

## **Jeram and Jaydevi**

### **Seeking the Beloved**

#### ***Jaydevi Joshi***

When Jaydevi, looking out of the schoolroom window, saw her father coming through the school gate, she grabbed her bag and ignoring her teacher's attempts to restrain her, ran out of the classroom and into her father's arms. She would have to put up with her teacher's scolding the next day, but she didn't care. She would do it again and again because her delight at seeing her father expressed not only her love for him but also her desire to escape from school. It wasn't that she hated school; she loved Gujarati School but English School was boring. The white teachers, who were not as good as the vernacular teachers, worked at a much lower level, especially in maths. Though she was a timid child, Jaydevi loved her father so dearly that she didn't care about breaking school rules.

She was, after all, from feisty stock.

Her grandfather, BR Joshi, had run away from home in India when he was only ten. Being from a Brahmin family, the caste system, which did not allow him to do manual work, required him to go begging for food (bhiksha) from house to house. As he hated the tradition, Grandfather couldn't bring himself to follow it and, with a cousin, ran away from home and stowed away on a boat bound for South Africa.

When the boys were discovered on board, they pleaded to be allowed to stay offering to pay their way doing odd jobs on the ship. But they were so young.

"You are under age. We can't let you travel by yourselves."

Grandfather would not be put off. "I know I look small but I'm actually sixteen," he insisted. With his blue eyes and white skin he didn't even look Indian. Even though he could not speak English, only Gujarati, he won over the captain and he and his cousin became dishwashers and cleaners and helped with the cooking in the galley.

When they landed in Lourenço Marques, they had to fend for themselves and somehow made a little money buying and selling goods. Eventually, they worked their way to Pretoria and ended up in the location. Here, Joshi found himself in a nurturing community that wouldn't let a young boy starve. While he continued to pursue his little trades, he taught himself English, which he learned to speak and write so fluently that he later became a teacher of English at the school in Cowie Street. As he had a natural bent for bookkeeping, small businesses began to employ him to do their books. When he began to make money, he started sending something home to India every month. By the time he was twenty, he was earning enough for visits to India.

On his second visit, his family arranged a marriage for him but he could not bring his wife back to the Asiatic Bazaar, as he had no home to offer her.

Back in South Africa, driven by the need for substantial and consistent earning in order to provide for a wife and eventually a family, he did two things: he acquired property in Jerusalem and Moghul Streets and started an accounting firm which became a very successful enterprise. Eventually, as B.R. Joshi and Sons, it would provide financial services to many companies trading in Prinsloo Street and the Asiatic Bazaar. Joshi, who was becoming prosperous, built a suitable home in the location, brought his wife and children from India and supported them in fine style. When his sons were old enough, he made them partners in the business and they in turn were also able to provide very comfortably for their families.

His son Baboolal, Jaydevi's father, lived in a big home and owned a car.

And Jaydevi was part of an extended family with a large number of children; one of her uncles had two boys and five girls, another two girls and three boys and her own family consisted of three boys and two girls. They were a gang of over a dozen cousins who played together, went to school together and devised fun activities together.

When they attended Mr Bhika Chiba's religious education classes on Boom Street, despite the seriousness of the subject, they sat there alert waiting for Pankaj, their most forward and forthright cousin, to liven things up. On one occasion, Mr Chiba explaining the Hindu reverence for the cow said, "We worship the cow because it is like a mother to us; it gives us milk."

"Why don't we worship the goat then? It also gives us milk." Pankaj was in his usual form and the other children were delighted. But at the end of the day, they were all disappointed when Pankaj declared that he would not attend any more of these classes as they did not make sense to him.

This huge band of Joshi cousins, who loved the movies, went to see all the latest features at the Royal, the Empire and the Orient: Hollywood musicals, horror films like *Werewolf* and *Dracula* and serials, like *The Adventures of Zorro*.

As they loved Indian films best, they saw many more of them and they were the inspiration behind the shows that they put on in a little fenced off area in the "Greenies" - a park like spot along the Apies River. Jaydevi and her sister, who learnt all the Indian songs and dances, used the dry Apies canal for their practice sessions. With one or two of his cousins, Pankaj, who was fascinated by Dracula, depicted his gruesome excesses to the horror and delight of his audience.

Children from the neighbourhood, who supported these ventures, paid an entrance fee of sixpence. The money collected was used to subsidise the shows.

On one occasion, Pankaj, whose ambition was to be a doctor, insisted on a doctor's white coat for a role he would play in their next show. When the others asked him to borrow a coat, he refused. Eventually, they reached a compromise when he offered to pay half the cost of a new coat. These concerts, which were great fun, continued for many years. When Jaydevi's family

fell upon hard times, they helped to supplement the family income.

That happened when Jaydevi was thirteen and her carefree childhood was brought to an abrupt halt. "Perhaps I would have grown up a spoilt brat and led a frivolous and superficial existence." But she didn't have that chance.

The prosperous Joshis, among the few families in the location with cars, could travel about the country for holidays and often went on trips to one or other of the seaside towns - Durban being their favourite destination. Jaydevi's father, Baboolal, and uncle Praboolal, Pankaj's father, organised these excursions and a convoy of two cars, stuffed with children and adults, would leave the little location to make its way into the big world beyond.

