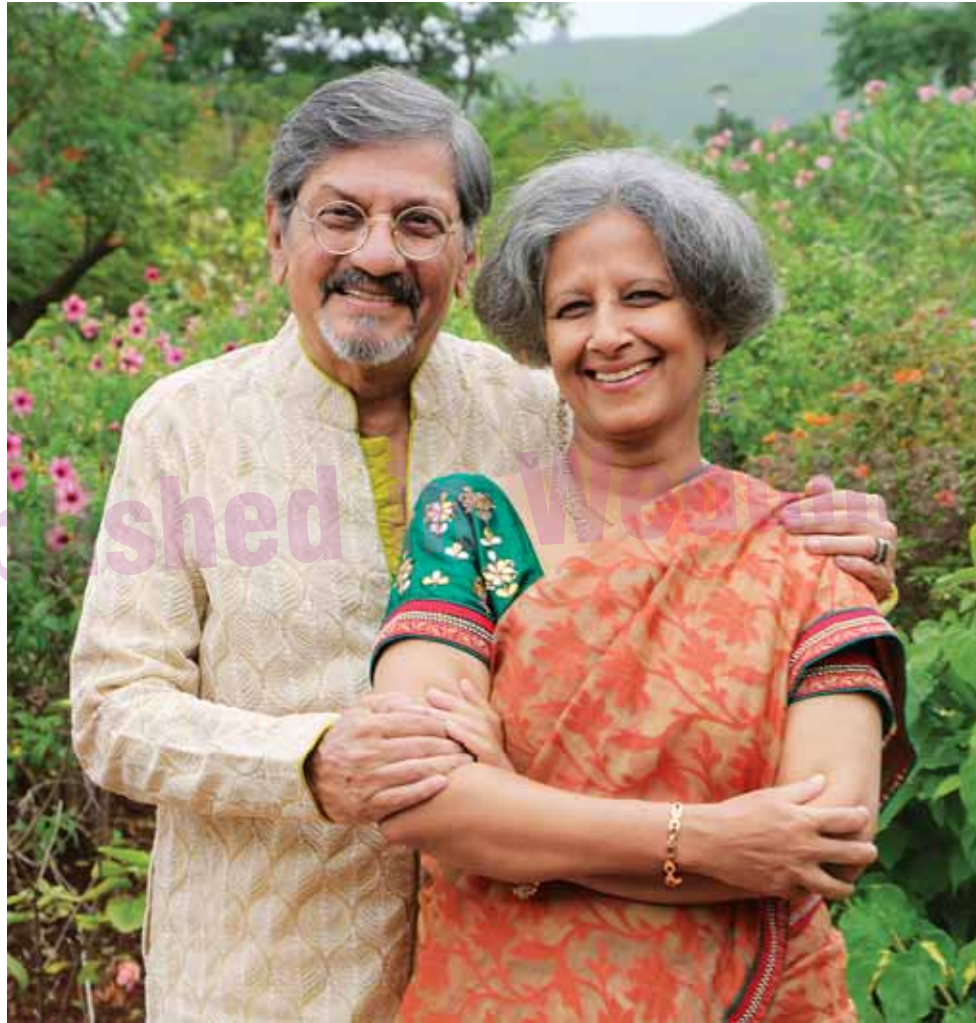


Dialogue with an Inimitable Couple



We bring to you, **Amol Palekar**, a force to be reckoned with, in Indian Cinema along with his better half **Sandhya Gokhale**.

Why were you not ready to be featured for our Cover Story?

