



In a League of Her Own

An Exclusive Interview with Sushma Swaraj

○ Madhu Kishwar

In India, politicians have become a favourite target of public wrath and a common scapegoat for most of the ills of our society. Be it news reports, Indian cinema, or TV serials, the politician is often the object of ridicule, contempt and caricature. MANUSHI too has been unsparing in its criticism of our political class. At the same time, people stay obsessed with politics and politicians. Those who manage to be in positions of power get surrounded by sycophants and favour seekers. The sum total of the picture that emerges has often made me wonder whether we are oversimplifying and attacking a caricature, rather than real persons.

With this interview, we are starting a new series through which we will introduce our leading politicians to MANUSHI readers. Since we want to understand how they view their own role, we will let them speak in their own words and give us an account of the problems they face, and how they meet the challenges of their high risk, volatile profession.

Our attempt will be to cover as large a spectrum of politicians as possible. These pieces will not so much be our evaluation of the person being interviewed as an attempt to understand their self view, their strengths and weaknesses as they define them. We will interview those whose politics we respect as well as those with whom we may have serious differences. **We invite you to pose questions to those we interview.** Their responses to your comments and questions will be carried in the next issue.

We begin this series with Sushma Swaraj of the BJP who is currently the Information and Broadcasting Minister in the NDA government. She is one of the few women who has the capacity to win an election on her own strength, even though she does not have a caste-based committed vote bank. In popular perception, she is among the few responsible and reasonable faces of the BJP and a person known for restraint in her responses. No matter how serious her difference with her party colleagues, she maintains the image of a "loyal soldier" of the party. That is why, even though she has cultivated good relations with the press, journalists find it hard to get her to provide "leaks" and inside information on the affairs of her party. In this interview too, she has not let one "indiscreet" word escape her lips.

Her account gives us an idea of how careful and reserved women politicians have to be while socialising with male colleagues if they to steer clear of scandals. It also gives us an idea of how even the more conscientious and sincere among our political leaders are able to make only dents-and those too are transient ones because the institutions of governance and those providing civic amenities have become totally dysfunctional. However, Sushmaji emerges as a pragmatic person who has no serious quarrel with the system but believes in simply making it run somewhat more efficiently during her years in the office.

I have known Sushmaji since 1978, when we started MANUSHI and she had just made her debut in electoral politics in Haryana. This interview took nearly three years to materialise. It was originally meant to cover the controversy around the Women's Reservation Bill. However, due to strange mishaps, I failed to keep the appointment on three different occasions. After that, the tape recorders I took to interview her let us down on three consecutive appointments. When she became a minister, I nearly gave up the idea because I thought it would now be harder to get an appointment with her. But I was pleasantly surprised to find that she is one of the few high-powered politicians who returns your call, if you leave a message for her. And her staff actually gives her the messages! Despite various faux pas on my part, Sushmaji remained patient and gracious and gave me several hours to pick her brain.

We differ on many issues and I have been an open critic of many BJP policies, especially their Ram Mandir campaign. Yet we have maintained a very warm friendship through these years. For reasons of space, I could not possibly cover every aspect of her political life. We hope our readers will feel free to send their questions and responses to her, and thus fill the gaps we may have left.

In the next issue we hope to carry an interview with Mani Shankar Aiyar of the Congress Party.

□ *How did you begin your political career?*

I have completed 23 years in active politics. I contested my first election in 1977. In fact, my life in active politics began with electoral politics. Between 1975 and 1977, I was actively involved in the anti-Emergency movement led by Jaya Prakash Narayan (J.P.). After the Emergency was lifted in 1977 and the Janata Party formed, I joined the electoral campaign to defeat the Congress.

Thus my life in active politics began with the Janata Party when the entire opposition was one. It was not a coalition, but several old parties subsumed their existence and came together as one party to fight the 1977 elections. I was among those who were selected by J.P. to enter the electoral fray. I won the Ambala Cantonment seat in the Haryana assembly in 1978 and was made a cabinet minister in the Haryana government at the age of 25 years 3 months. That in itself is a historic record that has not yet been broken in our country.

It is generally said that women get into politics either due to family legacy or by accident. But I did not get into politics due to family tradition because neither in my parents' home nor in my in-laws' place any one was in politics.

□ *But aren't you from a Rashtriya Swayam Sewak family?*

My father was in the R.S.S but his involvement was limited only to the extent of going to *Shakha* in the morning and taking part in R.S.S cultural programmes. However, I did not live with him. I was brought up at my *nana's* place. I used to visit my father during holidays. He was never



Sushma and Swaraj Kaushal

involved in active politics. My in-law's family was mainly in service. Swaraj, to whom I got married, was a political worker. He was the secretary of the Samajwadi Party, and the President of its youth wing — the Samajwadi Yuvjana Sabha in Chandigarh.

At the university, I was an ABVP worker. Since those were the days of J.P.'s "total revolution" call with emphasis on the leading role to be played by students, young activists from many parties and student wings

had joined the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini formed by J.P. That is how I met Swaraj. In 1973 I had acquired a law degree. Therefore, when the emergency came and people like George Fernandes were implicated in the Baroda Dynamite case, we both came to Delhi to fight these cases through the law courts.