In 1959, they arranged to spend their holidays in Cape Town. Baboolal's nephew, who had been studying in India, was back in the location and was to join them on their trip. This nephew, who had lost his mother when he was a baby and had been brought up in his family, was more like a son to Baboolal. He was a brilliant young man who was on his way to London to take up studies in law. He had stopped off in South Africa for a short break before heading north and was using this little holiday in the location learning to drive.

Baboolal, his driving instructor, was very proud of the progress he was making. On the day before they were to set off for Cape Town, they went out for a lesson and were involved in a car crash in which Baboolal was killed.

Jaydevi was devastated. Baboolal, the focal point of her existence, was gone. His sudden death sent her tumbling through a void. "He can't be gone forever. He has to come back." She demanded that religious leaders bring him back. Because of her belief in reincarnation and yogic miracles, she knew it was possible for him to return. She wrote to Swami Sivananda in India begging him to bring her father back. But no one could help her. She grieved for a long, long time and did not notice how drastically things were changing for the family.

Harsh reality only struck home the day she went out to fetch the milk and found that it was not in its usual place on the doorstep.

"They've forgotten to deliver the milk!"

"No, they haven't," her mother replied. "They don't deliver milk anymore; there's no money to pay for it."

They were suddenly destitute. One moment they were wealthy and respected with lots of relatives and friends around them; the next they had nothing and nobody. As there was no money to pay the rent either, they had to move. Inexplicably, her father's partnership in the flourishing bookkeeping firm B.R. Joshi and Sons had amounted to nothing. As her marriage under Hindu rites was not legal in South Africa and she did not speak English, her mother could make no claim.

The children were too young to question and accepted their dismal circumstances as part of the doom that accompanies death. They were poor now and could no longer take anything for granted.

For a nominal fee, the Gujarati community allowed them the use of a big room with a kitchen at the Seva Samaj on Eleventh Street. So they moved from a big house with plenty of space, to one room with a communal toilet and bathroom in the yard outside. Now they were on par with most of the community in the location. It was a

reversal, but like the people around them, this mother with her five

children, the youngest a baby, would eventually find joy in the fact that they were together and could share in ways they had never done before.

When she became aware that as the first-born she had responsibilities to the family, Jaydevi gave up her mourning and began to take on the role of the head of the household. Her father came back then, quietly and unobtrusively, to live permanently in her heart. She also found him in her brother, Ravindra, four years her junior but mature beyond his years, who became her help, her support and her guide.

Jaydevi walked around now with eyes wide open, alive to any opportunity that could bring in money. She could not appeal to relatives; the old spirit of not accepting bhiksha inherited from Grandfather, remained in her consciousness. With her sister and brothers, she began making little odds and ends for sale. At Christmas and Easter, they made plumes, which were very popular during the festive season and other holiday times. They were small dowel sticks with coloured crêpe paper strips attached to one end. Jaydevi and one or two other siblings stood on street corners selling plumes and little paintings. They expanded their activities to include babysitting and tutoring children in maths, typing and other subjects. They were often paid in kind and came home with a bag of potatoes or other vegetables.

When Jaydevi's mother left for India on family business, the children went around to vegetable hawkers and stall holders in the market asking for samples - a potato here, an onion there - promising to make purchases if their mother approved of the quality. The hawkers understood, cooperated in their little subterfuge and helped them to feed themselves. The children also found jobs in various shops and offices. Jaydevi, Shirish, Ravindra and Niroo, helped out at the bookkeeping offices of B.R. Joshi and Sons, now run by their Uncle Praboolal. At Makooloo Hopaan, the Chinese general dealership, they pumped paraffin into bottles. These small ventures that helped to sustain the family, continued as long as Jaydevi was in school. Her grandfather had obtained a government grant for their schooling but there was no money for books. As there wasn't a library in the location, the children went to bookstores, stood at shelves and read until closing time.

Jaydevi attended the Pretoria Indian Girls' School (PIGS) - the acronym exacerbated her dislike of English school. The principal was Miss Wolf. As in the fairy tale, Jaydevi felt like one of the little pigs trying to make something of his life but being thwarted by the big bad wolf. At that time, the authorities believed that Indian girls did not need higher education as all they wanted out of life was marriage and a family so education for girls went no further than Std 8 (Grade 10). When Jaydevi completed her studies at PIGS, she asked Miss Wolf for a transfer card to the Pretoria Indian Boys' School. But Miss Wolf huffed and puffed and sternly refused to give her the transfer. Though the principal frightened her, Jaydevi, who knew what she wanted, was determined to get it. Without looking where she was going, she made a mad dash over the principal's flowerbeds towards the gate. Propelled by the flurry of angry words from the office window, she charged into the boys' school nearby, burst into the principal's office and blurted out, "Miss Wolf won't give me a transfer card and I want to come to this school so that I can finish my matric."

Desperation had made the usually tongue-tied Jaydevi quite reckless. There was, however, no problem.

Mr Colinette had already admitted a few girls to the school so he enrolled her and she began attending the boys' school. A group of her friends took courage from her example and also sought and gained admission to the boys' school.

"Education at the girls' school had been a complete waste of time. We were learning nothing there that could not be learned at home. But at the boys' school, we were suddenly being challenged with physics and maths and other subjects. For the first time, I began to enjoy English School." [\[1\]](#)

After she completed her matric in 1964, Jaydevi went to work at Pretoria Distributors - the first Gujarati girl in the location to go to work! Other Gujaratis were outraged. How could her mother allow it? All  
How her daughter, a Brahmin girl, to become a 'prostitute'?

