

The Life and Clairvoyance of Dharmibai



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Author's note: This is my attempt to write a brief document on the life of my Paternal Aunt Mrs. Dharmibai Gandhi, born more than 100 years ago. I have researched events that happened during the time and used my memories growing up in a joint family, having heard anecdotal stories of events that happened during and in my Aunt's life and witnessed certain incidents, especially on her Clairvoyant abilities, myself. If I have inadvertently, omitted or modified any occasions in the write up, I ask for the readers' forgiveness in advance.

Early Life

Dharmibai, my *Bhua* (paternal aunt, father's sister), was born in 1912 in Sanpur, in Sirohi State (now part of Rajasthan), a princely kingdom under the British Raj. She was the only surviving daughter of Manikchand and Saklibai Katariya. She was the middle child with an older brother, my *Baasa* (or Uncle), Punamchand, and another brother - my father, Ratanchand, who was almost fifteen years younger than her.

Dharmibai was raised in the traditions of the Rajasthani Jain community of the times. She grew up in a Patriarchal joint family system with cousins. Her parents' family and her paternal uncle's family along with her Grandfather, my Great-Grandfather, lived in a traditional joint family. Most of the men travelled and lived in faraway Poona (now Pune), while the women ran the household in Sanpur.

Since her Grandmother had already passed away before Dharmibai's birth, when she was born, the senior women in the family were her aunt and mother, who managed the household together. Dharmibai had her own *Bhua*, Sadibai, who frequently visited from her village, Padiv, a few miles away from Sanpur. Dharmibai had another cousin, from another *Bhua* who passed away in childbirth, also growing up with her. Although she was an only daughter, Dharmibai had four sister-like cousins growing up in a joint family.

During those times, in Sanpur, medical services were limited to the local Vaidya (Ayurvedic Doctor), and during childbirth there were midwives to help. As Dharmibai was growing up, she witnessed death in childbirth, because her mother and aunts lost more than one baby when Dharmibai was not even eight years old. This was a precursor to her future, infant mortality being common, but still a horrific event each time for the mother to be.

Around the age of fourteen, Dharmibai was betrothed to Tarachand Gandhi, a young and enterprising sixteen year old from the Village of Mohabbatnagar, a few miles away from Sanpur. Tarachand was an adopted heir to the Gandhi family, since his adoptive parents did not have any children of their own. His biological parents were close relatives of the adopting Gandhi family and were also from the same origination, but they were not as successful financially. Tarachand's biological family had migrated to

Baroda which was also a princely kingdom under the British Raj for business opportunities. They kept in regular touch with Tarachand after his formal adoption.

Tarachand's adoptive family was prominent in the Oswal Jain community (a subsection of a larger community that incorporated other designations of Rajputana Jains based on their language and geographical origination) comprising 59 villages in Sirohi State. In Poona, where Dharmibai's in-laws had also set up business, the Gandhi family name was used to identify the subsection of the overall migrant Rajasthani Oswal Jain community; they had significant clout in establishing the rules and norms of cultural/religious identification for their emigrant group. In essence, this family was a leader of the community that Dharmibai was married into.

Dharmibai and Tarachand got married in early 1928, when my father was a few months old. She moved into the family home of her husband's adoptive family. The new bride was welcomed, and Dharmibai started settling down in her new home. In the next two years, she regularly visited her parental family back in Sanpur.



This map shows the general area of Mohabbatnagar & Sanpur, near Mount Abu, in the original princely Sirohi State which is located in present day State of Rajasthan in India. The straight line distance between Mount Abu and Sanpur and also between Mohabbatnagar and Sanpur is around 15 miles.

Just after the death of her father, in 1930 due to Cholera, consequent to a Sangh (A Sangh is a major undertaking by a financially successful Jain family wherein, the hosts organize a trip to an important Jain pilgrimage centre, bearing majority or all of the cost) organized by her grandfather, uncle and father's family, (*see the story [here](#)*), Dharmibai became pregnant. This was a big event in the childless Gandhi family. They were hoping to have a grandchild to continue their heritage. All were excited about the coming birth. However as Karmic fate decided, it was not to be; Dharmibai gave birth to a still born baby.

Dharmibai's older brother Punamchand and his wife Tipubai meanwhile had a son, Javerchand (my cousin), who became close to his Bhua, as he grew older.

After losing her father and first child, Dharmibai's young life started to turn into a long ordeal and never followed in the tradition that she would have hoped her life to be, mirroring those of her mother, aunts, female cousins and childhood friends.

