Dr. Vidya Dehejia

Dr. Vidya Dehejia, an alumna of St. Xavier's College was awarded the prestigious Padma Bhushan by the Government of India. She is a renowned art historian, curator, translator, academician and a writer of over twenty-one books. At present she is the Barbara Stoler Miller Professor of Indian and South Asian Art in the Department of Art History and Archaeology in Columbia University.

1. **What does the Padma Bhushan at this juncture mean to you?**

   It was a thrilling moment, a total surprise, and a most gratifying honour. To me, the Padma Bhushan is a hopeful sign that the Government of India will give a higher priority in the future to art, culture, heritage and museums.

2. **If you take a walk down the memory lane, what do you recall of St. Xavier's College, Mumbai?**

   I have so many memories of what was a very formative and influential period in my life. It is amazing how much life has changed in so short a time – most college-going students today can't imagine life without a cell phone, preferably a Blackberry, and a computer. And all we had were coin-operated phones and typewriters (if we were lucky). We were innocents those days who didn't know what fashion meant. I wore a simple sari each day to college. During the monsoon, I wore salwar-kameez and would regularly wring out the sopping wet salwar in the ladies room before wearing it to go down to the canteen or to class!

   The college itself is a fantastic and inspiring building which always bustled with activity – I'm sure it does so even more today. And good friends – that is what made college so satisfying, and I'm sure that remains true to this day.

3. **Who were the teachers you appreciated the most during your stay at St. Xavier's?**

   Professor Keny, who headed Ancient Indian History and Culture, was someone who moulded my interests; I owe him much for the direction my career took.

   Prof Aguiar who taught logic was controversially wonderful. We always looked forward to his classes. Father John Correa-Afonso who taught us Indian philosophy and religion was truly inspiring - a gentle human being who had a colossal influence on my thinking.

4. **How did the Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture influence you?**

   I was in awe of the Institute and its reputation and, of course, of what Father Heras himself had achieved. The books published by the Institute are on my students' reading list to this day. For instance, when I teach Mughal art, the Heras Institute publication of letters from Jesuit priests who visited the Mughal court is a staple that everyone reads and marvels over.

5. **What impact did your Ph.D on the Buddhist Caves of Western India have on you as a person?**

   Travel to the lesser-known cave sites, where I often had to spend a night in a small village, gave me an appreciation of the generosity, and the simple noble character of villagers. The village headman would insist I eat with his family, and they shared their rotis and subzi with me, and insisted I have a glass of milk, to them a most expensive and valuable commodity. And, of course, they would take no payment! I would be given the empty school hut in which to sleep, and I would join the women and girl children at the nearest tank or water source for morning toilet rituals.

   Early on, having just returned from spending a few years at Cambridge University in England, I wore pants on my travels, thinking it was practical dress to wear to climb up hills to the Buddhist caves which were always way up a hill. I remember complaining regretfully to my mother that I was not getting the cooperation of the local villagers in finding the simplest route up a hill. She suggested I wear a sari which I thought was a most unpractical suggestion. But I gave it a try. And it made all the difference! I was still a 'firangi' from a far off city, but they could relate to me. And I soon found that it was not that difficult to climb hills in a sari.

6. **You have written extensively on Arts and Diaspora. In a city like Mumbai, how would you envisage the preservation and celebration of art?**

   Mumbai has all the advantages you can think of: a vibrant art scene with many talented painters, sculptors, and architects; art galleries that put on exciting exhibitions; museums that display the art of both modern and pre-modern times; institutions that have an interest in the preservation of heritage; heritage walks of the city. It is only the interest in such matters that we need to encourage. And certainly, both young Mumbaikars and the youth of the diaspora are equally distanced...
from our ancient heritage; they relate more easily to modern and contemporary art.

7. What are the differences in the Indian and Western approach to Museums?

Museology as a field of study is barely recognized in India except at a few privately run institutions that do a fantastic job. But museums like the National Museum in New Delhi (and I could name several others), which should be the nation’s pride and joy, have yet to subscribe to the fact that it is not sufficient to be a repository of outstanding works of art. It is necessary to display these works of art appropriately, interpret them with informative and exciting labels and text panels, so that the works of art communicate with those who visit the museums. Without such communication, a museum is a repository of lost opportunities.

