Education And Independence

—An Interview With Kanti Shastri

Many of the women who administered, staffed and nurtured women's schools and colleges in the first decades of independence were those who had emerged from the national movement. Many of these women remained single- A few continued to be involved in pol-itical activity, particularly those who married fellow political workers. Many others dropped out of the political arena. Of the people who had been active in the national movement, a relatively lower proportion of women than men were absorbed into government and party hierarchies. It would seem that of the wo-men who become politically active in turbulent times fewer make politics an active career as compared to men in similar situations.

Not enough systematic study has been conducted of women's historical experience of political activity. Manushi has earlier carried interviews with women who were politically active in certain phases of their life (See Nos 20 and 22) Here, we present extracts from a taped interview with another such woman, Kanti Shastri, by Ruth Vanita. Her view of the move-ments with which she came in contact does not purport to be a representative or comprehensive view- It is one individuaFs account of certain events as she experien-ced and perceived them.

Could you tell me something about your experiences in childhood which you said, made you a rebel ?

It was the discrimination within the family, the social discrimination against widows, for instance. When my mother was 26 years old. my father, an advocate, died suddenly. His family abandoned us and we returned to my mother's parental home. Within a couple of years, I also lost my elder sister to whom 1 was very close, and my younger brother. My mother was too involved with her own sorrow to realise how traumatised my brother and I were.

My mother was uneducated. She wanted to study so that she could get a job but her family was very orthodox and would not agree. This put us in a very difficult situation because we were dependent on my-maternal uncles. My maternal grandmother too became hostile to us, so life was very difficult.

We were shunted from place to place like pieces of luggage. We had no choice. There was no corner of the house to call one's own, no privacy whatsoever. The discrimination in the joint family against widows and orphans was of a blatant kind.

A great anger grew up in me at the way my mother was treated after my father's death, at the way we were treated as dependants. For instance, I remember one incident that took me outside the pale of organised religion. The Shankaracharya had come to Chittoor. He said he would give *darshan* to my mother only if she shaved her head. My mother refused. She said "I have already removed my *bindi* and jewellery. I need not da any more." My grandmother flew into a rage and the whole house turned hysterical. My brother and I were sent away to an aunt's house until the storm blew over. Even my aunts would not sit and eat with-my mother because she was a widow and was supposed to bring bad luck.

For the first time in my life, I saw the difference between rich and. poor, ugly and beautiful, fair and dark. I was poor, I was ugly, I was dark, and my grandmother's

constant refrain was : "Who will marry her?" I told myself: "I am damned if I will marry anybody."

There was a great deal of obstin-acy in me, a great anger against the system which

made such differences between human beings, even in a small unit like the family. I was determined not to put up with this injustice.

What was your family background like?

We are Tamil Brahmans from Chittoor, It is a family of scholars and teachers of Sanskrit. My paternal grandfather had received a classical education in astronomy, logic, literature, philosophy, and in Sanskrit. He started going to an English school at the age of 12. He was called ABCD Narayanan because he started so late. But within three years, he completed his matriculation. He knew 18 langua-ges, including Latin and Greek. There was an atmosphere of learn-ing in the house, a love of music, poetry, acting.

My mother's family was much more puritanical, strongly influenc-ed by the theosophical movement. My maternal grandmother was probably the only girl in our community to have received a classical education in logic, mathematics and classical literature. Her father realised that she was more intelligent than his sons so he educated her and used to ask her to be present whenever scholars came. He took great pride in her accom-plishments. All that stopped when she got married.

Was your education also encouraged!

My uncles were not in favour of my going to school. Their daughters went to school. But they said it would be enough if I was literate and could do the household accounts. My mother insisted that I go to school so that I could at least become a school-teacher. She also wanted me to learn music but my uncle said : "Either she learns music or she goes to school." So my mother said : "1 want her to go to school."

I was a lonely child. I was the only girl in a household of boys. From the age of eight, I was told I should behave like a woman. There were so many regulations for girls and women. If I went and stood outside the door, my cousins would tell me : "Go inside, why are you standing here ? You are a woman." You were not allowed your childhood because you were a girl.

I was not allowed to play with male cousins. There was a wall of mystery, suspicion, fear lest some-how or other one get physically involved with someone. It was worse than being in *parda,* the restrictions were so many. Even to go from my grandmother's house to my aunt's house across the street, I had to be accompanied by a servant.

