A Striving Voice

Shabana Azmi talks to Manushi

Shabana Azmi, internationally acclaimed actress, is known not only for her sensitive interpretations of unusual women characters in cinema, but also for her work for the rights of pavement dwellers in Bombay (see ***Manushi*** *No.35) and for her involvement with human rights issues. Here, she talks to* ***Manushi*** *about the influences that have shaped her life and work.*

Childhood

I was born in 1951 in Hyderabad. When I was three months old my parents came to Bombay and we lived in a commune of communist party members until I was nine years old. The commune was in a large hall called Red Flag Hall where they had meetings, and where six families lived in seven rooms. Each had a small balcony for its own kitchen. It was a community upbringing where the children were looked after by everybody. For instance, we children were taken to the movies collectively by some parent or other. It was never my parents because they were too busy. I did not resent this because for the things that were most important to me, for example, that my mother should be home when I was studying for exams, she was always there.

Festivals - Diwali, Holi, Id, Christmas - were very big events and were celebrated by everyone together. The whole world and his brother would turn up and it was great fun.

When my parents got married, my father's salary used to go to the communist party of which he was a member, and they used to be left with Rs 40 a month. It was difficult to manage. My mother had come from a fairly protected family where she had done no work beyond dyeing and embroidering her *dupatta*. One day, P.C. Joshi said to her: "Look, a comrade's wife does not just sit home and cook. She helps her husband in everything and if you think you can't manage with Rs 40 you should go out and work." It was the first time such an idea had been put in her head. She didn't know that she had a talent for acting but she had a good voice so she joined All India Radio as an announcer and after that, Prithvi Theatre, where she earned Rs 150 a month.

To begin with, I was sent to an Urdu medium school. I have no memory of it but my mother says I used to stamp and cry and get a zero in everything. The school was in a Muslim area. The teacher said I was not interested in school and did not cooperate. Then my father decided to put me in an English medium school. My mother said they could not afford it but he said: "I will see to it that I can afford it." So I was put in Queen Mary's School. But this school did not admit children whose parents could not speak English and neither of my parents spoke English. So two of my parents' friends posed as my parents.

I was very happy at this school, I was a good student and had a lot of friends. But my first memories are of being a bit embarrassed by my father. He used to wear a *kurta pajama* whereas the other girls' fathers wore trousers and shirt. I used to call him *Abba* but pretend in school that I called him Daddy. Also, everyone's father went to an office from nine to five, but my father was either at home all day or would disappear for days together. Yet, I was sensitive to his feelings and didn't express my embarrassment at home.

But fairly soon my father began to be a well known poet. In 1959, by the time, he wrote the lyrics for *Kagaz ke Phool* , he was a well known lyric writer. Some poem of his came in for great praise and it was discovered in school that my father was Kaifi Azmi. Overnight, I became a heroine. And then I made a virtue of everything that was unusual about my father - his name comes in the papers, he wears *kurta pajama*, I call him *Abba*, everything. Very smart really to know, at that age, which side your bread is buttered!

I didn't understand his poetry at that time but our house was always

teeming with people like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Josh Mahilabadi, Firaq Gorakhpuri. Now I can see that at a subconscious level I began to realise that success is not just wealth. Other values are important too. I was never sent to bed if I wanted to sit up with the adults. I used to be fascinated by the smoke-filled room, the tinkling glasses, the music of Urdu - it was magical and wonderful to me.

It was like living in two worlds because in school we had to talk only in English. Some of the girls in the school came from very rich families, others from families of modest means. Also, I had friends in my neighbourhood who went to Hindi and Urdu medium schools. Like I had this neighbour Shamim who was the joy of my life and she had to wash dishes and sweep the house before she could go out to play. Although I never did any work in my own house, I used to go to her house and help her clean vessels and sweep so that we could go and play.

At school, I didn't feel poor, but there were disparities. My closest friend, for example, had her own netball and hockey stick which I couldn't afford. At recess, I had to run to the gym to try and get one of the school netballs. But my parents ensured that I got the things I really wanted. For instance, I wanted to travel, and I went on every school trip. Because my parents looked after my real needs, I didn't trouble them about smaller things.