□ *Were you two married by then?*

In fact, our marriage in a way was precipitated due to the emergency. We were both in student politics together and both were active in the debating society of the law department. As soon as Emergency was declared, we both decided to move around and organise resistance against it. That is when our parents advised that we should get married before we launched on our mission. Emergency was declared on June 26, and we were married on July 13.

However, it was the Baroda Dynamite case that became a turning point in our lives. George Fernandes, who was then the president of the Socialist Party, was the prime accused in that case. He had already been



Janata Party days: with Chandrashekhar and Devi Lal

arrested and put in jail. Swaraj went to see him on the day he was first produced in court. He was very pained to see George in handcuffs and standing alone. The atmosphere was rife with fear and intimidation. Not many dared to come out in support of those accused under the Defence of India Rules on charges of challenging the Emergency regime. Swaraj told George, he was going to shift to Delhi with me to fight the case. On Oct 1, 1976 we moved to Delhi and immersed ourselves in the anti Emergency movement. We had expected the case to last at least 15-16 years. Who could have imagined that things would take such a rapid and dramatic turn?

In February 1977, Indira Gandhi declared elections. That announcement catalysed the formation of the Janata Party. I toured the entire country as one of the key campaigners of Janata Party. Once the Janata Party government was established at the Centre, they announced the dissolution of Vidhan Sabhas whose term had been arbitrarily extended to six years by Mrs. Gandhi to avoid the holding of

elections. I was then fielded as a Janata Party candidate for the Haryana Vidhan Sabha. At that time I thought, Swaraj should go into electoral politics. But he told me: "Not me. From the very first day I have noticed this special talent in you. I feel it my responsibility to nurture that talent and let it flower fully."

For the stability of the family, it was not possible for both partners to be in electoral politics. He pushed me forward and chose to be the breadwinner of the family through his legal practice. I fought my first election from Ambala Cantonment, my parental home town and won with a comfortable margin. At that time, the Janata Party had committed that its cabinet strength would be no more than 10 per cent of the total strength of its elected legislators. So we had a small cabinet of nine. I became a full cabinet minister in the Haryana Government when I had just turned 25.

I was given charge of different departments including labour. That too was very unusual. In 1987, the Education Department was also put

under my charge. Being a woman and being young, can be liabilities in politics. In the first few weeks, people did think: "She is a mere kid. We can easily manipulate her." But I think they got the message very fast that I was not the puppet variety.

My experience at the Chandigarh High Court and Delhi Supreme Court came in very handy. Secondly, I could read and analyse the files and documents intelligently. Also I am a very articulate person. If you have these three qualities, then no one, including the IAS officials, can make a fool of you or manipulate you.

The main thing is that you should have patience and the ability to pay attention to issues. As a result I made a big mark as an able administrator. As you know, even in the Janata Party, different parties came to form distinct lobbies and groups. Despite my ABVP background, I came to be associated with the Socialist lobby due to my connection with Swaraj. After taking the oath as a minister, I went straight to Patna to seek J.P.'s blessings. He told me, "Even though now you are in power politics, do not forget that politics is a means of public service." I have held on to that message very closely.

Since my constituency of Ambala Cantonment was only 50 kms from Chandigarh, the state capital, I had a big advantage in so far as I was able to keep close contact with my constituency. I would spend every Saturday and Sunday in Ambala.

I have ensured that my politics continues to have *janadhar* (popular support), no matter what ups and down I experience in my political career. You cannot build a *janadhar* sitting at home. For that you have to slog hard, become one with the people. You have to make them feel that you



Welcoming Ziang Xemin

hurt when they hurt, and that you sincerely want to solve their problems.

Things have really changed in recent years. There was a time when people gave votes to MPs on the basis of their parliamentary performance. Our political structure was such that the MP sat on top of the hierarchy, with *panchayats* at the bottom. People expected their area corporators and MLAs to take care of local, civic problems. MPs were only expected to focus on legislative affairs. Vidhan Sabha elections were held simultaneously. The MLA contestants would not only print their own literature and organise electoral meetings, but also do this for their MP. The structure was built from the bottom-up. Now it is the absolute reverse.

When I first got elected as an MLA, I realised that the expectations people once had from their corporators, were now directed at the MLAs because municipal elections were not being held for 16 or 17 years. Nor were there regular *panchayat* elections. As these structures kept crumbling and collapsing, the institutions simply decayed. MLAs and MPs were all that was left of democratic representation.

By the time I fought the Lok Sabha election and that too from an urban constituency like South Delhi, I found that now people expected their MP to even take care of their local gutters, and get the street lights repaired. They actually come to your house and demand that the MP get their dead telephones restored to life.

I feel that instead of saying this is not my job, you have to be ready to respond to such demands. Or else you cannot go back to the same people

and street vendors. After that we moved on to the middle class and finally the colonies of the rich. All this was done to a plan. The officers had a whole week to do the tasks I assigned them on Saturday and Sunday. I was also available in the rest house for two hours every week for those who had any personal work. None of my constituency people needed to come to Chandigarh to meet me. I would report on their work in Ambala itself.

for votes. One has to change according to the times.