Mumbai is indeed fortunate in having in the Prince of Wales, or should I say the Chatrapati Shivaji, one of the best run government museums in the country.

8. What are the strengths of being an art historian and a curator? What would your advice be for the budding art historians and curators of St. Xavier’s?

As an art historian, I find it extremely satisfying to delve into the riches of the artistic heritage of this country, to explore the meaning and significance of monuments, sculpture, and paintings, to examine the socio-economic circumstances that gave rise to them, and to explore the religious and political milieu that made them possible.

As a curator, it is a pleasure and a privilege to work with a museum’s outstanding array of works of art which are of historic importance and exceptional beauty, are representative of regional diversity and at the same time portray a distinctive national characteristic. I was also a museum professional in my role, first as Deputy Director and then Acting Director of the Smithsonian’s Freer and Sackler galleries; I thoroughly enjoyed the challenges involved in the process of program and exhibition planning and implementation, as also museum administration.

To budding art historians and curators I’d say: “Follow this field only if it is your passion. It’s not a profession in which you make money; for that you should turn to the world of business. But if art and heritage is what truly interests you, your career will be a most satisfying one.” I count myself fortunate to have been able to combine my passion with my career.

Dr. Swati Piramal

Dr. Swati Piramal, alumna of the College, was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India in 2012, in recognition of her contribution to trade and industry.

1) How has your college life contributed to the moulding of your personality?

I remember my time at Xavier’s as a precious moment of my life. I have fond memories of some excellent teachers; the late Melky Alvares and Rajkumar Rao especially enhanced my interest in science and technology. I was not to know at that time that I would use chemistry in the pharmaceutical industry where my company Piramal Healthcare became a leader or that my company would hold a portfolio of 350 international patents and innovative new drugs for cancer.

2) Could you recount some of the best moments that you have had at St. Xavier’s?

I recall my intercollegiate debating competition which we won hands down! Also my contribution as one of the lowly editors of the Xavierite magazine. I loved our unique cafeteria and the vegetable puffs in the mobile cafe outside the college. My biology lab was a favourite place. It was our beautiful library that I loved most of all. It

Congratulations, Anu Aga!

Anu Aga, an alumna of St. Xavier’s College has been nominated to the Rajya Sabha. An industrialist and social worker, Aga (70) is also a member of the Sonia Gandhi-led National Advisory Council. She was nominated to the Upper House along with cricketer Sachin Tendulkar and actor Rekha.
Dr. Purnima Mane

in global advocacy on sexual and reproductive health policies and rights. Prior to this responsibility, she was the Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund. Dr Mane holds a doctorate degree from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, India. She was awarded a post-doctoral Fulbright Fellowship on women and AIDS to work at the School of Hygiene and Public Health of John Hopkins University, United States of America.

1. What are your fond memories of St. Xavier’s?
I have nothing but fond memories of my days at Xavier’s. Starting with the magnificent portico, the spectacular building, the great teachers, and the extra-curricular activities in which I was involved. I did a lot of Marathi theatre while at Xavier’s and fondly remember Professor Pethe who encouraged us all along. My Bachelor’s in Psychology has stood me in good stead throughout my career.

2. Could you recount some memorable association with your teachers?
My association with St Xavier’s faculty started on a positive note. I was very proud that I had secured admission directly into the second year of Xavier’s (then called Intermediate Arts) after my Senior Cambridge school leaving examination, skipping the first year.
of college since I had secured a first class at the exam (this was the practice then). However, I was extremely nervous when a month later I went to see Father D'Cruz, Principal, to tell him that I had been selected to go to the US for a year on the American Field Service scholarship and would have to leave college. I wanted to come back to Xavier's the next year and wanted him to assure me that my admission would be waiting for me. I had stepped into his room with trepidation, thinking he might refuse my request as outlandish and that I would have to apply for admission again next year. He looked at me sternly for a moment but to my delight, his eyes twinkled when he said "Good luck and come back next year to us". I have still not forgotten his generous gesture which made me a Xavierite forever.