Also, a big compensation was the status I and my brother got at home. It was in psychological terms a truly democratic family. We two small children were included in every major decision - not just in a token way but genuinely. For instance, when I was nine, we shifted to Juhu and going to school now involved taking a bus, a train and a 10 minute walk. The question was whether I should be shifted to another school. But I took the decision that I would stay in the same school even though it meant an extra hour travelling each day. This did bring about a certain amount of independence in me.

Or, another example. Once, my mother was rehearsing for the role of a madwoman in a play. She belongs to the school which believes in living each role to the hilt. So she used to burst into mad dialogue suddenly, while talking to the washerman or the cook. The cook one day left, screaming: "She's gone mad". I was about 10 years old and I got very upset. I told my father: "Stop her from doing this play." My father took me for a long walk and explained to me that what my mother was doing was important and we needed to give her total support. In fact, I should help her rehearse and I should explain to the cook that there was nothing to be afraid of. This made me feel important and my whole attitude changed.

On her father, Kaifi Azmi

My father belongs to a landowning family in Azamgarh. That family had a tradition of appreciation of poetry. They are Shias and they have a practice of reciting Mir Anees' poetry during Muharram. Every Friday my grandfather used to give each child a verse and they had to compose a poem to go with it. When my father was 11 years old, his older brother was having some trouble finding a rhyme, and my father said: "Shall I try?" He was considered just a kid so my grandfather laughed and said: "All right." And what my father recited was wonderful. There was dead silence. When everybody had gone my grandfather said: "This is very wrong. You should never take credit for something that is not yours." My father went crying to his mother. In their family, women were in strict seclusion. Even their voices were not to be heard in the courtyard. His mother said: "Why cry? Go to your father and ask for another rhyme and compose another poem." So my father did that, and immediately wrote his first *ghazal*:

Itnaa to zindagi mein kisi ki khalal padey
Hansney se ho sukun, naa roney se kal padey
Jis tarah se hans rahaa hoon main pikey ashq-e-gam
Yon dusraa hansey to kalejaa nikal padey
Muddat ke baad usne jo ki lutf ki nigaah
Ji khush to ho gayaa magar aansu nikal padey

So they discovered that there was a genius in their midst.

But he was a person, my grandmother told my mother, who, at the age of nine, wouldn't wear new clothes for Id because the other children on the estate didn't have new clothes. Another story is that when he was small he saw a big *babul* tree with white fluffy pods on its gnarled branches. He asked an old potter: "Uncle, how come this old tree has such delicate cotton on it?" The answer was: "Son, ever since Gandhiji has started spinning cotton, these fluffy balls fly everywhere in India to carry Gandhiji's message." This made a deep impression on him.

At the age of 18, he left home and went to Lucknow to study. There, he began to send his poetry anonymously to the communist party paper. When they finally found out who he was, they invited him to Bombay. He became a cardholding member of the party and started working for them.

He was also a member of the Progressive Writers' Association. It was through a *mushaira* of theirs at Hyderabad that he met my mother. Her cousin had hosted the *mushaira*. Poets were as well liked as film stars are today. They had fan clubs and people used to admire them and girls used to run after them. My father was a very popular, very good looking young poet, and at this *mushaira* he saw this girl from the stage whom he very much liked. Afterwards, the girl came for an autograph but she asked Sardar Jaffery for his autograph before asking my father. The kind of verse the poet wrote in a girl's autograph book was supposed to indicate his appreciation of her. So my father wrote a piece of bad, jingling verse in her book. She was very insulted and said: "Why have you written such a bad poem in my diary?" He looked at her and said: "Why did you take Sardar Jaffery's autograph first?" That was how the love affair started.

