning to Natal and starting a medical practice in Durban.

Kassim's wife and Zubeida Seedat's mother, Hajra, was involved in the Indian Women's Association and in the passive resistance movement of 1946–48. Kassim was known for his willingness to assist people across lines of class, religion or ethnicity, and Zubeida grew up in a household where 'we kept our faiths to ourselves – so there was never any divide as to a Hindu/Muslim type of thing that we were aware of, or were made conscious of – not like today'. To the suggestion that her father was the 'first Muslim doctor in Durban' she mused, 'Was he the first Muslim doctor? I suppose he would be. I never thought about it because we never think in terms of Muslim/Hindu, that kind, you see.'



*Zubeida Barmania and Zubeida Seedat were both raised in families with cosmopolitan ways of viewing the world that informed their professional careers.*

Seedat recalled her first trip, as a child, to their village of Mota Varachia in Gujarat with her father:

People came from all over the area. They segregated them – the Indian villages – they had their own little ghettos – Muslim ghetto, Hindu ghetto, and that’s how they lived but, when they heard that my father had come, they were crossing over ghettos to come because he used to practise on horseback and go from one village to the other, one section to the other, so they knew him and, you know, he would look at them and talk about their ailments.

In Durban, her father settled in North Street, Greyville, and opened his practice in Grey Street. The stream of visitors to their home included people across religious, ethnic, linguistic and political divides – AI Kajee, Dr K Goonam, Sorabjee Rustomjee, Dr KM Mistri, VN Naik, Dr Monty Naicker, ‘all of them used to be in and out of our home so I knew them all...’ VN Naik’s family



hailed from the same village as the Seedats' and it was Zubeida Seedat's grandfather Mahomed who enticed VN Naik to immigrate to South Africa.<sup>34</sup>

Zubeida's maternal grandfather, Mohamed Ebrahim Motala, arrived as an orphan and married a white woman, Sarah Briton, who died not long after the wedding. He returned to India and remarried. Zubeida's mother, Hajra, was born in 1910. She recalls that 'my mother and them were educated by governesses...my grandfather had white governesses for them, sent them to madrassah, insisted that they learn proper Arabic – sent them to Malaya to learn how to do that – [but] didn't send them to formal school'. Motala lived in Foundry Lane, being the owner of the building in which Mahomed and Zuleikha Mayat rented an apartment, but he also had a weekend home in Currie Road on the Berea. Zubeida recalls that 'he had this car, [and a] white chauffeur driving them around, you know, with gloves and all that, incredible man'. Zubeida's closest friend was Sorabjee Rustomjee's daughter Tehmina:

Her father and my father were very good friends. She used to spend more time in my home than her home, and my mother was extremely fond of her in fact...[Later] he used to fly me to Johannesburg to spend my holidays, December holidays, with Tehmi. Then they went off to Dublin, he had a house in Dublin, Tehmi did her matric there and then she came down to Durban to be with her father in the business.

Tehmina Rustomjee, who served as treasurer of the Women's Cultural Group for many years, was the granddaughter of Parsee Rustomjee, who arrived in Natal in the late 1880s and was a close associate of Gandhi. Rustomjee, a successful businessman, donated generously to educational, welfare and religious organisations, be they Hindu, Muslim or Christian. At a farewell reception prior to his departure for India, Gandhi commented that Parsee Rustomjee 'knew no distinction of religion. He was a Parsee among Parsees, but also a Mahomedan among Mahomedans in that he would do for them, die for them, live for them. He was a Hindu amongst Hindus and would do for them likewise.'<sup>35</sup> When Rustomjee donated £1 500 to the Roman Catholic Indian Mission for an orphanage for Indian boys, at the opening ceremony a Muslim, Zohra Moosa's grandfather OHA Jhaveri, spoke on his behalf.<sup>36</sup> Differences of religion were clearly secondary; a fraternal mix of class and Gujarati identities was perhaps paramount. Tehmina was the daughter of Sorabjee Rustomjee, who, like his father, was also



*Formal family portraits, such as those depicting the Rustomjees (above) and the Moosas (below), capture the weight of influence common to many of Durban's trading families. Young Tehmina Rustomjee (seated centre), with her dynamic father Sorabjee at her shoulder (wearing a fez), and Zohra Moosa (in glasses), one of three Moosa sisters involved in the Group, hailed from families with a long history of public engagement and liberal views on women's education.*

involved in transnational politics. He was a charming and cultured man who hosted visiting Indian philosopher Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, India's first vice-president and its second president; the future prime minister of India, Indira Nehru (née Gandhi); and the Aga Khan III, who was at one time the president of the League of Nations, and his wife Lady Shahzadi Begum. Sorabjee was elected president of the Natal Indian Congress in 1928. At times he was an ally of his neighbour AI Kajee, who with PR Pather was the public face of a conservative faction in Indian politics. But from the mid-1940s, Sorabjee gravitated towards the emerging radical faction led by Dr Monty Naicker, and accompanied HA Naidoo and AB Xuma to New York in 1946 to place Indian and African grievances before the United Nations. From New York Rustomjee went to Ireland, where he met Éamon de Valera, who was then chancellor of the National University of Ireland, and negotiated for the university to accept five to six South African Indian students to its medical school annually. Numerous students benefited from this arrangement until at least the 1970s.

Zohra Moosa came from a more orthodox Muslim household, but one with a deep historical involvement in politics and women's societies. Her grand-uncle, Aboobaker Amod, is widely regarded as the first Indian trader to arrive in Natal (c.1872). Her grandfather, OHA Jhaveri, was born in Porbandar and arrived in Natal in 1884. According to family folklore, he was passionate about education and attended the Boys' Model School in Smith Street, but was unable to fulfil his dream of becoming a lawyer when his brother, Aboobaker, died in 1886. This forced him to take charge of the family business. Jhaveri had seven children: Mariam, Noor Mahomed, Halima, Jubeda, Julekha, Shirin and Yusuf. He was also well travelled. His journeys took him to the United States, Europe, England, India and Egypt. He was a loyal supporter of Gandhi and served as secretary of the Natal Indian Congress for several years. He was also variously president of the South African Indian Congress during the 1920s, chairman of the Orient Club and trustee of the Jerbai Rustomjee Trust, the Rustomjee Gorkhodo Trust, the MK Gandhi Library, the Mahatma Gandhi Phoenix Settlement and the Jumuah Musjid Trust.<sup>37</sup>

Jhaveri's daughter, Halima, was involved in the Indian Women's Association, while some of his granddaughters, the children of Noor Mahomed, were active in the Women's Cultural Group. They were among a handful of Indian girls who had had an opportunity to obtain a secondary education, although they had to respect strict social conventions. Ayshoo – who was once noted in the news-

paper as the ‘small girl’ who ‘ably conducted’ St Anthony’s School percussion-band performance for Lady Rama Rau in June 1939 – was conveyed to school in a curtained rickshaw. As Zohra Moosa remembered:

My sister Ayshoo was older than me actually when she went to high school...Durban Girls’, you know, in Dartnell Crescent. She used to go in the rickshaw from Grey Street, you know, because my father felt she’s a Muslim girl and where will she walk from, Madrassah Arcade right to the Crescent? So he had arranged a rickshaw for her. Every day the rickshaw came to take her and bring her back. We, of course, as little ones, we used to walk...

