

Another Interview With Sonia Gandhi

—Not Only ‘Heart To Heart’ But Going To The
Heart of the Matter

The Times of India group’s Hindi fortnightly **Dharmyug**, published in June 1985 an interview with Sonia Gandhi by Pushpa Bharti, entitled “The First Time—A Heart to Heart, Homely Interview.” This was supposed to be the first ever interview of the “first lady of India”. In this interview, apart from Pushpa Bharti’s detailed description of Sonia Gandhi’s blushes, smiles, dress and jewellery, many interesting questions were asked and many even more interesting answers given. Here is a fantasy interview in which those answers are analysed.

AFTER I read Pushpa Bharti’s “heart to heart” interview with Sonia Gandhi in *Dharmyug*, I too felt eager to talk to Sonia Gandhi and ask her some questions, because I felt that Pushpa Bharti had left many questions unasked. Perhaps she did not have enough time since she was so lost in singing the praises of Sonia. Her lyrical ecstasies matched those of Mira’s devotional songs. All they lacked was the verse form.

But the problem is that I do not have a husband, let alone one who is the editor of *Dharmyug*, so how was I to reach Sonia Gandhi, encircled as she is by a vast security network ?

I had to think of another plan. One night, before going to sleep, I concentrated all my mental energies upon her, in the hope of reaching her inmost soul. And sure enough, that night, I dreamt that I had met Soniaji. I not only laperecorded but also videotaped a long interview with her. Here are some extracts of our conversation, translated from Hindi.

Soniaji, I read your interview and heard people’s reactions to it. I must say you have managed to win their hearts. People say that you are truly an ideal

Hindu wife. Only Sita can compare with you. You and Rajiv are a couple comparable to Parvati and Shiva.

I think you are right in saying that I am an ideal wife because Rajivji says so too, but I don’t quite like your comparison of me to Sita and Parvati. I fail to understand why Sita is considered an ideal wife. Did she not overstep the *lakshman rekha**? True, she underwent the fire ordeal but after that, she, a woman, dared to call her husband unjust, and, instead of spending her life at his feet, she sank into the earth in protest. Is that any way for a loyal wife to behave? She lived in the forest yet she overstepped the *lakshman rekha* to give alms to a strange man. I live in the capital city yet I do not even visit a close friend or relative without my husband’s permission.

And as for Parvati, both Rajivji and I take strong objection to her attitude. Whenever she saw the slightest injustice being committed, she would stop and

*Sita’s brother-in-law warned her not to overstep the line that he drew around the house, while he was away. She did overstep it, and was abducted by Ravan. The line is a symbol of the bounds women must not cross.

refuse to walk on until Shiva ameliorated the injustice. Is not this a kind of *satyagraha* or nonviolent protest against the husband? On the other hand, consider my behaviour. My husband’s party may perpetrate massacres but have I ever allowed even a frown of protest to cross my brow?

Does that mean that people have formed a wrong impression? People think you are moulding yourself according to the Hindu ideal of womanhood as exemplified by Sita, Savitri, Parvati and others.

I’m sorry I really cannot accept Sita and Parvati as ideal Hindu women. I think the ideal I represent has never existed before in the history of Hinduism.

You see, my husband is trying to establish a new Hindu nation. Therefore, it is my duty to contribute by exemplifying a new ideal of wifedom.

Would you agree that your unshakable faith in the need for a wife to immerse her identity in that of her husband is derived from the Hindu religion?

Not at all. I do not wish to narrow my vision in that manner. Do you think that only Hinduism has performed the task of preaching *pativrata dharma*? After all, I was born and brought up in a Catholic country. Hinduism does uphold inequality. Even in Islam, a woman is considered equal to half a man. But according to Christianity, a woman is not even an *ardhangini* or man’s other half as in Hinduism. She is created from his rib. Therefore, I wish to take a broad view of things and incorporate into my thinking all those aspects of every culture, eastern and western, Hindu and Christian, which preach men’s superiority and women’s inherent inequality.

But don’t many people also consider you an ideal modern wife?

Sure, why not? I am. Didn’t I tell Pushpa Bharti that I wear not only saris but also jeans and maxis.