Now since the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections have been delinked, an MP has to create his or her own infrastructure for fighting electoral battles. The MLAs in place may not even belong to your own party. Therefore, you need to have a direct relationship with party workers. These workers then expect you to meet all their expectations, which were once met by MLAs and corporators.

You have to attend weddings in their families; you have to be present at the funerals of their family members. I have always worked hard to nurse whichever constituency I got elected from. For example, in Ambala, every Saturday and Sunday, I would go on a *padyatra*, taking the concerned officials along with me. We would earmark areas in advance and let them know when we would visit that particular area. I think there is a world of difference in your perceptions when you go and see things for yourself rather than people coming to report to you about their problems. We would also sit and have tea with people — something that pleased them a lot.

When people presented their grievances, I would be there and would ask the officials how long they would take to redress them. If they said 14 days, I would add 7 days just so that we did not fall short of our promise. Maintaining credibility is the most important thing in politics. I would then go back and check if the tasks had been performed to people's satisfaction.

I began with addressing the problems of the poor *bastis* of *Balmikis*, *Mochis*, garbage pickers

and street vendors. After that we moved on to the middle class and finally the colonies of the rich. All this was done to a plan. The officers had a whole week to do the tasks I assigned them on Saturday and Sunday. I was also available in the rest house for two hours every week for those who had any personal work. None of my constituency people needed to come to Chandigarh to meet me. I would report on their work in Ambala itself.

□ *What kind of "personal" work did people come to you for?*

It is mostly for transfers that people come to ministers. Or else someone's pension is held up. Or delay in government sanction of something or the other.

□ *Normally the bureaucrats are prone to sabotage the work of responsive ministers; did you face such obstructionist officialdom?*

No, my experience is altogether different. The officials take the cue from the politician. If one is sensitive to people's needs, sincere and genuine about your work, then 99 per cent of the officials will cooperate with you.

Most important is your ability to build a culture of teamwork. If one is affectionate and respectful towards one's team members, then they are willing to stretch themselves to deliver the results you want.

When I became education minister, I used to often work late into the night even up to 2 a.m. We used to earmark days for listening to the problems of particular districts. No matter how many people turned up, I would let them know in advance, that I would not leave till I had given a hearing to each one of them. I would say, "Please do not create chaos here. We will give each one a token and the

approximate time when your turn will come.”

Why make anyone wait needlessly and waste their time? We would also tell the local teachers’ association to arrange food for all those who came from faraway. At the same time, I would ask the District Magistrate to arrange buses to take them back to their home-towns or villages. So, no matter how long it took me to give each one a hearing, they did not get impatient or demoralised because they were assured of their turn and also had no anxiety about looking for transport or food at odd hours in an alien city. This *lok adalat* (people’s court) of teachers helped provide quick redressal to their problems.

During my tenure, I signed 30,000 transfer orders with a 95 per cent satisfaction rate. This was done, when normally transfers evoke a lot of resentment and heartburn. I gave it the character of human management, rather than arbitrary transfers.

□ *Isn’t that a terrible waste of ministerial time? What was the basis of these transfers?*

My transfer policy was based on one simple consideration: how to place teachers in schools most convenient to them. For example, if a primary school teacher is posted to a school 40 kms from her house, it is bound to take a heavy toll on her health and peace of mind. In order to reach her school at 7 am, she has to get up at 5 am, cook, clean, get her children ready for their school then rush madly to catch her own bus. By the time she reaches school, she is already exhausted and irritable. In the evening she returns, even more tired to face more housework, children’s and family demands. What kind of



Holding an open court as Minister of Education in Haryana, 1987

teaching will such an overstressed and tension ridden person be able to do?

So I lay down a people oriented policy and let it be known that transfers would be carried out only within the parameters of that policy. There were several elements in that policy: First, widows would be posted to the school of their choice. A widow has already a heavy burden of bringing up children as a single parent. She has to figure out whether to stay with her in-laws or her parents, which of the two will provide a conducive atmosphere for the well being of her children or whether she would be better off setting up an independent home. Keeping all these pressures in view, we decided to let her have a posting of her choice. Second, the wives of army personnel who were posted at the border would also be given the posting of their choice for similar reasons. Third, two years before retirement, every teacher would be allowed to choose his/her posting because that is the time when people have to plan for their post-retirement years - select a place to

settle down, build a house if they don’t have one. Also, since;ment in transfers in a chain of 13. All I had to do was sign and endorse those lists. So naturally, everyone was happy because I acted according to their requirements. What did I lose? Nothing! But I had to take the *panchayats*, the education department officials and all the MLAs into confidence.

□ *All these people make a lot of money through arbitrary transfers. How did you manage their cooperation?*

Yes, ‘transfers’ are a lucrative industry. But when people know that I myself was signing each transfer order keeping the known policy guidelines in view and maintaining absolute transparency, not allowing any officials or MLAs to interfere with extraneous considerations, then everything fell into place.