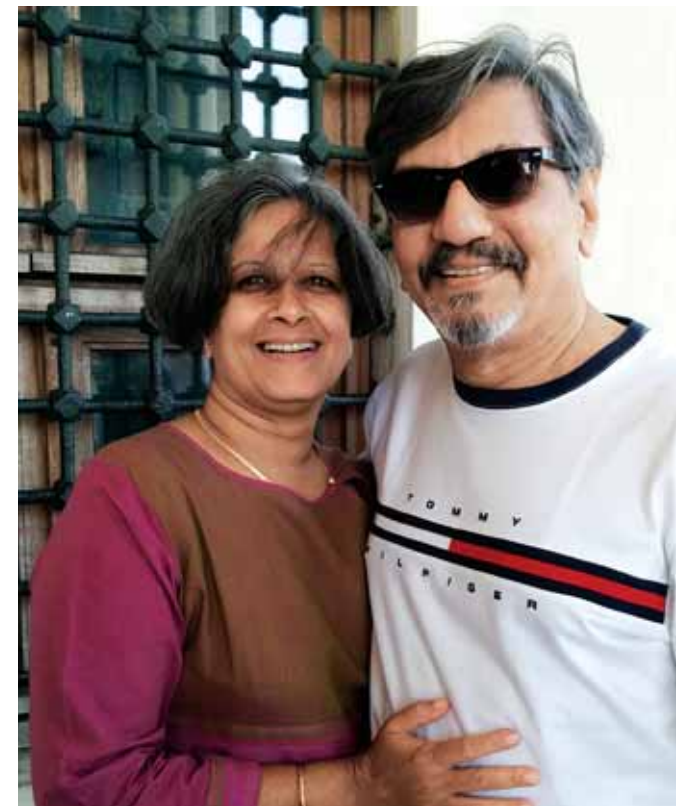
AMOL: At the outset, we both wish to thank you for two things – for managing to feature us despite our reluctance, and for committing yourself not to alter our expressions in any way. Honestly, looking at all the yesteryears' couples featured in your magazine, we were wondering as to why did you think of us? We are neither conventionally glamorous nor conform to the qualities of an archetypal couple which your readers will aspire for! Your question deserves our sincere answer.

SANDHYA: Our unwillingness was more for ideological reasons which we must clarify, so that our resistance to pose as a 'couple clone' in a wedding-centric magazine will not be taken as personal criticism on any of its agents. Glamour

magazines provide a base for an ambition of having a so called 'picture perfect' marriage. This picture perfect image creates an illusion of a 'whole' or completeness that consists of ONLY rosy pieces catered by certain brands or style icons customised by advertisement gurus. Various options from cosmetics, diet products, couture, jewellery, *mehendi*, accessories, designer, to condom flavour and honeymoon locale, to name a few, are recommended to the aspirants. The implicit promise that 'you too can do it or have it' engulfs the newly-weds into external parameters of 'looking good' as a couple through the showcase of social media. The buying of advice does not remain a onetime purchase, but a repeat buyer/audience is seeded into! The inbuilt small print is that any deviation from the advised verticals will be looked down

upon as an unacceptable/not-bridal-enough behaviour or not-so-cool-a-couple! This burden of remaining a 'whole' is carried forward by the bride not only throughout the wedding ceremonies and the honeymoon(s), but also through her married life. Hence, the good bride is trained or conditioned to be mute when in fact she should rebel against a macho abuser with an un-erect genital, or against his confession of an on-going affair, or against the onslaught of mental and physical harassment.

AMOL: This may sound like a farfetched, feminist paranoia but it's not. We don't realise that 'looking pretty' as a bride or as a woman is a male construct, defined and monopolised by the advertisement sellers and media. A few decades ago, the beauty attribute was expected of certain professions such as fashion models, actresses, show girls, sex workers or escorts. Later it is expected of any woman (who is fundamentally defined as a female consumer) despite her role in the social hierarchy. Thus, being beautiful has become the norm of meritocracy. Younger minds easily fall prey to this sold dream of looking beautiful. They get sermonised by the advice on erotic appetite, how to seduce or how not to displease the



husband, etc. They are driven away from 'being beautiful' as in the beautification process, their self-esteem, confidence, youthfulness and other natural emotions and desires get curbed or mutated.

SANDHYA: Talking about mutations...it's no longer metaphoric but visits to and procedures at cosmetic surgeons' clinics are a practice even in Taluka places. Again the 'need for self-improvement' is inculcated by men that we tend not

to notice. This insidious expectation of self-improvement is the beginning of the blame game i.e. if anything goes wrong in the marriage, hey woman, it got to be YOU!

AMOL: It is also the beginning of her assuming the subservient role of someone who falls short of something, and that something may be her appearance or her behaviour as a wife or a daughter-in-law and later as a mother!

SANDHYA: Competitive, insecure consumerism is thus



instrumental in women's subjugation. The shift of modern women from religion of domesticity to that of beauty/thinness and diet restraint is directly caused by the glamour industry and product sellers. I have yet to see magazines which applaud inter-cast or inter-religion marriages, weddings in which less than say a few thousand rupees were spent, or couples who donate the estimated budget for their weddings to some social cause, or a bride who refuses to conform to the sold image of a bride and accepts a groom who is willing to tend the housework while letting her earn the bread.

