

Kusum Kulkarni

INFORMATION CARD

Theatre Personality

Name	:	Kusum Kulkarni
Bio-data	:	1
Photographs	:	7
Printed Material		
Articles		—
Clipping	:	20
Brochures	:	1
Publicity Material	:	1
Audio	:	1
Video	:	1



Kusum Kulkarni

Bio-data

<i>Name</i>	:	Kusum Damodar Hegde/ Kusum Rajaram Kulkarni
<i>Place & Date of Birth</i>	:	Thane, 24th July 1924
<i>Residential Address</i>	:	Indira Co-op. Housing Society 60, Keluskar Road Opp. Shivaji Park Gymkhana Dadar, Bombay 400 028
<i>Profession</i>	:	Staff artiste with 'Natya Niketan' from 1956
<i>Education</i>	:	B. A. failed
<i>Languages known</i>	:	Marathi, Hindi and English
<i>Language of theatre work</i>	:	Marathi
<i>Period of theatre activity</i>	:	1931-1981
<i>Awards</i>	:	Maharashtra State Drama Competition — Second Prize for acting Felicitated by the Mama Warerkar Trust in 1992

Pai : Did you have a conducive atmosphere at your home for your artistic pursuits?

Kulkarni : Not directly so because my father Damodar Balkrishna Hegde was a Gandhian patriot. We were, therefore, encouraged to join movements which also included the nationalistic *mela-s*. Even this was considered risky at that time. With my sister I participated

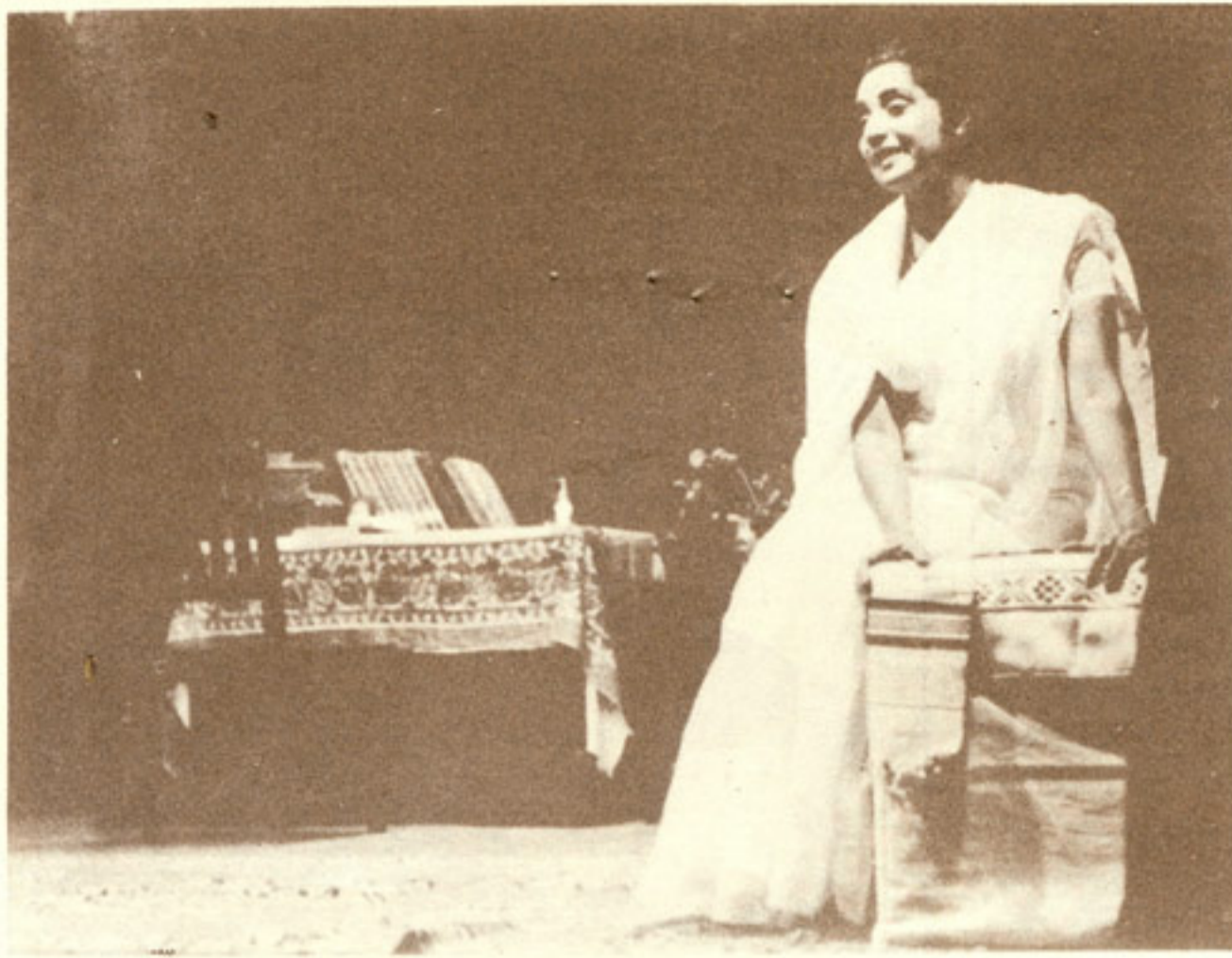
in the *mela-s* when I was 7-8 years old. I used to sing songs and also deliver short dialogues etc. I should say that this helped me in losing whatever stage fright I had.