□ *Do you think this led to an improvement in the performance of school teachers?*

Yes, to some extent. Though this happened in 1987-88, today even after

12 years, people remember my transfer policy as an important landmark in streamlining administration.

□ *But did things not go back to square one after you left?*

I could not institutionalise those changes. They lasted as long as I did.

□ *Don't you feel frustrated at your failure to institutionalise a streamlined transfer policy? Why should a minister be handling transfers in the first place? Isn't that a sign that the system is deeply flawed? With all this clerical and sifarish work being done by ministers, is it any surprise that they don't have time or energy left for introducing the overall policy and structural changes so urgently required?*

See I can't change the system. I have to be content with doing the best I can within the given parameters.

□ *But how will our school system really become world class?*

Even small things like this lead to substantial improvements. Half the problem is solved if the mental framework of the teacher is positive. If the teacher is himself disgruntled, he is not likely to do a good job. I was aware that *panchayats* are also very unhappy with the performance and commitment of teachers, but I knew you couldn't change the attitude of teachers through authoritarian methods. So I took the *panchayats* into confidence, and told them, "A person looks for two things in his career—money and respect. Anyone who opts for teaching in India can't hope for much money. That is why not many bright people are opting for this profession. It is mostly women who are gravitating towards it. We cannot do much about the money part. But if we can at least re-establish the tradition of social respect for teachers,

then there would be some positive change in the teacher's self-view. If the children touch their feet with respect the way it was done for *gurus* in the past, and if the whole village gives them real honour as the character builders of our children, we will be able to imbue them with positive feelings for their own profession." So I took this as a high priority task. That helped change the whole work culture.

□ *How did you get to be so pragmatic at such a young age?*

Good sense has very little to do with age. Actually, I got so much love from my family that it helped me deal with problems in a compassionate manner. The most important influence in my life was my *nani* (*maternal grand mother*) who actually brought me up.

□ *How come you were brought up by your nani?*

It happened because my mother's maternal uncle and aunt had no children. So, they had adopted my mother who was their niece. When my mother got married, she resolved that she would give her first child to them. The first child happened to be a son. So my mother told her in-laws about her vow and gave away my brother to her adopted parents. I was born nearly two years after him. When I was a little girl, my mother took me to her maternal family. When it was time to return, I hugged my brother and said, "I am not leaving him." So my mother left me there. I ended up being the extra 'bonus' child. At the age of eight there was a proper adoption ceremony for me.

I can't tell you how much love I received from my adopted family.

In addition, I have been fortunate

enough to get enormous love from Swaraj and his family. This is the background to my constructive approach to life. I got so much. So I am able to give a lot. And the more you give, the more you get.

□ *Don't you think people have begun to have a lot of unrealistic and even unreasonable expectations from their MPs and MLAs? All the sifarish work you are expected to do, does it not wear you out?*

One cannot build one's political base without slogging it out. For example, when I was elected as an MP from South Delhi, I would spend virtually every evening in my constituency. I would attend weddings, go to the homes of my party workers, tie up programmers with residents' associations in the same way that I had done in Ambala to solve their specific area problems. And in the mornings, I would meet people in my house, and attend to correspondence. I don't believe that people come with unreasonable demands. A person who comes to you because he or she thinks it is reasonable. If you tell people, I will get things done only on merit, it won't work. In any case, today people have come to firmly believe that merit notwithstanding, nothing gets done without a *sifarish*.

But the thing that has helped me most is that I don't mislead people with false promises.

□ *Why did you refuse to fight the South Delhi election last time?*

Well, there were several complex reasons for that. But even after that I did fight from Bellary, against Sonia Gandhi.

□ *Why is it that your party uses you as a sacrificial lamb every time it has*

to fight a tough electoral battle, as happened with the Delhi state elections in 1998 and the Bellary election against Sonia Gandhi in 1999?

No, I don't see it that way. As far as the Delhi election was concerned, I was brought in as chief minister barely 40 days before the election as a last ditch attempt by our party to win back the Delhi State assembly. Everyone knew that BJP was likely to lose the elections. But some of my colleagues felt that inducting me as chief minister might turn the tide in favour of our party. But I myself was reluctant. Therefore when I was called to take over as C.M, I asked our leaders: 'If you have called me to know my inclination then let me tell you clearly, I am not interested. However, if the party has made up its mind and you are merely conveying your decision to me, then I will follow the orders like a disciplined soldier.'

I knew that the time was very short — a total of 40 days. This meant 25 days for election campaign and a mere 15 days for administration. As I used to say during my campaign speeches, that I have been asked to play the last over. I was expected to play sixers on every ball but my difficulty was that the Election Commission's instructions were that you hit without a bat. So under those circumstances, the results could not be changed. But it is a matter of great satisfaction to me that I was asked to lead at the time of crisis. This demonstrates that the leadership has faith in you.

The Bellary election is a similar story. I had publicly announced that I was not going to contest the Lok Sabha elections - for personal reasons.