Zohra herself did not complete matric but it was not for lack of opportunity: ‘I wasn’t interested, don’t know why, I liked home, you know, domestic work, cooking and sewing and things like that, although my parents said I could go, but I regretted it later of course.’ Zohra and her sisters maintained their grandfather’s close friendships across religious lines. Zohra points out that

as a matter of interest, Sita Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi’s granddaughter, she and I were in the same class, we were friends, I used to go to Phoenix because our neighbour was Dr Desai [a Gujarati Hindu]. Dr Desai’s wife and my mother were very good friends because we lived in the same building, that was straight after we moved from Madrassah Arcade. So the girls and I were very friendly. When they went to Phoenix for the weekend I used to go with them to the settlement.

Zohra Moosa explained that women’s societies were very much a part of her upbringing:

My mother and my mother-in-law were going to this [Indian] Women’s Association, and then when [my sisters and I] grew we used to go with them, too...[we would] go with them and attend the meetings, too, because there wasn’t very much else for women, you know...After the Women’s Association, Indian Women’s Association, the elderly Muslim women also formed a group called the Mehfile Khwateen Islam, and that also, my mother, my mother-in-law, my auntie-in-law, her auntie went to attend...And we used to go there, too, because there was no other outlet, so, you know, we used to go to those meetings with them too.

The Mehfile Khwateen Islam was the group that Zuleikha Mayat had described as being ‘on its last legs’ in 1954. From the perspective of the Women’s Cultural Group, the Indian Women’s Association and the Mehfile Khwateen Islam ‘had in their heyday made valid contributions...[but] were past their prime and the activities had a tinge of maturity that did not appeal to more vigorous youth’.<sup>38</sup> There were other important reasons for creating a new organisation, even though by setting out to do so, Mayat, Moosa and their associates were asserting themselves within an existing tradition of community politics. As Zubeida Barmania points out, the founders of the Women’s Cultural Group ‘were mostly elite, you know, they were mostly elite. But [the Group] was interesting because it was a little bit – it was sort of *different* in the sense that so much was being done.’ The women were seeking to do something rigorous and new but, even more, they were asserting their confidence in taking charge of a recognised and respected form of civic involvement. Although there was an initial suggestion that they might join the Mehfile and then try to play an active role within its structures, Mehfile’s young secretary Fatima Osman (later Loonat) emphatically discouraged the idea. ‘Don’t do that, you will be so frustrated,’ Zuleikha Mayat remembers her urging. The women not only heeded the advice, but absconded with her. Fatima Loonat, who qualified as a teacher, became the first secretary and a lifelong member of the Group.

The young women who had gathered at Foundry Lane, fresh from the speech contest, clearly wanted a social and intellectual domain of their own, a space in which women of their own generation could spend time together outside of the tight and sometimes insular relations of their respective households. They wanted to be independent of social circles and voluntary activities over which their in-laws and other senior women presided. Against the vertical hierarchies of generational power expressed between women in the world of the family, they asserted a horizontal front of power as a peer group.

Their sleight of hand in this move was the ideology of modernism, encapsulated in the global figure of the post-war housewife. Far from being limited by her role as a domestic goddess and new consumptive force for capitalist markets, the modern housewife was empowered by these identities. She was attuned to the world beyond the household. Mayat, writing as Fahmida in her *Indian Views* column, gave voice to the complex vision of social agency she shared with many of her peers, and to the way that gender, generation and class shaped this view of productive and engaged modern womanhood:

Some of my friends accuse that this column is not typical of women's affairs. That for instance it should contain recipes, hints on housekeeping and advice as to the upbringing of children. That is dependent entirely as to one's conception of what is a woman's world. Whilst recipes and training of the young are most important in our lives, such advice should come from specialists in these respective fields and not from novices like Fahmida. Granny is any day a better teacher than I shall ever be in these matters. To my mind what is rightly a woman's world is an awareness of the social and political conditions of our environment, of the country and the world. Not just an interest but a very active participation in these affairs; even more than men since we are not burdened with the responsibilities of being the breadwinners of the family. The South African housewife especially can do a great deal to make this world a better place since as a leisured class most of our work is done by servants.<sup>39</sup>

Such a definition of housewife does not turn on the drudgery of labour – the washing, ironing, cooking and cleaning. While women were indeed expected to fulfil these tasks as daughters and daughters-in-law, well-to-do families were able to hire domestic workers to assist with some of this work. Indeed, class privilege, and the ability to subcontract household chores out to women of poorer economic means, is part of what made it possible for some women to participate in the social and political world. In the Women's Cultural Group's story of themselves, it was also the high-spiritedness and progressivism of their age-set that provided them with self-definition: 'youth and enthusiasm were the unique qualities in those days, and these were responsible for the "*always something new*" image with which the Group soon came to be identified'.<sup>40</sup> As housewives, many (but by no means all) of whom came from an affluent class, the Group's origins were linked both to an awareness of relative privilege and to a shared generational interest for creative control.

Like Zuleikha Mayat, many Group members had experienced marital life within a patrilocal, extended household arrangement, in which behavioural expectations were regulated by gendered custom and enforced by older women. However, moving into the household of one's in-laws was experienced differently by different women. Because it was relatively common to marry cousins, an aunt could double as a mother-in-law and would therefore represent continuity of familial inter-relations. This was the case for Zohra Moosa, who married Yusuf

Moosa, the son of her maternal aunt Halima.<sup>41</sup> In mid-20th-century Durban, marriage to first cousins was fairly common among affluent Gujarati-speaking families (with names such as Paruk, Lockhat and Mahomedy), as well as among Memonese-speaking families who trace their roots to Porbander (Moosa, Jhaveri, Jhavary and Joosub). For others in the Group, like Bibi Mall, marriage meant moving a good geographical distance away from their childhood homes.

In most homes, the premium on respectability meant that a new bride arrived within a set of expectations about etiquette, labour, time and social life. Gori Patel, who joined the Group in the early 1960s, spoke of her experience as a young bride:

You know when you get married, you go to the in-laws too, they won't allow you all these [activities away from the household]. We had to be *there*, with them *only* and all that, you understand? Those times the married life was very, very different...Then, we used to respect our people – our mother-in-law and all of them – and, then, we obey them. They tell you 'cook this', we cook that. We got no servant; we have to do all the housework.

Education and skill-building for young girls were typically directed towards preparing for the crucible of marriage, to ensure that daughters would be able to showcase their good upbringing as caretakers of domestic wellbeing and the family. Outside that household, 'for our Muslim women, there was no activities,' Patel continues, '[just] stay at home, go visit neighbours and do housework. And then we'd learn everything – embroidery, beadwork and crochet and everything we learn. Sewing – my mother taught us to sew so we – still I do my own sewing.' For women like Patel, with limited opportunities for engagement and entertainment outside of the family circle, the Women's Cultural Group provided an array of stimulation – intellectual, civic and aesthetic – as well as opportunities for leadership in the rotating offices of president, secretary, treasurer and a range of committee chairs. Involvement with a group of peers was a source of self-improvement and recreational fun. Patel recalls, for example, that one year some of the members decided to learn to swim, visiting a private pool together and enjoying their watery freedom in secure company. In the early decades, Group members also ventured out to play tennis, take acting lessons and join poetry classes.