The atmosphere in a Tamil Brahman family is such that it strongly upholds male superio-rity. Boys are superior, girls don't matter. They never gave a girl any credit for intelligence, artistic abilities, anything. I was fond of drawing and painting. I was told to stop it as it was a waste of money.

My happiness was in school. I was two people—one at home, the other outside.

It was a convent and I was involved in many activities there. But the experience, though joyous, also created conflicts. The nuns always ran down Hinduism. Also, we were angry at being made to sing : "God save the king."

After I completed high school, although I had very good marks, my uncles said: "Enough. She must get married now." I was determined to go to college. There was tremendous resistance. My uncle refused to pay the fees.

I applied on my own to Queen Mary's College. One of my aunts paid the admission fees. But who would pay the regular tuition fees ? I went and declared myself a pauper and got a government scholarship. This was my first act of rebellion. My uncles were furious : "How could you do that ? What will people say?" I said : "Either you educate me or illow me to educate myself." With the scholarship, I lived in the college hostel.

What did your mother think of this ?

She was happy but at the same time apprehensive because her sisters and brothers kept telling her: "Once a girl gets educated, she is gone from your hands for ever."

When I went on to do BA and M Lit from a coeducational college, there was tremendous protest that the family name would be ruined; my name would get linked

with some man's name. When I did not get involved in scandals I think they were a bit disappointed.

What kind of pressures were there for you to marry ?

At the age of 13, I was even beaten by my mother to get married to my father's sister's son. 1 refused. Until I fainted, I kept saying "No." Cross cousin marriages are allowed in the South, but I did not feel like marrying him because it so happen-ed that we had been brought up in the same house as brother and sister. Fortunately for me, he too felt the same way. Later, I was shown to many boys. I refused each proposal.

Why?

I had seen many marriages around me and I was not inspired by the marriages I saw. Every one of my aunts seemed to be unhappy in her marriage. I felt something must be very wrong with the sys-tem . My eldest aunt's husband was having innumerable affairs. She went through torment. Most of her married life, she was in her father's house, very miserable.

Also, I did not like the idea that you are worthy of marrying only if you are rich and beautiful. They never bothered to see whether you were a decent human being, warm-hearted, intelligent. Those things did not matter. I felt the atmos-phere of a Tamil Brahman family would choke me if I remained in it. One of the accusations frequently brought against me was that I read too much. They spoke derisively of women who were involved in politics.

I was rebelling against the whole system wherein only the outward manifestation of material well being mattered. Marriage was the ulti-mate shackle to bind you to the system. I could not accept that others, family elders, knew what was good for me. I was ready to do anything to escape. I was even prepared to run away to Wardha.

How did you think of that ?

I thought of Wardha as a sanc-tuary from traditional family ties. It would help me grow as an indivi-dual and I would participate in the freedom struggle.

How did your contact with the freedom struggle begin ?

My mother was intensely nation-alist. After my father's death, she had taught herself English, Hindi and Urdu. She used to get many newspapers and read them.

She had a cousin who had a fine intellect. She had not been allowed to study, and was married to some-one who was not educated. She lived in Vellore. She was interested in Marxism. When she came to visit us, she and my mother would sit together and read the Communist Party paper *Janshakti*. This was in the early forties. I was surprised by the camaraderie between these two women. I think they were closer to each other than to anyone else in the family.

I found my mother's diary after her death. She had followed the national movement very carefully, and had commented on the round table conference. She was full of hopes and also despair. I was astonished at the depth of her in-volvement.

So it was part of my upbringing to read the speeches of Gandhiji, Nehru, Bose. I also read the autobiographies of Gandhiji and Nehru. The peculiar thing was that my mother did not make my brother read these things. She wanted him to study well and get a job. He was to be the breadwinner. She thought I would marry and go away. She did not realise that I was ready for rebellion and that political interests only added to it. She did not like the end product. She did not like my joining the Congress Party. She asked : "Why can't you be like others ?" I said : "You didn't give me a chance to be like others. You brainwashed me." She said : "I never thought you would turn out like this."

