

“The Final Goal Is Justice...”

In April 1986, well known actress Shabana Azmi was one of five people who went on an indefinite hunger strike to demand alternative housing sites for evicted residents of Sanjay Gandhi Nagar, Bombay. The hunger strike was part of an ongoing struggle for the rights of slum and pavement dwellers in Bombay, who are constantly under attack by civic authorities. Manushi No. 35 carried an interview with Anand Patwardhan, civil rights activist and maker of national award winning film “Bombay, Our City,” who was one of the hunger strikers. Here, we reproduce extracts from a taped interview with Shabana Azmi by Anand Patwardhan, on her involvement with the s/umdweller’s cause and with other human rights issues.

Anand: Many people seem to be surprised at the actions you have taken on behalf of slumdweller in Bombay...

Shabana: Actually, I am surprised that I didn’t develop this motivation much earlier, given my family background. My father has been constantly involved with workers. About 25 years ago, he wrote a poem “Makan” which deals with the plight of a construction worker who makes fancy palatial buildings but after he has carved them out with his own hands, he is ousted from the place. So this is something that has been in my subconscious, so to speak. Perhaps what happens is that one is so busy in the process of growing up that many things lie dormant, and at one point, all that is lying dormant gets sharply focused. That is what happened to me with your film *Bombay, Our City*.

You see, although I had always felt slumdweller should not be evicted, yet I also thought Bombay was facing a very real problem of shortage of space. When I saw *Bombay, Our City*, it came to me as a big surprise that in fact, there is land in Bombay. So if a political will is developed, something can be done to house these people.

Anand: What I was trying to get across in the film was that what we see



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in Bombay is a good example of what is happening in the whole country. One section of the society has cornered most of the economy while the working people of our society are being denied absolutely basic rights.

Shabana: I think many people are unaware that slumdweller are actually

working people. There is a strong prejudice that slums are areas in which crimes take place, illicit liquor is brewed. Once you realise that they are not all beggars and ruffians, and Bombay needs them, you view their condition more sympathetically.

Anand: You have now openly made a political stand and have participated in several actions. You are also a woman in a society where women are oppressed. How do you connect these aspects of your life— being an actress, being a woman, being politically involved?

Shabana: I think that much of what has happened to me has also got to do with my being an actress. My work and I are not two separate things. I cannot look upon my work as merely a job I do from 9 to 5. Four or five years ago, I did treat it as a job and all I was interested in was doing my job well.

I do not think a film can bring about immediate change, but it can shape public

opinion to some extent. Because of the level of illiteracy in India, it is important for a person who is in a position to shape public opinion through this medium, to develop some sort of commitment. I didn’t gravitate towards it naturally. I fought against it until it became impossible for me not take a stand.

Anand: One problem I have is that I never know where to stop. At no point do I feel that I have done enough. For instance, some journalists asked us why we didn't take 10 slumdwellers into our homes...

Shabana: Certainly, before other people can ask us those questions, it is but natural that we ask those questions of ourselves. But I don't have any answer.

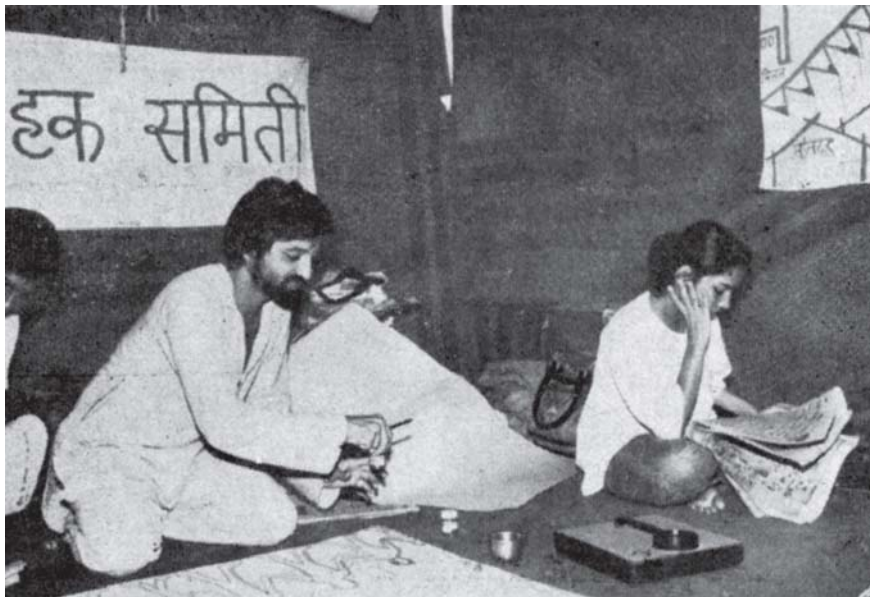
But when one undertakes an action, one is not certain that one is going to come out a winner, or even that this is the answer, the solution. I don't know the answer but I know that some things are wrong, some things must stop. That is important, although I don't know what the result of the action will be. It is not a desire for personal victory that motivates me because personal victory one can get in many other spheres.