There was greater resistance to it from my mother's family because she was

already engaged to her first cousin. Her family was rich, her father was an excise officer. They were religious but progressive in a strange kind of way. The girls were never in *parda*, they were educated. My father was unemployed and penniless but my mother declared that she would marry no one else. The courtship lasted three years, across the cities, with letters being written in blood, her brothers threatening to kill my father, and her cousin threatening to commit suicide because he was in love with my mother, and all this drama! Her family were Sunnis, Pathans. However, their main objection was not that my father was from a Shia family. It was that she was already engaged.

Anyway, finally my grandfather realised that my mother was very miserable so he said: "I'm going to take you to Bombay to see for yourself how these people live and you decide whether you can live that way." He told a lie at home that he was taking her on one of his tours. And he took her to Bombay, showed her the commune where my father was living without even a room to himself, and said: "Are you willing to marry him?" She said: "Yes" and, overnight, he got her married. All of the poets, my father's friends, were present. So my grandfather got her married on the spot and left her there. Absolutely amazing. Anyway, the family got reconciled and everything was hunky dory. We used to go to Hyderabad for vacations. Most of her family are still in Hyderabad, but my father's family migrated to Pakistan - he was the only one who opted to stay in India.

On her entry into new wave cinema

In 1973 when I had just passed out of the film institute Zarina Wahab was staying with me, and Shyam Benegal's assistant came to meet her. He saw me and suggested to Benegal that he try me for the main role in *Ankur.* Benegal had been thinking of much older people like Waheeda Rahman but all of them were refusing. The main reason was that the woman sleeps with a man other than her husband.

When the role was offered to me, everyone advised me not to accept. They said: "You'll be branded a vamp for the rest of your life if you play an adulteress in your first film." Then I asked my parents. I said that I felt like doing it. They said: "If you want to do it, do it." So I went ahead and that is how I got involved in good cinema. It was not a conscious decision at all. It was an accident. *Fakira* could easily have been my first film and if it had, my career would have taken a long time to come to where it came.

With her father, Kaifl Azmi.

On the image of women in films

My awareness developed only with *Arth.* Before that, I was still acting in films like *Thori si Bewafai* where the husband tells the wife: "Sorrow in the husband's house is better than happiness in the parents' house." I thought that if I got a heroine oriented film which revolved around me, this was a big achievement in the male dominated film industry. I wasn't paying attention to the values being propagated by the films. It was enough that I was the central character, which was so unusual in those days.

Then I attended a seminar on women and cinema. I had always been confident of my ability to articulate, but when people started questioning me as to how I could work in films which propagated such values as *Thori si Bewafai* did, I was shocked. I had not given it any kind of serious thought, and I felt so inadequate. And then, I began to place myself in situations where I felt inadequate. So far, I had been very busy and my social life reinforced the same values as the films in which I was working. When I began to meet people from another world, and was exposed to many issues, and began to feel inadequate, I naturally began to progress, to learn. Then came *Arth.* In this film, a man is involved with another woman, and his wife, played by me, learns to build a life of her own. At this time, I had just broken up a relationship with a man and I was not jumping into another relationship. I wanted to be with myself and not to be hopelessly involved with a man. I latched on *Arth* very strongly. Mahesh Bhatt, the director, and I were very good friends. The film ends when the woman's husband wants to come back to her, and she asks if she had done the same thing would he have taken her back. He says no, and then she says no too. That was my idea. I told Mahesh we should do it that way and he

struck by me. When the film was seen every single distributor said the film would not run two days, the end must be changed. But we stuck to our guns and said the film must be screened as it was. Then the film won three national awards, and when it was released it became very successful. Everybody was surprised.

When I went to see *Arth* in a theatre, I found women reacting to me not as to a film star but just coming up, holding my hand, behaving as one woman to another. It was a mind boggling experience. Also, women started coming to my house and telling me their problems with their husbands - I was swept away by what happened. Then I realised that films have a lot of power which should be used in the right direction. There was also of course a lot of angry response. At one press conference, some people strongly said that we were leading women in the wrong direction, encouraging them to walk out of marriage.