Pai : Did you participate in the '42 movement?

Kulkarni : Yes, I still remember those haunting days. The movement also included persons who believed in violent actions such as sabotage etc. I was involved in such activities when I was about 18 years old. Finally I was imprisoned . . . To tell you the truth prison was a palace for us. Women of the calibre of Maniben Patel, Mridulaben Sarabhai were with us. It taught us how to curb our egos and live for the community. All these influences became helpful in our future life . . . We were not sure how long we had to stay in the prison. We sought a way out by producing *Satteche Gulam* by Mama Warerkar! The well-known writer, Mrinalini Desai played Vaikuntha and I was the villain, Keropant!

Pai : So you played a male part! After release?

Kulkarni : I joined the Rashtra Seva Dal. Worked vigorously for it. Their performance wing, Kala Pathak, was established. We went on presenting performances of *Pudhari Pabije* (P. L. Deshpande), *Bin Biyanche Jbaad* (Vyankatesh Madgulkar) and such other *lok-natya-s*. My co-actors were Prof. Vasant Bapat, Ram Nagarkar, Nilu Phule, my brother Leeladhar Hegde,



Kusum Kulkarni in Smritichitre.

Pramila Dandavate and Sudha Varde . . . After a time the Socialist group broke away from the Congress and for fund-raising we presented a full-length political play *Udyache Jag* (Madhusudan Kalelkar), directed by Atmaram Bhende. I played the heroine . . . The next break was in the drama festival organised by Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha. They presented *Kavadichumbak* by Acharya Atre. With Atre himself playing Pampushet and other stalwart writers such as Prabodhankar Thakre, Vasant Bapat, Anant Kanekar, Anant Hari Gadre and you . . . it was a great opportunity.

Pai : *I think at this point you shifted to the experimental theatre.*

Kulkarni : Yes. Atmaram Bhende and other theatre lovers had established an institution called Kalakar . . . Priestley's *Dangerous Corner*, then *Waiting for Mr Lefty*, then *Ma Nishad* by Vasant Kamat and many others were presented. Atmaram Bhende certainly knew how to teach . . . By that time the Maharashtra State Drama Competitions had begun. I acted in *Lankechi Parvati* (Mama Warerkar) for the Indian National Theatre. I was adjudged the best actress. M. G. Rangnekar was one of the judges. He invited me to join Natya Niketan, his own dramatic troupe.

Pai : *What made you turn professional?*

Kulkarni : It was a necessity. My husband and I were active political workers. To earn daily bread was a problem. Some job was necessary. So I chose something beneficial to my artistic temperament . . . *Bhatala Dili Osari* was the first play I took part in for the Natya Niketan . . . The role was of an actress with wild behaviour . . . I smoked and all that in the role! Rangnekar