When I was in my early teens,, the Vykom *satyagraha* took place for the opening of temples to Hari-jans. It was a

Sixtieth birthday of a Tamil Brahman husband being celebrated as a wedding, with a reiteration of the vows (Shasthtiatapoorti)

great event, considering the way Harijans were treated. Interestingly, in our house we had a Harijan servant who ruled us with an iron hand. He didn't cook for us. But neither did he eat anything cooked by us. He cooked for him-self. It was a kind of reverse snobbery ! He and his wife were very kind to me because I was all alone.

"We used to go regularly to troosophical conventions. I was never attracted to theosophy because I found the atmosphere at the society at Adyar was a rather anaemic, pseudointdlectual, pseu-doartistic one.

I was very attracted to Rama-krishna Paramahansa. Reading his dialogues influenced me profoundly. I began to see this very simple man as what I would call a prototype Indian. A man simple and profound at the same time, who exercised a powerful pull on people's imagination. A man not in any sense elitist, yet attracting the very best minds to himself.

Maybe he prepared me for Gandhi because I found the same qualities in Gandhi, too. He may have studied in England but he was the same kind of man as Para-mahansa. Always ready to acknow-ledge his mistakes, always in search of truth, however unpleasant that truth might be. I was deeply moved by the forces that were pushing the national movement in the direction of *satyagraha* and nonviolence.

When was this ?

This was in the early forties. 1 joined intermediate at Queen Mary's in 1941. In 1942, Gandhiji gave the Quit India call. In August 1942, we organised a strike for the first time in our college, in response to the arrest of Gandhiji and others. The strike was given up only in August 1943. There were no students' unions at that time. The strike was spontaneously begun by a.bout 25 likeminded people. There was a lot of opposition from the principal, teachers and some students.

This was the first time even prestigious colleges like Presidency went on strike. We made contact with other colleges, and organised meetings and processions. Then, section 144 was declared and we were not allowed to go out of the college. We did symbolic things like pulling down the union jack and putting up the tricolour.

Kanti's mother, reading

We used to read material from Wardha. The socialists in the Con-gress, particularly Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyut Patwardhan and Aruna Asaf Ali, organised widespread sabotage throughout India. They were underground. They used to publish leaflets which we read.

At this time, I also made the acquaintance of the communists. They came and tried to dissuade us from striking, because their party line was that the world war was not an imperialist war but a people's war. But we were not convinced that Russia's having joined the war made a difference. Churchill's stand on the British empire continued to be implacable, so we were determin-ed to oppose the British. The atte-mpt to break the strike failed in all colleges.

How did your family read to your political activity ?

To hold political opinions was considered undesirable in our family. Also, we had ju*t been through the depression of the thirties. Salaries were low, and people could not afford to take a revolutionary atti-tude. My uncles feared for their jobs They were loyal servants of the British crown. It was only after independence that they began to talk about the great struggle for freedom, and even give lectures on it.

So my uncle came to talk to me. I was not allowed to go out of the hostel. The call to court arrest had been given. I did not court arrest and go to jail because it would make life very difficult for my mother. I felt resentful at having to do this. I felt I had betrayed myself. For the next couple of years, I continued to read political theory but I was not politi-cally active.

For BA, 1 did not want to go to Presidency, because all my male cousins were there and reports on my movements would constantly be sent to my family. So 1 wanted to go to Madras Christian College. The principal refused to admit me because he had heard I was involved in the freedom struggle and he did not want any trouble. A cousin of mine wbo was an old student of the college spoke for me, and then I was admitted.

In 1945, Gandhiji arrived in Madras for a camp and I enrolled myself as a volunteer in the Sewa Dal. The camp was for six weeks and there were hundreds of volun-teers working every day. I used to leave home at 5 a.m. and return at 11 p.m.

What was the experience like ?

It was a remarkable experience because of the way the people loved him. The whole place was a sea of humanity. Every day, there were 100,000 people or more. People came from miles away on foot, women carrying children on their backs. There were people from all sections of society from the poorest of the poor to the richest of the rich.

We had to maintain order be-cause the police was not allowed in. Gandhiji did not like the idea of police. The volunteers made arrangements, and also collected money for the Harijan fund. At the end of the day, Gandhiji would per-sonally count every paisa and enter it in his book, because he said public money must be properly accounted for.

At the meetings he always spoke in Hindi, but not the kind of Hindi Atal Behari Vajpayee speaks. It was Hindustani and nobody objected. He always spoke in short sentences and never for more than 10 minutes or so. His laughter would ring out and the whole mass of people would be laughing with him.

