

'Dorothy, I played for high stakes'...and he won

Reginald Pierce was the only member of the jury on the 1959 Nanavati trial who thought the defense was guilty. He turns 100

Anjali Thomas

In 1959, all of Mumbai, then Bombay, was riveted by the trial of Kavas Manekshaw Nanavati, a commander of the Indian navy, accused of shooting his friend Prem Ahuja who was allegedly having an affair with his wife Sylvia. This is was no ordinary case. It was the last case ever in the country to be a judged by a jury. After a month of allegations, the nine-member jury panel reached its verdict: Not guilty by eight to one.

One man thought Nanavati was guilty. His name is Reginald William Pierce, and today he celebrates his 100th birthday. Over six feet tall, he bends to shake my

hand; age has not dimmed his piercing blue eyes. With drink in hand, he says, "Come on, let's get this over with, else I will start talking bunkum."

But that's the only concession he asks for: "Oh yes, that trial. Anyone who pays income tax was eligible to serve on the jury panel. My name was picked from a hat and since neither the defence nor the prosecution had a problem, I was in."

For over a month, Pierce, who worked in the textile industry, was privy to one of the most talked-about murder trials in the country. "He fired three shots at Ahuja. One missed, one grazed his head, and the third killed him. I saw the skull, it was evidence in the court," recalls Pierce.

But there's more to the master weaver's life than an infamous trial, and his narrative is compelling: the rise and fall of his voice as he recalls 100 years of his life, captures the attention of all present in the room — his family members, many of whom have come from the UK to celebrate his centenary, and the photographer. "I was a true scamp," he says, his



■ Reginald William Pierce at his home in Bandra —Sathesh Nair/DNA

eyes glittering mischievously. "But I've done nothing I'm ashamed of against God or my family. Nothing," he says.

Pierce's father was an Anglo-Indian,

his mum French. He first set foot in independent Bombay in 1925 at the age of 17, and his first recollection of the port city was the water. "From the window of

my compartment, I saw the sea for the first time in my life. I was aghast when I saw this huge expanse of water." But whatever romanticism the sea held was quashed by the realities of life, and Pierce found a job at the David Sassoon Mills. On Rs50 a month, he supported himself and his sister. But 11 years later, he clashed with the management who wanted to transfer him to South India. "They were going to send me by third class, with no increment," his voice rises in anger, as if the incident occurred yesterday, and not 72 years ago.

"Sir Frederick Stones called me a bloody Bolshevik, but I told him: 'Fortune should present itself clearly, otherwise I'll be opening the door to misfortune.'" When a young Pierce was told that it was better he looked to another place for employment, dejection set in. "I told my sister, 'Dorothy, I played for high stakes, and I lost', I wept like a child; so did she."

Pierce is not only a master weaver, but also a master storyteller. And this story had a happy ending. He did not quit, but

was later asked to take the transfer with more money. "They gave me Rs250, and I left immediately. I travelled first class."

In fact, so good was he at his job that he was commended by Sir Victor Sassoon who, he says, told him, "Young lad, you have done well. I congratulate you."

Over the years, the young lad made a name for himself in the textile industry. When India got its independence, Pierce, along with his colleagues, resigned from the mills. Pierce went to Pondicherry where he met his wife Olga, and later got a job at Phoenix Mills.

Later, he got a job at Bombay Dyeing, for Rs5,000 a month. "My wife wasn't happy with the initial amount they offered, and made me go back to the manager, Mr Billimoria, to ask for more. I did that with my tail between my legs and blamed it on her," he laughs.

He claims that on his birthday, he will do exactly what his family wants him to do. But that's rather doubtful. No one can tell the "bloody Bolshevik" what to do.

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Sharkey's machines are not for the battlefield



■ Sharkey is in Mumbai to deliver a talk on robots. Kamlesh Pednekar/DNA

Robotics expert Noel Sharkey believes AI soldiers being used in wars and conflicts is a bad idea, that will only increase the number of collateral deaths

Living with robots

Sharkey is best known for his contribution to machine learning and cognitive science.

He holds a doctorate in psychology, a doctorate in science, is a chartered electrical engineer, a chartered information technology professional, a fellow of the Institution of Engineering and Technology, a fellow of the British Computer Society, a fellow of the Royal Institute of Navigation and a member of Equity, the actors union.

He is founder and editor-in-chief of the academic journal *Connection Science*, and an editor for *Artificial Intelligence Review* and *Robotics and Autonomous Systems*.



Labonita Ghosh

By 2015, if the US Congress has its way, about a third of its military's ground-combat vehicles will be substituted with fighting robots.

The US has already set aside \$4 billion for unmanned vehicles. But if Noel Sharkey, professor of computer science and artificial intelligence (AI) got a chance, he would certainly talk the military out of this. "If you replace soldiers with robots, to take away their power to distinguish between situations, between soldiers and civilians," he says.

"That means during war, the robots — or unmanned vehicles — will not be able to distinguish between an enemy platoon and a group of civilians, say, carrying a coffin." The loss of human life in war, therefore, might considerably go up.

Sharkey, who is in Mumbai to deliver a talk, today, on the benefits and downside of using robots as part of the British Council's 'Innovative Britain' event, will certainly bring up the "ethical" side of employing AI.

When he returns to the UK, he will kick-off an international campaign — with groups like Amnesty International — for the more ethical use of robotics. "I've met families of people who've served in the Iraq war, and they're happy with these developments. It means losing fewer soldiers in combat. But I doubt an Iraqi family, for instance, would be as enthusiastic," he says.