Anand: What I was trying to get at is that in a country like India, one lives with tremendous contradictions. One has ideas which are basically socialistic and humanitarian, but one is part of a social system in which we are the privileged.

Shabana: But if just you and I decide to give up the privileges we have, we don't change anything. The change has to be total, a revolution, an overhauling of the whole system. I do go through phases of wanting to lead a spartan life. But that is an emotional reaction. It will not bring about any change

Anand: Yes, I agree. What I mean is, what kind of choices can make one feel that one's actions are worthwhile? For instance, you gave up going to the Cannes film festival in order to participate in the hunger strike. Very few people would do that, so it was a clear choice. Is there a method by which you are making these choices, or are they impulsive?

Shabana: Well, in this particular case what happened was that when I attended the last meeting and it was decided that you would go on a hunger strike, it was something that kept bothering me. Because it was your last weapon. If it had been an intermediary strategy, then



Anand Patwardhan and Shabana Azmi on hunger strike

it might have been all right for me to go away. But since it was the last weapon, it bothered me that I was going away. I felt it was essential that I be here. Ultimately, I didn't look upon it as a great sacrifice not going to Cannes. It was no big deal that I didn't go.

Anand: How have your friends and acquaintances reacted to your action?

Shabana: Well, a lot of them have been cynical, for which I was totally prepared. In fact, I expected that people would remain cynical to the end. But I could see their attitudes alter as days went by. People would come up, first tentatively, then out of curiosity, and then, with concern. As days went by, more and more people came to offer support, and it was extremely moving.

We did manage to mobilise public opinion. For example, residents of Cuffe Parade hate that slum. They don't want it there because they think it's an eyesore. Yet they were moved enough by the fourth day to come and say: "All right, we didn't want them here, but they should be given alternative accommodation. So we are willing to testify that the slum was here." This was a definite shift in attitude.

Anand: One thing that disturbed me was that the press in Bombay tended to push the issue into the background and to glamourise our action.

Shabana: Yes, it was disturbing. But what can you or I do about it? When the protest rally received the kind of publicity it did, I felt very shy and just wanted to retire into the background. I became almost apologetic. I even approached the hunger strike apologetically because I was shy.

But why did the press behave that way? They did not even bother to question the people from the slum who were on strike. After a while, I started feeling, there was no point being apologetic. Because the press catches the vibrations you give them. If you are confident and say: "Yes, I am here, I am fully aware of what I am doing and I am proud of it", they reflect that attitude. So changing my attitude from being apologetic to saying: "OK, we are involved, what do you want to do about it?" helped change their attitude.

Anand: While we were on the hunger strike, many people from the film industry also visited. I felt that many came out of personal regard for you, and many from

the feeling that it is their duty to support a cause taken up by a person from the industry. Do you think this can be sustained or was it only limited to the period of the hunger strike?

Shabana: I think it can be sustained. There is no reason to believe that a person is desensitised forever and can never be brought to look at things differently. But I also think people from the film industry are shy to come to the forefront because they get so heavily criticised. I think this is a pity because people in the film industry in India can help change public opinion.

Anand: I suppose the charge of their being super rich can be levelled at any point.

Shabana: So what if they are very rich? If they have some kind of concern for the poor, some conscience, and want to do something, they should be supported rather than laughed at. Once, J.P. Sippy's son, B.J. Sippy, was badly beaten up by the police. We called a press conference and protested strongly. The press was hostile and aggressive. They said: "Even if this happened to hundreds of workers in your film industry, you would not bother to call a press conference." What does this mean? Should you get beaten up because you are rich? Should not rules that apply to all citizens of India apply to you? What kind of logic is this?

Anand: No. But if you see the resources and wealth of a country as limited, then you can make the argument that there is a link between being poor and being rich. That the rich are not rich in a disconnected manner, but they actually contribute towards keeping people like slumdwellers in a position of extreme poverty.

Certainly, if there are people from the film industry who sustain an attitude of sympathy towards the working poor, over a period of time, and can be counted on for support on issues like democratic rights, I think that people will cease to be cynical about them. But it will take time to develop that kind of credibility



**The other woman on hunger strike —
Gurubai Koli**

because it is rare for people of the film industry to take a stand, consistently.