If living with in-laws could be claustrophobic for some women, extended households also had definite advantages for individuals and for the household economy. Children benefited from much adult care and attention and women shared in the work of child-minding, domestic chores and meal provision, translating into a lighter load for all. Long-standing member of the Group Ayesha Vorajee spoke of the extended family as a source of resilience and abundance that provided a sense of a surety for the young; for example,

if your parent died, like for instance your mother died, the aunt always brought you up, one of the paternal women, paternal aunts. And there was always good food cooked because everyone was living together. So there was one big pot, whatever it is, whether it was chicken curry and rice...

For Vorajee's sister, Mariam 'Mana' Rajah – who had completed a design course at the ML Sultan Technical College and, prior to her marriage, had opened and co-run a boutique in West Street – moving into her husband's household meant joining the family business, Rajah's Greenhouse in Brickfield Road.

Before Sunrise [Fruiterers] or anybody came into the picture, they were there and we used to sell the best fruit. And people used to come from all over, but we used to give them the service too. People used to walk in and say, 'I want one kilo potatoes, one kilo onions', and here we used to dash around and put in packets and it was hard work.

I worked there as well. I left my designing [career]. Then I was doing wedding dresses and things from home and working late in the night doing baking and everything. And that was nice too, but when you live with a family, they want too much of your time, so I couldn't concentrate on that as well. So that was shelved. But I still enjoy my sewing.

When her brother-in-law died, Mana and her husband were still part of the extended household, and took their two nieces into their care as their own:

I had no children; and the two girls, my husband and I brought them up. We lived in Brickfield Road where the shop was, and then we built our house upstairs. So the one young daughter said to me, 'I'm coming up with you Mummy-ma.' So I said, 'Ja, fine' and we educated them. One did designing, the other became a pharmacist. Both got married and both have one son each...so, from the big family, now there's very few left.





*For some Group members, learning to play tennis meant having some time away from home and with peers.*

Fatima Patel, who joined the Group in 1989 after she lost her husband, married into a family that was more orthodox than the one she had been raised in, and this presented challenges as she tried to adjust to her new household:

My parents were not – we used to wear the scarf, ja, but they were not fussy about this thing. We used to stand in the shop all day. I got married to a very conservative family which never took off their scarf.

For me it was a bit difficult because mine was an arranged marriage so I felt it very different when I got married. We were not allowed to go to movies, we were not allowed to go shopping, nothing...I [moved into my husband's family and] stayed with my mother-in-law until she died. Twenty years I stayed with her, my mother-in-law, my father-in-law, my three brothers-in-law and one sister-in-law...I was the eldest daughter-in-

law. Lucky my [own] mother was a very good cook and we [daughters] knew how to cook and all but I, when I was in Standard 9 I got – that time we had Standard 9 [now Grade 11], so that’s when I got proposed [to].

Laila Ally was raised in a household of no fewer than forty family members, including six aunts, and describes her childhood in this context as ‘absolutely fantastic’:

It taught me so much, prepared me for the world out there... At one time when I was quite young, growing up, I didn’t even know who my mum and dad were, because my uncles were like my dads, and my aunts were like my mums... I see more positives than negatives because it taught the children to interact with one another, and it’s amazing how, although there was a lot of sibling rivalry, we grew up as siblings and not as cousins. Even now we have that relationship.

Ally’s experience highlights the camaraderie and co-operation that, contrary to stereotype, could exist among the women in a large household, though she acknowledges the potential tensions:

We were forty of us living together, you can imagine how many women we were, and that’s not easy, you know, taking everybody’s temperaments into account. But Alhamdulillah it worked out so well, and I only felt sorry for the girls that got married into the family because for them it was like being thrown into the deep end. So I always had sympathy for the sisters-in-law... At that time, we had a roster: one aunt in the kitchen [for a week and then] she gets five weeks ‘holiday’. [She’d cook] for one week [and] for that one week the entire family became her own, for breakfast, lunch and supper. She provided breakfast for everybody, lunch, school lunch, sandwiches [which at that time it used to be twelve to fourteen sandwiches] and then supper, and two of my aunts were vegetarians, so we had to make a complete vegetarian [meal] and a complete other meal.

Under the tutelage of many mentors, all in mild competition with each other, Ally herself became an accomplished cook, ‘so I know how to make aloo fry in six different ways, to put it nicely’.

Some women did not move in with their husband's families. In Mariam Motala's case, marriage at a young age broadened rather than restricted opportunities for her. She was thrust into the wider world immediately and, indeed, remembers the initial years as isolated and lonely. At age sixteen, in 1949, she set off to London with her husband, Yusuf, who received his medical qualification at St George's Hospital in Hyde Park. Yusuf was one of a handful of black medical students to have attended the University of Cape Town in the early 1940s. Racism at the institution encouraged him to leave:



*Mariam was young when she married Yusuf Motala and moved to England.*

In the second year we did anatomy and physiology. There was apartheid there too – they won't allow us to have a white body, to do post-mortems on white bodies. And then when we went to the hospital, if they had a demonstration, a clinical demonstration, if it was a white patient we were not allowed. If it was a white patient, you must walk out. And if they put outside 'NE', Non-European, then you can go in – it's all right. What broke the back was the fact that now they even objected to post-mortems – even the dead whites objected to our presence there. I was getting fed up. And even some of the lecturers, sometimes they will take the white students and talk to them and educate them, tutor them, but ignore you.

Cape Town widened Yusuf Motala's social and political horizons, however. He was a regular at the parties and meetings of the cosmopolitan Gool clan. The Gool's extended family included Cissy Gool, IB Tababta and Dr Goolam Gool. Yusuf described Goolam's brother Dr AH Gool, as a sophisticated Englishman, 'he was a pukka Englishman, only played Beethoven and Bach and things like that'. Moving to England, Yusuf met medical students from India, Pakistan,

Australia and West Africa. His young wife, however, endured extended periods of time alone at their residence at Earl's Court while Yusuf worked at a hospital in Wimbledon. For Mariam, adjusting to England

was very traumatic because at the young age of sixteen, you know, I had not gone away from home before. I had to adjust – to myself being there. And it was, it was very difficult because there was no family, there was nobody there – very, very few Muslims or very, very few Indian people you'd see around, not many. Very few blacks you would see in those days too.

But then, England 'grew on me and I [was] getting around, doing my own thing and I had other friends, South African friends who all came to do dentistry or something else; then there were some Pakistani friends and we used to meet at weekends.' Mariam was also introduced to her husband's wider social circle and credits this period with making her more 'mature... self-reliant...independent...and open to ideas'. Upon her return to Durban, being related to the Malls, she was persuaded to join the Group and served as its president for a number of years.