was such a fine teacher that I could do diverse roles . . . *Dbakti Aai* (co-acted with Jyotsanabai Bhole), *Bhumikanya Sita* (Mama Warerkar's rather feminist mythological) as also the older plays like *Vabini* (P. L. Deshpande used to act in it earlier) or *Majhe Ghar* . . . Finally the drama that made history on Marathi stage was *To Mee Navbech* by Acharya Atre . . . I used to play the role of one of the wives deceived by Kazi . . . As coincidence would have it that deceived woman used to be my co-student . . . I remembered her and played the role with rare identification . . . The play had such a great demand that on occasions we had to give three performances a day! Later Rangnekar produced a sequel, *Patita Ekada Patita Ka Sada* in which I played a mad woman . . . This role made extraordinary demands! For example even one facial muscle was not to twitch . . . It taught me many things . . . After Natya Niketan I began performing for Natya Sampada . . . *Vedyache Ghar Unhat* (Vasant Kanetkar, directed by Dr Shriram Lagoo), *Asbrunchi Jbali Phule* (Vasant Kanetkar, directed by Purushottam Darwhekar). These were followed by other plays under different banners. For example *Devaki* (based on a novel by Madhu Mangesh Karnik) or *Majhe Gharthe Majhi Pille* (Vasant Sabnis). In it I played an old woman . . . a role that earned praise from Vijay Tendulkar . . . I also remember your own *Ha Kbel Savalyancha* . . . I was one of the heroines in this play.

Pai : *Then came your Sakharam Binder . . .*

Kulkarni : You will have to go back a little. I had presented a one-person show of *Smritichitre* which Vijay Tendulkar had directed. He was familiar with my gestures, my laughter etc. and this probably made him

suggest my name to the director to play Laxmi . . . This was a very difficult role. In the first act Laxmi is naive, affectionate, animal-loving etc. But in the third act she is cruel, crooked . . . This was a challenge and even our director, Kamalakar Sarang was not sure whether I could do it . . . You know the history that *Sakharam Binder* created.

Pai : *Coming back what made you think of doing Smritichitre?*

Kulkarni : My brother Sitakant Hegde saw a performance of Charles Dickens by Emelyn Williams. He had a copy of *Smritichitre* in his hands when he attended the performance. An idea suddenly occurred to him: why *Smritichitre* cannot be presented likewise. With the help of our friend Shrikrishna Rangnekar he prepared a stage script and came to me. I said we need somebody to direct. Tendulkar liked the script immensely and said, "Please go ahead, I am with you." I was doubtful whether I would look Laxmibai! Tendulkar argued that it was unnecessary to look like her as the script and the character was powerful enough.

Hegde : Charles Dickens, the well-known novelist, used to give public readings of his novels. They were extremely popular in England and America. The famous actor Emelyn Williams gave a similar reading (dressed as Charles Dickens) at the Bhulabhai Auditorium in 1964. It was a very impressive performance. I had a copy of *Smritichitre* with me and I immediately saw the possibilities of presenting *Smritichitre* . . . My friend Shrikrishna Rangnekar enthusiastically picked up the idea and we prepared a script . . . The guiding principle was fidelity to the text. The autobiography was, therefore, to be presented as that. No extra word to be added and thirdly Rev. Tilak and Laxmibai were to be the centre of the whole presentation. These principles determined the format . . . The first reading of the first draft was given on 15th August 1965 at Shanti Sadan in the presence of Devdutta Narayan Tilak. The second took place at Chinchani with Laxmibai's grandson, Shri Ashok Devdutta being present. After many discussions he was agreeable to the idea. The Maharashtra State Censor Board gave us permission on the 4th of March 1968 . . . The entire Tilak family received the performances enthusiastically . . . They were so much interested that in one letter they suggested 40 items to be added in the presentation! We explained our decision not to add a single word and finally they came round.

Pai : *One of the reactions was that you had omitted the fourth part of Smritichitre . . .*

Rangnekar : This is because Rev. Tilak dies by the end of the third part and we had decided to concentrate on the couple. In addition, the convention of three

acts also weighed on our mind . . . Our first editing gave us three acts . . . with a duration of nine hours so we brought the script to a total of three hours! We worked independently and yet the resulting scripts were identical . . . It was a moving script.

Pai : *Why did you approach Kusum Kulkarni ?*

Hedge : Initially we had approached Vijaya Mehta nee Khote who was running Rangayan. Unfortunately there were differences of opinion about the presentation. Kusumtai was getting plaudits for her roles in the Natya Niketan productions.

Pai : *Why didn't you direct the production yourself? You had enough experience of direction.*

Rangnekar : We had tried for other directors but none was as responsive as Tendulkar. He suggested we should go and record aged Brahmin ladies' speech by visiting areas such as Mohan Building, Shastri Hall etc. We did that and gave the material to Kusumtai and Tendulkar for further processing.