□ *This is again the disciplined soldier speaking! You won't admit*



Campaigning for the South Delhi elections

that you felt hurt at the way you were eased out of the Information & Broadcasting portfolio using Delhi elections as an alibi and not reinstated after you failed to deliver a victory in the Delhi assembly elections.

No, had I been sulking, then I would not have started the Lok Sabha election campaign for the party, much before other leaders did. That particular day I had just returned home around midnight from Punjab after inaugurating the campaign for an Akali Dal Candidate in Patiala. At about 2 a.m, I got a call from Mr. Venkaiah Naidu informing me that party leaders had decided to field me from Bellary after it became known that Sonia Gandhi was contesting from Bellary in addition to Amethi.

BJP, Janata Dal (U) and Lok Shakti had a seat adjustment in Karnataka. They all decided that Sushma could offer a good fight to Sonia as the NDA candidate.

I was taken by surprise but I told Mr Naidu – "In ordinary peace time, a soldier can demand and take leave.

But at the time of war, a soldier must follow the orders and simply march to the battle front." So within three hours I had left for the airport to catch the six a.m flight to Bangalore from where a special helicopter flew me to Bellary.

The response I got from that constituency was really heart warming. I filed my nomination papers three minutes after Mrs Gandhi. People saw the difference from day one: She came in her bullet proof car with heavy security and left soon after filing her papers. But I not only spent time with my workers but stayed put in Bellary for all of the 18 days that were left for election. I went to people and campaigned in Kannada – their own language.

Since the illiteracy level in that constituency is more than 60 per cent, people knew neither Hindi nor English. I realised that if I wanted to get my message across, I could not rely on translation of my speeches. So within no time I was able to pick up Kannada – given my grounding in Sanskrit and a flair for languages. And I spoke with the correct accent with the right intonation and pauses

because I don't believe in doing things half-heartedly.

I got the Lok Shakti candidate Mr Tippanna to give me a crash course while we drove from one meeting to another. My longest speech there was 18 minutes on the day Prime Minister Vajpayee came for my election campaign. On an average I used to address 25 to 30 meetings – big and small. This could not have been a rote learning job because I had to even condense my speeches or elaborate them at the last minute, depending on the occasion.

I got such an enthusiastic response because I became one of them – I dressed like them, spoke like them.

□ *But isn't it true that people in our country are fascinated with leaders who look and behave as if they have descended from the heavens?*

No, in a democracy, you cannot afford to remain distant from people and yet win their love. One kind of charisma is that which Indira Gandhi carried with her. That has a feudal quality to it. Women of our country adored Mrs Gandhi but only as a distant, awe inspiring figure.

The other kind of charisma is whereby on account of complete identification, the person inspires love. When people see Sushma Swaraj, they say 'she is like us'. They feel empowered because they feel they or their daughters can also aspire to be like me. I become a role model even for the ordinary women and girls. They don't hesitate to come close to me, hug me.

Look at what happened in Bellary. I just got 14 days for campaigning. And I had never even seen this constituency before. BJP had the weakest possible presence in Bellary.

We were dependent on Lok Shakti's political base. And yet I created a record: I got 3,58,000 votes. Many of the victorious parliamentarians did not get that many votes.

There were eight MLAs of our alliance below me. They all got defeated. I won in two assembly constituencies. In three assembly constituencies, the difference of vote was between 1000 to 3000. Only in two assembly constituencies Sonia got more than a 25000 vote lead which accounted for a total difference of 56,000 votes

An important reason for my defeat was that we were pitched against the anti-incumbency factor since there was Janata Dal (U) government in Karnataka. Moreover the Congress had won 12 consecutive Lok Sabha elections from Bellary. Even at the *panchayat* level, they had a clear monopoly, whereas the BJP did not even have a party unit there. Moreover, our MLA contestants and I were fighting on different symbols. The electorate was not even familiar with the BJP's lotus symbol whereas the 'hand' symbol of the Congress was already known to every household. Many of the illiterate electorate did not even know that Indira Gandhi had died. They thought she was the one contesting. So in effect, I was fighting against Indira Gandhi.

The confusion about our symbol led to 44,000 votes being declared invalid. Those were all my votes since there was no confusion about the Congress symbol. Look at it this way, Sonia won the Amethi seat by a 3 lakh margin – a constituency which had a BJP sitting MP, plus a BJP government at the State level. But in

Bellary she won by a mere 56,000 margin despite the fact that BJP had zero presence in that constituency and very little influence in the state.

□ *I believe you have such a phenomenal memory for names and faces, that you know each one of your constituency workers at this personal level.*

How else can you be effective in a democracy? Indian people in general are very emotional. If you can call your worker by his name, remember the name of his wife and children and care to enquire about their well-being, he is elated and will be committed and loyal to you. When I fought from South Delhi constituency, I had 17,000 workers who were my card holders.

□ *Yet, your party treats you so shabbily. Some of your own colleagues spread rumours about your alleged "corrupt" deals as I & B minister and your supposed connection with a gangster like Ramesh Sharma!*

It was the Congress who did this. If you are running against their number one, such things are bound to happen. No one has dared openly make corruption charges against me. So I see no point in even responding to such rumours. As for my supposed connection with Ramesh Sharma, I have sworn by the Gita – the book I consider most sacred – that leave alone know him, I haven't ever seen Ramesh Sharma.