But her mother was proud of Jaydevi who had voluntarily stepped into her father's shoes to provide for the family.

With her mother's support, Jaydevi was able to ignore her detractors in the Gujarati community but she couldn't avoid poor whites on Potgieter Street, who harassed her on her way to work. She did not respond to their shouts of "Coolie" and avoided the stones they threw at her.

When they chased her, however, she ran for her life. It was a nerve-wracking journey every morning. As she made her way to work, she tried to make herself as insignificant as possible, keeping her focus on herself and her purpose - to work, work, work, to make lots and lots and lots of money.

Following in the family tradition, Jaydevi had become a bookkeeper like her father and grandfather before her. Being a woman, however, this was a break with tradition. But the owners of Pretoria Distributors, the

Kalas,  
had employed her because she was a woman.

In addition to bookkeeping, as a woman, she could take on various other functions such as helping in the kitchen or cooking during weekends - all for R10 a month.

One day when she came home from work, she got the shock of her life. Her uncles had come to the house to inform the family that she was to be married. The parents of the young man chosen for her would be coming the next day to make a formal proposal. She was stunned. She had long made up her mind that she would never marry and now, without any warning, she was being married off. But she said not one word.

Her uncles had taken charge; she was powerless. It was only in private that she confessed to her sister and brothers that she did not want to get married.

When Ravindra urged her to make this known, she did not.

She felt too intimidated to say anything.

She couldn't understand why this was happening to her.

Were they ashamed that she was working?

Had they come up with this idea to stop her bringing disgrace upon the family?

Her grandfather, who would have been her ally, was on a visit to India.

She felt trapped.

The next day, the proposal was made, the family accepted on her behalf and she was engaged to be married.

What was she going to do? She spent many futile hours weeping and feeling sorry for herself.

When her grandfather came back from India and saw what was happening, he diplomatically put a stop to the wedding.

Jaydevi could go on with her life as she had planned it.

After a year at Pretoria Distributors, deciding that she could do better for herself, Jaydevi applied for and obtained a situation at *Mod Homes*, a Jewish firm where she was offered the princely sum of R30 a month. She felt on top of the world.

By comparison with what she had been earning, she was rich. Despite having to put up with certain demeaning conditions like entering by the backdoor and working where customers would not see her, Jaydevi was happy at the firm. Racism wasn't a consideration; she had lived with it all her life. At least no one was throwing stones at her. Her white colleagues, who were friendly, loved the Indian food that she shared with them. But when she discovered that compared to them she was earning a mere pittance for equal if not more work, she felt humiliated.

But she couldn't give up her job; she was putting her siblings through school and college. Her brother, Shirish, was at a teacher training college and Ravindra would be going to Salisbury Island University College (later the University of Durban-Westville), the university in Durban designated for all Indian South Africans.

Fortunately, it was only in his first year that Jaydevi had to provide for Ravindra. Thereafter, he won scholarships year after year that paid for the rest of his university education.

But in that first year, 1967, she had to pay his fees.

It was a struggle but she was determined.

She took on extra work and saved as much as she could. When she found that she would not meet the deadline, she tried to raise a loan.

She had no luck until she approached her best friend's father, Naren Kala, the uncle of her former employer, who helped her out.

After her father's death, Jaydevi had set her mind on one thing and one thing only - money! In order to restore her family to its former status, she had to get rich. To do that, she had to become a chartered accountant. That meant university. So she began to save. Despite having to pay all household expenses, support her brothers and sister at school, college and university, she managed to put away money for the time when she would be able to study.

When Shirish, the oldest of her brothers, obtained his teachers' diploma and took up an appointment, he relieved her of the responsibility of providing for the family. This meant she could at last enrol at university.

A month before the university term began, relatives in India invited her to visit. Though she knew that this was another scheme to get her married, that her maternal grandfather was behind it, probably her mother as well, she agreed to go. In India, after she had been with her relatives for a short while, she impulsively went on a solo tour of the country. Alone in a foreign country, in unfamiliar situations among strangers with no father or grandfather to depend on, she learned to fend for herself. And in finding her way around, she found herself, found her voice and learned to speak her mind. At the end of her stay, when the family approached her about marriage, she flatly refused.

In 1969, after she returned from India, she went with Ravindra to the University College of Salisbury Island and enrolled for a bachelor's degree in Commerce. Ravindra, who was working on an Honours Degree in Mathematics, questioned her motives when he discovered his sister's course of study. But she was quite clear: she wanted to be rich. When she thought of what it had been like when her father was alive, she wanted to live like that again. Though Ravindra scoffed at the subjects she had chosen, regarding them as mundane and practical, he helped her with her work, explaining concepts that she found difficult to understand. Because she was older than most students and had worked for several years, she did not have their carefree attitude. She was serious, took responsibility for herself, understood the consequences of her actions and worked hard. At the end of her first year, she won a scholarship, which was a useful supplement to the R600 she had saved to cover her university expenses.

