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MEET THE PARENTS

Super-achiever parents share
their experience and insights
from their parenting journey.





approach reflects her mother, Anu Aga's, ideology

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Affectionate counsel

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MEHER PUDUMJEE/51

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Anu Aga is an open book, Meher Pudumjee, not so much; Anu couldn't care less about exercising atop the Burj Khalifa, Meher would never dare to do it in her wildest dreams. The mother-daughter duo is quite distinguishable that way. Then again, if there is one thing that they both agree on, it is their values passed down the family line. The



MADE FOR EACH OTHER: Despite having a conservative upbringing, Anu and Rohinton treated their children alike

two leading women of Thermax have not only witnessed the company's journey at various stages, but have been its chairperson, too, at different points of time. Yet, each of their stories spanning across two generations make for a fascinating read.

Anu, the youngest of three siblings, belonged to a family that believed they were liberal in their views and yet gave very constraining messages to their daughter. Though Anu was very good at studies, she was constantly reminded that her main goal in life was to marry and have kids. So, while her two elder brothers were encouraged to study and join the family business, she was not encouraged to be a career woman and was taught cooking and sewing. Since Anu had not seen women in business, she assumed that must have been the norm back then. "Because in those days I didn't see many working women, except in nursing or teaching. So I thought certain professions belonged to the male domain," she says.

Having experienced the divide first-hand, obviously, Anu was determined she wouldn't differentiate her children on the basis of their gender. She says, "I had a wonderful husband who was a workaholic but supported me. He [Rohinton] came from a more rigid family than I did. But he completely disagreed about the prevalent gender bias." Take for example, when their son, Kurush, at about six years, showed interest in knitting, Anu taught him but he gave up in a couple of days. When Kurush was about four, as she recalls, he was attracted to wearing jewellery like the kings used to. Had this been the case with Anu's brother, she is certain that her father would have ridiculed him. But Anu instead let Kurush wear the jewellery and advised him, "There's noth-

ing wrong with liking jewellery. But in India and the world, men are not supposed to wear jewellery. People will make fun of you or misunderstand you. But it's up to you." No surprise, her son very soon gave up that interest as well.

Encouraging her children and allowing them to decide for themselves has always been Anu's method. Meher, for one, agrees to picking up the same from her mother. Much like her mother, she rarely says 'no' outright; instead she speaks her mind about the issue and lets her kids decide. However, this is where Meher's parenting style strictly differs from that of her husband, Pheroze Pudumjee, who is a believer of the 'right and wrong, black or white' ideology. She recalls Pheroze once joking, "Do whatever you want' is not correct. Tell the children what you want or what you don't like." Despite their difference of opinion on the subject, Meher agrees it balances their relationship, much like how it worked with Anu and Rohinton.

Of course, having two different sets of ideals in any family is difficult, especially when it involves parents and grandparents. Pheroze and Anu had their own differences to work out. So much so, that an exasperated Pheroze may have said a couple of times, "You've brought up your kids. Let me do things my way now." And "torn between them" was Meher, as she describes her predicament. She still finds herself in situations, where she has to decide to tackle a situation Pheroze's way or choose to be more like her mother. But Anu and her son-in-law had to work on their relationship. Pheroze explains, "We've disagreed many times, but we always openly discuss these things. My children are capable of knowing what is right for them. So sometimes they agree with us and sometimes they don't." Over the years, the relationship between Pheroze and Anu has dramatically changed for the better. Meher's children have reached an age, where they can think for themselves. That means, accepting whichever idea makes more sense.

Anu and Meher's relationship has no doubt matured over the years. Meher recalls a phase that strengthened their bond, "After my dad and Kurush passed away, I realised, 'All mum has left now is me and I want to be there for her.'" Meher calls her mother an "authentic individual"; Anu can't appreciate her daughter's maturity, love and affection enough. Anu says that she has learnt a lot from Meher. In fact, Pheroze sometimes jokes that perhaps Meher's umbilical cord hasn't been cut yet. That may be stretching it a bit too far but it is true that over the years, they have become each other's closest companions.

What's your parenting style like?

Anu: When parents put a *fatwa*, it invokes rebellion in children. The same applied to my children also. Whatever be the issue in their late teens, I would talk to them about my concerns, but never say 'no'. In fact, all of Meher's boy-friends thought I was the most wonderful person. Even if I had reservations, I would talk about it to her and leave it to her. I also feel my kids have the right to make mistakes, even if they had selected the wrong person. My only advice was, "Divorce before you have children. Don't mess up their lives." But I was not a perfect mother. I had a temper and I have made many mistakes.

Have there been instances when you lost your temper?

Anu: Sometimes Meher would say something at the dining table in front of guests, which I thought was inappropriate, and I would make big eyes at her. She knew exactly what I was trying to convey and yet, would embarrass me by asking "Why are you making big eyes at me?" When I found that Meher had not been honest with me I really lost my temper and gave her a beating.