□ *With all this political work, how do you manage time for your personal life?*

I do well on that front. What you need is methodical time management; it is "quality time" that matters as far as family members are concerned. My busiest time was as chief minister of Delhi because I was simultaneously

preparing my party to face the impending election. Even then I did not allow certain family routines to get disturbed. For example, in the morning, I would spend one hour with my daughter Gudia as I helped her get ready to go to school. Now, of course she is grown up, so she manages on her own. But even now, we sit down to breakfast together and chat for about half an hour. So no matter how busy I am, the morning time is reserved for her and I see to it that she gets the

change that commitment for anything on earth.

The time between 8 to 9 a.m., I spend with my husband. We discuss the daily news, have breakfast together and discuss the affairs of the government. However, when we talk of these issues, we do it as husband and wife. We jokingly refer to our evening tea as *pati-patni-chai* — meaning a relaxed chat over tea. We have been married for 25 years. But the friendship we built before marriage

though I have to constantly interact with men, and as a lawyer, he has a lot of dealings with women.

□ *Tell me, have you never faced sexual harassment or male advances, considering you were so young when you entered politics?*

No. Never! Two things matter in this regard. Firstly, a woman's own conduct, but even more than that whether she is happily married. If a woman has such a reputation, then no man will dare express sexual interest in her.

□ *Are you saying, nobody ever tried ever linking your name with any man? For example, I have heard cheap rumours during the early 80's linking your name with George Fernandes because you were his close associate.*

Exactly, but such rumours die their own death with time. I also heard them. However, Swaraj said, "Don't worry, I am with you. Just keep moving ahead." These rumours matter when your husband starts paying heed to them or your own family starts believing in them. That lends strength to such rumours. In the beginning, every woman gets sucked into such things. But as your reputation builds over time, such rumours become ineffective. I have always been disciplined about these things. When I go to the party office for meetings, I don't hang around after the work is over. Rumours and fantasies arise when you socialise with male colleagues, indulge in light talk and chat sessions, have dinners together. I don't do any of that.

□ *Your party is associated with a lot of contentious and negative issues. How is it that despite being closely associated with L.K. Advani, who is identified as the prime mover*



Bellary election campaign

breakfast she wants. She returns home at about 4 p.m. that is when I make sure to phone home and talk to her. In case, there is something serious bothering her, then I leave work and come home for a while.

At night also, I will give her some time, put her to bed, and kiss her goodnight. . My daughter also feels that I give her more quality time than those mothers who stay at home. You see, it is a matter of small gestures. For example, her school's founder's day used to be on November 18. So that date would be blocked right at the start of the year. I wouldn't

is still intact. He has never tried to dominate me as a husband. He is the only person with whom I have enjoyed the closest intimacy as a friend. And yet he is also a colleague. This is what made our conjugal and domestic life so satisfying. We have never quarrelled or got stuck over any issue.

For years, we stayed apart. In the 1980s when he practised in Delhi's Supreme Court, I was in Chandigarh as an MLA. When I came to Delhi as an MP, he was sent to Mizoram as the Governor. But there has never been a shadow of doubt between us, even

of the Babri Masjid demolition, your name has somehow remained above these controversies?

The controversies you refer to are a product of that misinformation campaign. People have not tried to understand the issues we raised in the right context.

As for my image, a person who has built her own profile through years of hard work, cannot be easily stamped with other people's issues and identities. As for Advaniji, there is a big mismatch between who he is and the way the media projects him.

□ *Be that as it may, the truth is that some of your party leaders are deeply enmeshed with the violence and mayhem that accompanied the Ram Mandir campaign.*

I personally do not consider it appropriate to comment upon this matter since it is *sub-judice*. In any case, the term Babri Masjid is a misnomer. We refer to it as a "disputed structure". Even the Supreme Court has forbidden the use of this term. The final verdict on who did what, must come from the court.

□ *But the BJP's name is also associated with creating communal divides and disharmony. I am referring to all that as well.*

It is not correct to say that the Ram Mandir campaign was the cause of all communal riots. This kind of misinformation campaign is what was used all these years to keep us out of power. Look at the track record of BJP governments. There have been no big riots of the kind that had become routine features of our polity during Congress regimes.

□ *Yes, but it could well be said that the BJP used communal riots and polarisation as a tactic to come to power.*

That is wrong. If the BJP really wanted to eliminate the Muslim community, they could do it more effectively when in power. Why would they allow Muslims to grow and prosper under their regime? But the fact is there has been a definite reduction in communal tension under BJP led governments.

□ *Anyway, let us get back to how you have managed to stay clear of all such controversial issues and events even though you evidently do not disagree with your party's approach?*

It is perhaps because I am over cautious to stay away from such tussles and controversies. I feel, whoever enters public life must care about how people view them and the image that gets built around them. If you begin to care, you inevitably become cautious. Those in public life should not be insensitive to the public opinion. Your life has to be like an open book. People have the right to watch and monitor your conduct. Those in public life must aim to set an example and be positive role models. If this awareness is constantly with you, then automatically your conduct remains within dignified social norms.

