Cricket to films to farmers' cause

RAJIV KHANDEKAR

I was still in school when I first saw Nana Patekar on screen, at a touring talkies in our village playing the Marathi film *Aavhaan*.

It was his debut as the lead, a hero. He had previously appeared in renowned director Jabbar Patel's widely acclaimed *Sinhasan*, but that was a cameo, one I hadn't even watched back then. So my first encounter with him was through *Aavhaan*, and he left me spellbound. His raw, rugged persona, with a commanding baritone and above all, a piercing gaze won over not just me, but my entire circle of friends.

Naturally, at that time I could not have imagined that this screen icon would one day become a dear friend, or that I would work alongside him on his life's passion: the NAAM Foundation. It is with a mind and heart deluged with memories and emotions that I sit to write about him today.



NANA PATEKAR: 1951-2026

Everyone knows Nana was an exceptional actor. Yet acting was only one facet of a profoundly gifted persona. An alumnus of Mumbai's prestigious Sir J.J. Institute of Applied Art, he had an innate artistic flair. He was an accomplished painter, a gifted poet and a writer with a nuanced appreciation for literature.

His calligraphy was exemplary; when he first stepped into theatre, he lovingly designed calligraphic titles for several Marathi plays. Later in life, he took up competitive rifle-shooting. A late entrant to the sport, Nana went on to make a mark at the national level.

● **Rajiv Khandekar is senior executive V-P, ABP News & ABP Majha**

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In recent years, as Nana scaled back his Bollywood commitments to embrace farming, he proved to be an equally dedicated agriculturist.

When discussion once turned to his boundless versatility and his knack for excelling in every chosen pursuit, cricket legend Sunil Gavaskar remarked that poverty had robbed Indian cricket of a formidable fast bowler. Gavaskar had played school cricket with Nana and recalled how his raw pace terrorised opposing batsmen. Had circumstances permitted, Nana might well have donned the India cap.

Poverty, however, cut short any sporting dreams. After a business partner cheated his father, the family lost their home and ended up on the street. Thrust into hardship at just thirteen or fourteen years of age, Nana had to take up any available odd job to keep the hearth burning. That gruelling grind forged his street-smart resilience, an education earned in the unsparing university of life.

Was that what bred in him an outward defiance, a swaggering bravado he wore like an armour over his inherently delicate, sensitive soul? On the streets, that toughness meant survival; for without it, a tender-hearted boy would have been crushed by ever-prowling predators. Throughout his life, he inhabited this duality: an uncompromising, defiant exterior guarding a deeply pure, gentle heart. Close friends understood both facets and knew how to engage with him; outsiders, however, often found him an enigma, unsure of how to approach him.

Hearing farmer woes moved Nana to tears. But he was not one to merely listen, he was a man of action. It was these interactions which led him to establish NAAM and work with a definite purpose for the rural community.

Art was etched into his marrow. Following his schooling, he naturally gravitated to the J.J. School of Art, studied applied art and eventually secured a job at an advertising agency. By then, however, theatre had consumed him. Forced to choose between steady employment and the stage, he chose the stage. This, despite being in dire financial straits!

To sustain his passion, he did whatever it took: painting film posters, writing play titles and even painting zebra crossings on city streets for a modest fee of ₹15. His devotion to the craft was unyielding; he endured grinding penury rather than turn his back on acting.

It was this dedication which led him to the tutelage of the legendary Vijaya Mehta. Nana delivered iconic performances in her productions, notably *Hamidabai Chi Kothi* and *Purush*. In *Purush*, he portrayed a ruthless antagonist Gulabrao, who rapes a village schoolteacher's daughter. His performance was so magnetic that audiences routinely broke into applause during his monologues. For the sensitive artiste within, that applause was agonising.

After witnessing these reactions in the initial shows, he realised the ethical stakes. From then on, before the curtain rose at every performance, Nana would step out on stage, fold his hands and plead with the audience to not applaud Gulabrao's lines. He reminded them that Gulabrao was an evil force, one that society had a moral duty to crush.

His transition to cinema coincided with a seismic shift in Mumbai: the collapse of



Nana Patekar

the historic textile mill workers' movement. Thousands of mill hands were cast onto the streets, and the city's underworld emerged from that widespread social despair. As communal and social harmony fractured, a deep-seated angst seized the common citizen. Nana became the cinematic vessel for that collective unrest, channeling their simmering fury, humiliation, disenfranchisement, moral outrage and class struggle onto the screen.

He was not a conventional, polished screen idol; instead, his face mirrored the ordinary citizen — raw, authentic and unmistakably Indian. That was why he struck such a deep chord.

Standing up against societal injustice became his second nature. He took definitive stances, held the establishment accountable and gradually emerged as the moral conscience of Marathi society. Driven by conviction, he resolved to dedicate the latter chapter of his life to the agrarian crisis.

The NAAM Foundation was born from this mission. Serving alongside him as a trustee, I witnessed firsthand how deeply the tragedy of farmer suicides scarred him. Rather than delivering platitudes from a podium, he rolled up his sleeves and headed straight to the fields. He acquired farmland near Pune, left Mumbai behind, and worked the soil himself.

Through the NAAM Foundation, he spearheaded water conservation projects across thousands of hectares in Maharashtra, provided vital financial relief to countless families and steered hundreds of vulnerable farmers back from the brink of suicide. He may have been an icon as an actor, but it was this tireless devotion to the marginalised that elevated his stature as a human being.

Alongside acting, painting, writing and marksmanship, he harboured an enduring love for music. Though he was not a vocalist himself, he was a passionate connoisseur of Indian classical music. Just as he revered Vijaya Mehta in the world of theatre, he held an almost devotional regard for Kishori Amonkar in the realm of music.

To the world at large, Nana was often fierce and unyielding, thriving on blunt confrontations. Yet in the presence of Vijaya Bai and Kishori Tai, he dissolved into total humility. The rugged, defiant persona melted away, revealing a boyish innocence. I often saw him look upon the two of them with immense reverence, much like a young kindergartner gazing wide-eyed at a teacher, longing for a word of praise. Despite all his achievements, he hungered for their approval. This softer, vulnerable side of the otherwise fierce Nana was profoundly endearing.

In the passage of time, Kishori Tai passed on. A few months ago, Vijaya Bai also passed away. Now, the prodigal son who loved them like a child has departed as well. An humble tribute to the memory of Nana Patekar. Om Shanti, Shanti.