After two years at Salisbury Island, Jaydevi returned home, went to work in

Johannesburg for a Mr Friedman, who owned *Chicktique* and *Harlequin Fashions*, enrolled with the University of South Africa (UNISA) to complete her degree by correspondence and was articled to a chartered accountant. In addition, she was making and selling dresses to people in Laudium. On one of her visits to Mogi Kollapen's house, she saw musical instruments in the lounge.

When she found out that classes were being held there every Sunday morning, she became quite excited. She loved singing and impulsively decided to join.

At the beginning of 1971, she became part of Jeram Bhana's Sunday classes in Laudium and began her education in music.

### ***Jeram Bhana***

Mr Bhowan Lalla, the tailor, kept to himself and was virtually a stranger to his wife and children. He preferred to spend his time at his tailor shop in Mitchell Street in Pretoria West rather than at home in Ninth Street in the Asiatic Bazaar. He stayed in a little backroom at the shop during the week and only came home weekends. His children wondered why. They found his presence vaguely disturbing. He was like a visitor that overstays his welcome and they were impatient for him to be gone. He didn't talk to his children or prescribe what they should do; still it was irksome having this 'stranger' around. He himself had no idea why he came home; he had a hazy notion that that was what was expected of a father.

He enjoyed a drink or two and played the harmonium but he didn't try to communicate with anyone, not even his wife. She was a simple woman from a village in India who had never learned to read or write, not even in the vernacular, and she kept to her chief functions of cook and housekeeper. She was as much a stranger to her children as their father. "It didn't matter at all what we did. I can remember sometimes coming home late in the night. We would just jump over the gate and enter the house. There was really no kind of security. Sometimes, we would stay over at some friend's place and only pitch up the following morning. She wouldn't even know that we hadn't been home all night." She and Bhowan knew each other exclusively in the Biblical sense, had produced a family in the biological sense, but in the social sense had little idea what to do with it or with each other. They understood that they had to make material provision for the children, and so they did, but that was where it began and ended. They imposed nothing on their children; their love of India and the Indian culture and their fear of the children becoming too westernised were transmitted unconsciously. The youngsters were basically left free to develop in their own ways.

Fortunately for Mr Lalla and Mrs Lalla, the community in the Asiatic Bazaar was small and cohesive and provided an extended family for their children. Most of the people were poor, but it was a stable, close-knit community in which human weaknesses were motes, not beams, and people struggled together, laughed together, cried together and celebrated together. It was a community of people recently arrived from India with strong cultural ties to the mother country and strong yearnings to return to the land of their birth someday. They thought of themselves as Indians with loyalties to Bharat (India) rather than the country in which they had come to live. In

South Africa, they concentrated on their own individual needs and focused on making enough money to return to Bharat as wealthy citizens; African problems were not their problems. So they kept to and revered Indian values, customs and traditions.

The Bhana [\[2\]](#) children, growing up in this environment with almost no parental supervision, were free to select a lifestyle from the norms of this generally homogeneous community. But they did not choose any formal or organised religion. As their parents had not insisted on any religious path and had not subjected them to prayers, rituals and attendance at temples, the children grew up free of religious dogma and open to people of any colour, creed and culture -

quite unlike their father.

When their uncle married a Coloured woman, their father would have nothing more to do with his brother. Much later, when their uncle took a second wife, an Indian woman, and his Coloured family moved to the Cape Location, Bhowan still remained very cool to his brother even though both his brother's wives and their children got on very well together. Bhowan, however, believing that his brother had brought shame upon them all, constantly warned his children against fraternising with Tamilians, Muslims and *adhmania* (half-castes).

In general, however, Bhowan let his children be and sat alone with his bottle. His wife did the same. This kind of *laissez faire* parenting might be considered parental neglect, but it actually provided these children with the rare opportunity to find and make their own ways in the world. Since their basic needs were taken of, they were free to explore and discover themselves and follow their own interests and talents. That made school a huge problem because of its prison-like conditions, its prescriptions and its imposition of values and standards. Of course, Mr Lalla and his wife were completely unaware of this as they took no interest in their children's education; she, because she was illiterate; he, because it was none of his business. They had no idea what grades their children were in or how they were progressing. All decisions about school had to be made by the children themselves.

And Jeram hated school. "It did not interest me at all and I would hardly spend any time on school work because to me it was a big pain. It was like being in jail. I remember years later after I had left school and it was no more a part of my life, if I dreamt that I was in school, the dream would be a nightmare. The minute I woke up, it was such a relief to realise it was only a dream." He attended the Pretoria Boys' High and the only subjects that interested him were History and Woodwork: History because it required illustration of the events and he loved drawing; Woodwork because it allowed him to be active and creative. And Fridays were like holidays because he spent most of the day doing woodwork. But for the rest, it was all very painful and restrictive. Furthermore, instruction was in English, not in his mother tongue, Gujarati, and it was the apartheid era with mostly white teachers, who were paid a tolerance fee for teaching in black schools.