□ *How did you learn to be so careful in the choice of your words?*

It comes with practice. In a way it is also God's gift because oratory does not come through mere effort or practice.

□ *I am not talking of your oratorical skills, but your ability to be very disciplined about the language you use; you seem to weigh each word very carefully even when you are speaking extempore or answering provocative questions in a press conference.*

I believe this has to be an integral part of oratory because I feel that dignity and firmness are not mutually conflicting qualities. You can make the most firm and strong statements in a polite and dignified manner. One should never lose the discipline of language (*bhasha ka sanyam*).

Every language has a sufficient range of words to help you be clear and firm, yet courteous. For example, instead of calling someone a liar, you can say his or her statements are "baseless" or "inaccurate". You have made your point while keeping your dignity intact, whereas the word "liar" feels like an insulting slap on the face.

Your words are like arrows. Once you have fired an arrow, it cannot be brought back. Therefore, one must avoid wounding people with one's words. Other wounds can heal, but not those caused by words.

□ *Well, there is also a flip side to your being over-cautious. True, there are not many negative things associated with you. But at the same time, people also do not associate many positive issues with you. For example, Maneka is associated with animal welfare and environment. But in the public mind, there are no such positive agendas associated with you – except dignity and discipline.*

This is not a correct assessment. In the public mind I am associated with the defence of Indian culture. That is why, whenever there is talk of portfolio distribution, or improving the content of our television, there is a popular demand for Sushma Swaraj, as the best person to be entrusted with the job of protecting Indian culture.

Unfortunately, a few biased people tried to give it negative connotations by spreading the canard that I wanted newsreaders to

wear full sleeve blouses and appear on TV with their heads covered. This is absolute baloney. I have never passed such orders or made such statements, simply because I believe in practising what I preach. Have you ever seen me in public with my head covered? In my entire public life, you will not find even one poster of mine with a *pallu* on my head. Nor have I ever worn a full sleeve blouse. Why then would I lay down rules requiring such a dress code for news readers?

And yet this image has been wrongly created to project me as a *dakiyanusi* (obscurantist traditionalist) type. But, fortunately, they have not succeeded in branding me as such. I continue to be seen as someone who understands Indian culture and can be trusted to uphold it in positive ways.

□ *What are the essential ingredients of Indian culture in your view?*

An important aspect of the Indian way of life is to respect one's elders. This is ingrained in us from our birth. No matter how 'modern' we may become, we feel offended at seeing a child being rude to his or her parents. It is not part of our value system that a 12 or 15-year-old tells his parents: "This is my life. Who are you to interfere in it?" In the elite as well as in poor families, in 'modern' as well as traditional families, we like it when a person touches the feet of his elders, his *dadi-dada, nani-nana*. These modes of addressing near and dear ones, including neighbours in intimate familial terms, are an integral part of our culture. Similarly, the relationship between a husband and wife is treated as a sacrament. No doubt, divorce is now becoming common, but, we do not treat marriage as a mere contract.



Playing with her daughter

Similarly, bringing up children in our culture is not a contractual obligation but a sacred trust. In our culture, even at the age of 50, a person remains a child as far as his/her parents are concerned. There are no sharp lines drawn between my life and my child's life – no matter how old the child may be.

Similarly, in our culture 'environment' is not to be treated as a government programme. It is an integral part of our life. We worship the *tulsi* plant, we treat a *peepul* tree as sacred and have evolved social taboos to prevent people from vandalising our environment. We treat our rivers as sacred.

□ *But that is all a matter of the past. This is not a live tradition today.*

It is true that many distortions have crept into our social beliefs and behaviour. But even today, try cutting a *peepul* tree in a village. People will die, but not let anyone touch it. Many of these traditions are still alive. For example, can you think of another culture in which lakhs of *sadhus* are being looked after through social

charity without any institutional backing? Among us, even today such *samskars* are alive that if a *sadhu* comes in when you are about to have your meal, you will offer your food to him and make do with the leftovers or a cup of tea.

Even today, elderly people are not called senior citizens – they are called *nana-nani, dada-dadi*. This is how they are made to feel wanted and have meaning in life. Even today, most of those who have some connection with our traditions, remember to buy *bajra* for feeding birds along with their monthly rations. The first *roti* is made for the cow, another one for a stray dog. If you look at this entire ethos, it shows our culture's inbuilt tendency to have a holistic view of life. You owe society something out of your earnings. A Marwari Bania may have left his village 40 years ago, but wherever he may be located, he wants to give part of his earning for the welfare of his village — build a school in his mother's name or a dispensary in his father's name. He remains attached to his roots. All these things put together define Indian culture.

□ *You have emerged as one of the champions of the Women's Reservation Bill. Considering you are one of those who can easily win in a general contest, would you ever need to fight on a quota?*

It is not arrogance when I say that I can hold forth against any man in electoral politics. However, I cannot generalise on the basis of my own experience alone. I also see what is happening to my fellow sisters. No doubt, I am among the few fortunate women who got all the opportunities and breaks very early in life to develop their talent and prove their worth. For women like me, the sky is the limit.

