

WOMEN ON THE MOVE

YES, for telling the truth a week ago, at least for once on this issue, without mincing a word of it. Truth that is hard, bare and beautiful. And what was the momentous statement that she made? Let us repeat it: "When I was a young girl, my parents never insisted on my wearing the traditional Islamic female dress, veil and all. Had they done so, I could never have become what I am now — the Prime Minister of Pakistan." This was how Benazir Bhutto, the world's first female Muslim Prime Minister, reacted, while on a recent visit to France, to the controversy caused by the demands of a number of orthodox Muslim families settled in France for their girl students to be allowed to wear head scarves in the schools. Such a practice, the families concerned claimed, has been enjoined by their religion. This issue of what these families choose to call proper Islamic dress for females, simmering for some months, came to a head recently, when the French Government finally decided against the use of head scarves by Muslim girls in mixed secular public or private schools. Accordingly, 25 such students, a minute proportion of around 150,000 Muslim girl students in France, were expelled from their schools. Benazir Bhutto, while careful neither to queer the pitch for her French hosts nor to rouse the ire of her co-religionist Mullahs at home or abroad, was obviously distressed enough by the sorry spectacle to give an honest piece of her mind in such a heroic manner.

Yes indeed, heroic it was. Anyone with the slightest awareness of the Mullahs' stand on various women's issues, their place, position and rights in society and the limitless capacity of the Mullahs for mischief making around the world when aggrieved by or challenged on issues dear to their hearts, should know the perils of such a remark by the Pakistan Prime Minister. She, like her two other lady fellow-travellers, Turkey's Tansu Ciller and Bangladesh's Khaleda Zia, has more than a fair share of her own Mullahs to think about and take care of. Religious bigotry of one hue or another has been an ever-present source of violence and strife in her country throughout its brief but chequered history. Shia-Sunni sectarian infighting has, of late, become particularly vicious, claiming the lives of dozens of citizens almost every day. On top of it, hard on the heels of her return from France, she was faced with an armed insurrection in the northernmost province of Pakistan. It is a region, inhabited by Pashtuns speaking warlike Afghan tribes, historically known for its turbulence and ultra-orthodox jingoism. Not too surprisingly, the rebels, a bunch of marauding Muslim zealots, have demanded the immediate establishment of Islamic government that would enforce strict observance of Shariah laws. Reportedly, the local administration, faced with the imminent collapse of its authority, has promptly announced the introduction of such laws in the rebel held areas. But Benazir, once again, in another welcome but rare show of courage in the face of fundamentalist onslaught, has branded the insurgency as very unfortunate — a state of affairs the real solution to which, she made it clear, is in the successful creation of a more modern state in Pakistan.

There can be no denying the fact that she could reach the top in politics in such a

NY octogenarian in this land and climes feels comfortable when both their physical and mental energies are not taxed. The question of engaging in fine-art work is almost outlandish. But Zindu Prava Devi is an exception to this rule.

An 83 year old she still takes pains in pursuit of creativity demanding great concentration of mind and eyes. Her needle works were on display at an embroidery exhibition, at the city's Jojon Contemporary Art Gallery recently.

"I was always fond of needle work, those precise and faultless stitches, so many different styles of them simply fascinate me," she reveals her first passion in life. Their love story — the needle and her began at an early age of eleven. Initially she picked tips and clues from her mother, sisters, relatives and later from neighbours.

It was the British era then, and many Indian officers were posted in Chittagong as part of their services. Since we lived

in Chittagong where my father was an Ayurvedic doctor, we had many Indian neighbours. It was from their wives that I learnt these exclusive stitches of Lucknow, Shantipur, Bardhawar even Faridpur" she recalls.

Each place has its own individual stitch besides the already common ones that everybody knows. Zindu Devi,

she explains. Her themes are a combination, rather a mix and match of some of her own ideas and some shared one. She collected and also made her own designs. She never stopped her embroidery work, because she did it solely to quench her own thirst to create. And never, till now, made her hobby or passion, as you may call it her profession. "I could never visualize earning money for what I do for myself. I easily gave away my works to friends and relatives but never sold one," she says.

Born in 1911, she is the sixth child of her parents. Zindu Devi earnestly believes that creativity or such imaginations that are not merely mechanical skills, cannot be replicated. So the question of mass production does not arise.

She never took orders and was never interested in sales. "People will ask the same piece of work to be done in 15 pieces, I cannot do same designs repeatedly," she laughs about her impatience.