Realising the power of the medium, I was feeling very strongly the need of a realistic interpretation, the need to break away from stereotypes. I was feeling very very tired of stereotypes. For example, when I played *Doosri Dulhan*, I met streetwalkers from Juhu and they talked to me. I felt we had a responsibility to them to project them in the correct light. I was unable to keep my work and me as two separate things. It was difficult for me not to concern myself with the message being projected.

But when a film glorifies women as mother, as goddess, and you say it is doing harm, it is antiwomen, nobody understands what you are saying.

On "Paar"

Paar was a mindboggling experience for me. I was staying at a very fancy bungalow in Calcutta. When we went into the city for the shooting, I was deeply upset and shocked by the conditions in which people were living. When I went back to my room it seemed a kind of fraud I was doing. Here I was playing Rama's role in the day (a migrant Harijan woman's) and then coming back and living in luxury and grumbling because the airconditioner was not working. I became more and more uncomfortable.

With Naseeruddin in *Paar*.

In one very noisy scene, we were shooting on the streets. Just a little ahead of where we were shooting, with so much noise, the generator on and everything, a woman was sleeping on the pavement and she did not once open her eyes in that din. I felt she must have worked so hard all day that she could not wake up. It affected me very deeply. I felt that feminist issues seem almost elitist when you see how people are living, ruled by socioeconomic conditions. So the experience of *Paar* was also a turning point. It was a film to which both Naseer and I surrendered completely. We were swept away and so the issues came into focus much more strongly than any one character.

On commercial cinema

I think if change has to be brought, and is to be in significant, it has to be in commercial cinema. The small cinema is seen only by the elite which in any case has a different sensibility. I think Smita's and my contribution has been to make not only women's issues but also woman oriented films respectable. This is because we played our cards well and were respected in commercial cinema as well as in new wave cinema. If we had worked only in parallel cinema we would have remained part of a small minority which would not have been taken seriously. It is because we could hold our own in the commercial mainstream cinema that other women too began to get respect. It was realised that the most important thing is not necessarily to be number one, to dance and to look glamorous.

Earlier, women looked on their film career as a way to make a lot of money before marriage and then give up the work later. They were happy to be appendages to the male playing the central role. Now women started demanding central roles. Dimple, Sridevi, Rekha would be interested in the new kind of woman oriented film. Unfortunately, two heroine oriented films, *Razia Sultana* and *Meera*, bombed at the box office which was very bad. These were high budget films and their misfiring made producers feel that you cannot put your money on a woman oriented film. A woman oriented film has to be a small budget film. Directors also began to feel that if they make a woman oriented film, Dimple or Sridevi will be so pleased that they will reduce their price. They know that no top hero will work in a heroine oriented film.

In the film industry success is

everything. If a film is good but flops it counts for nothing. I am viewed with respect but not with envy. When you envy someone you want to be like them. But now other women feel: "Well, Smita and Shabana will be remembered when the history of Indian cinema is written. But that will be after 100 years, after we are dead. Well, let's do our own thing but give them some respect!"

On her relationship with Smita

My relationship with Smita is just so strange. We were never friends. We were rivals because we were vying for the same roles, we had the same concerns, and the rivalry was aided by the gossip magazines. Yet our backgrounds were very similar. Smita also comes from a political family. Her parents were also very supportive, very rational. When she died it shook me very badly because her life and mine had been so similar. She had also gotten involved with a married man, so many things were similar that I felt I had seen my own life unfolding. Three days after her death her father called me. When we met, he hugged me so fondly and they were so good to me. They were trying to find Smita in me. I felt deeply touched - it was wonderful that the core of the relationship survived the ugliness of the rivalry. And another terrible thing: at airports, people would come to me and say: "Aren't you Smita Patil?" I felt we had joined forever. It could be Smita Azmi and Shabana Patil even in people's eyes.

On her political concerns

My eyes were closed for a very long time. For instance, I just wouldn't read the newspapers. I did not want any truck with politics.