But my experience as a member of the election ticket selection committees of my party and others shows that women don't get treated fairly. For example, in selection committees for Lok Sabha or Vidhan Sabha candidates, a woman's application is dismissed with a mere three words: "She cannot win." I always respond by saying: "Without giving her a chance to enter the electoral fray, how can you pre-decide that she does not have a winning chance? Does anyone give a serious thought to the fact that to even reach the point of applying for a ticket, how many hurdles she would have had to cross? She would have first gone through a long process of mustering enough courage to face electoral politics. Then a big battle to persuade her husband. If she is middle aged, she would have had to persuade her children as well. Not to forget winning over in-laws and other relatives. After that she would have to win the approval of her *mandals*,

her district committee and all the rest. Only then does she manage to qualify to apply for a ticket. And all she gets is a dismissive response from the male party bosses saying, "she cannot win"?

There is no dearth of capable women. But their talents are being thwarted due to lack of opportunities. I am convinced that women will never get a chance without reservations. But when they implement 33 per cent reservation, they will have to seek out women, no matter how – as is happening for *panchayats*.



□ *Finally, I want you to tell me what kind of India do you want to build?*

I would like to see India strong and prosperous with a distinct place and recognition in the international sphere.

□ *That is too general. Everybody would say the same. How will it come about?*

Through the following path: without opposing modernisation, in fact, by making use of all the modern means and technologies, we should be able to preserve and nurture our own legacy. I see no contradiction

between tradition and modernity.

□ *What is your position on economic reforms?*

I am not against opening up the economy, as I did with DTH. But we should open up keeping our national interests in mind and be cautious in areas that require careful consideration. We have such tremendous resources — manpower resources, natural resources — and so much talent. Not surprisingly, we are doing so well in the IT sector. We should use our strengths to make a distinct identity for ourselves. But at the same time, we should not be so dazzled by the glamour of modernity so as to lose *our sense of self*.

□ *But the new opportunities have opened up only for those who are wealthy enough to get education in good elite schools. How do we improve our school system for those who can't afford expensive private schools?*

That indeed has to be a high priority. This area, in fact, cannot be left to the

private sector. As the economy moves towards greater privatisation, the government will have very few responsibilities left. Therefore, it can concentrate on the social sector, especially education and health.

□ *But the standard of education in government schools is deteriorating very fast.*

I think the new *panchayati raj* will be able to fix things. Decentralisation and devolution of power is the appropriate solution. When there is direct accountability, things do improve. Through the new *panchayati raj* even young people

can and do take an interest in managing the village affairs. Gandhi's concept of *gram Swaraj* and the idea that each village should be an autonomous republic is the only solution to India's problem.

□ *In your present charge as I & B minister, what are your plans for an overhaul of this ministry?*

Right now I & B has become an economic ministry. Its role today is Infotech, Communication and Entertainment. (ICE). It is the sector of the future. See, there is also great scope for employment in this sector. Also, it can provide a fillip to our folk culture.

The first major thing I did was to grant "industry status" to the entertainment sector and notified them through the IDBI Act. That means you are entitled to get loans from banks and financial institutions to invest in this sector. Unlike the IT sector which needs high investment but gives low employment potential, the smallest of entertainment companies give employment to at least a dozen people.

□ *What about autonomy for AIR and Doordarshan? Do you believe in it?*

I sure do. After all, it is a public broadcast service. Public money is invested in it. A public institution must be allowed to get out of *sarkari* clutches. It should be accountable to the people of this country.

We are reviewing the old Prasar Bharati Act to figure out its relevance for today. Some of the recommendations of the Prasar Bharati Board are anti-employee. We will try to work out a balance between the demand for autonomy and the interests of employees.

□ *We have heard it promised often and look forward to the day when somebody will have the courage and conviction to implement it.* □

I Long to Come Running to You

*I come to you
nothing in my arms,
just this bundle.*

*Cloth covering
what the pity of war
could not render up*

The bones of a father.

*The horses of Uttarakhand wept salt.
Their necks were torqued.*

*At the gates of Central Park
you search for me.
Birds stalk clouds*

*Clouds hang cold.
On a hill of gold
stick insects clamor.*

*You grew up
without him, wondering
what kind of creatures fathers made*

*Moustaches messy with smoke.
What shit poured from their sides.
If the waters they from in turned dark.
Where are the burnt plains of the Punjab?
The killing fields of partition?*

*At the mouth of Central Park
apple blossom sifts your breath
and you search for me*

*I long to come running to you,
hair flying utterly ready
a girl again*

*In the moist air
in the ordinary light
of a garden*

*But how shall I hold you,
this bundle in my arms
love's fierce portion?*

*How shall we face
the burnt rim of green,
the horses of Columbus cut in steel?*

Meena Alexander, New York

*(For a Friend Whose Father was Killed On The Lahore Border
In the 1965 War Between India and Pakistan)*