Sayedah Siddique (later Ansari) was another early member of the Group. Sayedah, who was born in Meerut in India, came from an ancestral line of religious leaders tracing their lineage back to Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddique, the first Khalifa of Islam, on her paternal side while her mother's lineage is linked to the Prophet Muhammad. The 'Cultural' in Women's Cultural Group was apposite in Ansari's case. Her grandfather Mawlana Abdul Hakeem Siddique was a renowned poet who wrote under the pen name Josh (an Urdu word for 'passion' or 'intensity'). His brother, Mawlana Ismail Siddique, published numerous Urdu books which continue to be used in schools and universities in Pakistan – according to Sayedah, this great-uncle was also Queen Victoria's Urdu tutor. Sayedah's father, Mawlana Mohamed Bashir Siddique, and his brothers Abdul Aleem, Nazeer Ahmed and Mukhtar acquired the title 'Roving Ambassadors of Islam' because they travelled to places such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Philippines, Belgium, France, Trinidad and Tobago to establish mosques and madrassahs. Mawlana Nazeer was a great sha'er in Mumbai, earning the title Shamshul Ulema for composing shairs in Urdu, Hindi, Parsee and Arabic. The youngest brother Mawlana Abdul Aleem Siddique, became the father-in-law to the renowned scholar, Fazlur Rahman Ansari.

Sayedah Ansari was herself a performer of Urdu poetry, a singer and a teacher. She had been involved in the Mehfile, and regularly read the Mouloud Sharief, which was an intrinsic part of the Muslim landscape in South Africa until reformists criticised this tradition as *bidah* and succeeded in reducing its practice. When the Women's Cultural Group was formed, Ansari gave Urdu classes in private homes 'for the ladies' and participated in the *musha'iras*, which were a regular feature of the Muslim cultural experience in Durban.

Ansari's early experience of her family was shaped by its transoceanic nature, with close family members spread out accross India and South Africa. She had arrived in Durban during the Second World War, at the age of six, by cargo ship in the company of her older brothers. Her mother had, on this crossing, remained in India. One strong memory she carries from that voyage was hearing a siren and being helped into an orange life jacket, after being told that 'on the third siren' they would 'jump' into the lifeboat because a submarine was beneath the ship. When the third siren did not sound, she remembers a scene of relieved prayers and crying among the grown-ups but that she had felt distinctly 'disappointed. No jumping!' That same voyage to her new home also brought her to meet her father for the first time. Mawlana Bashir had left Meerut while his wife was pregnant with Sayedah. The only description of him she remembers bringing with her: 'He'll be tall and he got turban.'

So that is how, when I see my father I said, 'There's my father!' When the immigration officer came he said, 'Who's your father here?' So I just pointed my finger towards my father because there was nobody taller than him and with a turban – I was very impressed with him. I was very thrilled. I just hugged him.

When Sayedah's mother arrived in Durban a few years later, she became ill and Sayedah, aged ten, cared for the family and younger siblings in the daytime, and her father instructed her in languages, Persian scholarship and Islam in the evenings. Her marriage had been tentatively arranged, but it was left to her to approve of the choice: at a picnic, she was able to spot the young man at a distance, liked the look of him and assented to the match.

Khatija Vawda, a founding member, was the daughter of GH Mayet and Mymooha Vawda. She grew up in an extended family that was spread out geographically across the province of Natal. She was born in 1926 and was one

of several children: Ahmed, Fatima, Ayesha, Hawa and Amina. Her father ran a company in Durban that manufactured paper for cigarettes. When the business became insolvent, he relocated to Newcastle, where his wife's family lived. Khatija and Ahmed remained in Durban and were 'adopted' by an uncle, SM Mayet, who did not have any children of his own. The fluidity of extended family meant that such arrangements were not uncommon and, after about five or six years, her parents returned to Durban. Meanwhile, her aunt, Ayesha 'Burri' Mayet, according to Khatija's sister Fatima, was

a very social person and, as a result, we used to accompany her – Mrs Paruk was somewhat related to us so we used to go to Paruks frequently – they used to visit us and so on. And she had a lot of contacts. She, at that time, belonged to the Women's Association – the Indian Women's Association – and because she didn't know much English and didn't speak English, Khatija or I used to accompany her to these meetings.

In this way Khatija Vawda was socialised into the workings of the women's organisations. Her sister Fatima, on the other hand, did not join the Group. Slightly younger, she insisted on an education and qualified as a medical doctor and went on to become a professor of medicine at the University of Natal. It helped too that their uncle, SM Mayet, was a well-known public figure who was involved in politics as a member of the Natal Indian Congress and, at the time of his death in 1973, was its longest-serving member. It was he who read out a message of condolence on behalf of the organisation at the funeral of Chief Albert Luthuli in 1967.

While a few of the founding women would go on to become highly educated professionals, Zuleikha Mayat explained that the idea behind forming the Group was to cultivate the talents of 'the ordinary housewife, who was sitting at home, being a bonsai, really. They had talent [but] they didn't even know what talent they had.' For this reason, their friends who were scholars and doctors, such as Fatima Meer, Hilda Kuper, Devi Bughwan and Violaine Junod, were associated more as 'patrons' than regular members. 'Ours was a little housewife thing that started off – we were just housewives and so on. Also some of the members might be intimidated by [too many professional women]. So you have to protect this.'

## Ingredients of autonomy

Though occasionally the word ‘feminist’ has been used in relation to the Group, none of the early and current members have claimed to be part of a women’s movement seeking to undermine a patriarchal order of life. This does not mean they remained silent about what they saw as gender injustice and inequality. As Mayat said, the Group was ‘not women’s lib’, but was oriented towards the recognition of women as equal partners in the project of community development and family upliftment, with the capacity and freedom to pursue employment outside the home if desired. Without recognition and support, women’s energies, capacities and native talents were a squandered resource:

This is what I’ve always felt – that there’s so much potential in women, so much talent, but they’ve never been allowed to exercise it. It makes me very, very angry. I knew of women who were running the business, who were really the earning power in the house, but yet the man was in front, maybe very lazy, not capable and so on – but he was now the big shot in the air. I know of these women who used to make mithai, right, daughters of rich, rich families who have made mithai and they earned so much and they kept the whole household running, children’s fees, whatever, whilst the husband would have a little shop which was not doing well, or maybe he was working as an assistant somewhere, and that made me angry. Alright, the woman worked, it was fine, but give them recognition for what they are doing!

A founding ideal of the Group was that it could develop and utilise the unrecognised talents of women. It was dedicated to seeing women empowered, not as androgynous or secular citizens in relation to the state, but as gendered and culturally embodied agents with a capacity to offer material and moral welfare, close to home and beyond. Women in the Group did not view their political agency as falling under formal government, which was in any case not offering enfranchisement of any sort for women of Indian descent. For women in the Group, civic participation largely meant a desire to live with a fuller capacity to contribute to society within an Islamic way of life.

With passing decades and the end of apartheid, the Group’s Muslim identity has been augmented. As one committed member has critically commented,

‘somewhere along the line it became just very Muslim-oriented. Not that I have anything against it, but the aims and objects have changed [from those of its founding].’ She continued:

The activities were going to be cultural – plays, you know, and we were going to – the whole thing now has changed in that they are doing more charitable work. The whole complexion of the members has changed too, the whole ethos has changed. It’s become very Muslim-orientated. They have no [active] non-Muslim members. We had some but now, you know, everything has changed. I would have expected it to be slightly different with the founder members that, you know, they could have broadened their whole outlook. But it’s become more narrow and parochial.

