



WOMEN ON THE MOVE

Exclusive Interview with Maneka Gandhi

An Uncompromising Environmental Crusader

CALLING her and fixing up an appointment was not the end of all the tension. She set up the interview at her house in Maharani Bagh, New Delhi. No one could just afford to walk into the red, ceramic brick, one-storied house, guarded by long trees, giving it a villa-like look. The house which is surrounded by different fruit trees, is hardly visible from the gate. Passing the checking points of the heavily armed security guards, accompanied by huge German shepherd dogs, the main door to the house opened. Maneka Gandhi, stood at the door with a welcoming smile. She was in an informal, light-blue, cut-the-cuff, Lucknow salwar kameez. This gave her a confident look, disarmingly intimate and observant.

I choose to live my life in a particular way, acts as a political beacon. If I am a vegetarian, I am open about it and take pride in it, that is a political act. If I take an interest about nature, and I try and talk about trees, that itself will change many people's perception in

By Rahat Fahmida

International environmental conferences. Within India, she undertakes well publicised swoops on polluted industrial sites, dishing out humiliating reprimands to factory owners. She is known as a champion

hero in the end. It should convey a definite message. Part of this country is reaching out and saying — 'this is not what we want.' What we want is someone who has already done something for others, becomes

per square kilometre. 'How can they say we are overpopulated? We are producing our own food. Are they producing their food? They are producing computer, can they eat that? So, in India, which has 90 million people, supposedly we had 30 million, would they be rich overnight? I guess they would be poorer, because there would be dearth of labour.

'This makes us borrow money to expand our power system or put up a new power plant. We do all this at the cost of some necessary new hospitals, or we cut on the sewerage system. So the process is, the house makes you sick, insufficient hospitals puts you in a bad situation, bad sewerage system makes you sicker, the wastage from the power plant makes you sicker. So the problem is why did you build this house following Western architecture? We don't know where to start, unless we change our policies. Seventyfive per cent of our health budget goes into combating malaria.

'Our whole system is wrong. The end result, is the waste land, and desertification. This is a result of political wrong decisions. A political decision is a result of political attitudes which is ignorant and corrupt. And there it is misleading and later mismanaged. 'I will give another example. We went out and bought one of the most expensive sewage plant there. It is sitting there, but is too sophisticated to operate even in Britain? It is a plant to turn garbage into fuel. But the little boys pick up plastics, throw away toothbrush, broken glasses, so what is ultimately left is mud and clay. What fuel can we get from that? This machine must have cost something around four to five million. So, the man who was responsible for this could have done something more constructive.'

'For example, take a house in the West. It has thick walls and low ceiling, and big windows. The idea is to let in heat. And we who are dying of heat, also make thick walls, low-ceiling, big windows, so in a way we also keep in heat. In the long run, our houses are hotter inside than it is outside and we are very happy. Then what we do is put up airconditioners, fans, which lead to insufficient power supply.

In suggesting definite guidelines as such, she mentioned the non-government organisations (NGOs) should take a more assertive stand. And this would go even for the time of election. 'We should elect those people who would

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India and would start a new movement, for me that is politics. If I speak out against injustice or corruption, for me that is a political movement. If I write — I do write a regular column 'heads and tails', for a number of papers at the moment — I express my views. It is a column I used to write before. In this I talk about environment, things that I think are going wrong, about wild life, consumer problems, job shrinkage, insecticide problem, for me that is politics.

'I don't believe that politics is just going to and 'gheraoing' the Parliament. That may be necessary in certain cases. But it doesn't mean that you are out of politics when you are not doing it. I believe that politics is what you are. When you can't walk with anybody else, if you walk by yourself that is good enough.'

Articulate and photogenic, she has been an effective advocate of Third World concern at

for her work regarding protection of environment. A vast number of people now feel she has withdrawn from the centre stage. What is the reason for this? Maneka Gandhi said, 'There is no centre stage for environment. Anybody who does anything special — or anything is particular — has a stage of her/his own. Why do we need stage for environment? 'The fact that I have filled my garden with fruit trees — so that birds come around. I have various types of plant and many different fruit trees — is my stage.'

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While discussing the major environmental problems now troubling in this sub-continent, this Indian activist explained, 'I think what is really wrong with our countries is that, we have a political leadership which is untrained, illiterate and completely different from what the country wants. The whole sets of politicians in our countries believe in the words of the West.'