But one thing which upset me was that to meet Gandhiji, you had to contribute to the fund. Autographs he would sign for Rs 5. Rich people like film stars and busi-nessmen would give Rs 1,000 or Rs 10,000 and Gandhiji would meet them even if only for a minute, But *satyagrahis* who had lost every-thing, whose property had been confiscated during the no tax cam-paign, who had no means to educate their children, would be waiting and could not have *darshan* of Gandhiji, because of the money. Although he was collecting rmney for a good purpose, I felt his first priority should have been the *satyagrahis* who had embraced poverty for the cause, had given up their studies, their jobs, their properties, and did not want anything from Gandhiji except his *darshan* because they put their faith in him.

The second thing that upset me was the way the people surrounding Gandhiji behaved- Their attitude was one of arrogance. They bypas-sed rules, and spoke to people with arrogance. I felt Gandhiji should have taken note of it. Sometimes, those who surround the one whom people respect, behave arrogantly even if they have not done anything to deserve respect.

Did you talk to him about this ?

I never talked to him. It was difficult to get near him to talk to him. It was not an atmosphere where you could ask questions. There was hectic political activity going on behind the scenes, but no dialogue with the people. Most people had come only to see Gandhiji, not to talk to him.

But I was tremendously drawn to him. When you saw him, you never thought of him as ugly. You never thought about his ears which were an outstanding feature of his face. You only saw a glowing figure. The charisma seemed to radiate from him, his. Daughter was infectious, his gestures all embracing.

Working at the camp gave me a chance to fulfil a lifelong ambition to work with Gandhiji. But it was also a time for me to come to terms with realities.

Women volunteers from different provinces at a Sewa Dal central training camp in Bombay

After the camp, feelers were sent to me to join the Congress but I felt unhappy about the struggle for power that was taking place, for example, between Nehru and Bose, and the way the INA was shunted to the sidelines and the navy rebels in Bombay let down. The Congress was taking positions of convenience rather than positions of principle.

Partition came as a big shock. I don't remember communal violence as such in Madras. That is why communal violence in Bengal and the North came as a shock to me. Gandhiji was against partition bu the compromised with Nehru. If he had come out, I felt the whole country would have followed him and opposed Nehru. I think his personal affection for Nehru prevented him.

But Gandhiji's Noakhali march made me see that he was the only one standing between anarchy an4 sanity. I also knew that he was not getting enough support from the government. More and more, I began to veer towards the Com-munist Party.

But you said you did not like their stand earlier ?

Yes, but I had also become disillusioned with the Congress. I felt the Communist Party believed in justice. I began to feel that one must stand up for justice even at the smallest level, otherwise it would not be possible to fight the big battles. I met communists who had given up lucrative jobs and were living the life of an ordinary worker. I felt maybe this would work out.

In 1948 or so, we tried to set up a women students' union in Madras. This was our first expression of the fact that women had some special problems. Sjudents' unions had come up at the all India level and had begun to contest elections on a party basis. We felt we needed to articulate our problems such as disgusting harassment of women students by men, lack of common rooms for women, and the general attitude of men that women should go back to the kitchen. We held a convention.

But the Congress immediately set

about saying ours was a communist front organisation, and at that time Rajaji had declared communists enemy number one. So everyone panicked. Teachers and principals began to pressurise students. You know how difficult it is to organise women. Even though they know they are oppres-sed, women are afraid of repressive measures. There were orders not to let us into the women's hostels. So the organisation broke up.

What other work did you do as a sympathiser of the Communist Party ?

We were asked to sell the party paper *People's Age* on Mount Road, Madras, where everybody comes. We were asked to distribute the speeches of Beria to factory workers. I argued about this because I won-dered how the workers would be interested in the speeches of Beria. What was important was what mattered to the Indian worker, not what was happening somewhere else.

I became a member of the Communist Party in 1949 but it seems it was a bad time, because a lot of witch hunting was going on. Com-munists were being denounced right and left, for class bias or for not having proved their revolutionary credentials. Wives were being asked to denounce husbands, children to denounce parents. It was nothing but a struggle for power.