The Group did not set itself up as a Muslim women’s group. Although religious ideals certainly have informed most of their activities, the Group had long determined officially to maintain a more open sense of itself. It is also the case that, for some of its non-Muslim participants, the Group’s Muslim orientation was a drawcard rather than a detraction. Mary Grice, born in colonial East Africa in 1926, the same year as Zuleikha Mayat, was a founding member of the Durban Black Sash and active in the Women’s Cultural Group from the 1960s as she was looking for avenues of cross-cultural exchange. In her understanding, ‘the life of the members was mostly based on Muslim religion and they did everything on that basis. They worked jolly hard.’

I perceived [the Group] as an Indian Muslim group and it was a fantastic experience. They didn’t push their religion at you so that did not put me off, but their actions and the drive to raise funds and see to others was driven by that religious belief. It is sad but among whites there is much more mistrust of Muslims today and I don’t know how we are going to end that.

Siko Mji, a medical colleague of Mahomed Mayat, was a graduate of the University of the Witwatersrand. She participated in many community development activities of the Group and was similarly energised by the multicultural exchanges this afforded:

The Cultural Group came through as a Muslim group. I saw Julu [Zuleikha Mayat] as a conscientious and practising Muslim. At the time of her



husband[’s death] she did all those rituals of bereavement of Muslims. This was new to me. It was a learning curve to me. I saw them as a conscientious and wholesome group of Muslim women but, you know, they never tried to impose anything on me, and I appreciated their culture and learnt from them. In fact, I was so fascinated that Julu must have thought I was going to become Muslim. [*laughs*]

The participation of women like Mji and Grice, who were not Muslim, held many benefits for Muslim members and for the Group as an organisation. Over its half-century of existence, the story of the Group’s beginnings has been well circulated in its own literature, and all members can recite its inception at the speech contest and the subsequent launch by thirteen women. This history has had ongoing importance in affirming the identity and purpose of the group, and is worth considering here not merely as an empirical sequence of events but also as a narrative resource. Narratives of origin often assist in the ongoing conception of a group’s cohesion and direction. For example, in preparation for their 50th anniversary, the joint president-treasurer’s report at the AGM in June 2003 poetically recounted the Group’s beginnings and development:

Great hopes accompany the birth of a child. The young parents in whose laps the baby falls are often not well prepared for such a heavy responsibility. With prayerful hearts they start the nurturing and rearing process, seeing to its health, education, its well being, hoping that it attains adulthood to become a respectable and useful member of society. The birth and rearing of the Women’s Cultural Group underwent a similar process. It was not a well-planned birth, for it was hurriedly conceived by young women who had participated in a speech contest. Prematurely born, the thirteen parents struggled to keep it alive and rear it to maturity. It was a heavy task.

Feminist scholars have observed that familial metaphors, utilised to naturalise group identity against divisive realities and counter-narratives, tend to entrench women in a narrow maternal role. Here, with a humorous admission of parental befuddlement, the Group’s existence is set within a discourse of sustenance and maternal care, perhaps eliding the contingencies and class positioning that also shaped its evolution over the years. Yet, it is just as crucial to note that the

image of the Group as ‘child’, a baby nurtured by its membership into adulthood, is a claim of proprietorship that allows no possible contestation. The Women’s Cultural Group belongs to its members and to no one else: it is ‘their baby’ and they are responsible. As a claim to autonomy, the Group’s founding narrative has served them in a number of ways.

Importantly, in many recitations of their story there is mention of founders and early members who were not Muslim. This religious statistic has allowed – at different times and for different reasons – the Group’s proponents, critics and neutral observers to portray it as a ‘mostly Muslim’ association. While ‘mostly Muslim’ is not incorrect as a description, the participation of Parsee, Hindu and Christian women was crucial to the Group’s independent conception of its identity and aims, oriented often towards a national rather than a religious delineation of community. The first instance in which the importance of this can be witnessed is in the name they selected for themselves. Over the course of their existence, it would often be suggested to them, mainly by leaders in the Muslim community, that they should rather be called the Muslim Women’s Group. Yet, they had rejected this idea from the outset. This is evident in Zuleikha Mayat’s account: ‘And now to look for a name. We couldn’t make it a religious thing, although, you know, most of the thirteen members – ten – were Muslim and three were non-Muslim.’

Clearly, the multi-religious composition of women mattered greatly to the self-definition of the Group as it was formed. It provided a means of distinguishing themselves from the Mehfile Khwateen Islam, sending a clear signal that they were not setting out to take over occupied terrain. But it also justified their forging of a civic identity that was, at least officially, independent of direct religious regulation and monitoring.

One name they considered was ‘Progressive Women’s Group’. This name spoke to their own enthusiasm for modern innovations and ideals, in many ways typical of the post-war period. Yet, leftist political uses of the adjective ‘progressive’ were beginning to circulate and, as Mayat’s activist friends pointedly informed her, the Group did not fit well into that definition. Zuleikha recalls: ‘Fatima Meer said, “What do you mean? You are not *progressive*, you are *retrogressive* or something like that!” [*laughs*].’

In choosing a name, the women considered their aims and their assets. As they would write later, part of what they wanted to do was ‘to promote cultural

and educational activities [and]...create an “awareness” of these in the public mind’.<sup>42</sup> Their constitution would make it clear that these functions would be carried to ‘as wide and varied a public as possible’ and ‘develop and inculcate in the public of the Republic of South Africa a meaningful interest in and understanding of the culture, the arts and crafts, the traditions and religions of Indian South Africans in particular and of other communities.’<sup>43</sup> From this angle, cultural diversity within the Group would be an asset and a trait they would attempt to cultivate. Culture was an open concept, an avenue towards knowledge of self and other, and this openness is clearly what they wanted. Mayat says that ‘after three or four months we landed with this “Cultural Group” and it somehow worked for us’.

Claiming a sense of independence has not meant a severing of social ties in the quest for autonomy, but, as Sayedah Ansari remembers, they aimed for a broad definition of culture, not one that was defined as Islamic only. This meant that they sought connections with the public face of the Durban Muslim community, but in a relationship that allowed them to maintain the terms of their own agency and identity. In practice, this has meant a negotiated relationship with several prominent men: businessmen and philanthropic leaders such as Cassim Bassa, AM Moolla and Essop Randeree, and local ulema including Mawlana Bashir Siddique, Mawlana Abdur Rahman Ansari and later Mawlana Yunus Patel. The Group cultivated ties with supportive males whose influence could open doors – not merely financial doors, though this was crucial in some of their fundraising activities, but also ideological doors. Respectful relations with men’s societies or individual leaders, not to mention male family members – husbands, fathers and uncles – was crucial to claiming legitimate moral ground as they increasingly entered into public life. As will become clear in several of the chapters that follow, key males – powerful or cosmopolitan men who held modern views about women’s participation – promoted their cause. While it is also true that stonewalling and the withdrawal of support from male community leaders could work powerfully against Group aspirations, the Group sought to avoid dependency. And when the Group achieved financial success through the publication of their best-selling cookbook, *Indian Delights*, they successfully diversified the basis of their organisational longevity.