Yet, at the same time, as a young girl, when my father took me along to meetings and *mushairas*, there was a poem of his, for instance, *Makan*, which he used to read in workers' colonies, which I used to like very much. The poem is about construction labourers who construct a beautiful mansion with their blood and sweat, and when it is ready, a guard tells them to get out as they are not allowed to be on the premises. The unfairness of it all.

In the film *Mandi,* in which Smita (right) played Shabana's daughter.

Now, in Bombay, you notice demolitions of slums all the time. I used to feel it was wrong, but everyone would say, Bombay is bursting at the seams, and I used to think the government had no alternative but to demolish illegal structures. It was only on seeing Anand Patwardhan's film *Bombay, Our City* that I realised that demolition is no answer to the problem..It was something I had not been able to figure out on my own but when I understood, my emotional response grew very strong. In the beginning, when I started work with slumdwellers there was a great awe, but people quickly accepted me. There is now no question of police protection when I go into slums. It has also got to do with my films, the kinds of roles I have played - I am not looked upon as just a star.

The decision to join the fast for the pavement dwellers was taken in consultation with my father and my husband, both of whom encouraged me to go ahead if I really believed in it, but also warned me that I wouldn't get any pats on the back for it, but only criticism, that everyone would say I was doing it for my personal gain. My mother was not well at the time and she was in terror for me but she didn't want to stop me. My father was in Patna. On the fourth day of the fast the government people told my mother that the demands we made were impossible and I would have to be sacrificed. My mother was weeping and sent a telegram to my father. My father sent a message: "Best of luck, Comrade" or something like that.

It was my brother who felt that I should not do anything to distress my mother who was already very ill. He is extremely protective about our parents. My brother's resentment or disapproval does bother me. I cannot dismiss it. My family is very important to me; I am very close to them. If Javed, my husband, had resented my involvement as much, it would have been very hard for me.

On the film industry's reaction

To begin with, the industry thought: "She's Kaifi Azmi's daughter, she's bound to do something crazy." Then they started looking at it as part of the phenomenon of film stars joining politics, like Sunil Dutt, Vyjyanthimala, Amitabh Bachan. But then they got confused, seeing that I was standing for something else, not the usual kind of politics.

And they were unanimous in their disapproval of my stand on Safdar Hashmi. They didn't even stay for my film *Madame Souzatska* which was the festival's inaugural film - they were so embarrassed. And for the next two days, whenever I walked into the lobby of the hotel where we were staying, they would avoid making eye contact with me. I found it very depressing. I think it was a reaction of embarrassment and things will become normal. It's not that I will be ostracised on that account*.

My political involvement has not affected my work because I have not

started cancelling shootings or turning up late just because I have to go to a slum where I work. I would rather work it out the other way, except sometimes, in extreme instances. I have been disciplined so it doesn't hinder my career in any way.

On her career

Not much work is coming my way. It's a natural process of getting older. However, this doesn't mean I am sitting at home because my other involvements have increased and they take a lot of my time.

I am still playing leading parts but I can see a stage not far away when this is not going to be the case. I have to take a career decision. I am not going to take mother roles -I have played the hero's mother, that doesn't bother me, but I definitely don't want to get into the Nirupa Roy slot of just playing mothers. There is no urgent need for money and this is not something I enjoy doing so I don't have to do it.

I can't honestly say this doesn't bother me at all. But it did not come as a surprise because as long as you are a glamour doll you have a significant part in commercial cinema but very very soon, the dividing line is very thin, you are relegated to mother roles. That point comes very fast in Hindi films.

On being a Muslim

I don't feel any discrimination in the industry on this account. There is very little communal feeling in the industry. In fact it's strange that at a time when all the top stars were Muslim they tended to change their names because it was considered more acceptable to the masses. So you had Yusuf Khan calling himself Dilip Kumar. It was a repercussion of partition. But it is no longer the case now. No one changes their name. You may have the strangest name in the world but it doesn't matter - Benjamin Gilani, Shatrughan Sinha.

From left: husband Javed Akhtar, Anand Patwardhan, Gurubai Bhaskar, Shabana and Uday Raj, the latter four on hunger strike for pavement dwellers' right to shelter, May 1986.

