

Smita Patel

— An Interview



Smita Patel was one of the few women in Hindi cinema who emerged as an actress rather than a star. Her presence was a constant reminder that a woman need not be a fair complexioned, doll-like “heroine” to be a success in cinema. She not only brought power and vitality to films of which she was the protagonist but also a certain dignity to those in which she was made to act as a foil to the hero. Her untimely death has created a void that will be hard to fill.

I first saw Smita at a seminar on women in Indian films held in Delhi in 1982. She was surrounded by feminists who were demanding to know why she accepted stereotyped roles in commercial films. She was at pains to explain how her refusing such roles would not make much difference to the industry because there were dozens of others who would jump at them, and also how actresses do not have much of a bargaining position in the Bombay film world.

Later I asked her if I could taperecord an interview with her. She patiently answered my questions at great length, even though she had a busy schedule. The next day, I went to take photographs of her with my small and not very effective camera. The interview and photos show her as she was — an ordinary person with certain extraordinary qualities, among them being a certain spontaneous warmth and a rare honesty.

*After this, she sent her life subscription to **Manushi**, with a letter expressing her solidarity with the “fight against injustice and inhumanity.”*

This interview was not published at that time, because on transcribing it, I felt the need to follow it up with another more substantial interview. Unfortunately, another interview never took place. Here are some extracts from the interview of 1982.

Did you plan to become an actress or did it just happen ?

I just fell in my lap. I was working on television as an announcer and I started getting commercial offers. At first, I just kept looking down and saying no because I had no idea what the industry was. I was brought up very strictly. I was involved in social work and as a student I never saw films.

Were you not allowed to ?

My upbringing was such that I was never interested in cinema. I had not even heard film songs at home. My parents were members of the Socialist Party before independence. After it split up, they continued to work with Jayaprakash Narayan’s group of freedom fighters. I was in the cultural branch called Rashtriya Sewa Dal. Every summer vacation, we had

a programme called *Maharashtra Darshan* and *Bharat Darshan*. Under this programme, we travelled to villages and towns in different parts of the country to perform dance dramas. I was also involved in sports in school.

I studied in a Marathi medium school. I knew no English. Then I went to Ferguson College in Pune. When my father, Shivaji Rao Patil, became a minister

in the Naik ministry, the family shifted to Bombay. I went through a culture shock in Bombay.

Why did that happen ?

In Bombay I was in Elphinstone College. I felt totally out of place. I did not have a single friend. We used to be called "the vernacs" because we had studied in the vernacular language. I learnt English on my own by reading Hadley Chase kind of novels and through contact with some friends whom I met later at Xaviers where I was shifted. I felt somewhat freer there. Elphinstone is a small place. At least, Xaviers was spacious. I could go and sit in a corner. While I was in BA, I got on to TV.

What would you have wanted to do if left to choose ?

I was preoccupied with dancing— not classical but folk dancing which is much freer and more expressive. I was very involved with sports and with the free movement of the body. But I had fallen seriously ill with acute colitis and had to give up sports. I was listless and depressed so my sister decided to take me to television studios where her friend was an announcer. They liked my face and my voice and asked me to sing a song. I sang a Bengali song but I was listless, I had no active desire to work on TV. TV was new then and they were looking for new people. They took me on.

Earlier, in Pune, someone from the film institute had seen me going to college and had wanted to put me in a film but my mother said "Nothing doing, finish your BA first and learn to stand on your own feet." However, I had acted in one short film there. I think Shyam had seen me there. While I was on TV, I kept turning down the commercial offers. Then, suddenly, one day, Shyam popped into the TV station, and made me an offer. I said yes. *What made you say yes at that point ?*

I really don't know because I had not seen any film of his. I was extremely timid and shy. I could barely speak. But I said yes and we went to Bhilai to shoot *Charandas Chor*. Shyam's sound recordist whom I had met at the film institute in Pune had become a close family

friend. So Ma did not feel too insecure about sending me off to make this film. I liked the atmosphere on Shyam's unit. It was like the atmosphere of our theatre group where everybody ate together and was deeply involved with the work. I felt at ease, and I did four films continuously with him— *Charandas Chor*, *Nishant*, *Manthan*, *Bhumika*.

It was with *Bhumika* that I really came into my own. I felt cinema was my medium, I must act.

How and why did you decide to act in commercial films too ?

There were two major reasons. One was that although I was happy doing small films, I had the feeling of settling into the same kind of role. I was not developing as

in commercial cinema ?

I really don't know. If I refuse an offer because I find the script offensive, someone else can always be found to accept it. But one can encourage the films that are midway between the commercial and the art cinema. A film like: *Bheegi Palkein*, in which I acted. It is a bad film but has good things in it. It is about a conventional woman who tries to keep her family together but her husband is uncooperative so they part company. After 20 years they meet again. She is teaching in an orphanage. He asks her to come back to him. She feels it is too late. He tries to persuade her. Then she says : "As a husband you always decided for me. Today, decide for me as a friend." He says:



In Akrosh

an actress. When you work with a very good director, he does the basic thinking and you do not have to work much on your role.