Do you consider dress the indicator of modernity?

I don’t think modernity consists only of new ways of thinking. There are many

old ways of thinking which people have begun to discard, considering them outdated and reactionary. To dress up such ideas in a new way and disseminate them with the help of new technology over the media is also modernity.

Soniaji, you said that you fast once a week. This impressed many readers. But you initially said that you fast on Monday. Later, you said that you fast any day of the week. Why this inconsistency ?

This is not inconsistency. I would call it an example of presenting an old idea in a modern way. I put it that way with the intention of impressing everyone from simple folk in the villages of India to the fashionable socialites of New York and Paris.

For the readers of *Dharmyug*, who are much influenced by *karva chauth* culture, I deliberately said that I followed my mother-in-law's example and began to fast on Monday. This created the image of me as a loyal wife, because women traditionally fast on Monday for the husband's welfare. But, later, I also mentioned that nowadays I fast any day of the week. So, when I go to America, if anyone asks me how I can be so superstitious as to believe that my not eating one day in the week can lengthen my husband's life, I will immediately say: "Oh no, that fast is part of my dieting programme to stay slim."

As you know, just as women in India are taught to observe fasts and other ceremonies to keep a hold over their husbands, so also in the west women are taught to maintain their figures, keep their face and skin young looking, so as to keep their husbands attracted to them. So my fast will please everyone and increase people's devotion to our family—which, of course, Rajivji knows how to transform into votes.

Could you tell me one more thing in this connection. You said that Indiraji used to say that we should sometimes sacrifice what is dear to us and offer it to god. Since everyone likes food, she

and you fasted once a week as an offering to god. But was not Indiraji's seat of power far dearer to her than any delicacy I Did she ever think of offering this power to god as a sacrifice ? Would you like Rajivji to make such an offering ? Because, after all, there are many who sacrifice their meals once a week to god, but no one wishes to sacrifice their seat of power to god. Isn't that why god is powerless to prevent in-justices that occur all the time ?

How can that be ? Foodstuffs are produced by human beings and can be eaten or sacrificed as we please. But as for the seat of power, that is the gift of



She always looks up to him—even in photographs!

god to the Nehru family. How can we return to god what god has given us ? That would be very bad manners.

Could you tell me why you decided to give your first interview to a Hindi language magazine ? Also, how did you learn to speak such good Hindil

Well, you see, one has to speak Hindi with the servants so I get regular practice. As I told Pushpa Bharti, we make it a rule to speak Hindi at the dining table even though we may speak English the rest of the time. This way, the servants find it easy to serve food, and also, the poor things feel happy.

Of course, we could have employed English speaking, imported servants. As you know, the Nehru family used to employ foreign nursemaids and governesses. But, after independence, we thought that at least our servants should be Indian. This is our concrete contribution towards solving the unemployment problem.

As for giving the first interview to a Hindi magazine—as you know, Hindi speaking people in this country suffer from a severe inferiority complex. Of course, that is natural, since Hindi has been the language of slaves for the last two centuries. In this country, is anyone who cannot speak fluent English considered educated ?

So, Hindi speakers, because they suffer from an inferiority complex, are easily flattered. Just as my servants are greatly impressed if I occasionally give them a smile, so also the whole Hindi press is enamoured of is because we gave the first interview to a Hindi periodical. Had we given the interview to an English or Tamil or Marathi magazine, would this have been possible?

Soniaji, you said in the interview that men are superior to women. Do you really consider every man superior to yourself?

Yes, I do, and I want to teach every woman to believe the same way. So you look with the same reverence upon every male servant, washerman and chauffeur in your house as you do upon your husband! (Having read the interview by Pushpa Bharti, I thought Soniaji would

An annual fast kept by women in north India for their husbands' longevity.

look shy and a roseate hue would overshadow her delicate face but no! She glowed with indignation).

How can you compare the servants to Rajivji ?

But, Soniaji, your driver is a man, your washerman is a man and so is Rajivji.

But they are servants !

Are servants not men?