As a Group of mainly Muslim women, members also have related themselves to the ulama and have, in some cases, submitted to the concerns expressed by

a given mawlana on customary matters. These occasions are matters of principle and what Mayat has called the ‘very Islamic respect for religious diversity and dignity’. For example, one of the Group’s functions at Orient Hall featured Indian girls dancing. A local aalim took exception, as Mayat explains:

He called in Dr [Daoud] Mall and he said, ‘Tell Bibi that they must stop this, this is the Orient Hall, you see that Kabah frieze there? How can you have dancing there?’ So, when this message came to me, I said, ‘Daoud, tell Mawlana that that hall is being hired for Hindu weddings every week and there’s bhajans and all sorts of things going on there.’ So Mawlana then said, ‘Yes true, but those are Hindus doing it, not Muslims doing it.’ And that was very fair. And we accepted it. After that we would see that that sort of thing didn’t happen.

Yet the Group resisted wholesale submission to the preferences of religious leadership that might seek to push them in a ‘retrogressive’ direction and, early on, pushed towards a greater space for religious learning and participation in religious affairs, which sometimes brought them into conflict with traditional ulema. One example is the holding of tafsir classes by women. Khurshid and Salman Nadvi arrived in South Africa in the 1970s, when Salman Nadvi assumed the professorship of the Islamic Studies Department at the University of Durban-Westville. Khurshid Nadvi joined the Group and gave the members tafsir classes – that is, exegesis of Qur’anic texts. Zohra Moosa points out that ‘she used to give us tafsir, you know, meditation on the Qur’an, I used to go every week. We sometimes went to Farouk Moolla’s house...because when Mrs Nadvi was very sick then Ayesha [Moolla] started [the classes], because she studied Arabic too.’ The hour-long weekly classes were conducted at private homes, and for two years at the Group’s Centre in Kenilworth Road. According to Fatima Mayat, ‘about ten to twelve members used to attend. We used to thoroughly enjoy the lessons.’ Shairbanu Lockhat, a second-generation Group member, who completed reading the Qur’an at the age of five, has always sought to understand more of its meaning:

I had finished my Qur’an so early. The Qur’an is not something to be put on the shelf, it’s a way of life – that is your guidebook, that is your encyclopaedia. I regret that I didn’t learn the meanings of the Qur’an in English. In that era we were not told to learn the meaning, as long as we

learnt the Arabic it was fine. And at that time, we were not allowed, we were not told to go to these meetings [tafsir classes]. It was just to read the Qur'an and come back. My mother and them didn't go to these meetings as such. They used to read at home every day. So supposing my mother sat this morning, she would make sure she read about a chapter, a long chapter which is about thirty pages, so she made sure that she read it. But beyond that, no. Because first there was no transport so, and nobody had cars. And then living with your mother-in-law and that, you had to look to their needs – your father-in-law and sister-in-law and all that. I don't think they had the time to do it too. But then my generation came up, and then the splurge of getting to know, read the Qur'an more, read the meaning [so that] it makes sense. When you stand up, when we say our prayers, we are reading in Arabic, but if you sit down and you read the meaning of what you are saying in prayer, you find enjoyment in that, you know what you are reading. So it's very important.



Three pupils of the Siddiqi Free School in Durban, Shaher Banoo Paruk (6½ years), Fatima Bibi (5½ years) and Ebrahim Randeree (7) who featured in the Mainly About People page for having completed the Quran within a period of 11 months.

*Shairbanu's early accomplishment was documented in the Leader.*

For Zuleikha Mayat too, tafsir has been instrumental in her own development. While her father was very strict in a religious sense,

we were also allowed to debate issues and I don't know whether this is wrong, and I still keep on asking questions of myself. I've got all the translations of the [Qur'an] – Asad, Yusuf Ali, Maududi – five, six different translations. I still like Mawlana Maududi very much, especially his Urdu translation. The mawlanas don't like Maududi because he was controversial in a few places and they said, 'Don't read, [it's] very delicate – you

won't know where he's gone wrong'. [But] I keep on reading every morning and asking questions and so on. I conducted a tafsir class at my sister-in-law's house for five years and I finished it with a few of them. Mrs Nadvi was very strict. She was the one who had started it at the Centre. I find so much in the Qur'an, which is so broad and it is so scientific.

Such activities brought reproach from the ulema, who argued that only those who have formally studied to be Islamic scholars should provide Qur'anic exegesis. They wanted to maintain their monopoly of Islamic knowledge and also feared that some Muslims may employ tafsir as a vehicle for reformist ideas. As Zuleikha Mayat maintains, 'I respect them [the mawlanas] very much but they are also in a "trade union". They can't speak out too much out of the way...'

Another issue that Zuleikha Mayat and the Women's Culutral Group have struggled with is the access of women to mosques. Traditionally, women are prohibited from entering mosques controlled by Indian Muslims in South Africa. Zohra Moosa explains: 'Mrs Mayat, as you know her, she used to say, like, "Why can't the ladies go?" And then they used to make arrangements for ladies to be there.' Khatija Vawda remembers that 'we used to go and Mawlana Ansari used to give us talks; we used to attend his talks down there, the ladies only used to go down there'. As a result of pressure from the women, an area in the basement of the West Street Mosque was set aside for women. Yet even this was more than many men were prepared to tolerate. The pressure on the trustees to totally forbid women was sustained. The women stood their ground, and with the support of the some of the trustees, such as AS Vahed, Ebrahim Moosa, Essop Randeree and Ismail Kathrada, they were able to attend the mosque. Mayat articulated her position clearly in a letter to the trustees on 20 January 2003:

At the outset let it be stated that I am in no way qualified to pronounce on Shariah rulings but as a Muslimah I have always questioned and debated on some issues with ulema, both local and visiting ones from overseas. Like your late father, I could not gulp down everything that was being bandied about in the name of our Shariah. This issue of 'Women in Musajid' I have pursued for nearly four decades and whenever a visiting aalim or lecturer from overseas arrived, the men started making

jokes about the perennial question from the Women's Cultural Group about the role of women and their presence in Mosques. They expected it to be asked. I did, and was applauded or jeered by the 'fors' and the 'againsts' in the audience. I am enclosing some material on the subject by very eminent authors, all of them belonging to the orthodox school, for whatever the modernist authors have to say on the subject, will not be acceptable until the time when the Ummah honestly start reading, meditating and acting on the Qur'anic guidelines as lived out by our Nabee (peace be upon him).

Mayat's letter is lengthy and will not be quoted in full. The following, though, is worth relaying:

I would like to narrate my experience with Late Mujahidul Islam (1937–2002) an eminent authority on Islam who held highest posts [in Islamic organisations] in India. He came to Durban in 1979 and through courtesy of Mawlana Yunus Patel a lecture was arranged by the Women's Cultural Group at Orient Hall, but I held a private meeting with him beforehand, appraising him of the dilemma faced by women who work for a living, who maintain their families, who are working within areas adjacent to Masajid and yet at salaah times they are locked out of the premises, boss and males go to Masajid while female employees mull outside window shopping etc. I had posed three questions to him, one was about nursing and medicine as careers for women.

