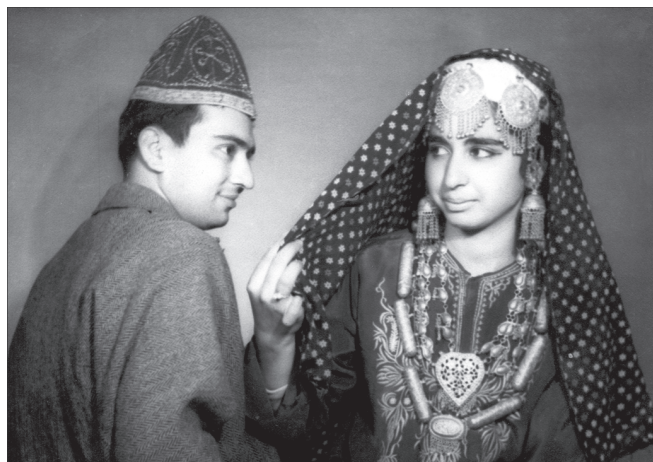


CHAPTER 4

THE BEGINNING OF
FAMILY LIFE



Newlyweds, Nanik and Geeta, in Kashmir.





At twenty-five, Nanik was, by all standards, an eligible bachelor. He came from a well-respected Sindhi family and had proven that he could stand on his own feet. Indian tradition demanded that parents search for a suitable spouse for their son or daughter. The prospective couple would have very little say in the decisions taken by the elders.

The proposal came through a priest who knew both families, as was customary in those days. Nanik, however, had set notions about marriage. He felt that both the prospective bride and bridegroom should get to know each other and be convinced of their compatibility before taking the decision.

Geeta was born in 1945 to Ishwari and Dunichand Chandani, a well-to-do landlord in Karachi. In the wake of the India-Pakistan Partition in 1947, the family left Karachi and settled in Calcutta (now Kolkata), where Geeta

completed her schooling. The family owned a small business in the city. Initially they ran an opticians shop. Later they switched over to jewelry line. “My father was an industrious person who gave us a reasonably good standard of living. I was close to both my parents, but more so to my mother,” says Geeta.

She first visited Bombay when she was thirteen years old. “I fell in love with the city. It was my earnest desire to live there someday,” she admits.

Nanik narrates: “Geeta and I first met by arrangement at the Gazebo Restaurant in Bombay, where my father was also present. We did not exchange a single word except for a ‘Hello!’ When my parents asked for my opinion the next day, I said that it was difficult for me to make up my mind so quickly considering that I had not exchanged any thoughts with the girl. My parents laughed. Where was the question of entering into a dialogue before marriage, they asked — it was simply not the tradition.”

But Nanik was not the type to fritter away his right to choose for the sake of appeasing tradition. He phoned up Geeta’s elder brother Ashok who had accompanied his sister to Bombay. Nanik convinced him that he needed to meet Geeta again, and Ashok consented. They decided to meet and talk at Hotel Sun-n-Sand, a landmark in those days. “I wanted to see whether Geeta and I could be compatible for the rest of our lives. Marriage is a serious commitment; you have to feel the right vibrations before you can say yes and plunge into it. “

The Beginning of Family Life

Partners for Life

“As we sat in the restaurant sipping drinks, we talked about various things. After that, Geeta and I had a little walk in the beautiful premises of the hotel, while Ashok purposely walked a little ahead of us to give us an opportunity to share our thoughts. After a pleasant and lively conversation, I realized with all joy that she would be my perfect companion in the truest sense of the word; who would understand my ambitions and give me enough space to grow. I needed a friend who could be my back-end support in whatever I did. The inspiration had to keep flowing from her to me and vice versa.

“After I went home, I gave the green signal from my side. My mother was happy, but she was worried about what my father would say when he would learn of this secret rendezvous. Thankfully, he was not upset about the meeting, but said that the marriage would not take place unless and until my grandfather approved of the match. The ball was in a different court now and I grew apprehensive. Luckily, my grandfather consented. Geeta and I got engaged in July 1966.”

Even after the engagement, the code of conduct was clear. There was no question of meeting alone or going out for a movie or dinner. However, the couple managed to exchange letters expressing their deep emotions. Nanik would spell out his plans for the future and Geeta would respond with encouragement. Financially speaking, those were difficult days. After Nanik’s return from Ghana, he had put all his earnings into the joint business venture he had started with his father. Even if Nanik had to buy a gift for his fiancée, the permission and the money had to come

from his father.

As Geeta recalls with a smile: “The conventions were so different then. I admired Nanik for his daring quality of defying conventions that he did not believe in. We kept up a steady flow of letters. On certain occasions, we even managed to speak to each other over the phone. Long distance calls were not easy to make in those days, when telecom services were scarce and expensive. We were married in May 1967 and I moved to Bombay.”

“Over the years, I have come to appreciate what a unique and special person he is. He is not at all demanding like some husbands can be of their wives. His expectations are very few. He is very focused about what he wants to achieve, whether it be in business or in the social sphere. He always seems to be in control, whatever the difficulties or challenges. The wonderful part is that despite his innumerable commitments, he always finds time for the family. He has been a doting father and very close to our two daughters. He also finds time to interact with the families of his brothers and sisters and is always around when needed. That’s a great support for everyone concerned.”

Geeta has proven to be a very supportive wife. In fact, she is everything Nanik ever wished for in his life partner. She is a companion, a friend, and a caring person who has stood firmly by Nanik’s side in all the travails that he has gone through. Her support in the early years of their marriage gave a further boost to Nanik’s dreams of rising to great heights and to his ambitions of operating over a bigger canvas.