Jeram's real education happened outside of school. His very good friends were Sinthumbi's sons, Ronnie, Bobai and Raymond and as he spent a lot of time in their home, Sinthumbi became a surrogate dad. Unlike Mr Lalla, Sinthumbi was keenly interested in moulding his children. He wanted them to be exemplars of Tamil culture and scholarship, perfectly fluent in high Tamil and with a sound knowledge of Tamil customs and values. In 1958, after the Marieamman Temple on Sixth Street had been renovated, and new murthis, statues of deities, Muruga and his two consorts Velli and Devayanai, were being installed, there was to be a forty-eight day consecration ceremony and Sinthumbi was preparing a group of Tamil children to sing and recite from the Thevaram, the Tamil hymnbook. There were practices every evening and Jeram, who is Gujarati-speaking and of a different ethnic background, joined in and learned to sing Tamil songs. He had to learn to pronounce Tamil words correctly, because Sinthumbi, who was very proud of his mother tongue, was fastidious about the way it was spoken and sung. "He would say you must scrape your tongue every morning to get all the scum off it so you can speak the language properly." Although he did not understand what he was singing, Jeram learned the songs and took part in the celebrations. Being involved in this musical activity gave him a great lift and a sense of purpose. Because of his close association with Sinthumbi and his sons and his participation in their cultural activities, some people believed that Jeram was a Tamil boy. Years later, when he went to study art in Bombay, his school toured the south of India where Tamil people live. As he walked around in the villages, visited the temples, saw musicians on the street playing the nageshvaram, the South Indian flute, and other instruments, he felt he had come home.

Jeram also joined the Bharatia Orchestra that his friends Ronnie, Raymond and Bobai had formed. Because he didn't bother about schoolwork, he was always free for band practice two or three times a week and for long sessions on Sundays. "We practised in the lounge of the Kollapen home in Moghul Street or at Rajagopal's place."

The band included youngsters from the Kollapen family - Mogi, Nadas and Jimmy.

Though Coopoo Paul, who played the accordion, was the band manager, the working adults in the band, mostly waiters, willingly accepted his leadership. Mogi, Raymond, Bobai and Ronnie were the singers, Jeram, the violinist, and Kanda, the drummer.

"We always have a good laugh when we think of Kanda; the way he used to play - Tut, tut, boom, boom, that was his basic beat." But in fact none of them had had any formal training.

They all played by ear and were quite unaware of the range of their instruments or the variety of

sounds and rhythms that they could produce.

The band, which played Indian music, had a repertoire chiefly of music and songs from the movies. In those days the most famous Indian artists were P. Sushila, Soundarajan, (South Indian singers), and Mohamed Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar, Talid Mahmood (North Indian Singers). And the music was good not like the film music of today which imitates western pop. The band would get the records of the latest film hits, listen to them and imitate what they heard.

“We did the best we could and we thought it was great, of course.” So did the community. They were hired to play at weddings in the location and in Indian communities in Johannesburg, Benoni and Boksburg. They were spurred on in their efforts by rivalry from the Nadaraja Orchestra, which had a similar repertoire and was vying for the same market. When Abdul Gani, a Memon singer, despite opposition from some Muslims, joined the Bharatia Orchestra and sang a Tamil song,

*Kanay Rajah,*

the rival group rushed to include people from other groups in their band. For a little while, there was even a Muslim band, the Taj Entertainers, with a lead singer, Ossie

Though Jeram thoroughly enjoyed his involvement in music, it was just a hobby at this stage, as he was busy exploring all his options. Living on Ninth Street, it was inevitable that he would become involved in sports because the Dhiraj Soma family lived at the end of the street. The father and sons, whose whole world was sport, swept all the youngsters into teams for every game and sporting activity: *kennetjie*, cricket, tennis, athletics and soccer. Jeram, who was a good athlete, was a striker for All Bharats, the Ninth Street soccer team.

At first, competition was mainly with other street teams in the location. Then, as their confidence grew, they became involved in matches with teams from other areas.

Soon, the team was travelling to Laudium, Atteridgeville and other places for soccer competitions.

In those days, Jeram loved sport as much as art as much as music - they were all ways in which he could actively express himself.

But he believed that art was his true vocation.

As art was not offered at school, Jeram began a course of self-study. He bought instruction manuals and art books from the CNA, read about Renaissance artists like Michelangelo and Da Vinci and wanted to become a great artist like one of them. As he did not know of any art schools or the kind of apprenticeships that these great men had been involved in, he began his study of art by copying pictures, mainly representations of Hindu deities on calendars. After he had drawn the figures, he painted them in watercolours. "Religious pictures have to be gaudy. The more they resemble the original, the greater the praise." And there was much praise for his work. When people began to commission paintings, he realised that he had no need of school and dropped out. But he still wanted to study art.

While he was trying to figure out how to do that, he went to work in his father's tailor shop. When he heard that his eldest sister and her husband were planning to visit India, he suddenly realised that this was the opportunity he had been waiting for. Images of Indian art had been imprinted on his memory when he had lived in the village of Matvad as a young child. When he was six, his father had taken the family back to the village of his origin in India and they had lived there for two years from 1946 to 1948.

Matvad, a tiny village quite close to Dandhi, the seaside town where Ghandi's famous salt march ended, is right on the shore. Jeram remembers that when the tide was in, children would rush out to swim and play in the water that came right up to the doorsteps.

They made little fishing rods and had fun pretending to fish. It would have been idyllic had the village not been plagued by hundreds of monkeys that raided the fields and houses.

It was scary yet thrilling to see them come right into the house and grab a roti right out of someone's hand. "Those monkeys were big and quite vicious. They would attack you if you went after them." Even dogs were no match for them. The beautiful peacocks that roamed about freely, compensated for these nasty creatures.