'So, if the West says — 'You should have big power houses' — we have big power houses. If the West points at us saying — 'You have too big a population', we fanatically nod our heads agreeing we are overpopulated. In fact if they did study the problem, it would be evident that we are 170 people per square kilometre. Whereas in Europe there are 450 people



Maneka Gandhi — gentle, but adamant! — Star Photo

represent the people and not a particular caste or group, or religion. I feel this masjid/temple problem, Gulf War issue, Babri mosque problem — all these problems should not become a big issue.

What is also essential is a responsible — more responsible and dutiful Member of Parliament (MP). And you can get this easily. We should choose those who would have the time for the people, who would understand their need and their problem. I tell you, most people in the villages are quite organised. They do have good innovative ideas. We ought to give them the chance to speak and discuss things and exchange views.

Frankly, we should not really have TV or film stars as our MPs. They don't understand where the problem is and what the solution is. You

cannot afford to be just vague and superficial regarding our masses and their grassroots problems. An MP also has to be accessible. This surely goes for our countries as well.'

Maneka Gandhi was glowing with radiance all through the conversation. She knows too well how to express herself. Born in 1956, in the Indian state of Punjab, she was a former fashion model till her marriage. Ever since, she had been associated with a magazine — 'Surya', which she stopped publishing after the death of Sanjay Gandhi. But she is a freelance writer, mainly dealing with environmental issues. People continue to barrage her with personal questions. Despite her demanding commitments, Maneka Gandhi manages to keep up her glamour, gentility and grace.

Diary of a Working Mother

By Shaheen Anam

NOW that schools have reopened and life is back to normal, how are we all feeling? In spite of the children getting on our nerves once in a while during the vacation I am sure we will all agree that it was nice having them at home. I am sure many working mothers took a few days off work to be with them. But looking back at the holidays, what did we actually do with them? In trying to organize activities one realizes with a shock that there is practically nothing available. There is of course the Shishu Park which created quite a stir when it opened in 1980. Lack of maintenance has reached an extent that many of the rides have become dangerous according to a report in a local newspaper.

Other than that what do we have? The zoo is rather nice, and children love going there.

But transportation is a problem and people without cars and those who live on the other side of the city find it very difficult to get there. There are very few parks in the city and most are not fit for a visit with the children. The Bhawal National Park is an interesting place to go for a picnic with the children but logistic problems such as booking the rest house, arranging transportation inhibits people from going there more than once in several years. The other problem is, wherever one goes there are so many people. People who have nothing better to do than just sit and stare at others, especially at women. It is really a shame that women still have to tolerate these covert and not so covert harassment whenever they go

out. It is not at all easy for the mother to take her children on an outing if for some reason the father is not available. Where ever she goes, be it a restaurant, the park or the shopping centre, she is subjected to stress and irrelevant questions. One can imagine the fate of the single mother who has to live with this kind of harassment all the time. With all the work going on in gender awareness it seems people still cannot accept women as having separate identity. She must always be an appendage to another man.

So much for the negative sides of the holidays. The children had a lovely time with the relatives and friends living here and with those who came from abroad. My four year old daughter went wild over her two and half year old visiting cousin and practically gave away all her toys to him. The children who came with their parents just refused to go back after all the pampering and affection they got here. A friend who was visiting said her children wanted to know why they couldn't get a job here and live in Bangladesh. Their parents complained that these children will be uncontrollable once they are back and will really need to be disciplined. But speaking from experience, children, once they get the taste of living with the extended family do miss it when they go abroad. They miss all the loving relationships of uncles, aunts, grandparents, neighbours etc. Parents try very hard to make up for this vacuum but it is not easy at all. In spite of the problems of living with the extended family, one has to appreciate its merits also.

I had started the column by asking how does it feel now that school has reopened? The parties are almost over and friends and relatives from abroad have all gone back and life is returning to normal. For me, and I am sure for many others, another year has begun which promises to be at times rewarding and sometimes frustrating. Life for a working mother is very challenging as she has to balance so many demands made on her and still keep smiling. It would have been wonderful if all working mothers got the support and the appreciation they deserve. But many don't and yet go on in spite of the obstacles. They continue to strive and to excel in their profession and at home.

