

Benchmarks >

Sensex **CLOSED**
37,576.62 **↓** -893.99

NSE Gainer-Large Cap >

Abbott India
15,589.15 **↑** 735.60

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Nippon Life India ...
344.30 **↓** -40.95

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Market Watch

Women's Day: Rohini Nilekani says her 20th century-born grandmother was modern in best sense of the term

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By Rohini Nilekani

Born Godavari Ketkar, at the turn of the 20th century, she spent her childhood in the sylvan surroundings of the Gwalior palace, as her father was an ambassador to the maharaja's court. She spoke of going to the little local school in deer carriages. The beautiful young Goda came to Belgaum at the age of 12 as the second wife of my barrister grandfather Babasaheb Soman. He had no interest in material things or maharajas. He and his blind brother Bhusaheb were known as the RamLakshman of the neighbourhood. He spent his time in social work and in getting his clients to settle out of court.

When he took off for Champaran in 1917, in answer to Gandhiji's first clarion call for volunteers, Godavari, by then simply called Atyabai, managed not just her pregnancy but also the large house, with many mouths to feed. My grandfather got more and more involved with the freedom movement, and Atya's home became the gathering place for visitors and dignitaries of the Indian National Congress. Her precious maternal possessions were hawked off one by one. She was no meek sufferer and must have expressed her opinion. But the cause was greater than them all. Swarajya and deshbhakti were infused in all hearts and she faced her personal challenges head on. She was sent ceremoniously to prison by the British along with her husband. She won prizes for spinning the finest yarn and hand-spun her own nine-yard saris. Remarkably, she also stood resolutely by her husband's decision to undergo prayopavesha or gentle fasting unto death, when he suffered from incurable paralysis.

Much after Independence, when her son, Vice Admiral Bhaskar Soman, became the second chief of naval staff, Atya had a brief return to luxury in the Lutyens' quarters. But her mind and heart had turned to austerity. And she was unafraid of making unconventional choices.

She spent most of the next quarter century living in a rented one-room tenement in the temple town of Alandi, the Samadhi Sthala of the 12th century Bhakti saint Dnyaneshwar. She took in a Varkari student, Sakharam, who, in turn, helped her with chores like fetching water. The Vitthal temple, the bhajans and Dnyaneshwari shlokas became her world.



Atyabai was Rohini Nilekani's inspiration, and still lives on for her.

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Rohini Nilekani's grandmother Atyabai

Her occasional visits to our home are among the most prized memories of my childhood. Atya was a magical [storyteller](#), imprinting the life stories of Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram and Namdeo in our minds. She was the most fabulous cook and, as I write this, I can almost taste her sweet gulpoli and her spicy pithla. The sugar and the spice she loved quite defined her personality too. She could drip honey when her grandchildren needed comforting. But she was not above throwing bitter phrases at errant autowallahs or others who came in her path.

Atya was my inspiration, and still lives on for me. As a woman, she was modern in the best sense of the word. She was imperfect but a seeker, she was feisty and fun but put duty above personal pleasure. She participated fully in life even as she withdrew into her inner self. Her Vitthal was a compassionate and forgiving God, her true companion and, ultimately, her home. She was a woman of her time, but perhaps a woman for all time, too.

The writer is chairperson, Arghyam