The last straw came when I was asked to go and bring about a strike in a school I had never seen before. It was supposed to be vanguard action by students. I said : "How can you have vanguard action when you have not worked with them and 4o not have their confidence and affection?" I was told I had to obey orders. Three of us girls went there and were nearly lynched by people of the neighbourhood be-cause nobody would like tbeir school to be disrupted.

I submitted a report saying that unless you are actively working with people, you cannot get them to do anything, and whatever you do must be in their interest. You cannot go against their interest ; you cannot coerce them to do something they do not want to do. I was told I was not being a good communist so I left the party after being in it for about a year.

Being a citizen of the country does not mean I have no right to criticise the country. If this is so, then I have no right to criticise any other country either

Soon after, I completed my M Litt and applied to several colleges for a teacher's job. I got a job in Kinnaird College, Lahore. I would have preferred that job but then partition took place and they said they might not be able to ensure my safety. They were as sorry as I was. So I joined Miranda House, Delhi. I travelled alone to Delhi and lived in the college hostel.

What made you take up teaching ?

I had always sworn I would, not be a teacher but I ended up being a teacher. There was little else we could do in those days except be a doctor or a teacher.

Law was what I really wanted to do, particularly labour law but who would finance me ? There were no evening classes or correspond-ence courses in those days.

I thought of going into the civil services but then I decided 1 did not want a government job. I guess I had not fully formulated my rea-sons, but I had a gut reaction to the government.

I felt the Indian National Con-gress had gone back on its promi-ses, right from the word go. They failed to change the criminal law procedure which was a promise of the national movement. Neither did they abolish the special police which used to commit atrocities. In 1948 itself, the special police was let loose on striking workers in Madras.

I hated the idea that what was advocated as part of the freedom struggle, like students' involvement in politics, was now supposed to be wrong. Now students were told to be apolitical. How could a govern-ment which had come to power as a result of struggle adopt this anti-people attitude, start passing laws curtailing freedom of speech, and arresting its own people ?

I thought the government was antipeople ; I still think it is anti-people. I did not want to be part of this set up. I wanted to be in the opposition, to have the freedom to criticise.

I met some foreign service probationers when I was working towards my D Litt at Oxford later. Most of them were nice people. But some had a chauvinistic attitude, saying that one should not criticise one's country and should always project a good image of one's country because to tell foreigners about what is going on amounts to defaming the country.

I thought the government was antipeople; I still think it is antipeople. And the basic tenet of Gandhism is that one must oppose a bad government

One of them is now one of the seniormost diplomats. When 1 see his name in the papers 1 remember my arguments with him. 1 said that civil disobedience is very important in a newly independent country. The government has to be constantly reminded of its obligations to the people. It must respect the rights of the people including their right to oppose injustice by nonviolent means. Being a citizen of the coun-try does not mean I have no right to criticise the country. If this is so, then I have no right to criticise

any other country either. Just because the colour of the skin has changed it does not mean the government has automatically become just. And the basic tenet of Gandhism is that one must oppose a bad government.

Even though teaching was low paid, one felt one had more free-dom in the academic field than elsewhere.

What were teaching conditions like ?

We were heavily overworked. We taught 22 periods or more a week, and had to look after all the extracurricular activities and do a lot of administrative work. We had no time at all to study or do research. The December vacation was spent correcting about 400 terminal exam papers. The set up in Miranda House was very authoritarian. Arbitrariness and unreasonableness of the authorities was a dominant feature of the college. It may have been better in men's colleges.

The pay scale was Rs 200 to Rs 560, with an increment of Rs 15 a year. No allowances. I used to send half my salary to my mother. The hostel cost Rs 60, and other expenses like laundry, crockery and so on. It was just a living wage, nothing more.

At this time, I got involved in reviving the Delhi University Teachers' Association (DUTA) which had become defunct. It had no records and no money. A handful of teachers, women and men, began to mobilise by going from college to college. Around 1951, we reconvened the DUTA with Dr Majumdar as president and myself as secretary.

We decided we would not bring party politics into the DUTA. It would be a teachers' association, working for teachers and for improvement of academic standards.

The liberal atmosphere of Delhi University pleased me. It was not so hierarchical in those days. Pro-fessors and principals too were active members of DUTA. So we had wide support for whatever we did.

At that time, vice-chancellors themselves were teachers, so they were more accessible and there was more respect for teachers. Now, they are bureaucrats who behave in an authoritar ian manner. The principals too regard themselves as different from teachers and have their own association. Then, they were regarded as part of the teach-ing community.