As a child too, I never experienced discrimination. It may have been because we were living in a cosmopolitan city, in a non Muslim area and in a communist circle. None of my friends had any overriding sense of religion. I do remember one comrade Joshi's mother did not allow me to enter her kitchen. I used to have a lot of fun at her expense, running in and touching the vessels. He, being a communist, of course did not believe in such things.

I never went to a mosque or a *dargah.* Of course we celebrated Id just as we celebrated Diwali and Christmas. Id meant you wore new clothes and *Abba* would have a bundle of crisp notes for the children who came, and *korma, biryani, dahi bada,* would be made by mother. Festivals were more fun than religious occasions.

Yet, there are some cultural traditions that I observe. Whenever I travel, for instance, even for half a day, I tie an *imame jamin,* which is tying some money up, reading the *kalma* over it, and when you arrive safely, the money is given to the poor. Mummy always used to do that for me, and I do it to this day.

There is also something about the ethos of a Muslim home which makes me feel at home. For one thing, good food is always a big concern in a Muslim home - *korma, keema,* and so on. Then, in Hyderabad, in my mother's home, beds would be spread in the courtyard with white sheets known as *chandni* and flowers like *mogra, chameli,* would be scattered on the beds. That was part of what I thought of as Muslim. My parents never kept the *rozas* but I did, strangely. Maybe it was Shamim's influence. Her whole family were our immediate neighbours and they would get up early in the morning. It was group participation for me more than anything else.

In my personal identity, I have never felt that I am a Muslim. But, culturally, I'll tell you what happened. Around 1980 I visited Dubai and I went to many Sindhi homes there. Then I went to Ali Anwar Jung's son's home and when I went in it was beautiful - the vases and *pandan* and *hukka* and *takht* - the things I had seen as a child in my mother's parents' house in Hyderabad. I suddenly felt so happy with the language being spoken, the food being eaten. In that alien set-up I

** In January 1989, Shabana Azmi publicly protested from the platform, at the international film festival, New Delhi, against the political murder of Safdar Hashmi, CPI(M) theatre activist in Sahibabad on Januaiy 1.*

suddenly felt at home. And I realised that culturally at least I think of myself as a Muslim.

On Urdu

Urdu is a language that comes naturally to me. But as a child I didn't get an opportunity to study it, because I had English, Hindi, Marathi and French and no time to seriously study Urdu. I could have taken Persian instead of French but I don't know why no one insisted that I take Persian. But now I would like to read my father's poetry in the original and also there are hundreds of books in the house - it seems a pity that I will not be able to read or understand them. I now want to learn Urdu. It is a beautiful language and one feels very sad that it is being made a religious thing when it is not a religious thing at all.

Urdu was the language spoken in Hindi cinema. In those days the lyric writers were poets. But, today, if you write poetry you are disqualified. Javed used to write beautiful songs but he became the most sought after lyricist only after writing songs like *Hawa Hawai* and *Ek do teen char.* The kind of ghazal that is popular today is not a *ghazal* - it is not poetry. It is just something that gives people a chance to say *Wah Wah* after every line.

On communalism

When riots take place and each time the worst victims are the minorities, I feel a deep sense of outrage not only as a Muslim but as an Indian. The articulation of communalism is not strong enough. After a riot takes place it gets looked upon as a law and order problem, whereas the fact is that communalism is really a form of fascism and should be condemned in the strongest possible terms.

Instead, we have all come to accept that nobody will get punished for perpetrating a carnage. Is there a soul in the country who doesn't know that the PAC was involved in killings in Meerut in 1987, and yet what action has been taken? Commandant R.P. Tripathi who was suspended after the riots, has been reinstated. In Delhi during the 1987 riots, of the 249 people arrested, 209 were Muslims, even though most of the victims of violence were also Muslims. Is it not a strange coincidence?