They are, but only as far as their Wives are concerned. Their wives should consider them superior to themselves. Why should I consider a driver or washerman my superior ?

Well, if not servants, would you consider your husband's cabinet colleagues and the male officers working in his secretariat your superiors ?

I think you have completely missed the point. Most of the people in this country behave like as servants of our family. Haven't you seen how chief ministers and chief secretaries, MPs and MLAs fold their hands in reverence before us and bow at our feet ?

You also told Pushpa Bharti that you believe that there are many things a woman cannot do but a man can do everything. But Indiraji did not confine herself to looking after the household, did she? She ruled over the whole country.

That was because she considered the whole country the private property of her family. Since her father had no son, she looked after the country, considering it her household estate and then handed it over to her son when she died.

But she did not consider her husband her superior as you do yours. She was a very bold woman. She left her husband and stayed in her father's house.

I think you have failed to understand the complexity of her personality. She, too, like me, considered men her superiors. But because her father had a superior status to her husband, she thought it better to live in her father's shadow. Now, if my father had been the prime minister of Italy, I too would have

given him more importance. But since my husband has a far higher status than has my father, I have moulded my personality according to my husband's requirements.

You must remember that just as Indiraji spent her youth in her father's shadow, she wished to spend her old age in her sons' shadow. That is why she was so anxious that one of her sons should become the prime minister. Otherwise, how could she think of living in the shadow of a son who was an ordinary pilot or a car mechanic?

Soniaji, you; also said that, after your marriage, you deliberately "broke away totally" from your natal family so that you could develop deep roots in your in-laws' place. *How could you grow so, alienated from the parents who: brought you up with such loving care ?*

That is a woman's duty. As I told Pushpa Bharti, I am conditioned to believe that women are inferior. And it is clear that a slave cannot have two masters. Before marriage, one must obey the father and after marriage, the husband.

You also said that when you first came to India, you felt very upset at the sight of poverty prevailing in parts of Delhi. But you said that now it is not so. Could you explain this change ?

When I first came to India, I was not yet married. After marriage, I gradually got habituated to viewing the world through the coloured glasses of my husband's power. Now, poverty and the poor do not trouble me. In fact, I feel quite fond, of them. After all, the poor also have the right to exist and grow. And the Congress stands for this right of the poor. I have gradually come to understand that just as the Congress party inherited power from the British rulers, so also they inherited the poverty in this country. Any heir would like his or her inheritance to prosper and grow so, naturally, our attempt is that all the things we inherited from the British rulers, such as poverty, corruption, a topheavy and inefficient bureaucracy, should prosper and grow by leaps and

bounds. And I must say, with due humility, that we have not been altogether unsuccessful in this attempt.

How did you suddenly decide to give this, interview ? *You told Pushpa Bharti that you have never liked to be in the limelight and I have also heard that you shrink from publicity.*

Forgive me for pointing out an error in your use of grammar. I am sure you know the difference between the active and the passive voices. Well, in our culture, it is considered highly ungrammatical to use the active voice for a woman. It is therefore ungrammatical to say that I decided to give an interview. This decision was taken for me. Why this decision was taken can best be explained by the men of Rajivji's publicity department. And this is not my publicity. It is Rajivji's publicity, to enhance his image.

Look, let me explain it this way. Suppose there is a Mr X, and a magazine writes about the decor of his house or about his pet parrot. It cannot be said that his house or parrot are becoming famous and coming into the limelight. This is considered part of Mr X's publicity. Well, what is true of a house or a parrot is far truer of a wife.



At this point, I suddenly awoke. I felt very annoyed with myself. If only I had slept a while longer, I could have heard more of her sweet and edifying conversation. After all, in today's world, how often does one get to hear such ideas ? Even the illiterate, rural women of this country put up with the burden of inequality not happily, but unwillingly and with resentment. But here is a veritable Devi descended from Cambridge !

Pushpa Bharti's metaphor seemed very apt—truly, Sonia has lost her identity in that of Rajiv as the Yamuna river merges with the Ganga—the same Ganga and Yamuna which have become major health hazards. An Indo-French project is currently afoot to cleanse these rivers of pollution.

(translated from Hindi)