After the private meeting I had to leave for Johannesburg and on that trip my sister Bibi Mall and [my husband] Mahomed died in the tragic accident, and I was left in hospital with broken limbs. The night of the lecture (two days after accident) Mujahidul Islam gave a lecture that had everyone in the hall, especially women, enthralled. He skirted around the three questions, but did not give any clear clarification, mentioning that these need to be sorted out. However, Mujahidul Islam came to see me in hospital and assured me that he would have the brains in India and the Islamic scholars dwell on the questions posed, and when he returned to South Africa in the early nineties he asked Shuaib Omar that I should come to the Truro Hall Board Room and attend the discussions between him and the Islamic Medical Association.



*Members of the Group challenged the pronouncements of religious leaders about their presence in mosques from the earliest days.*

My son Aslam escorted me there; I was the sole woman present and Mujahidul Islam and Dr Yusuf Motala gestured that I should sit in front but I preferred to remain in the rear behind the small gathering. At the end of the discussions Mujahidul Islam addressed me saying that you had asked me about presence of women in Mosques. The pronouncement of Islamic scholars, he said, was that there was no way in which they could be debarred but he added a rider saying that women should not be confrontational but must quietly enter, perform their salaah and exit. I am confident that this pronouncement must have been related to our Jamiatul Ulama.<sup>44</sup> Whatever conclusion your committee or myself or anyone else will arrive at after reading the views of the eminent scholars, it will carry no weight. Everyone seems to consider himself or herself an authority on the Shariah and the views of the ultra-orthodox ulama has burrowed deeply into the psyche of persons. The mood of the Ummah currently is loud and clear: Women in hijab, back in the home, women out of mosques.

The Group's relationship with the ulema has not always been confrontational. Over the years, they consulted with mawlanas, forming solid relations with several individual leaders that led to mutually beneficial arrangements. Mayat



had a healthy respect for Mawlana Ansari: ‘My relationship with Mawlana was very good, he was quite liberal. Mawlana was quite liberal, you would phone him and he would give you an answer.’ In terms of stature, Mawlana Yunus Patel replaced Mawlana Ansari among a large segment of the Muslim community in Durban. Mayat relates her first contact with him:

I see Mawlana Patel coming out. He says, ‘Is there anything I can do for you?’ So I said, ‘Are you Mawlana Patel? I am Zuleikha Mayat.’ He said, ‘I know you.’ I was taken aback. He said, ‘You know, every home may not have [a] Qur’an, but they have an *Indian Delights*.’ [laughs] So I said, ‘Mawlana, is that a reprimand or a compliment?’ [laughs] That was my [first] association with Mawlana Patel.

Mawlana Patel told Zuleikha Mayat that he was starting an Islamic school for girls who were being taken out of government schools at a young age and not receiving an adequate secular education. He wanted to provide an education in mathematics and English in addition to Islamic studies, and was looking for teachers. Mayat spoke to her daughter-in-law Shameema, who agreed to teach at the school and worked with him for six years. Any religious issues that Mayat had, she would discuss with Mawlana Patel whom she ‘found to be a very fair person. But the younger mawlanas coming in now, who just go straight from here to India, into those madrassahs and come back, and they think they know everything...’

Shifts in the political orientation of Islam worldwide have impacted upon the Group and the pressures they face. The following transcript of a few of the older members speaking about it with the authors testifies to how some perceive the changes in local religious leadership since the 1950s and 1960s:

I think at that time the mawlanas didn’t really object to our group at all, and we didn’t do anything that was objectionable – I mean, some of our dinners were mixed [men and women together], initially when we had one dinner at Kajee Street Hall too.

But then, whoever wanted to come came, and people who didn’t want to come didn’t. There may have been a little controversy about it, but I think now [the mawlanas] are more meticulous than they were at that time.

Mawlanas didn’t take objection at that time – I’m sure you’ve noticed too, as the years go by, they’re becoming more, sort of...strict! And

complete segregation and all that. I mean [in the past] we didn't go overboard; we did everything in limits you know.

*Interviewer:* But even what you did [in the past], *today* they will say you can't do it.

Well, we're still doing it. [*laughs*] I mean we still have our mixed dinners too, as you know.

But then as people walk in, you can sit with your wife down there, or you can sit separately on one side. We leave it to them to decide.

We leave it to you to decide, whether you want to sit together. But we don't put a curtain or anything like that.

While Group activities have, over the years, often indirectly challenged received views of gender propriety, they have on occasion advocated for women's religious equality more directly, such as the wish to enter mosque space. Not everyone in the Group may have shared the same view, and some members declined to be involved with politics. Acting in her personal capacity, Zuleikha Mayat frequently exercised her public, journalistic voice on women's issues. In a series of radio essays, broadcast in the 1970s on a programme called *Saturday Mirror*, Mayat often recounted the role of famous Islamic women of the past, such as Razia, Queen of India, who

often deputised for her father when he was away for any length of time. Her grounding in statercraft and warfare was thorough and so in 1236, nearing the end of his long rule, Ilututumish willed the care of his Kingdom to her. When the coterie of forty Turkish Amirs, who as State counsellors jointly held power of King Makers or Breakers, objected to her on the grounds of sex, the King asked them to show him where in the Qur'an or Shariah this right was denied a woman. To their murmurings of it being against tradition, he quoted them the many examples including that of Bibi Ayesha, wife of the Prophet, who had led an army against the Caliph; of Arjundkht, who had succeeded her father; of Gur Khan's widow, who ruled so ably after her husband's death; and of that pearl of a slave girl, Shajarat Al Durr, who had succeeded Sultan Ayub of Egypt. 'No my Amirs, I chose not Razia because she is a woman, but because dynamism shines forth from her. Despite her beauty she is not given to a life of ease and comfort.'<sup>45</sup>

Over the course of the decades, the Group has aimed to interface with their own Muslim orientation without being subjected to direction from religious authority.

Under Mayat's leadership, regular members developed a thick skin to criticisms, some of which came from their own families. Yet, with sufficient numbers of economically powerful and professional men who viewed women's participation and equality as an important indicator of community progress in the modernising world, they were not in danger of exclusion. And Mayat was a stubborn, if diplomatic, leader.

Zubeida Barmania remembers that the first time she met Mayat at the speech contest in 1954 she was 'very struck by her because...there was something about her. She had spirit, she was, she was sort of strong and she had a presence, and I was really taken by the kind of confidence she had.' As Ayesha Vorajee observes, following any controversy 'there [are] a couple of phone calls from the religious fraternity, but of course, within the community Mum [Zuleikha] is respected, greatly respected. The day she is not around, I hope that we get the same sort of treatment.'

### Gender and generation

Besides being an avenue of civic and cultural expression, one of the benefits of the Group for its early members was a space away from the control of family and in-laws where a horizontal peer-sisterhood could be cultivated. Members have made lifelong friendships and have been with each other through joys and sorrows, births of children and deaths of parents or husbands. The membership, however, has changed and shifted in its numbers and make-up. Some members remained in the Group until the end of their lives; others have come, remained for years or decades, and then pursued other ventures; many, too, have come into the Group and left after one or two meetings. Once established, the founding Group recruited new members, a difficult task as Mayat told the audience at the Group's 50th anniversary celebrations in 2004:

Keep in mind that women had to be motivated to join the Group. The thirteen of us that founded it were, so to say, friends but we had to absorb more members. The young ones that wanted to join were held back by the more conservative elders in the family. When that was overcome there was their acceptance in the Group. If they found a niche

in it they stayed, but many could not handle the hard work that was involved and would drop [out] after a few working sessions.