Towards Equality of the Sexes

At Home

Leisure activities and roles in the family are shared without discrimination



Father and mother looking after their children together

Every member of the household has a clearly defined role according to sex



Father reading, mother knitting

At Work



Women working in a whole range of different occupations formerly reserved for men.



Women work only in 'women's jobs.'

The Labour Market

THE labour market segregates men and women in occupations as well as on the shop floor, to such an extent that some occupational branches, professions and trades are assigned exclusively to women, and others to men. Furthermore, the same jobs performed by men and women do not earn them equal pay; women who show manual dexterity on electronic equipment assembly lines, or on sewing machines, are not rewarded by salary increases or promotion, as are men who perform jobs requiring physical strength or work with machine tools. Higher professional qualifications in blue-collar jobs (skilled or highly skilled categories) are reserved for men, while women tend to be classified as unskilled or semi-skilled workers, and remain so all their lives. In all occupations, manual or intellectual, positions of authority and responsibility are given to men, as it is assumed that women are not interested in such positions or are incapable of taking on such responsibilities.

Thus the world of work, too, is sexist. The child has only to look around to be convinced of the 'inferiority' of women.

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Shanti's Story

By Quazi M Fazal

Shanti (a fictitious name) is a rarity in Bangladesh. She is a Hindi-speaking Hindu whose family has been in the country for several generations. Over the years her community in Azimpur has been able to preserve its language, religion and most of its culture and traditions despite the division of the subcontinent along religious lines and the presence of religious strife.

Shanti could not explain her unusual background. I have lived here all my life and this is how I grew up, she declared. A little investigation revealed that her ancestors came to Bangladesh a few generations ago from the area known as Orissa in India. They apparently belonged to the harijan (untouchable) caste in Orissa and decided to move to an Islamic region of South Asia in order to live a life without the stigma of their social class — Islam sees everyone equally. Over the past years, through intermarriage only within their community, her people have managed to retain their language and religion.

Shanti works at various households of the well-to-do as a masseuse. Her husband, like her father, is a cobbler a government agency in Sylhet. She lives in an extended family structure of cousins and siblings in the same neighborhood. With the money that she earns she sends her two sons and a daughter to private schools. She even keeps a tutor for them — education is very important, she explained.

Although she does not have any career plans for them, her only wish is that they grow up to be able to make proper decisions and that they do not have barriers against them because of any intellectual incapability. They are learning Bengali as their primary language, but she still speaks in Hindi to them at home — it is her heritage and duty. She makes them read texts on Hindu rites and scriptures. Since these texts are only available from India they are written in Hindi; therefore another effective way of transferring her language to her children.

Shanti is firmly rooted in her faith in God and is happy. Her only regret, however, is that her community is disappearing. Her community does not suffer from much persecution, although there are occasional frictions with political and religious zealots. The government has been good in protecting minority interests. However, her community's background is different from that of even other Hindus in Bangladesh. Through intermarriage with Hindus from various other communities, her own unique culture is disappearing. Her community is also breaking up and moving to different regions of the country where the culture may fade over the generations because of isolation.

Although intermarriage between Hindus and Muslims is nonexistent, some do convert and marry outside even the Hindu community. But she is following her responsibility as a mother, she said with a sigh. She is passing on what she has grown up with to her children, and it would be up to them, to take or leave whatever they wished.

If everyone followed the same way of praying and living their lives and if everyone followed the same culture and rituals, life would be boring indeed, she said. She enjoys the rituals and spirituality of Islamic events such as the Eids (although she would prefer it that her Muslim neighbours did not sacrifice cows, which are sacred to Hindus, in front of her), and she likes to share the values of her Hindu rites and Pujas with her neighbors (she does not worship statues she explained — she uses the idols to merely focus her perception of God).

'Diversity among the various communities of faith and dialogue among them through tolerance' was her phrase when she tried to explain her understanding of the importance of being a minority member of country. Shanti does not have any formal education and is illiterate. Yet her depth of character reveals a broad understanding of pluralism in a multi-faceted world. Perhaps it takes something more than a Harvard degree to understand the importance of one's own background and value that of others at the same time. Shanti would ask us to imagine the world with all its different religions and cultures as an interweaving of threads in one large blanket of humankind. And in the final analysis, what good is a blanket with threads weaved in only one direction?

In a Different Angle



A potter's wife helps her husband, while her own labour goes unrecognized.

— photo by Sultana Siddique