

WOMEN JOURNALISTS COMING INTO THEIR OWN



SADIA DEHLVI



many people have abandoned Urdu for one reason or other. The profession is heading towards a veritable bankruptcy," she says. In Pakistan though, where she is married, Urdu has well and truly arrived as the language of the decision makers and the common people alike. And unlike in India, some of the leading journalists there are women. Maleeha Lodhi, for one, who edited the influential *Muslim* earlier, is now the editor of the *News*.

Still young the exuberant Dehlvi has also forayed into film-making and social activism. She recalls having led a peace march from Delhi to Meerut after the riots of 1987 and

For the convent-educated pretty woman, taking to Urdu came much late in her life

Journalism runs in her veins, literally. Heiress to the *Shama* empire, the flamboyant socialite, Sadia Dehlvi, who is also editor of *Bano*, a highly-rated Urdu magazine for women, recalls having played around "more with magazines than toys as a child". First her grandfather, Yusuf Dehlvi who founded the *Shama* group of publications and later her father groomed her like a boy to be able to discharge the awesome responsibility of owning/editing the group publications confidently. Naturally, she scoffs at attempts to make women, especially working women, the barely concealed objects of pity: "Nowadays, it is no longer a question of whether you are a man or a woman, but that whose man or whose woman you are," she quips with candour, and adds "Whether you like it or not, top positions, as much in journalism as out of it are the preserve of people with extra-professional skills".

Basically concerned with women-oriented issues and studies, Dehlvi contends that



Top positions as much in journalism as elsewhere are the preserve of people with 'extra-professional' skills

there is tremendous need yet for giving women a clear sense of direction. *Bano*, the magazine she has been editing for years now, is primarily addressed to a sizeable chunk of under-privileged Muslim women across the country.

For the convent-educated pretty woman, taking to Urdu, despite an enviable paternal influence, came much late in her life. "It took me a long time to get out of the highly urbanised English mindset. Even now, I can't really think in Urdu all the time but I have learnt to improve if only to be in tune with hordes of my Urdu-reading women," she confesses.

As for the status of Urdu journalism in the country, she doesn't sound too optimistic: "So

creating quite a stir by visiting the severely-affected crannies of the town, violating curfew restrictions and the official bandobust.

Even in her sizzling journalistic experiences, she has often created ripples, sometimes to her grave personal risk, by her bold exposes. Among the many controversial stories is an interview during the Zia regime, with a senior Pakistan cleric, Mian Mohammed Tufail, then president of Jammal-e-Islami. The Moulvi's tape-recorded utterances, which were first published by the *Illustrated Weekly of India* (issue dated April 5-11, 1987) and later picked up by many Pakistani dailies, were so offensive to all self-respecting Pakistani women that everyone from Benazir Bhutto downward was virtually up in arms against the cleric. Mass rallies and continued public outcry against the *moulvi* ultimately climaxed in his resignation from the powerful party post.

Leading a relatively laid-back life these days, Dehlvi recalls with nostalgia the initial times when all that mattered was a hard day's work. "I miss the stress, the pressure and all the fun of setting and keeping deadlines," she reflects.

I has taken long years of toil to shake off the male-perpetuated hoax that women, if at all they entered journalism, were meant for detailing just the fashion, boutiques and such girlie parades. That they simply weren't worth the 'all-mighty' political beat. Not any longer. On a modest scale, they have also served another purpose - having helped shift the focus of newspapers from the daily diet of violence and gore to some of the striking social concerns. **KUMAR M. TIKU** spoke to some of the women journalists, representing the dominant languages - English, Hindi and Urdu.

She looks what she is. Austere, affable and self-effacing, Coomi Kapoor's Curriculum Vitae would turn many an aspiring journalist green with envy.

A master's degree in journalism from Boston University, a PR executive in a Massachusetts health agency, chief reporter in the *Indian Express*, principal correspondent, *India Today*, Bombay, launching *Sunday Mail*, the Capital's first full-fledged Sunday news and features paper, and finally the political editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, a position she held till recently.

Her trail-blazing achievements apart, all this also makes her one of the first highly-successful job hoppers. "I think it does you a lot of good professionally," says the eminent political analyst with a smile, adding "There are only two options left when things stop

COOMI KAPOOR



working out as one would like them to. You either suffer the experience quietly or simply move on. I always prefer the latter recourse."