In Miranda House hostel

What were the issues taken up ?

One of the first issues was that of married women teachers. At that time, there were only three women's colleges and no women were em-ployed as teachers in coeducational colleges. Married women were not given permanent jobs. They were appointed on a contractual basis. There was no provision for mater-nity leave. It took us about six months to get this system abolished.

Another issue was segregation between Indian and European teachers in the refugee camp college; run by the Jesuits. When we protested, they dismissed about 23 teachers. The vice-chancellor did not want to take action. He kept on repeating : "The chain of autho-rity cannot be broken." We insisted that the federal character of the university required him to take action. There was no Delhi University without the constituent colleges so if a college transgressed univer-sity rules, it had to be stopped from doing so. This was a very important principle which is being violat-ted today, with the proposal for colleges to be autonomous, with no-accountability to the university.

The third issue during my tenure was the pay revision. At that time, schoolteachers were being paid more than university teachers.* Under the first pay commission, the new-pay scales were offered only to uni-versity appointed teachers. This included professors, readers and Miranda House lecturers, since Miranda House was the only

As has been the case again, from 1986 till date, with schoolteachers having gotten the new pay scales under the seventh pay commission, and university teachers being denied them until 1988.

uni-versity college at the time. We refused to accept it because it would mean abandoning the federal character of the university. We did not allow ourselves to be divided and the pay scales were given to everyone.

At that 'time, Miranda House had an identity as a university college which it has gradually lost. Academic freedom has been diluted. As the college grew bigger, a lot of people not interested in teaching have also come in. Many take it as a kind of second income. Even so, women's colleges do take teaching more seriously than most men's colleges.

Were you involved in politics outside the university ?

1 was approached to rejoin the Communist Party. I seriously consi-dered it, and began to attend meet-ings again. I was also a founding member of the Indo China Friend-ship Association, as I had long been interested in China. Some of us thought of reforming the party from within. We formed a ginger group for this purpose. We wanted to form a national association, of stu-dents and teachers, free from politi-cal interference. We felt it was in the interests of a larger democratic movement for such associations to develop.

But I found the party was too rigid and too doctrinaire, and was importing its doctrines. When the Stockholm peace appeal was issued, the party asked me to get a resolution in support adopted by the DUTA. 1 refused, saying DUTA was not a political organisation but an organisation for teachers. Once I introduced my politics into it, others would do the same. The lady who had come to see me said : "I will report you to the party secretary." I said: "You can report me to Stalin, if you like."

In 1956, the Soviet Union invad-ed Hungary and the Indian Communist Party was justifying it. Then I dissociated myself completely from the party. I always believed that the hopes for revolution lie within the country and cannot be imported.

How did your academic career develop ?

I always have a feeling that I never was my best in my academic career. Politics always acted as a distraction. During BA, 1 did not pay attention to my studies, my mind was elsewhere, and I missed a first division.

I had switched from science to economics because 1 thought econo-mics would offer me an insight into India, and what was wrong in India. To my disgust, 1 found that econo-mics consisted of drawing diagrams and answering hypothetical ques-tions based on laws that could not be proved. For a science student, this was traumatic. In science, a hypothesis must be accompanied by proof in order to establish the vali-dity of a law. In economics, you are told that other things being equal, this will happen. I found it difficult to come to terms with "other things being equal." How can you assume things will not change ?

In 1957, I went to the London School of Economics and then to Oxford to work on a doctoral thesis on agricultural policy and develop-ment in India. I was working on a hypothesis which no one was willing to accept at that time. My basic idea was that economic develop-ment is 'not cost free. In every country, a price has been paid for development, and the price has been paid by those least able to afford it—the peasantry. This ran counter to currently accepted views on economic growth.

I felt in my guts that neglect of agriculture would prove disastrous in the long run for India. Land reform in itself was not a solution. A change in methods of production was called for. I said that the concept of the peasant being unrespon-sive to change is not proved by history. Once you demonstrate the profitability of something, the pea-sant is always willing to accept it. But this was not then accepted at Oxford. There was a curious collu-sion between rightwing and leftwing economists —both agreed that industryled economic growth was the most important thing.

In those days, we got paid study leave only for a year. The pay was not enough. I was not eating well or sleeping well. I was working very hard, reading a lot, and surviving on loans.