Is it not also more than a coincidence that communal riots tend to occur in places where Muslims are economically more stable? There is a definite and systematic attempt to stop them from progressing. What recently happened in Badaun was not a spontaneous outburst. It happened in collusion with the state administration and was aimed at frightening the Muslims into believing that the Congress (I) is the only saviour. What has Urdu got to do with Islam? Why should Urdu being given second language status create a problem? The problem was created deliberately and coldbloodedly by people who can get away scot free after brutalising others.

Thus the Muslims are led into believing that there are two kinds of laws in the country - one for ordinary murder, the other to give an amnesty for mass murder. A fear psychosis is created and the only way they can deal with it is to stick to their own kind, thus creating a greater communal divide. I recall some lines from *Abba's* poem *Firkaparasti :*

... Aj ki zindagi ka nam hai khauf
Khauf hi voh zamin hai jismein
Firke ugtey hain, firke paltey hain
Dharey sagar se katkar chaltey hain.

So-called secular Muslims like us don't say a word of protest when Muslims are slaughtered because we are too afraid of being labelled communal. We are silenced by our need to be called secular. Who comes to the help of the poor Muslim who is killed or economically destroyed? The likes of Syed Shahabuddin and the Shahi Imam. So the poor Muslim looks upon them as saviours. Because no one else ever comes to see him. In the 1987 riots during Ramzan in Delhi, it was the Imam who sent food to the arrested Muslims for *sehri* and *iftar.* So when someone like Syed Shahabuddin raises the question of Muslim Women's Bill or calls for a book to be banned, the poor Muslim will support him.

The intellectual Muslims - and I am not excluding myself - have not raised their voices strongly enough. So why

At a demonstration on November 9, 1989, at Churchgate station. Later, a street play *Sabse Sasta Gosht* was performed.

should their opinions be listened to? The feeling is: you didn't come to the rescue when we were in real trouble, now you can keep your fancy ideas to yourself.

On her husband, Javed

I always used to say that I would marry someone who had the depth of my father and the lightheartedness of my brother. Javed is the one person I know who has the same values as my father vis-a-vis women. It's amazing - we come from the same kind of background - he is from Lucknow, the families have the same small town sense of propriety. We could have had an arranged marriage! His father too belonged to the Progressive Writers' Association. As a girl I believed that I would just be a wife, and go my mother's way. I didn't start off serious on a career. But coming from a family where work was respected, the individual was respected, I don't think I would have got involved with anybody who believed that a woman should sit at home.

It was Javed who said to me that successful women are made to feel guilty about their success. I said: "What nonsense." But he said that women who are successful and have choices as men do, feel afraid in their hearts lest their feminity be destroyed, because they have been taught that success is the domain of men. So they unconsciously try to compensate by working twice as hard at being a woman and doing all the domestic duties, coming home and saying: "Papa, I'm still your daughter; Brother, I'm still your sister; Husband, I'm still your wife; Son, I'm still your mother." He said: "There is no need for this drama. You don't have to be guilty about being successful." He told me that if at a party people were seeking me out, I didn't have to make an effort to include him all the time, he could look after himself.

I think he had this confidence because he was extremely successful and well known in his own right, he was comfortably esconced in the film industry. I don't know what would have happened if he was less known than I was. In an earlier relationship, the man had struggled hard for years but failed, and he confessed to me afterwards that this was a major reason for our relationship not having worked out - my being so much more successful than he was.

With the widow of a victim of terrorist violence, in Jalandhar, at a function organised by Hind Samachar group.

If you think I get any kind of help in the kitchen - to turn on the microwave and heat up food even - no, not at all. He's exactly like my father in that. Doesn't even know which clothes of his are to be washed. But he makes absolutely no demands - if his guests come, he doesn't expect that as his wife I must be around to cook, or to entertain them.

Immediately after I got married, I went off on long outdoor shootings. It did become a bit tiresome for him to have a wife who was constantly away, yet, every time I asked him if it bothered him, he would say: "I would be lying if I said it didn't bother me, but this is your work and this is why I admire you, and you must do what you want to and enjoy yourself. I can't expect you to be around for my physical comfort." And he has a lot of respect for my kind of cinema which is very unusual for people in commercial cinema who normally scoff and say: "Your two bit cinema seen by two people - what use is it?"