Kapoor who now runs a syndicated column in several newspapers and is also a stringer for *The Times*, London, feels that women in India continue to be on the receiving end of what she sees as mild discrimination. This shows in women not being entrusted with the top-most jobs in the profession. However, not much of the discrimination seems to have touched her personally. Her professional exploits, probably, are difficult to be ignored by the sex-preferences of a male-first society.

She loves reading light fiction but editing a proper Sunday paper with complete freedom, remains one of her unspent dreams.

Nineteen sixty one. That year a young ebullient girl, barely out of teens, joined the *Indian Express*, Bombay, immediately after graduating from nearby Nagpur. Three years later, she kicked the job, came down to Delhi and took up employment in *The Times of India*. Now on the threshold of her fourth decade in journalism, and still going strong with *The Times*, Usha Rai is arguably one of the longest serving journalists on the staff of any newspaper in the country today. Rai, who was heavily into sports in her early days, (she represented Delhi and Maharashtra in the National Badminton Championships but that is ancient history) represents a welter of consistent writing on some of the burning social concerns of our times, notably education, environment, women, the social costs of industrialisation and much else.

Her continued and long standing espousal of a variegated stream of causes earned her the prestigious Chameli Devi Award for journalism this year. "I have

USHA RAI



enjoyed the work and derived immense job satisfaction from my profession, particularly on odd occasions when the work translated itself into a material difference in the lives of people," says the highly esteemed journalist. In the same breath, however, she laments, "Loyalty is on a premium these days. It doesn't quite pay. Despite an unstinted tenure with one newspaper for close to 30 years, I haven't done particularly well in terms of status or position within the organisation. No wonder," she moans "having to work with such a disincentive the tribe of my kind of journalists is fast depleting."

Rai doesn't approve of the attitude of a lot of new female entrants to the profession "who think the road to top lies only through politics". Proprietorial attitudes, according to her, need to change sufficiently to regard a development journalist, man or woman, on par with those writing on the politics of the country. Unless that happens, the situation of a journalist like her cannot be expected to improve.

Having proprietorial stakes in the colossal Living Media group gives her an advantage that most women can only crave for. Yet, as an articulate, soft-spoken anchorperson of the independent news magazine, *Newstrack*, Madhu Trehan has brought the best of feminine grace to the art of news moderation.

A late and somewhat reluctant starter on the video, Trehan began as the Washington correspondent of *India Today*, a job which she did for close to 10 years after obtaining an MSc in journalism from the Columbia School of Journalism, U.S.

"I don't think anyone can get the kind of encouragement that I got from my family," she says. But on a more generalised plane, Trehan is not unmindful of the constraints in the way of working women journalists.

"They (the establishment men) perceive women as if it is all right to leave them in their middle-level positions, despite having given their best years to the job. This must change," she observes with visible ire. She reels off her own experiences as an employer to corroborate that

MADHU TREHAN



the best reporters applying for jobs these days are women. "Best in their willingness to court danger, in getting into places where men can't and in successfully delivering the results." But she isn't unduly derisive or contemptful of the menfolk either. With some objectivity, she opines: "Sex differentiations are meaningless. An unimaginative woman reporter can make a hash of even a human-interest story and a good sensible male reporter can, and often does, handle a soft feature beautifully."

Newstrack certainly isn't the last thing on her mind. "The information industry is in for a major change over the next five years," Trehan states. Even the chic video magazines are soon going to look obsolete in the wake of newer concepts emerging. "Obviously I would like to move on and do other things, may be within the same Living Media umbrella, but yes, *Newstrack* is certainly not the end of the road for me," says the high profile employer-journalist, who admires Nalini Singh for her newsbreaks and loves everything from squash to swimming, people to movies, except guess what? Accounts!

MRINAL PANDE



The small town girl from Tikamgarh, M.P., has become a role-model for virtually the whole of the present generation of Hindi-speaking and practising women journalists. Her roundly balanced versatility in churning out a prolific range of short stories, comic-serious fiction, writing and moderating women-oriented serials for prime-time television, besides being a full-time journalist, clearly places Mrinal Pande many notches above her contemporaries in any language.

But the 45-year-old editor of *Saptahik Hindustan* encountered quite a few subtle psychological pressures from her over-protective family members who felt journalism was too demanding a job. Pande, herself though was facing a cruel dilemma. She had started off by

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teaching English literature at the Jesus and Mary College, Delhi, but had simultaneously started venturing into the Hindi domain by contributing regular articles to *Dharmayug*. And so, with trepidation, she decided to say adieu to Chaucer and Spencer and settle down for the more rewarding and purposeful field of journalism.