In 1960, I returned to India, because my leave ran out, and continued working on my thesis. I had been suffering from headaches. Suddenly, I developed high fever which was diagnosed as typhoid. I did not respond to treatment. When I was dying, they realised it was meningitis. They said there was no hope. But I did recover. My nerves were shattered. It took me a long time to learn to walk and to speak again. I was not allowed to read and my eyesight became very weak. A few years later, I developed severe arthritis.*

The college refused to extend my leave so I had to resume teaching even though I was in a cold sweat every time I got up to speak. For two years, I was under constant medication and medical care.

After this, the college would not give me leave to do the final work on the thesis. So I did it while teaching. The deadline for sub-mission was approaching, and I foolishly did not ask for an exten-sion. I completed it in a hurry. The typing was also badly done due to haste, My supervisor was away in the US at the time of the viva, when I had to defend the thesis before a board of examiners. I went to Oxford at personal expense for the viva. The board rejected the thesis.

I accepted their criticism that it was too long. I wanted permission to rewrite parts of it. I said I would accept any supervisor they appointed in Delhi, and would revise it. But they refused permission. My

*The arthritis eventually resulted in serious disability which confined her to a wheelchair. College authorities tried to use this as a pretext to deny her the extension after retirement age, which most teachers get automatically. Her colleagues fought an extended battle to get her the ex'ension on the ground that physical disability does not interfere with a mentally alert person's teaching abilities. Finally, the extension was granted. Ms Shastri has now retired and is at present living with her brother's family.

teachers at Oxford tried their best to get the decision changed, but failed.

Later, I came to know that two very anti Indian people were on the board. I could have asked for different examiners. But a great sense of defeat pervaded me. I walked along the Thames and felt like throwing myself in. But it was so slimy and green. I told myself if it had been the Ganga, I would have jumped in. Of course, I wouldn't jump into the Ganga now, because Ganga now is like what the Thames was then, whereas the Thames has been cleaned up !

I never looked at my thesis again, I was too shattered—not because I overvalued myself, but because years of hard work had been wasted, whereas people who had done less work had got away with it.

What other activities were you involved in after this ?

In London, I was one of the founding members of the India Society. We organised shows and a seminar on the relevance of Gandhi. Earlier, there used to be an India Majlis which broke up after parti-tion, due to quarrels between Indians and Pakistanis over the Kashmir question.

After returning to India, in the midsixties, I took leave from colle-ge and went to Varanasi to work with the Sarvodaya movement. I thought I might be able to fit in better with something that involved people. But I found Vinoba Bhave had derailed the movement because of his insistence that there should be no political resistance to govern-ment. Even constructive work requires a certain degree of confrontation which he would not allow.

The treatment of agricultural workers on Sarvodaya farms was no different from other farms. The Sarvodaya leaders kept saying that manual labour should not be replaced by machinery even though they themselves were using electri-city, gas and other modern techno-logy. I pointed out that we should use technology to take the individual out of the poverty trap and gradually help people move up the ladder of skill and become skilled workers. But they were not interested. There was an attitude of blind devotion. I would have liked Bhave to encourage a critical attitude.

Another thing which upset me very much was their attitude to-wards untouchability. Many Sarvo-daya workers would not allow the sweeper women to enter the house. Some of them would not even flush the toilet after use, because if they touched the chain they would consider themselves polluted and would have to bathe. So the toilets stank.

When we were visiting *bhoodan* villages, we went to a Harijan village just near a Brahman village. The women offered me water and g«r. It was offered with affection, and I took it. My colleagues later told me that I should not have taken it because it would alienate the Brahman villagers. So, instead of educating the Brahmans, they were willing to compromise with them on untouchability. How effective could the work be if we tolerated the most intolerable part of the system—untouchability ? How could we be called Gandhians?

In the *bhoodan* villages, the donated land was lying barren. The movement had not done any-thing to improve the lands or train the villagers to use it. Bhave had begun by asking for *bhoodan* (gift of land to the poor), had gone on to *gramdan* (gift of villages), *mandaldan* (gift of blocks), and finally *Bharatdan* (gift of India). Sarvodaya workers were arguing: that nothing could be done on a small scale. Unless the whole of India was given in *dan,* social and economic regeneration could not take place. This was totally unGandhian. It amounted to "waiting for the revolution," and doing nothing till then.