When I returned the following year, it wasn't easy assimilating. I had a strong American accent and I recollect my initial conversations with the teachers who struggled to understand my American-Indian accent! But I loved coming to college. Nisha DaCunha and Eunice D'Souza were fabulous English teachers who kept me enthralled in class. And then there was Father D'Cruz, whose World History classes introduced me to the world I would deal with in my later career. Professor Aguiar remains the most amazing teacher I have ever encountered. I never understood why we had to study Logic but I would have gladly signed up for cookery classes as long as he was teaching them! That voice, that style, and the humour - they were legend. His daughter Kamalini and I met a few years ago and reminisced over those classes. I was also taught by some very "with-it" clergy like Father Fuster and Father Filella, cementing my impressions forever of Catholic priests as being one of the most contemporary of teachers! And then there was Sheila Rao who took the major brunt of our psychology classes at what must have been a youthful age. She put up a tough appearance but cared about her students deeply and had a wonderful laugh that still echoes in my ears. Way too many memories to put down in a few paragraphs!

3. How has the time spent in St. Xavier's College helped you in making professional choices?

The BA in psychology led me into a service-oriented profession. I did my Master's in Social Work after my BA and the choices I made in Xavier's both academic and non-academic helped guide me towards this trajectory in life. Besides, education in Xavier's involved not just classroom learning but also applying the learning in the field which is what social work and public health are all about. I also learned that participation in extra-curricular activities was just as important during college and came to believe that life was about balancing fun and work. While at Xavier's, I was also doing professional theatre outside and travelling for it but I was never restrained by any of the educational requirements or by any of the professors. It was considered as a natural thing to combine other activities with education. The attitude of tolerance for diversity in life was ingrained in the Xavierite way of life.

4. What were the challenges that you faced while holding such important positions? How did you surmount those challenges?

Getting to important positions is a tough process that teaches you the value of pushing yourself to the maximum and reaching for the stars but learning to take the disappointments - and there are many hidden behind those achievements. I learned a lot with every new position especially in my international career. I became well-versed with different work cultures, learned to manoeuvre around complex situations and difficult people, became focussed and disciplined in my work methods, and learned to chase excellence. I also learned new languages and how to live in new cultures, moved house 7 times crisscrossing three continents over 20 years, and made lots of friends with all my moves. I learned to develop a circle of close advisers in whom I could trust and who could be role models in their own way, and came to value the importance of building a team that could support your work and grow themselves in the process. I recently took charge of a 55 year old international non-governmental organization called Pathfinder International that works in 20 countries around the world and (again!) moved to a new location and now I have another new set of challenges to face. But I believe that each challenge in life is an opportunity to learn, to try out something new, and new is always an experience worth living. Even if at times your response might not be the right one, it teaches you a lesson for the next time – and there is always a next time!

5. What is/are the benchmark event(s) in your professional life that give you immense joy?

Thankfully, there have been many events in my professional life that have given me immense satisfaction. Winning the Fulbright Fellowship after the completion of my doctorate to go to Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore, USA was a major professional honour for me – and it changed the direction of my professional life. It was after this stint that I moved into an international health career. Being appointed Assistant Secretary General in the United Nations was a humbling honour. This was a post I had never dreamt I would hold. Getting the approval of the UNAIDS Governing Board on its very first strategic plan and budget in 1995 and on a very difficult HIV prevention policy in 2004 were major professional landmarks for
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A former student of St Xavier’s College in Bombay was one of the dozen singers from the Royal College of Music who braved the cold, wind and rain last month to perform for Her Majesty the Queen in the Diamond Jubilee Pageant on the River Thames. Pictures of 26-year-old Oscar Castellino and fellow students became an iconic image of the occasion as they continued singing patriotic songs for the Queen, despite the downpour.

Oscar comes from Goa on the West coast of India and studied for his Bachelors in physics at the Jesuit College between 2003 and 2006. “At the time Xavier’s was unique in its Honours programme and I got the opportunity to work on projects outside the course framework,” he says. “Being in physics I went into research, and got to do projects with leading Biophysicists in the world at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. Such a programme encouraged me to strive high and do the best in whatever field I chose.”

Oscar’s introduction to music was in church and his interest in it continued with his involvement in the college’s performing arts festival, which he helped to organise, and its Social Involvement Programme. “I got the chance to work with underprivileged students at an NGO called SNEHA (Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action) which aims to improve the lives of vulnerable women and children in the slums of Bombay ... I taught them singing!” He also started singing with the Stop Gaps Choral Ensemble during his years in Xavier’s.