&quot;You were virtually living with nature.&quot;

And the simple people of the village, who had not spoiled their environment, sang the most beautiful religious and fisher folk songs to express their oneness with their surroundings and the creator. Jeram still remembers one song:

*Holiwala hodali hunkaar*

*Mare jawu Prabhu male vale*

(Boatman row me across the ocean, to the other side

My Beloved [\[3\]](#) is waiting there for me.)

So in 1959, when he heard of his sister's trip, he instinctively knew that he had to go back to India. He approached his dad, &quot;My sister and brother-in-law are going to India and I can go with them. I'm doing nothing here.&quot; His father, who had no idea of his son's involvement in art or his status as an artist in the Asiatic Bazaar, thought his son just wanted a holiday in India. Jeram made no attempt to enlighten him.

&quot;But what are you going to do there? There is nobody in the village.&quot;

&quot;Don't worry about that. It's only for a little while.&quot;

Mr Lalla eventually agreed. A trip to the motherland would be good for Jeram, probably bring

him to his senses. He paid for his ticket and made some financial provision for his visit.

Jeram made his way to Matvad and stayed with an uncle from the extended family. As soon as he arrived in the village, he began making enquiries about art and music schools. One of the villagers suggested that he send for prospectuses from Baroda University and the J.J. School of Art. Beca  
use of its location in Bombay, Jeram was inclined towards the J.J. School of Art, and a visit to the school clinched it for him. He discovered that the school offered art classes for two hours every morning from eight to ten with no obligation to sign up for a degree or any course of study. In the same vicinity was the Deodhar School of Music, offering training in all Indian instruments. Jeram couldn't believe his good fortune.

He was not one for institutions and all his life had followed his own interests. Now he was being presented with the opportunity to choose everything he had ever dreamed of without being tied down to someone else's curriculum. Naturally he wanted it all. Seeing the wonderful possibilities before him, his latent love for music suddenly came to the fore, overwhelming his interest in art. H  
e enrolled at the School of Art, attended art classes from eight to ten in the morning, then spent the rest of the day at the Deodhar School of Music learning to play a variety of musical instruments - the sarod, sitar, violin, flute and tabla.

All his spare time was given to practising on the various instruments.

His day, which began at eight in the morning, continued until late into the night.

The local people couldn't understand this foreigner's fanatical interest in so many instruments. They had no idea that Jeram having escaped from an environment culturally impoverished in terms of his personal artistic needs, had landed in one that was overflowing with riches. People said, &quot;You're crazy. Just to do one instrument is more than enough for a whole life time.&quot;

Jeram responded, &quot;That can't be. What's so involved about it?&quot;

As he now says, &quot;I was still living in a dream world and trying to make it a reality.&quot;

At that time, having no idea of the complexities of the music and the subtleties of interpretation, he tried to absorb in three years, a whole musical tradition that had taken centuries to develop. What he got was "a little taste, a little insight." In the years to come, as the complexity of the music began to reveal itself to him, his ability to understand and appreciate it would deepen considerably.

When Jeram wrote to his father explaining that he was going to study art, Mr Bhowan did not object. "He felt that staying in India would be good; I would have some culture."

Mr. Lalla informed his son that he could make use of the five hundred pounds he had left in the bank of Baroda in 1946. This amounted to about ten thousand rupees. In the early 1960s, people who earned 200 rupees a month considered themselves very well off so Jeram believed he was quite rich. He withdrew about six to seven hundred rupees every six months, paid sixty rupees for board and lodging and ten rupees for fees. He believed he could survive on a little over a hundred rupees a month and knew he had enough to see him through the three years of his study. What he was getting in return for this small investment was of incalculable worth and he came to believe that "the best things in life are free."

He lived in Nil Bazaar, within walking distance of the central area of Bombay, near the beach and near his schools of art and music. He was glad he was only minutes away from his classes; he had a three-year visa and no time to waste. While he studied and worked hard, he wondered what he would do with all the new knowledge and skills he was acquiring when he returned to the Asiatic Bazaar. He had no idea. There was little place for such refined art or music in the location. There seemed to be no future in it; still he was glad to be following his instincts.

Jeram returned to the Asiatic Bazaar in 1961, to find that his father, who had been evicted from his home by his brother, had bought property in Laudium and he had come back in time to help him move.

Jeram tried to pick up the life he had led before his trip to India. He went back into the tailor shop, into the old friendship circles, the football team and the jogging, but his priorities had changed. He wanted to get on with music but didn't know whether he would find like-minded

people to share his love for it. Even though there was no financial pressure on him as his father still provided for all his needs, Jeram wanted to be a professional musician who could earn his keep through his music. Sinthumbi invited him to the Marieamman temple to play during the morning meditation and he was gratified to find that when people heard his flute, it opened their hearts.

Though people loved his music, they still thought of him primarily as an artist and began to commission him once more, this time to make clay models of Hindu deities. As he needed to earn a living, he agreed.

He converted some space in the backyard into a working area and began to look around for suitable modelling clay. His good friend, Ronnie, Sinthumbi's son, helped him by introducing him to Kansamy Chetty, a potter who came from the only family of potters in the location. Kansamy, who was working out in Benoni, promised to bring him the kind of clay he needed. After a while, Jeram started accompanying Kansamy to work. They caught the five o'clock bus to the station to get the five-thirty train to Germiston station, where they boarded the Randfontein train to Benoni. When they arrived there at seven, they walked to the factory to begin work at seven-thirty.