Some of the daughters of early Group members, or of their friends and associates, joined the Group as teenagers. Such was the story of Shairbanu Lockhat, who first entered the Group at the age of eighteen, accompanying her mother in the early 1960s. According to her account, she found it an intimidating experience initially and sat at the back, while the older women planned and prepared and articulated their ideas. After a few years, however, Zuleikha Mayat invited her to step in as acting treasurer, because of a temporary vacancy. By this time, she was keeping the books for her husband's business and Mayat expressed confidence in her bookkeeping skills. Lockhat slowly gained confidence to join in on more of the management activities required by the Group. Now, many decades later, she reflects on what attracted her to the Group and why it is currently more difficult to find young women who want to become members:

As you get older you think about all the lovely times we had and I think it was fun with all the youngsters, but as you see now, we are not getting a lot of the youngsters. At that time, you must remember it was the apartheid era, so we couldn't go to restaurants, we couldn't go to the beach and all that, so this was a way of meeting other people, I mean other different types of groups of people. Now, with the present generation, now that you have got everything, the children get out, now they [parents] are spending more time with the children, they are making their own friends, they have got their groups, their lift clubs and things like that.

Ayesha Vorajee came to the Group in the late 1950s through a connection to Zuleikha Mayat that pre-dated the launch of the group.

Mrs Mayat was living in the next building. And she used to come and teach my mother and my aunts, teach them English, to read and write English. From the time I was a little girl, I remember that when I was, I think, seven or eight years old, she used to come and give my mother and my several aunts English lessons.



*Mana Rajah often organised a fresh-produce stall for Group fêtes and bazaars.*

Vorajee's great-aunt, Hafeza Paruk of Derby Street, was a member of the Group who often opened up her house for meetings and for culinary preparations for various events. Ayesha was invited to come along to these meetings. Like Shairbanu Lockhat, she found that the Group was a place for young women to develop practical skills and, despite her young age, she was given responsibilities almost immediately:

Very soon after I joined they encouraged me, too. I was nominated to become the secretary. And I was the secretary for quite some time. I had just done my Junior Certificate, Standard 8, which is now Grade 10, and Mrs Mayat, who was the president at that time, she used to come home and then help me to write up the minutes of the last meeting, and so on.

Vorajee was especially drawn to the Group's passion for continued learning, the admonition to pursue education from cradle to grave. She has enjoyed the lectures, particularly (being a painter) those related to the arts.

Vorajee's sister, Mana Rajah, joined the Group before she was married, but living and working in her in-laws' business made meetings difficult. '[We] had a very busy supermarket and there were times when I couldn't make it [to Group meetings] and I couldn't go, so I sort of dropped out and then later

rejoined.’ Similarly, Sara Simjee joined the Group early in 1970 soon after she married and had children. But later in the decade, she accompanied her husband to London for a number of years, and when she returned they moved into a home south of Durban that was physically too distant from the Group’s epicentre to be able to participate as a full member. She attended functions and supported fundraising events, but it was not until her mother’s death in 2006 that she rejoined. By then, her children had grown up and losing her mother had meant a period of loneliness for her. During a casual visit to Zuleikha Mayat:

She asked me, ‘What are you doing?’ and I said, ‘Well, I’m quite depressed and I lost my mother and I don’t know what to do.’ And she says, ‘Okay, come with me and I’ll take you around the homes and you can come to one of our meetings here.’ And that’s how I rejoined the Group. And once I did that, I felt I was part of the Group again, you know, I felt very welcome – my daughter is working and she stays with me and I look after the [grand]children, but she says, ‘No, Mummy, go ahead [and join the Group] since you are not doing anything, go ahead, do it.’ And I said, ‘Ya, fine,’ and when I came here I enjoyed it. When we get together we not only work, we sort of socialise, we have fun, we go out, and eat. And I liked it and I said, ‘Okay, put my name back in’.

She found herself taking on responsibility for the old-age home and spending time with elderly residents, involving them in crafts and other projects. In this activity, she has found herself useful as well as reconnecting with friends.

Second-generation Group members have found it difficult to recruit their own daughters to full membership status, although all count on family support to help with fundraising and often expect them to attend special events. As Ayesha Vorajee points out, ‘We have been trying in the past as well to join [younger members]. I have two daughters-in-law and both of them have three children each, they are members, but they cannot attend every meeting but they are there at every function and so on.’ Vorajee’s point was that because of increased opportunities for women in education and work life, as well the additional responsibilities on them, all in the context of nuclear families, which has increased the workload of women in many instances, many of their daughters do not have the time or the flexibility to attend. Shairbanu

Lockhat also emphasised that women's increased responsibilities have restricted their ability to participate actively in the Group:

Whenever [younger women] come [they] say, 'Oh I have to pick up my children, I have to do this, I have got to do this, I've got tuition, I've got to go to swimming classes, or gym' or whatever – I think more of the younger mothers are more involved with their children [and related activities].

Notwithstanding the changing profile of the Group, and the difficulty of attracting new members, this is unlikely to mark the demise of the Group. As will be made clear in later chapters, a core of new young talent has been recruited and has taken charge of updating the look and feel of its fundraising events, and applying new technologies and school-taught skills to increase the efficiency of its administrative work. While the older members constitute the heart of a 'roll-up-your-sleeves' work ethic and retain the benefit of decades of resourcefulness in the face of adversity, the younger members bring professional skills and worldly cultural knowledge to ensure that the Group's central projects run smoothly. They, too, have passion for contributing to the wellbeing of others and believe that their own involvement in the Group has set a good example for their children, as well as being an exceptionally positive experience in their own young lives. As Shameema Mayat, a member since the early 1980s, noted, the women of the Cultural Group operate as a collective of nurturing aunts and grannies for the offspring of its membership and affiliates. In the 21st century, the Group offers something of the lavish attention, positive role modeling and discipline that inter-generational, extended family households once took for granted. A voluntary association with such longevity continues to feature in the childhoods of sons, daughters, nieces, nephews and grandchildren. So, although the Group was founded half a century ago by young women seeking a measure of autonomy from the inter-generational pressures of extended family life, what it now offers is precisely that cross-generational companionship that threatens to diminish with the rise of new family norms.

Of similar importance, the Group offers its young members a channel for action that is civic and community-based, and which departs from the growing contemporary ethos of individual accumulation and consumerism. As Shameema put it:

We [in the Group] are fortunate – if we can't help others then what can we do? We go to bursary meetings and when we see how little others are living on, we feel blessed. Our mission and responsibility should be to help. Even when Mrs Mayat is not here we must carry on the good work. There is great joy when you see someone benefit from the little you do.

These sentiments are shared by most of the younger members, suggesting that, although the personal reasons why women find it worthwhile to join the Women's Cultural Group have changed, these motivations are just as strong as those of its founders. They are likely to carry the Group well into the future.