Second, I found that some small film makers preferred to choose actors who had what is called market credibility, that is, who acted in commercial films too. I then realised it was important to work in commercial films even to retain my standing with small film directors.

Do you think you can make a breakthrough in the portrayal of women

"The husband has lost and the friend has won." She does not go back to him. In a commercial film, I can refuse to say a particular line which makes me sound like a slave to my husband. But I have to refuse in a gentle manner. You have to handle these men gently so that you don't hurt their egos, and you make them feel the great bosses of the whole world. Although I have fought over such lines, sometimes I would feel it is useless to fight because even though not saying that line might ease my conscience, the presence or

absence of that line will not make any real difference to the formula film as a whole.

Which film has been to your satisfaction ?

Umbartha (Subah). It portrays a middle class woman struggling with herself, with her family, with society in general and with other women.

What are the problems of working in the commercial cinema ?

They don't do justice to women. They think any film about a woman is a "heroine oriented" film and I should be very happy to act in it, even if it shows her in an old formula like that of the *tawaif*. For instance, after *Chakra* (where I did a bathing scene which I thought was necessary to the film because it showed something about this woman's personality—that she was the only woman in the slum who took a bath every day), I was offered about half a dozen films, all about women selling booze and taking a bath. Of course, I turned them down. I could have made a lot of money by falling into that slot and glamourising it. I have worked without money for many small producers, and for very little money for films like *Bhavani Bhavai*, *Akrosh*. Some of the commercial film makers come to me and want to pay me the same kind of small money for working in their so-called heroine oriented films. Then I fight, literally with tears in my eyes, and demand the market price. Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not. Mostly it does not. I don't have a secretary and my family knows nothing about money or how to handle it.

What kind of films do you see your-self doing in the next 10 years ?

For me, the commercial film is like a job I have to do in order to pursue my goal of helping create an audience for the small film in India. For example, if someone has seen me in a film like *Shakti* or seen the posters of *Akrosh* and *Chakra*, they may become curious about a film like *Subah* and say "Arre, isme to Smita Patil hai. Isme bhi sali ne kapde uthar diye kya ?" I am quite used to that kind of comment now. And of those who come to see the bathing scene, a few may like the film. Thus, I may help make a small dent. Not all of these

films are radical but at least they brought forth women of a class which had never been touched before. And showed them as they are. Like Amma in *Chakra*. Once I develop a certain standing, I could suggest a script to a director.

Do you see yourself directing films ?

Yes, I would like to.

How much space does your profession allow for your personal life ? Are you planning to get married ?

I have no plans at the moment, because I have no time. But I would like to marry a man who is like my father. Because my father is the one man I have seen who is so much like a woman. You can leave a one day old child in any condition with him and he can look after it so well. He can cook, he can clean, and he does it. He still combs my hair because he likes to do it. He is that kind of a father. I would want to have a family, a good family, the kind of family I grew up in.

Could you elaborate ?

We are three sisters. My mother was a nurse in a municipal hospital and an extremely conscientious person. Not just as a human being but as a public servant. She took her role as a nurse very seriously. Her sense of cleanliness, her sense of duty and sense of justice was so strong that it affected us, very deeply, right from early childhood.



In 1982

My mother was the only earning member because my father was in politics, in the JP movement. My mother concentrated totally on her family and her work. She had no other world. She had to go to work at eight and you could set a watch by her. She is the strongest looking woman I have ever seen.

She had to face a lot of family opposition when she became a nurse because it was not considered a respectable job. She would have loved to become a doctor but she could not. She fulfilled her ambition through her oldest daughter. She insisted that she be a doctor. My sister is so grateful to her now.

What did she want you to be ?

I think she left it to me. I was full of beans as a child. I was also a very independent kind of person. She was very fond of me. But she saw to it that I went to a Brahmin school although we are Marathas. There was a certain sophistication in the education I got because the school, Maharashtra Education Society for Girls, was run entirely by Brahmins. The credit goes to my mother. So much went into my childhood, so much love, affection, integration. That is why I think the family is the most important unit because that is where people are made.

Assuming it is a good family...

Yes. I think it is in one's hands. We are fortunate to have opportunities for courtship. My parents never really connected with each other. She was busy with her work and the family, he with politics. The contact was with the children actually. But my mother was interested in politics. When my father wanted to stand for elections to become an MP she refused to let him. She said "You will go and sit down in Delhi. You will not do any work. Who will look after the district ? Can people from here go to Delhi each time to meet you ? Stay in the district, do not become an MP."