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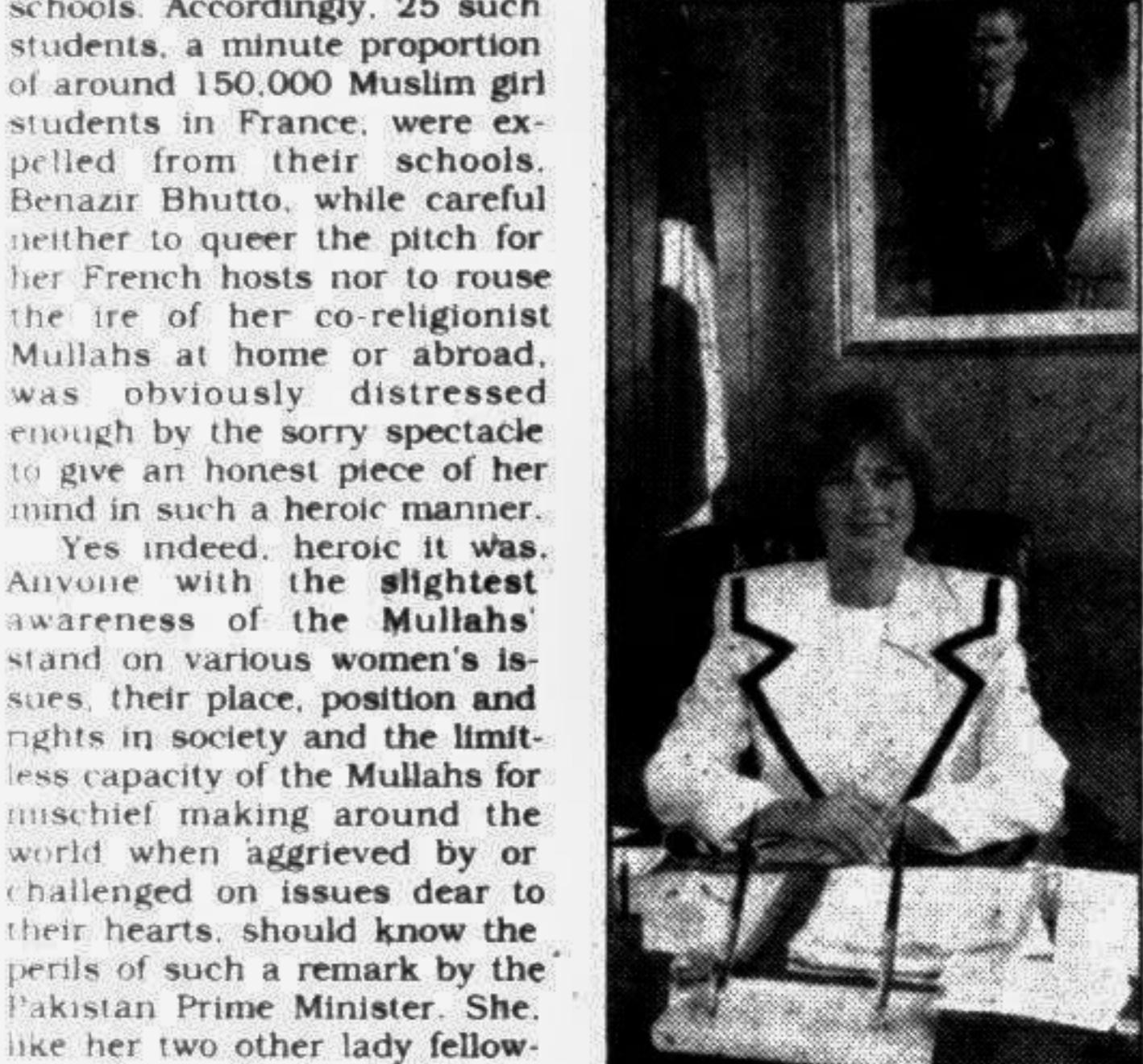
To cover or not to cover?

— Photo : Newsweek

Benazir, We Salute Thee

by Zaheda Ahmad

state was due, among other things, to the very modern education that her parents were wealthy and enlightened enough to equip her with. She is a modern woman in, on her own admission, a yet to be fully modern state, receiving her



Trimming her salts.

— Photo : Newsweek

education first at Oxford and then at Harvard. At the former university she once held the prestigious post of the president of the University Debating Union. As a student at both the institutions she did give quite a good account of herself, a record which later served her well when she assumed the mantle of the party and national leadership. But at the same time it is also true that had Pakistan been a state like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or other Middle Eastern nations, Benazir, even with all the distinctions of family, class, character and education could never have aspired to compete for, not to speak of securing, the top job. For it is well-known that although Islam, unlike other religions, has granted certain limited rights to its women, it has unambiguously excluded women from the position of political or religious leadership. That is why when she urged Pakistan's fundamentalist scholars to keep themselves confined to religion and not meddle in politics, one of them replied, "Benazir should also do her duty as a woman, raise children in her home and leave politics to men."

Then again, the practice of *parda* or strict seclusion of women, the mandatory use of the veil — call it by any name, the Iranian *chador* or the South Asian *burkha*, is all the same — severely restricts the

writer who teaches history at Dhaka University is the editor of *Saptahik Samay*, a newsweek.

they are very dedicated and patient. They are my good students," she says but complains about the younger ones. Students are busy with life — their studies, their own entertainment and so their desire to master embroidery skills is less, still they are keen.

Zindu Devi's school is nothing professional, anyone can come and learn, "it's not a proper school because that would mean real responsibilities. I don't think opening up a school now is possible because I won't be able to give proper

time," she says. All her daughters are capable of doing what she does and besides their regular jobs and family chores they also take orders — unlike their mother.

Her childhood was like that of other girls of her time. She spent most of it indoors but never bored. She always found things to entertain herself. She learnt her basics from her elder brothers and it was then she picked up her excellent taste in literature. "I used to read books every day, Rabindranath, Sarat Chandra,

her works are definitely a class of its own. Her recent canvases which she completed in 1993, 1994, look like rugs found in carpet shops. Unusual and uncommon stitches which are so real that apparently it gives her work a "this cannot be done manually" type of impression.

Mostly cross stitch work dominates her exhibition. Besides these she did many Nakshi Kantha and each one of her children and grand children have atleast one piece of her work.

So old yet so young, Zindu Devi is an inspiration to all around her. School and college students, housewives even older women near to her age are her pupils. "The old and housewives come to me to learn what they don't know,

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