"It is better than many other professions," avers Pande. "Most editors these days would be happy to give women the most challenging assignments." The basic problems for women, however, as Pande sees it are lack of social and domestic support.

They are expected as much to add to the family coffers as to perform their traditional domestic chores. The attitude according to Pande is that women must take care of everything from cooking, cleaning, children and what have you. "I think a positive change in the social attitudes is a more fundamental question to be answered," says Pande.

Rather coy about her rich personal exploits, she nevertheless, takes credit for introducing serious, sophisticated writing for women into Hindi journalism and thereby responding to their long over-looked thirst for knowledge.

Considering her unswerving commitment to women and her profession, Mrinal Pande is bound to make waves for many

more years to come. Half in love with the electronic media, she however thinks "there is no substitute to the printed word".

"Television, no doubt, has its own set of advantages, not the least being a very wide reach but its influence is far too ephemeral than the print medium," says the genial professional.

A keen student of art and architecture (she studied drawing, design and architecture at the Corcoran School of Indian Art, Washington DC) and a connoisseur of Indian classical music, Pande was honoured with the Ugra Smriti Samman for journalism by the National Press India and the Haridutt Sharma Jayanti award in 1985. Outside the media, her larger-than-life presence adorns a wide range of apex bodies and organisations. She is member of National Committee on women, under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister, member of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women under the aegis of the Human Resources Development ministry, member of the panel constituted by Delhi Police to prevent indecent representation of women on

"Most editors these days would be happy to give women the most challenging assignments"

posters and hoardings, member of the Central Hindi Committee, under the department of education, and the non-official director of the board of National Film Development Corporation Ltd, and numerous other influential outfits.

Her soft exterior hardly betrays the astounding mental faculties that have gone into grooming her remarkably multi-faceted personality. Small wonder, her name inspires awe and strength, wherever it is heard.

The senior journalists of the fairer sex that SUNDAY MAIL spoke to are by no means the only women torch-bearers of the fourth estate in the country. Promilla Kalhan, Amita Malik, Manini Chatterjee, Madhu Kishwar, Tavleen Singh, Olga Tellis, Anita Pratap and many others have all contributed to make journalism as one of the most sought-after professions by women today.

DAYA KAREER

IT WAS THE mid-seventies. The front page of the Times of India featured a sensational story on the trauma of farmers who lost their hands in threshing machines during the peak of the harvest season. It was the beginning of a series of stories on the pathetic condition of farmers, who due to power shortage in their areas, were forced to thresh wheat during odd hours at night, when mental alertness was at its lowest, and consequently they fell prey to all sorts of accidents.

The stories were written by the young and dynamic reporter of the Times, Usha Rai. A chance encounter with the anaesthetist of Safdarjung hospital was how it all started. It could have ended with one human being merely sympathising with another over the sleepless nights the former was facing due to the mysterious flow of hand amputation cases streaming into the hospital. But, Usha Rai's news sense was at once alerted and she sniffed the makings of one of the most explosive stories in the making. The net result was enormously satisfying, as within weeks of the articles coming in print, design institutes and agricultural universities began re-designing the threshing machines, with safety becoming an important feature.

"The Times was a wonderful place to work in," says Rai. It was a kind of a 'retreat' to her, having worked there for 27 years.

She fondly remembers one incident when she had been asked to cover the tear gassing of a demonstration at Super Bazaar. All of eight months pregnant, she went nevertheless, only to have a rescue team of the Times come to collect her after it was over. "Their protective attitude was very touching."

Today, she is the development editor of the Indian Express, in addition to being the vice president of the Indian Women's Press Corps.

Usha Rai began her professional career in September 1964 when she joined the Times of India, Delhi, as a young reporter, and at that time, the only woman on the editorial staff, a fact which was to dog her for the next eight years. "There was this tendency to pamper me," laughs Rai. "They all had this old world gentlemanly air of protectiveness for me. I would be given soft beats like, education, fashion shows and the like." But, her hunger for doing more meaty stories remained unappeased.