AMOL: In fact, as an extension of your pursuit of projecting contemporary styles and trends, you ought to reflect the relationship models that are alternative to that of conventional marriages. Live-in relationships committed for years, same sex couples, or couples who are getting married with a clear understanding that they do not wish to bear children, or many more examples which may highlight the value of commitment which may not necessarily be present in the institutionalised matrimony.

What is the secret of your marriage?

AMOL: No secret is the secret...! Sharing as much as

possible is the backbone of our relationship. That gives us an opportunity to bounce off our own thoughts and decisions, to discuss people, circumstances, financial transactions, health issues and even the most banal of matters.

SANDHYA: There is a constant exchange of opinions and dialogues at home, including the latest developments in the world of art, politics, literature or sports.

AMOL: The transparency and understanding in a relationship is very cathartic!

❑ **Some memories from your first meeting...**

SANDHYA: As per the suggestion of one producer who was



an acquaintance, I had approached Amol's office for a particular role in a Marathi TV serial which he was to direct. I told him that I was going to be in Mumbai for about six months, to which he said that they would not be shooting that particular serial in that duration. Just as I was about to leave, he asked me if I was keen on doing an important role in a period costume serial in Hindi. I frankly said that I would be uncomfortable in period costumes and was not very fluent in Hindi. Amol was ticked off as he thought I was sitting on a high horse.

AMOL: It didn't just end there! The best part came when I told her to keep a few photos with my office, and she point

blank refused! She said she did not have any acting aspirations. She was the one and only one who said 'no' to everything suggested by me, till date!

❑ **How much time did you give to each other before getting married? Has it changed over time?**

SANDHYA: We met again when I came back to India from the States; I was a single working mother by then. Raising Samiha who was 4-5 years old, was my single most priority. I was practicing at the Bombay High Court. Finding time to meet Amol was a nightmare for me. He too was very busy in shooting his films.

AMOL: Those days we did not have mobile phones to track one's movements. Over the years, we have more than compensated for that loss! We make it a point to go on long family holidays together at least twice a year! I realised that if she continued her legal profession in Mumbai, she would be unable to spare any time for her creative pursuits. As a way out, we entered into a 10 years' sabbatical agreement with each other and moved to Pune.

SANDHYA: It was more of a bonded labour contract, wherein I was supposed to taper off my legal commitments gradually and commit to full time writing screenplays for him! Ha... ha! I agreed as I have always perceived life as an on-going learning process. The very first screenplay I wrote was for our first film together, 'Anaahat' (Infinity) which was an adaptation of a Hindi play. Fortunately, he loved the way the screenplay was conceived and unfolded. That's where our journey together as film makers commenced.

AMOL: My assessment that her deep understanding of world cinema, regional and international literature would prove vital in her first attempt at writing a screenplay proved to be spot on! After that, she wrote ten other screenplays for me one after the other. 'Paheli' was her second screenplay. I loved her contemporary interpretation of the original story, Duvidha. From 2002 to 2014, we made about nine films, one serial in Hindi for television, and one documentary! So my plan of

spending as much time with her as possible succeeded in a very fulfilling manner.

❑ **Was the contract renewed for another term?**

SANDHYA: Just for a few years as I wanted to finish my commitments in hand. I preferred not to be in the film field as I like working by myself.

AMOL: The basic difference between me and her is that she is not people oriented.

SANDHYA: I think the major difference is Amol's calm and patient nature. His demeanour and composure as a director is very rarely seen in the industry. I have never seen him rattled,

no matter how much stress he may be undergoing. His focus is enviable.

AMOL: I made eight films in 20 years prior to Sandhya's entry in my life. Post that, I made nine films in 12 years. So you can see how much creative energy she has brought into my life. We both have lived such a condensed and happy life together that we have nothing left to ask of it.

❑ **Some of the best memories from your wedding!**

SANDHYA: We simply registered our marriage in the office. There were no rituals, no spending on the wedding. We sponsored lunch for about 380 children and women in a shelter home...that was our celebration. We ourselves did not see any point in 'getting married' as the conventional institution of marriage does not mean much to either of us. But Samiha was young then and we did not want to create social awkwardness for her at that age. Our society is not open minded to absorb any diversions from the conventions.

AMOL: One does not need extravagant weddings, external symbols like *sindoor* or engagement rings or *mangalsutra* or the modern day exhibitionism like tattoos or selfies flashing on social media, to cling on to and validate a relationship. These are mementos of patriarchy, which men use to establish their possession and control over women.