On women friends

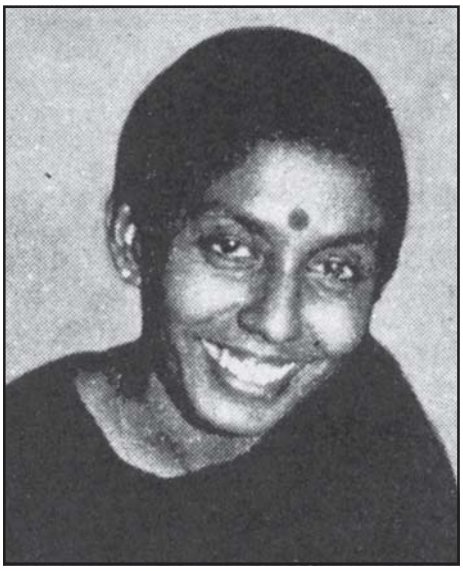
I have always liked women. I find them very interesting. I have never looked down upon women. I can discuss jewellery, recipes, everything that comes to mind. Frankly, I find women more interesting than men.

I have some very good women friends whom I have known for years - one for eight years, one for 15 years, one for 21 years, right through school and college. This is one of the nicest, most fortunate things in my life.

I believe that there is a need for a very striving voice when you are talking about change. But equally important is to adjust yourself to people who are in a state of confusion. To solve confusions by talking - your own confusions too in the process. Not the attitude that I have reached somewhere and know everything, not talking down, but joining and sharing, growing together. ❐

In Memoriam

Rajani Rajasingham Thiranagama, 1954-1989



Garland for Rajani

You refused to eat the exile's bread, bounteous and bitter; returned to live with the hot breath of death pursuing you, yet held your head high. They shot you like a dog in the street, but that death will be remembered as their shame, your pride. For you no tinsel wreath, but flowers as for a bride.

- Reggie Siriwardena

Dr Rajani Thiranagama was returning home on September 21,1989, at 6 p.m. from the University of Jaffna where she taught anatomy, when she was brutally gunned down by unidentified assassins. She was 35 years old and the mother of two daughters aged 11 and nine,

She had returned to Jaffna only two weeks previously from England, after a two month sojourn. She had completed her postgraduate studies in England in 1986 and returned to Sri Lanka at a time when Tamil intellectuals and professionals were fleeing the country. In 1987, after the October war, she was active in rallying people to restore normalcy. One main example of this was negotiating with the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to get the university reopened.

Ever since, she continued to be active, speaking and writing, trying to build a people's politics as a counterpoint to the meaningless violence that permeates Jaffna. Rajani bravely stood against the politics of the gun which is being perpetrated both by the IPKF and by the LITE. She argued, cajoled and fought with the IPKF for the release of students. She led a protest against the killings of university students. After her return in September 1989, she had tried to organise a protest against the conscription of youth carried out by certain militant groups under the auspices of the IPKF.

Her fervour in challenging the IPKF in no way dragged her into the fanatical nationalism practised by certain militant groups. She viewed this with abhorrence thus alienating both sides. Thus, her assassination could have been planned by either side. All forces, both official and unofficial, have used assassination as a political tool though none wants to be identified internationally as committing inhuman acts. She knew her life was in danger yet she chose to return to Sri Lanka against the advice of friends and relatives. She was a dedicated teacher and worked hard to fill in gaps at a time when there is a severe shortage of qualified lecturers in anatomy. Rajani was also involved with women's issues and was helping establish a home for women in need in Jaffna. She wrote: "It was mainly women who, in the midst of war, pleaded and argued with the militants for their families and the whole nation. Again it is women who have braved the guns and sat in a fast to save others in Batticaloa. Thus when one appraises the political bleakness that confronts this community and this land, the women's history does have a triumph."

Rajani's death shocked her many friends in the subcontinent and in England, and also all those associated with the struggle for peace and freedom.