Jeram met Kansamy's boss, Harry Duys, a very amiable and cheerful Hollander, who had just joined the Divine Life Society. Duys considered Kansamy, known as Bob at the factory, to be the best thrower in the country. According to Jeram, Elias Bosch had at one time taken lessons from Kansamy. Duys wanted to know, "Are you Bob's friend?"

"Well, I've just met him and he has been giving me clay for modelling. I've just returned from India where I was studying art."

"Oh, so you're in art. That's very interesting." But Duys was not interested in the paintings that Jeram had brought for him to look at. He was worried about his pottery business, which was on the verge of collapse. He took Jeram aside, out of Kansamy's hearing, "Look, I have a big problem with Bob. He is a very hard worker and a perfect gentleman

but he is an alcoholic. He often goes missing for days at a time. He is my only thrower and his erratic attendance will force me to close down. Do you think you could bring him to work every day?"

Jeram became Kansamy's constant companion even over weekends just to make sure he didn't go on a binge. As he was at the factory everyday, Jeram became involved in the work, took to making pots himself and soon became a second thrower at the factory. Then Duys was able to relax because he was no longer solely dependent on Kansamy. When he suggested that Kansamy and Jeram move to Benoni to cut out the long hours of travelling, they went to live there and remained in the town for the next twelve years.

But Jeram did not give up music; in his spare time he was performing at community centres in Indian areas along the reef. When a member of The Indian Arts and Culture Academy, Mrs Lilabehn Desai, who promoted cultural shows, invited him to perform for the community in Johannesburg, Jeram found the people there very receptive and broached the idea of music classes for young people. Mrs Desai was delighted and organised Saturday sessions at the patidar in the Bharat Shree Mandir opposite the Fordsburg Plaza. As Jeram did not have to work at the factory on Saturdays, he took the train to Johannesburg on Friday afternoons, started classes on Friday night and continued with them for the best part of Saturday. Then in the late afternoon, he took the train to Pretoria for Sunday classes in Laudium, an arduous routine that he followed for about ten years.

In 1971, Jaydevi Joshi joined his classes in Laudium. Though they had both lived in the location, not very far from one another, and were Gujaratis, they had never met before. When Jaydevi joined his class and came to know Jeram, she regarded him as a foolish dreamer who took things as they came and pursued the interests of his heart with no thought of money whatsoever. She, on the other hand, planned every step of her life and couldn't understand a man who did things on impulse. He thought of her as dreadfully worldly because

she was studying to be a chartered accountant and wanted to be rich.

In 1972, to give his students the opportunity to perform and demonstrate their skills, Jeram arranged a tour of Southern Rhodesia. Jaydevi asked if she could bring her brothers along. Easy-going Jeram cheerfully agreed. Her brother, Ravindra, now a lecturer at Salisbury Island University College, had won a scholarship for a master's degree in Mathematics at Stevens University in New Jersey and was home for a while before leaving for the States. He and Jaydevi's youngest brother, Paresh, accompanied the musicians on their trip. Because Ravindra was knowledgeable about music, Jeram made him Master of Ceremonies for the tour.

The company, having enjoyed great success in Rhodesia, were making a triumphant return when disaster struck. As they were approaching Pietersburg in the Northern Province, one of the drivers suffered a stroke and his vehicle overturned, killing five people and injuring several, among whom were Jaydevi's brothers. The injured were taken to Pietersburg Hospital. The accident, which brought back memories of her father's death, filled Jaydevi with anxiety and distress. She could not leave and she stayed to help nurse all the injured back to health. She remained at the hospital for six weeks. As a result, she lost her job and her apprenticeship with the chartered accountant. When they returned to Pretoria, it was time for Ravindra to leave for the States. He found a job on a ship, worked his way over and after completing his degree, stayed on to lecture at Boston University for a few years.

During the time that Jaydevi was at the hospital in Pietersburg, Mrs Desai who had been observing Jeram and Jaydevi for some time, decided to match-make. She knew that these two, with their heads in clouds of music, had no idea of their growing attachment to each other, or if they had, had no idea what to do about it. Jaydevi, who had spent much time sharing ideas and discussing her problems with Jeram, had come to rely greatly on him. He had helped her discover that there were more important things in life than being rich and that her real interest was in music. Nevertheless, he admired her for her resourcefulness, her courage and determination to succeed in life. Neither of them recognised that they loved each other. So when Mrs Desai suggested to Jeram that he and Jaydevi were right for each other, he was taken aback. He hadn't thought of Jaydevi in that way. Mrs Desai insisted that he write to her. He did. When she received his letter, Jaydevi couldn't believe what she was reading but from

then on they began to talk and a new relationship developed.

On 27 December 1973, they decided to get married and set the wedding day for 29 December. Jaydevi's relatives were horrified, not by the short notice, but because she was marrying out of caste. She belonged to the highest caste, the priestly caste of Brahmins. How could she marry someone of a lower caste? A Koli (craftsman)! What kind of an example was this dreadful girl setting for her siblings? Jaydevi ignored all objections but she needed someone to give her away. As a widow, her mother could not and her uncles refused to have anything to do with her wedding. Cousin Pankaj and his wife stepped into the breach, and as surrogate parents, took responsibility for ensuring a good marriage. In the presence of members of the immediate families, Ram Ram, a local priest, married Jeram and Jaydevi on the stage of the empty hall at the Marieamman temple.