❑ **One thing you didn't know about each other that you've learnt now...**

AMOL: Oh, many things. She is a fabulous cook, has a profound understanding of classical music, she is very immaculate in running the house and tasks taken up by her, the way she manages our finances, investments... all this was unknown to me. I only knew her as an intelligent lawyer, and a charming, loving, versatile woman. Her diagnostic skills as far as our family health issues are concerned were surprising too.

SANDHYA: I think every woman keeps doing all these things for her family.

Nothing very particularly unique to me! But what is unique is a man admiring his woman with such heartfelt gratitude. Very few men appreciate their wives this way. This is a fantastic quality in Amol – he feels proud to see women in powerful positions, whether it is in sports, administration or artistic fields... he compliments them with pride.

❑ **What have been the biggest surprise and the most important learning in the marriage?**

SANDHYA: My own image of myself before I started life with Amol was different. I have always been a very independent woman, but I never thought that I could also be

so emotionally dependent on a man. His affection is infinite. Probably because of his nature, I love doing small things for him like pack his bag, clean his studio, colour coordinate his clothes, cook different cuisine. I do this voluntarily as he never demands or compels any one to do anything for him.

❑ **How frequently do you get into knitty-bitty fights? What annoys you about him or her?**

AMOL: We have quite a few of such fights and quite often! Sandhya's energy level, pace and standards of tidiness are



too high and it's very hard to match those for most. She wakes up at 3.30 am and sleeps at 9.30 pm. I am a night person! I can do only one thing at a time whereas she thrives on multi-tasking. Such differences are bound to create conflicts.

SANDHYA: The most frequent source of argument is temperature! The temperature in our bedroom or even in our car is at least about 18°. He loves to eat everything cold which I cannot still come to terms with.

❑ **They say compromise is the mantra for a successful marriage. Do you agree?**

SANDHYA: Certainly...not just in marriage but in our work space also, we have to adjust to each other's idiosyncrasies. I guess the mantra is to respect the core of the person. Rest is all trivial.

AMOL: Compromise entails negotiations with one's principals, and values which one should avoid as much as possible. Adjustments are with minor issues which we keep doing all the time!

❑ **How important is expression of self in a relationship?**

SANDHYA: That is the difficult balance – if the spouse's personal interests and ambitions are antithetical to the others, one is bound to have a clash. Unfortunately, the teething problems in cohabitation coincide with setting respective career goals; if the timing is managed well, may be the conflicts will be lesser.

❑ **What message will you give to young aspiring couples?**

SANDHYA: Think of marriage as just another turn in life as important as choosing your own career. Don't feel pressured to get married if you are convinced otherwise. It is ok NOT to get married. You can have a beautiful and fuller relationship without its institutionalised form. Do not let parameters like gender; race, cast, money, power, age etc. rule your relationship. What matters in the end is love, faith and commitment.

AMOL: Both the people in a relationship must have total freedom, even to make mistakes. Take risks together and achieve your cumulative goals. It is okay to fail, it is okay not to be picture perfect, and it is okay to be vulnerable. All these experiences make you strong and beautiful. It is okay to argue, but never cross the line of respect. Violence in any form should



❑ **Raising a family together is as learning as challenging it is. What are some memories from your days of raising your kids?**

AMOL: My daughter Shalmalee was just a one of a kind kid. She was always so loving, very mature, intelligent and accommodative. While she was growing up I was often away from home either for shooting or for theater performances. But whenever I used to be in Mumbai, I used to try spending as much time as possible. I look forward to reading her poetry and when I interact with her son Karin now, I am often reminded of Shalmalee when she was growing up. Samiha is a lawyer and has just joined her post-graduation in sports law. Samiha is very independent; her charm and friendly nature is infectious. Life would have been very empty without these two twinkling fairies.

not be entertained at all. The journey of life can be much more enriching if you and your partner explore it together!

❑ **How do you perceive to grow older?**

AMOL: Equally in a dignified manner... hopefully we will be fit till the last call. I started my career as a visual artist and now I have gone back to painting since the last two years. I am also engaged in a few public interest litigations for causes which are dear to me. Very few people are ready to fight with the system. I will continue doing the same. Its only one life, why not make the best of it, especially when I have a partner like Sandhya?

Dynamic in the true sense, this spirited couple defies the old and the clichéd. Wedded simply, the celebration lies in the companionship. Their perspective that fits the epoch perfectly, can be an inspiration for 'real' people. ■