Meher: When I was in the 2nd standard, I erased my homework a couple of times and got caught. My mother rang up my friend's mother and asked, "So the children did not get any homework?" And she said, "No, they got this, this and this." Then mom



A WALK TO REMEMBER: Meher with father, Rohinton Aga, on the day of her wedding in 1991



HOUSE OF LEADERS: Pheroze with Meher and Anu are all smiles at Thermax's Golden Jubilee celebrations in November 2016

asked me, and the tears started rolling down my cheeks. That was the first time my mum hit me with a ruler on my arm.

What was the relationship each of you shared with your parents?

Anu: My father was very conservative; he did not like jewellery, sleeveless clothes or wearing make-up. There is a Parsi way of wearing a sari. My mother wore it that way, and I thought I was expected to wear it that way too. When I would go down the stairs, I would change the drape. But one day, I plucked up the courage and asked my father, "Do you mind if I wear it the other way?" And he said, not at all. So, some of my fears were unnecessary. When I cut my hair short, he was not at all furious.

Meher: My father was very passionate about building Thermax. Unfortunately, as we were growing up, he was hardly in the house, but mum was with us 24x7. So all the anger and disappointments were directed towards her, but it also meant that I grew closer to her. However, my father was a perfectionist. I remember, I was to play the piano in a concert for a competition in England. He hired a little room for me and said, "Practice, till it's perfect." On the day of the concert, just before I went up, he said, "Play to express, not to impress." Those words have stayed with me throughout my life in everything I do.

Anu: They put their father on a pedestal, just like I had done with my father because he was not present with us, either.

Meher: In my family, I would say Pheroze has been a far more hands-on, involved father, especially when the kids were very young and we lived overseas. Yet, the kids take me much more for granted.

Tell us a few amusing anecdotes from your growing up phase?

Meher: I was an obedient child, but there was a naughty side to me. When I was about six-years-old, my best friend and I went under my parents' bed and started a bonfire. Our maid found us and was furious with me. Once, with that same friend, we were trying to balance on a parapet, but both of us lost balance. We fell down and I broke an arm. I was so scared to tell my mum because I was supposed to be the 'obedient one'. Another time, we both pierced our noses with a *babul* tree thorn.

Anu: My father had two siblings, who had schizophrenia. But it was taboo to talk about it. When the film *Autumn Leaves* came out, I suggested we go for it. But my father came back all depressed. My middle brother, Darayus, got very angry and accused me of taking my father to the movie. I got angry with him too and out of frustration slapped him. So he came out shouting, "Anu hit me." My father, for the first time in his life, smacked me that day.

What was the difference in the way you and your kids grew up?

Meher: When I was growing up, I would see my father on Sundays or at night before going to bed. He would play a record called *The Moldau* every night, that would put me to sleep. The difference with my children is that they don't look up to me and Pheroze in awe; we are more like friends, especially as they grew into teenagers. Some of my friends never have fights in front of their children because they feel it's something they shouldn't see. My parents have openly disagreed and fought with each other; my mother has cried and my father once walked out of the house. But we also saw a huge amount of love and respect for each other. The same is true of Pheroze's parents. Hence, Pheroze and I have behaved the same way with our children.

What kind of assistance did you give them with respect to academics?

Anu: I wanted them to study on their own or take tuitions. My son would ask me questions for which sometimes my response would be, "I don't know." Once he asked me, "Mum, are you sure you went to school?" In contrast, my husband would take the time to study and explain to them very well.

Meher: Like my parents, I also selected a school based on academics. But today, we would perhaps select differently. Academics is important but a child's overall well-being with sports, music and theatre are also important ingredients.

Anu: I was also very competitive. When it came to my children, I would ask, "What did your friends

QUICK TAKE

Parenting tip: **Anu:** Don't take parenting so seriously that you don't enjoy your children's childhood.

Meher: Don't try and be the "perfect" parent. Be yourself

What do you call your parents? **Meher:** Papi and mum. Sometimes I also call her Anu

When you're playing good cop-bad cop:

Anu: I was usually the bad cop, my husband was the rescuer. In their adolescence, I was the good cop

Meher: I am the bad cop in terms of academics and money; Pheroze is the bad cop when it comes to discipline

Who's the patient teacher?

Anu: My husband

Meher: Pheroze is the better teacher, but I'm the patient one

How'd you rate yourself as a parent on a scale of 1-10? **Anu:** 8 or 9

How do you think your kid will rate you as a parent? **Meher:** I would rate my mum 10/10

The best advice your parents gave you that you passed on:

Anu: From my mother, "be yourself"

Meher: From my mother, "An apple tree cannot give oranges" which means, be yourself. From my dad it was, "Profit is not just a set of figures but of values"

get?" But Meher would say, "What difference does it make what they got?"

Meher: I'm not so competitive. For Pheroze, academics is important, but he is not particularly focused on grades.

What are the parenting lessons you've learnt from your children?

Meher: I've learnt that it is okay to be myself and I don't have to put on a façade. When I'm angry, I can be angry; when I'm sad or disappointed, and want to cry, I can cry in front of them too. I can express myself the way I am. They have always seen it and are accepting of it.

Anu: I've learnt a lot from both of them. From my son, I learnt generosity. He pushed me towards philanthropy. From my daughter, I learnt unconditional love and acceptance. 