The inevitable clash came when she was asked to report for work on a Sunday just to cover the opening of a boutique. Usha flatly refused saying that either she would cover all the functions that day or leave. Angered by the willful woman before him, the chief reporter promptly put her on the toughest assignment of the time. Some cops had gang-raped the womenfolk of a small town in Bihar and Usha Rai was asked to go and cover it. "I was frightened but I also took it as a challenge". However, the news editor would not hear of it," she recalls.

Gradually from reporter, she graduated to becoming the special correspondent of the Times of India, and finally the deputy news bureau chief. It was time to quit. It had become more shallow, the focus of issues was changing."

Her achievements are impressive. She covered for the TOI the world conference on education at Bangkok, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature at Perth. For the Indian Express,

"Journalism is my sustenance"

she has covered the Earth Summit at Rio, the International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo and the social Sum-

mit at Copenhagen. Usha Rai has also bagged awards like the Media India award for outstanding woman journalist, Media Foundation award for the best human interest stories and the FAO award for environment writing. In addition she has authored a couple of books on travel.

loves. Reading is mostly when she is in transit, and that too catching up with those who are in the news, having little time to do serious

like to give to young aspirants in this highly competitive field is,

reading. Long walks every morning is all she has time for before work takes over.

Usha Rai is a success. She doesn't quite agree. "If by success you mean that I have written a lot, received recognition, then yes, I suppose I can be called a success. But, I still don't feel that I have made it."

There are more girls in the profession than there ever were during her time. "But I would still say, girls, don't join this profession," comes the surprising revelation. "Its become too much of a racket, too much of a rat-race. The ideals and honesty is somehow missing nowadays. If I were to choose my career all over again, I would become an environmentalist."

One advise which she would

MID DAY WOMAN

USHA RAI

Society, despite its considerable exposure to western culture, still frowned upon girls who were too ambitious, who did not hesitate to speak their minds and had open contempt for the submissive role laid down for their sex by the nameless, faceless law-makers of society. Breaking the shackles of tradition and aiming for a career in a field, which not just asked, but quite frankly demanded almost transparent aggression, and agility, both of mind and feet, Usha Rai stormed a hitherto male bastion. The lone female voice in the organisation, she says. "Our fights for being recognised that we were serious about our profession and not just birds of passage came in handy. In a way we have made it easier for the girls of today."

Rai has a son, who is presently the photo editor with the Sunday magazine, and a daughter who works as an interior designer. Her marriage broke up when her children were toddlers, "no, not because of my journalism," she adds quickly. "It just broke up. I brought up my kids single-handedly." Walking the tight-rope between a demanding career and the equally pressing needs of home, Usha Rai, did not let a broken marriage affect her. "I had very supportive parents and sisters. They all rallied around me," she says. She may have been a career woman, but that did not stop her from turning down the offer of chief reportership in the Times, solely because her kids needed her at home.

She stresses the need for women to be financially independent. "Life is tough. Marriages are uncertain," she remarks succinctly. "I actually envy women who can be content with being only housewives. I cannot imagine myself in that role. I'd get bored. I am too used to this pace of life and work."

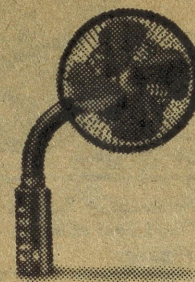
Writing articles, breaking stories, doing her weekly column, meeting people, keeping appointments, Usha Rai's day simply races by. Work has a way of taking one away from one's hobbies, but Usha Rai, despite all the pressure of time, has managed to remain in touch with one sport, badminton. She was an avid player once, having represented the state at national and state levels. Every Saturday and Sunday one can see her on the courts, playing the sport she



Usha Rai

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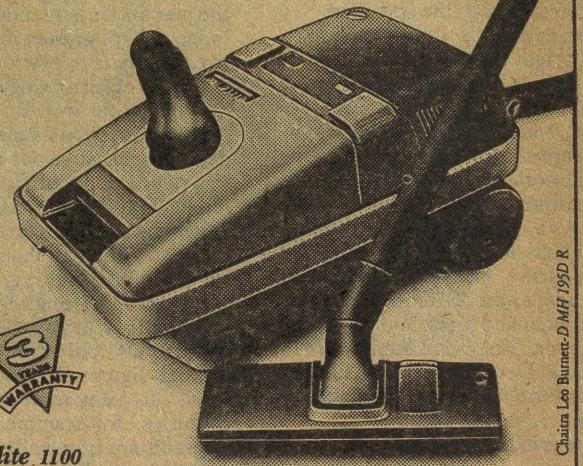
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