In 1931, Dharmibai was pregnant again, and the family was happy for the young couple. Just around the end of the first trimester, Tarachand had to travel between Poona and Mohabbatnagar. He had been ignoring some pain in his abdomen that accentuated enroute this trip. It led to a perforated appendicitis that turned out to be fatal.

This death of the most important person in her life was devastating for Dharmibai. Following tradition, the bejewelled young daughter-in-law of the Gandhi family had to discard all her ornaments and colourful clothing and switch to the dark clothing of widowhood.

As the societal norms during the time dictated, there were some very traumatic practices that followed widowhood in the community. One of them included a ceremonial destruction of the jewellery that the widow wore before her husband's death. Subsequently, the other widows in the family and community would move to a private room, cluster around the new widow and help her switch to the garb of a widow. This was considered to be an initiation because it would be difficult for the new widow to be able to do this on her own. These practices, along with the heavy lamenting and wailing that went on for days, took their toll on her. This could have been the reason that Dharmibai lost her unborn child again.

After weeks and months, my Great-Grandfather and Grandmother intervened. Against customary practices, they decided to bring the overly exhausted and despaired Dharmibai from her in-laws' home to her maternal home in Sanpur, where she would be around people she had grown up with, loved and who in turn cared for her. They hoped that she would still be able to occupy her time by interacting with her Aunt's, brother's and cousin's families and four married female cousins' families who all regularly visited Sanpur.

However, it was a very difficult life for a young widow. She had become widowed in a part of India, where in the Sati practice had been glorified over the centuries; Sati was the apparent self-immolation of the widow on her husband's funeral pyre. In Jain communities this practice was barred. However there was no concept of a widow's remarriage at that time in this diaspora of the Rajasthani community. And, as a widow, Dharmibai would never be formally included in any significant social and cultural celebration.

So, the next decade for Dharmibai passed almost as a solitary life. In this time, Dharmibai got into spirituality and studied the Jain scriptures while living in Sanpur. She had not received much formal education earlier, so this time period allowed her to improve her reading skills in the Gujarati and Hindi languages, which had many translations of older Jain scriptures from Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tamil and Kannada. She could have considered becoming a Jain nun, a very austere and difficult lifestyle proposition. However, it did not come to fruition for Dharmibai. She did become a religious lay person, following the daily regimen of strict practicing Jains in terms of diet and protocol.

By the mid-1940s her youngest brother (my father) was married. The joint family had given way to her Uncle and Mother living in separate homes. Then, her nephew, fifteen year old Javerchand fell severely ill due to Typhoid and died. This was an immense loss to my Baasa, my Aunt, Grandmother, my father and my Bhua who were all very close to him. Dharmibai's immediate family, in her generation now had no living children at all- Javerchand was the only child that either the older brother or the sister had. And sadly, he too passed away.

Dharmibai's Clairvoyance

The expectations were that my parents would have children soon. My mother conceived almost five years after my parents' wedding, four years after Javerchand's untimely death. As was the custom during the times, my mother went to her maternal home in Kolhapur to deliver her baby (additionally, in Kolhapur, a Doctor's care would also be available). Dharmibai, my Aunt Tipubai, and my Grandmother were all in Sanpur. My maternal Grandfather in Kolhapur had no direct communication like a telephone or even a telegram (the nearest office would be in Sirohi or Abu Road, an hour's journey in the daytime on a good day) to get the message quickly from Kolhapur to Sanpur in event of the birth of a child. All were anxious, as this childless family was expecting their next generation to take birth and arrive, once again after a long time.

I have never been clear on the origins of her clairvoyant abilities. Dharmibai may have had earlier episodes, but I have always wondered if her unique and solitary life caused her to get those entrancements. Those episodes of unusual behaviour are not clear and nobody thus far has been able to explain it scientifically, but I strongly believe there was an extra sensory perception in Dharmibai's case. Even though I may have a biased opinion, it was observed by a few outsiders and if they ventured to query her in these moments, she would deny them a response.

There were only a few predictions in her lifetime that I have been made aware of or experienced myself, and they were all related to the immediate family. Also, her clairvoyance only came into realization during a major family event or crisis. I myself had witnessed her going into her trance in the mid 1980s in my high School and early college years, and I knew she had no compelling reason to go into this reverie; She always told my mother after the event (she was in her seventies by the 1980s) that it caused her physical stress, and she did not have the strength to handle the vibrations during the trance.

My brother was born in November 1949; the news had to reach Sanpur in a post Independent India in a rural part of a Princely state that had not yet clearly become part of Independent India. (Sirohi State was merged with the state of Rajasthan on 16 November 1949).