How did she feel when he became a minister ?

That was in the state government so he remained situated in and connected with the district. He only went to Delhi for

major decisions. But he still goes to Dhulia every second day.

Do you see yourself as another Jay a Bhaduri ?

No, no, certainly not. Impossible. I will never give up my career. I feel Jaya should not have given up her career even though she is wife to a very big man...

Would you be wife to such a big man?

No, I won't marry a big man, because I know the hassles of all such big men. I have found my identity and I will only

accept a person who accepts my identity. He will have to do equal duties in the house.

But most women do not succeed in getting men to do that.

They don't succeed because of the situation they are in. I am in a privileged situation because I am earning well and if the person I live with or marry does not agree to share the responsibility, I will try my best to bring him on line, and if I fail, I will just give up. Separate.

You can conceive of that ?

I can very much conceive of it. Right from the beginning, whenever I thought of marriage, I have always, in my mind, accepted the idea of divorce or separation along with the idea of marriage.

Do you think a relationship could work out without marriage ?

I feel the insecurities of living together and of being married are the same. People say if you are together and your partner feels threatened, he may leave you any time. But the same happens with marriage. What is the difference ?

Remembering Smita

Extracts from an
account by Sonal
Shukla



As the elfin daughter of a prostitute (Shabana) in
“Mandi”

Sometime in 1983, Smita had offered that *Subah*, the Hindi version of the Marathi *Umbartha*, could be premiered to raise funds for the Women's Centre, Bombay. At that time, the Centre desperately needed funds for a proper office. *Subah* was one of the few films that

was appropriate to raise funds for a women's organisation. In it, Smita plays the role of a social worker whose life undergoes change while she works as superintendent of a women's shelter.

Smita put her heart and soul into coordinating the fundraising drive. It was

difficult to get a tax exemption certificate for the highly came to rely a great deal on Raj Babbar to guide her career in commercial cinema.

Smita used to get excited when she met people with ideals. She immediately wanted to do all she could to help them

out. At the Centre, too, she was more interested in how she could help women than in developing an priced tickets. Smita's mother, Vidyatai, had to go to the secretariat several times and chase a file from one office to another. This, despite her husband being a Congress (I) MLA and her daughter being a well known actress.

At that time, a building collapsed and dislocated important rail connections in Bombay. Lakhs of commuters had to depend on the bus service. This was also the time of the second heaviest monsoon in Bombay in 100 years. The volunteers of the Centre found it hard to run around for advertisements for the brochure. Smita had access to two cars. She helped out in every way she could, without being asked. One had just to give her a list of telephone numbers and, the same night, she would report on what had been accomplished. I never saw her with any staff. She did all this herself.

Smita had some endearing Maharashtrian middle class traits. She was simple, unpretentious, without airs. She was impressed when someone gave a donation, little realising that the person was impressed by Smita, the film star.

Smita, I think, was going through a transition at that time. Some small film makers had utilised her talents as a springboard and then taken a more established star in their later films. Although she could never refuse a worthwhile film, even if it paid her nothing, she did want to be a success in commercial cinema too.

I remember, once, Smita's mother, who was deeply involved in her own social work, of which middle class Maharashtrian women have a long tradition, received a call on her behalf, forgot about it and later said to Smita : "Oh, one Mr. B.R. Chopra had called a few days ago." Smita narrated this with mixed feelings. She was in a sense, proud that the B.R. Chopras and Prakash Mehra of Ihis world meant nothing to hsr mother, but, at the same time, was slightly irritated that her parents did not care to help her in public relations with film makers. She understanding of the causes of women's oppression. She never



—Madhu

understood what it was to belong to a group or a movement although she felt drawn to it and felt a need to identify herself

with it. The only time she attended a meeting at the new premises of the Centre, hundreds of people collected outside to gaze at her.

After she publicly claimed to have married a man who would have committed bigamy by marrying her, she kept away from all of us. After a year or so, she sent a message that she wanted to discuss certain matters with the group but that meeting never took place. Some people say she felt let down by the women's movement at this time. We did not see what we could do to help. Some of us who discussed the matter felt that while we could not insist that a man stay married to one woman all his life. At the same time, we could not support Smita's desire to call herself a wife rather than a companion. After all, the legislation abolishing bigamy among Hindus had been passed after a long struggle by women's organisations and their supporters.

How Does It Happen

*How and when
Does it happen
That we begin to grow complacent
When the squalor and dirt
Around us no longer bother us*

*When worldly possessions and
success
hold a key
To man's respectability
In society
When goodness and integrity
Are like so many other words*

*When not being yourself is being
clever
Being clad in masks most natural*

*Yes, we have built a magnificent
Facade around us
We, living in the most
ingenious
times
Are most creative
In deceiving ourselves*

— Gurdeep Dhingra