Sharkey says on an earlier trip to India in 2004, he visited labs and technical research institutes and came across "many robotics people, but they were all doing primarily theoretical things".

"It's a case of under-resourcing," he says. "Indian scientists are very good at the mathematics and the engineering of it, but because of a lack funds, they can't do the same kind of practical applications that I can in the UK."

There is a silver lining, though. With the worldwide demand for robots going up, India could think of a lucrative role in manufacturing robots.

And as long as it's ethical, it can certainly count Sharkey among its supporters.

passing through

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All aboard the Mumbai Love Taxi



■ Amid the din of a city on the move, a couple finds the time to back in an affectionate glow, at the International Airport on Monday. ■ Vishnu Prasad

Vickram Sethi's brand new art mart

Ramya Sarma

It's an idea whose time has come. Art fairs and expositions are held as a matter of routine all over the world — Dubai's version begins later this month — and Mumbai is determined to catch up.

Vickram Sethi, gallerist, curator and entrepreneur, takes this first significant step with Art Expo 2008, which will bring together professionals from various branches of the art world: From galleries to framers, buyers to artists. To be held at the World Trade Centre March 14-16, it has been organised by the Trade and Technology Exposition Co (India) Pvt Ltd, established in 1987 as an exhibition organising company headed by Sethi.

He has managed to bring together art galleries from all over the country. Sethi says, even though many are still hesitant. "They want to wait and see how this one goes," he smiles. "Those that have signed up include Aakriti Art Gallery (Kolkata), Marvel Art Gallery, Karma Art Gallery, Archer (all Ahmedabad), Ashok Art Gallery (Nitanjali Art Gallery), Arushi Arts Gallery (all New Delhi), Art In-



■ Vickram Sethi's Art Expo will be held at the World Trade Centre from March 14-16 —Kamlesh Pednekar/DNA

It used to be NRIs buying art, but now every young couple wants to own something that they can be proud of

dia Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd, Art & Soul, The Osmosis Gallery, Ashish Balram Nagpal (all Mumbai), Kalakriti Art Gallery (Hyderabad) and, as a coup of sorts, Canvas Art Gallery from Karachi, Pakistan.

In time, Sethi explains, there will

also be support services showcased at the Expo — insurance, valuation and more. Art supplies and artists' facilities are not being planned, at the moment. Sethi looks to this collection of industry-associated services being a huge success, since the art market in

India is growing rapidly. "It used to be NRIs buying art, but now every young couple wants to own something that they can be proud of," he says. And this is where they can start.

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Mumbai's Scouts and Guides society may be 99 years old, but that isn't stopping young members from getting out of Urbania and heading back to nature

Summer's coming and Wolf Cubs are set for a season of scouting

Mahaftred Irani

It is early Sunday morning. A walk along Mumbai's Fashion Street doesn't throw up anything interesting. Rather, it is the loud yells and thumps emanating from a nearby hall that attracts the attention of morning joggers.

The hall is the Pirojsha Godrej Scouts and Guide Pavilion, and the loud yells are characteristic of the oldest scouting group in the country — the 94-year-old Sethna's 18th West Bombay Scout Group. The occasion? It is the annual investiture ceremony.

Inside the hall, the youngest member is four while the oldest is 76. They all sing of the importance of pure thoughts, words and deeds as they stand in a horse-shoe shape, symbolising the open friendship circle.

Nineteen-year-old Mohit Pathak, a

student of Wilson College, sports a well-adorned shoulder. It is covered with proficiency badges, marking his many achievements. "I am an Ambulance Man, Healthy Man, Electrician, Best Camper, Soil Conservator, Ecologist, Best Cook, Swimmer, Athlete, Handyman, Pioneer and Soil Conservationist," he says.

Travelling is an essential part of a Guide and Scouts life. And since it is an international movement, there are huge gatherings (jamborees) that take place every year. Arzan Wadia recalls how he represented India at one such jamboree, "I went to the Korean jamboree, which was an event where scouts from everywhere would meet and make lifelong friends," he says.

But it is not just about camping. Young students pick up various

skills at camps. Captain Lavji Mistry, group leader of the scouts, attributes his success as a captain in the Merchant Navy to the training he received during his Sea Scout days. "I was trained to swim, sail and row at the Apollo Yacht Club. It was a good break for me and young students who want to set sail," he says.

Six-year-old Farang Daruvalla calls himself a Wolf Cub. "C-U-B stands for cheerful, useful boy." His fellow cubs and he salute as they tell me tales of how they want to grow up to become Scouts and then Rovers. They contemplate and make plans about the future of the movement.

They may only be children, but their determination to uphold nature's principles lends a lesson that we all best learn.

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■ (left to right) Jehaan Darbari, Kaiwan Davar, Malcolm Randeria, and Farang Daruvalla at the Pirojsha Godrej Scouts and Guide Pavilion —Mahaftred Irani

Did you know?

Hillary Clinton, Tony Blair, Bill Gates, Steven Spielberg, JK Rowling, and David Beckham, were part of the scouts and guides international movement.

India has the third largest number of Scouts and Guides in the world after the US and Indonesia.

Participants of the movement are referred to by different names according to their age.

- Bunny (3-5 years)
- Cub-Bulbul (6-10 years)
- Scouts/ Guide (11-17 years)
- Rover/Ranger (18- 25 years)

The left hand shake is a secret sign used throughout the scout brotherhood. It was originated by the founder who was offered the left hand after a battle by Zulu chief as a sign of brotherhood, leaving the right (weapon) hand free. It is the supreme sign of trust