The earliest clairvoyant episode of Dharmibai known to me took place at the time of his birth. She went into a trance. With traditional symbolization, she indicated that the Goddess Amba had finally blessed the family, and her namesake had taken birth (there is a historical temple complex in Ambaji, a town along the border of Rajasthan and Gujarat State, dedicated to the Mother Goddess Amba, who was also the Katariya family's ancestral benefactor). The news of my brother's birth was confirmed in a couple of days. Dharmibai's clairvoyant episode was graciously accepted by the family, and all anxiously awaited to see the new mother and son.

My mother was raised in Kolhapur City, and was adjusting to rural Sanpur. Because of various reasons, there was a decision for all family members to move to Poona, with regular visits to Sanpur as required. So my brother never had to live in Sanpur. A new home was acquired in Poona for my parents, my Grandmother and Dharmibai to live in. My *Baasa* and his wife still lived in the upper level of the ancestral residence in Poona, along with his cousin's family. This residence and business location had been purchased by my Great-grandfather in the 1900s, almost 50 years ago.

The years went by.

My parents' family subsequently grew with four more children by 1959. In 1960, a three storey home was purchased for my parents and elder uncle's family. The family grew in the 1960s with two more children, including myself. Dharmibai lived with my parents' family, and was close to all her nieces and nephews. She went through health issues during this time also. She was diagnosed with an early stage of Breast Cancer, and had to undergo Mastectomy.

In the year 1975, one of my older siblings, who was in the early twenties, had a personal crisis, and left home without informing anybody of the whereabouts. My *Baasa*, Aunt and Dharmibai at this time

participating in a Sangh organized by another native family of Sanpur, who also were Katariyas and distant cousins of my family. They were contacted in the middle of their trip, since my sibling had been missing for several days with no news of the whereabouts. They immediately decided to return to Poona, which was still a two day train journey from the eastern part of India (where the destination of the Sangh was planned).

As soon as Dharmibai, who was in her 60s now, entered our home from her aborted trip, she sat down in a corner of the room where a lot of the family and friends were seated. Then, she went into a trance. She started her reverie. It lasted only for a few minutes. She uttered just a couple of lines during this period; translated from the Rajasthani dialect she spoke, it meant “Everything will be fine and should be home tomorrow!”

This came true!

I was a young child then, but it was a thing of amazement to me, never being able to comprehend how and why such events happened.

The years went by.

Dharmibai decided to adopt a child. This was going to be a toddler who was the second son of another adopted son; her brother-in-law in the Gandhi family she was married into. There was a big ceremony at the Jain Dadawadi centre in Poona, with a Luncheon for the relatives and community members. Since the adoption was only formality at this point, not much changed in her life consequent to the adoption. The young child continued to live with his biological family, and Dharmibai with her brothers’ family.

My siblings were all married by the mid 1980s and Dharmibai had grandnieces and grandnephews through them.



Dharmibai Gandhi. 1985

My grandmother passed away in 1980. Dharmibai lost her closest friend and companion for the last fifty years - her mother.

My father, her baby brother, passed away in 1986. Along with everyone else, she was devastated. On the night of his death, she had her reverie again. This episode of clairvoyance was to assure the family that he had gone to a good place, to paraphrase her words.

Around this time, my family was going through a minor crisis. I recall I was home one day when she started entering her trance. Normally, I would have never been in the immediate vicinity. However, with some inhibition, I asked her, “What does the future hold for me?” She replied, “You work hard and you will be fine.” It was assuring to me, since at this point I had decided to travel to the Western hemisphere for further education.

Final years

Dharmibai’s adopted son visited us several times as he grew up to be a teenager and adult. She lived with my family through the mid-nineties. In 1996, her older brother, my Baasa, passed away. Her adopted son, who was in his twenties and had gotten married by then, decided to take her home to live with him.

I last saw her in December 1998, during my visit to Poona. She had suffered a major fall and was in an unresponsive state. Through her eye movement, I had a strong sensation that she recognized me when I went to see her along with my wife and little daughter, who was seeing her for the first time. It was a very sad moment for me as I had a feeling that I would not be seeing her again after this trip.

Dharmibai never got out of her catatonic state after the accident. She passed away in February 1999, about a month after I last met her. She lived almost her whole life with her birth relatives due to the circumstances life bestowed on her, but died living with a family she did not really know well. I have always wondered why her clairvoyance, if it could have been powerful enough, did not help her in negotiating her own life.

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