After excelling in the All-India test in Advanced Computing, Oscar became a software developer, but his first love remained in singing. However, he says he was constrained by a lack of training and the scope to pursue this interest in India. “Education in music in India, especially in Western Classical Music, is hard to come by or it’s expensive.” His big break came in 2010, when he signed on for the Giving Voice to India vocal-training programme, conducted by the world-renowned soprano and vocal teacher, Patricia Rozario in Bombay. She also praised his commitment and talent. “Oscar is hardworking

Ms. Kshiti Jayant Gala an alumna of St. Xavier’s College is one among the fifty students who have been selected for ‘The Young India Fellowship’. The Young India Fellowship (YIF) seeks to groom young women and men who will lead India through the 21st century. It is a fully funded Fellowship programme for one year and is held in Delhi.

6. What will your advice be to contemporary Xavierites?

Education is a gift that I hope Xavierites value as much as I do. A world where education is a luxury for a few and not a right for all is a world where inequity, conflict, and poverty are rife. All of us Xavierites are fortunate to have benefited from strong educational foundations. I hope that Xavierites drink from the fountain of education plentifully. I also hope that they drink from the fountain of youth that they enjoy since youth does not return.

I wish for them to value balancing work with play, giving back to society what they received. But most of all I would ask them to take note of the fact that many who leave Indian shores to seek their fortunes elsewhere are returning home today. In fact, as an economy, India is doing pretty well for itself these days and there are plenty of opportunities available. In any case, cribbing about the way the world is moving is not enough. If they want to see a better world for themselves and a better India, they need to get engaged in fixing it.

Indian Alumnus Sings For The Queen

A former student of St Xavier’s College in Bombay was one of the dozen singers from the Royal College of Music who braved the cold, wind and rain last month to perform for Her Majesty the Queen in the Diamond Jubilee Pageant on the River Thames. Pictures of 26-year-old Oscar Castellino and fellow students became an iconic image of the occasion as they continued singing patriotic songs for the Queen, despite the downpour.

Standing second from the left - Oscar Castellino
The years that I spent in St. Xavier’s College have not only been the years that I have gained the most from but also the years where I learnt the most about myself. The beauty of St. Xavier’s is that it doesn’t just teach you, it truly educates you. We often forget that learning is not just about academic literacy. It is about all round development. The combination of knowledge you gain from the treasure of books in a fantastic library, the life-long friends you make in the iconic canteen, the debates you have in various fora, the organizing skills you develop while organizing Malhar, the leadership traits you hone as a CR or a leader of an extra-curricular activity, add as much to your personality as the education you receive in the lecture rooms and laboratories. I can definitely say that the years spent in St. Xavier’s have stood me in good stead. They gave me the opportunity to be selected for higher education, the confidence to build a career of my liking, the determination to succeed and get to an industry leader role and the humility to treat all my colleagues as friends. They also gave me my wife, whom I met in the Zoology Lab. Today, as a proud father of a Xaverite, I keep reminding my son, Abhinay, that these are the best years of his life. What’s strange is that you often don’t realize the value of St. Xavier’s till you leave its portals but you never really leave it. It stays with you for life!!

Ashish Bhasin

Chairman India & CEO South East Asia - Aegis Media

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‘If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos.’

- Edward O. Wilson

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Ms. Deepa Kumar and Ms. Prachi Jadhav alumnae of St. Xavier’s College have received the LAMP (The Legislative Assistants to Members of Parliament) fellowship. The LAMP Fellowship places one legislative assistant to work with one MP. The LAMP Fellows are engaged full-time for eleven months to work with their MP from the beginning of the Monsoon session to the end of the Budget session of Parliament.

By Ged Clapson with additional reporting by Luis Dias in Bombay

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Ashish Bhasin

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Although Oscar recalls that his Jesuit chemistry professor (who was also the choirmaster) taught the students songs during some lectures, he says that being asked to perform for the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee was an honour he could not have anticipated: “Coming from India, I used to watch a lot of Royal Ceremonies on the BBC with my dad who followed them keenly. But never would I have expected to be part of one of the most prestigious of all, the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee, singing on liquid history (the Thames) itself... Well, it was the liquid from above that made sure we made history!” he added jokingly.

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