What about your work in the DUTA?

DUTA was gradually taken over by political parties. The setting up of Delhi administration colleges created fissiparous tendencies, going against the federal character of the university. The Delhi administration is subject to political pressures. Each time there is a change of party in the government, there are changes in governing bodies of administration colleges. The university became increasingly fragmented. I remained a member of DUTA but people like me became an ineffective minority.

I think I did some good as the first fulltime coordinator of the Noncollegiate University Education Board for Women. I regard it as the major achievement of my

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life. - The idea of nonformal education for women had always attracted me because of the constraints under, which women have to live in this country. I remembered my own struggle to get an education and I felt an institution like this could give women the beginning they needed.

The board was being run like a racket, a system of patronage. I set up systems of selection and organised regular classes on Sun-days as well as a book distribution scheme. This was in the rnidseven-ties. In one year, the pass percen-tage jumped from 55 percent to 75 percent. Schoolteachers who were graduates came to do MA because as postgraduate teachers they could earn more. Housewives who had discontinued their studies came to do their postgraduation. I was planning to introduce vocational studies and make it job oriented.

But I fell foul of the university administration. They were not willing to give the board even the status given to correspondence courses. They were not willing to allocate a proper budget. They would question every decision, however small, and try to obstruct «very move. The behaviour of the authorities was very rude. So I left and returned to the college, They were surprised because the job was much better paid than a lecturer's job.

What about your family! Bow were your relations with them!

Initially, they had opposed my working. No girl in our family had gone to work. One of my grand-uncles told me that I must take an «scort wherever I travel, even to the library. I said: "I have difficulty paying my own busfare. I can't pay for the escort."

There was a lot of family ten-sion because I did not marry. I was the only girl in the family who did not marry. My uncles said: ""We must finish our responsibili-ties." I told them 1 would not be a burden on them. They would not have to spend on my marriage. If I wanted to marry, 1 would have a civil marriage.

After I started working, the pressures to marry diminished. When my brother and I got jobs, we took my mother out of that house. Unfortunately, she did not live long to enjoy her independence. She died in 1953. But I think I gained respect in her eyes for not having allowed the system to break me. Later, my uncle too expressed happiness that I had proved myself. He accepted the principles 1 had fought for, which he could not accept earlier.

Did you ever consider having a self arranged marriage'!

I wanted an equal relationship. I was determined to be myself, and to marry only if 1 found somebody I liked who would treat me as a person, not an object. I never came across anyone who went through with it. Maybe there were some who professed these ideas but I never found a man committed to the idea of equality with women. Always there was a feeling of woman being inferior. I could not accept an unequal rela-tionship. If the price to be paid was singleness, then I was prepared for it.

A communist friend once told me: "You know, man does not live by bread alone." I said: "It depends what bread means to A, B or C. For me, my integrity is very important."

In a way, I was more of an anarchist in my attitudes. That is why I could not fit into any poli-tical party. My basic attitude was one of wanting to find answers to questions, not of accepting the given as right. For me, human relations too were a question of finding a right equation, not marriage for the sake of marriage.

My mother once asked: "Why are you so austere? You cannot separate the mind from the body." 1 found this interesting. Here I was, thinking myself so revolutionary, but 1 had only a partial view of life—a cerebral life, not a physical life. It was very common among women who went in for higher education at that time. Suddenly, it became important to be themselves. They felt marriage would not allow them to develop the way they wanted to develop. But I do think austerity is a flaw. One should be able to enjoy the pleasures of being. It would be ideal if one could combine the sensual experience with intellectual pleasures.

I have been asked if I feel lonely. But I like solitude. 1 have time and space to read, think, listen to music. Maybe the love of solitude and independence comes from my childhood experience when I had no privacy, no oppor-tunity to articulate my feelings and had to suppress them and rerruin silent.

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What are your plans for the future?

I want to learn Sanskrit. I want to relearn Tamil. I have some idea of writing a screen play as an exercise to see if I can, because films have always fascinated me as a genre. I think cinema is a complete art form, combining elements of all art forms—literature, painting, music, photo-graphy. It has been my lifelong dream to direct a film. I would like to do a screen play on R.K. Narayan's novel, *The Dark Room.* The subject fascinates me; it is set in the milieu in which I grew up.