Pai : *You saw performances by Emelyn Williams in 1964 and Batatyachi Chaal was being staged from 1960. Any influence?*

Hegde : *Batatyachi Chaal* was popular but reading of an autobiography meant a different form altogether.

Pai : *How could you manage to identify with Laxmibai's character?*

Kulkarni : Individual difficulties may differ and yet there are common griefs and woes of a woman! I was married to a trade unionist and such a marriage has its own difficulties . . . you are always short of money, your husband is mostly in prison, there is no stability and everything is insecure . . . Don't you feel that Laxmibai's life was all this . . . I could, therefore, easily tune with her . . . One more thing I felt in her life . . . a boundless tolerance . . . life in prison and political activity taught me this. I also cannot forget Sane Guruji. He was from Khandesh and was instrumental in arranging our marriage. Sane Guruji loved the entire world . . . The second person was Bhau Ranade. He too influenced me . . . Such idealists, God's people came in my life and that helped me in feeling reverence for Laxmibai and Tilak . . . I also feel that there is one more similarity between Laxmibai and me, she was prone to laughter and I too.

Pai : *How does a preparation for a play and a one-person presentation differ?*

Kulkarni : For a play you need teamwork. In one-person presentation you have to entirely depend on yourself . . . In one-person presentation there is more intimacy with the audience . . . you are almost looking in their eyes.

Pai : *You presented Smritichitre before various strata of audiences. Any memorable responses?*

Kulkarni : Yes, all of them very pleasant . . . Of course there were occasions when emergencies of performance played havoc. . . . In one performance during the scene of Tilak's death a spectator fainted . . . On an occasion

Tendulkar's reading of Tilak's will could not be heard as the taperecorder would not function! But these are all occupational hazards. I cherish my memories of the appreciation I received from the young and the old alike.

Interviewer: Shirish Pai

Kusum Kulkarni : List of Productions

<i>Sr. No.</i>	<i>Name of the play</i>	<i>Character</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>1st Performance</i>	<i>No. of Performances</i>
1.	Satteche Gulam	Keropant	Mrinalini Desai	—	1943	2
2.	Udyache Jag	Bina	Atmaram Bhende	Socialist Party Kalapathak	1946	5
3.	Sangamravri Swapna	Shanta	Madhusudan Kalelkar	—	—	3
4.	Phudhari Pahije	Leela Lele	Vasant Bapat	Rashtra Seva Dal Kalapathak	1950	80
5.	Kavdichumbak	Kasturi	Acharya Atre	Sahitya Sangh	1951	3
6.	Davrechi Vat	Parvati	Atmaram Bhende	Kalakar	1952	4
7.	Bin Biyanche Jhad	Asturi	Vasant Bapat	Rashtra Seva Dal Kalapathak	1953	30
8.	Ida Pida Talo	Nirmala	Vasant Bapat	Rashtra Seva Dal Kalapathak	—	14
9.	Andhala Samsar	Rohini	Maltibai Bedekar	Rashtra Seva Dal Kalapathak	—	12
10.	Amhi Sarya Durgabai	Kanchan	Atmaram Bhende	Kalakar	1953	3
11.	Sashtang Namaskar	Shobhana	Ram Tipnis	New Insurance Co. Drama Club	1954	1
12.	Jhoplele Nag	Janki	Atmaram Bhende	Kalakar	1954	3
13.	Lankechi Parvati	Hema	Atmaram Bhende	INT	1955	4
14.	Shrimant	Aai	Vijaya Mehta	Rangayan	1956	1
15.	Bhatala Dili Osari	Suvarnalatika	M. G. Rangnekar	Natya Niketan	1956	200
16.	Ma Nishad	Manorama	Atmaram Bhende	Kalakar	1956	2
17.	Dhakti Aai	Vijaya	M. G. Rangnekar	Natya Niketan	1956	22
18.	Bhumikanya Sita	Urmila	M. G. Rangnekar	Natya Niketan	1958	20
19.	He Hi Divas Jatil	Nalini	M. G. Rangnekar	Natya Niketan	1961	12
20.	Hirkani	Vahinibai	M. G. Rangnekar	Natya Niketan	1961	1