After they were married, Jaydevi wrote to Ravindra in the States. He was happy; he felt she had been too dependent on him. Now he didn't have to worry about his sister any more. After the wedding, though Jeram was still working in Benoni, he came back to live in Laudium. When the travelling, became burdensome, he gave up his work at Duys's company.

Once again, he was at a loose end and once again there was a fortuitous solution. Their matchmaker made them an offer they couldn't refuse.

Mrs

Desai was

the daughter-in-law of Pragjibhai Desai, who had been part of Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha community and had lived and worked at Tolstoy Farm in 1910

Now Mrs Desai was on the Gandhi Centenary Committee that was trying to obtain and restore Tolstoy Farm in order to turn it into a national monument. She invited Jeram and Jaydevi to live there as custodians and provide music lessons. This was a wonderful opportunity for the couple. Once the house on the farm was ready for occupation, Jeram and Jaydevi moved in. Virtually alone in beautiful surroundings, they spent their mornings hiking in the hills, practicing yoga, singing and playing music. In the afternoons, they conducted music classes for students from Lenasia.

When visitors arrived, they welcomed them and showed them around. In these peaceful and beautiful surroundings, they were happier than they had ever been. Though they were close to

Lenasia and Soweto, they felt completely cut off from the world and no hint of the chaos of the Soweto Uprising of 1976, filtered into their sanctuary.

But their blissful existence at the farm came to an end after three years. The Centenary Committee's inability to get things moving led to conflict between various groups. When Jeram and Jaydevi felt they were being dragged into a situation that really had nothing to do with them, they quit and in 1978, left for India to further their studies in music. In so doing, they moved from clean, beautiful surroundings into a Mumbai slum. At first, Jaydevi was very unhappy. Disgusted by the filth, poverty, disease and living conditions worse than anything she had ever seen in South Africa, she didn't think she would survive. Jeram, on the other hand, seemed oblivious to it all. He attuned himself to the music, which, like the musicians who made it, transcended the squalor from which it emanated. Master musicians lived all around them, devoting their energies to the unending quest for sublime new harmonies. They gave no thought to material circumstances or to fame and fortune. Totally immersed in music, they had nothing and nowhere else to live. Students like Jeram and Jaydevi, who came to learn from them, gave them what little they earned. These masters played, sang and taught for almost nothing.

Jaydevi's voice teacher was Agni. When she met him, enthralled by his genius, his vision, his artistry, she bent down to kiss his feet and forgot all about her discomfort. She longed to be able to improvise in the way he did. When she brought a tape recorder to try to capture his creative style, the device alarmed him and his singing became mechanical. He understood what Jaydevi was trying to do but he discouraged her from wanting to copy him.

He told her she was missing the point; the essence of music is the expression of one's own uniqueness.

With every rendition of a

*raag*,

one goes within to find oneself in order to interpret the

*raag*

in terms of that self. Agni, like his fellow musicians, lived only for music. Jaydevi couldn't help but feel sad that the divine music that he made in the slum, was born to die there

.

Jeram and Jaydevi knew they would not find this total surrender to music anywhere else in the world.

They wanted to stay forever but the debilitating conditions under which they lived overcame Jeram, who developed tuberculosis. They moved out of the slum and when Jeram had recovered sufficiently, took a short tour of India before they returned to Pretoria in 1980.

Unlike the musicians in Mumbai, Jeram was unable to live by music alone. He had a family and needed to earn a living so he fell back on producing temple icons. He became involved with artists working in the same medium, discovered new techniques and materials, learned to mould and cast using resin and silicone to create a variety of textures, and began constructing domes for temples. He has gained wide recognition for his sculpture and his work can be found in Hindu mandirs all over the country. He has exhibited at the Kimberley Museum, at the Art Department of UNISA and examples of his work are in the permanent collection at the Pretoria Museum.

Despite the kudos he has received for his sculpture, his passion is still for music and it is through this medium that he yearns to pursue his quest for the Beloved.

“Music is not just a few notes that are played. Music is what you are. Whatever you are is expressed in your music. We ask questions all the time; what is life all about? What is its purpose? Art does, to a large extent, address these issues. I have learnt that life is beautiful. Behind all the mess that we see in the world, the sorrow and the pain, there is something beautiful, which makes life worthwhile and helps us through the mess because that is not all there is.

I have never studied religion. It has never appealed to me. But when I meet religious people - from the Divine Life Society or the Hare Krishna movement - and they start talking about the sound, Ohm, the unheard sound, the sound that is Brahman, God, universal energy, to which you connect and experience moksha (freedom), I understand completely because I have the practical experience through my music. When I play, I lose myself, sometimes only for a few seconds. It is an experience of tremendous power and beauty and sustains me through the chaos of ordinary living. It is fortunate that I have this medium. All arts allow you to get in touch with that central energy but music is the finest, most subtle form through which to do it.”

---

[1] Interview, Jaydevi Bhana

[2] Bhana is a corruption of Bhowan and was the surname given to the Lalla children at the Registration Office.

[3] The Beloved in Hindu songs refers to God even when the song makes specific reference to a lover.