Shabana: I think the industry is waking up now. Earlier, they have taken up causes, but always those connected with film workers like technicians or spot boys. Now a few tentative steps are being made. They should be encouraged.

Anand: Can we talk about your work experience? For instance, in the last 15 years, I've only made five films and they were documentaries that I really believed in. People question this way of doing things because it's slowing down my output. It takes me a long time to raise money. People suggest that I should make some advertising or fiction films to make money so that I can then make films I believe in. Do you think it is possible to separate work from belief?

Shabana: I have been separating them for a long time, but I can't do it any more. In the past, I have done films which went against my grain. But now, for no amount of money in the world would I do a film where a woman is degraded. For example, a film called *Nasib Apna Apna* was offered to me. It is about a

woman whose husband leaves her for another woman because she is not pretty. Then she becomes very glamorous and falls at his feet to get him to take her back. The posters showed both women falling at the man's feet and the slogan read: "Whether good or bad, my husband is my god." I was absolutely furious that the producer should even want to make such a film. He looked at me as if I was mad. He said the film would be a success. And it was a success.

A few years ago, I did act in films like *Thodi Si Bewafai* in which there is a dialogue: "It is better to be miserable in one's husband's house than to be happy in one's natal home." Now, I could never work in such a film.

Anand: You once said in an interview that in the process of growing up, one rebels against many things to which one later reverts back. Would you see your acting in films like *Thodi Si Bewafai* as part of reverting back?

Shabana: No, no, certainly not. What I meant was that, I used to always say: "I am apolitical, I have nothing to do with politics." I think that could have been a subconscious rebellion, wanting to keep away from the atmosphere of my parents' home which was politically committed. But, ultimately, one comes full circle and finds one's roots in one's beginning. I realise now that one can't say: "I have nothing to do with politics." Politics is entering your kitchen and you cannot say you will have nothing to do with it.

Anand: Given the nature of the commercial film industry, don't you feel that it is almost inevitable for the values of the dominant power groups in society to get reflected in commercial films? Values of the rich, and of men, because society is controlled by the upper classes, and by men. It is because I feel I cannot enter the market system without in some way making serious compromises, diluting what I have to say, that I make documentary rather than feature films.

Shabana: I think the best way to fight

it is to join the fray. It's all very well to make films which are viewed by a handful of people who are, in any case, "enlightened." But it is necessary to bring about change in the mainstream cinema as well.

I think it is very important to have more thinking writers in the industry. If we had better writers, better films could be made. Because I think, often, people

pregnant. I was supposed to say: "Oh my god, we are ruined." Now, I wanted to change that. But if I told them that I shouldn't say we are ruined because we are not really ruined, they would have looked at me in horror and thought me perfectly immoral. So I quickly calculated and said: "If I say that, then, when she commits suicide in the next scene, the audience will think that the mother drove

to feel dissatisfied with that position. Like, Sridevi, who is doing very well and commanding a very big price, said she ultimately would like to do films that say something about women. This is because they see that those who do quality work are regarded with respect. This creates in them a certain awareness.

Anand: As a woman and a Muslim, how do you react to the controversy over the Shahbano case and the Muslim Women's Act?

Shabana: It's so very, very complicated. When I, as a Muslim, talk about a uniform civil code, I can talk about it with the satisfaction of knowing that in the majority community I will be regarded as a secular, fairminded person. But when there were riots in Moradabad or in Bhiwandi, I did not speak, I did not ask why Muslims were being treated like that. At that time, people like Banatwala and Shahabudin raised their voices and said: "What the hell is going on." They are not scared even though they know they will be called communalists. But I kept quiet, perhaps because I knew I would be branded as communal if I had spoken up then. Then what right do I have to talk about a uniform civil code?

Also, who are the people who are most strongly raising their voice for a uniform civil code? Balasaheb Deoras and other Hindu fundamentalists. What should one do in such a situation?

As for the Act, it is obviously the worst thing that could be formulated against women. There is no way anyone can prove it will work in favour of women. It is ridiculous to say that a woman should be supported by those persons who will inherit from her. If a woman was in a position to leave an inheritance to others, why would she go through the whole rigmarole of asking for maintenance? As a woman, I revolt against it. I see that it is completely wrong. But the issue is complicated because Muslims, being a minority, see any kind of attack on their personal law as a threat to their identity. There are no



Reoccupying the site at Sanjay Gandhi Nagar on April 1

are not even aware of what they are perpetuating in their films. I don't think all of them are evil, I think they are naive almost. When you point out the stereotypes in their films, they say: "We are calling women goddesses. How can you say we are against women?"

Therefore, I would work in a film that has traditional values but doesn't say anything against women although it doesn't have anything of very great value to say, either. For instance, in one film I was doing, my daughter got raped and about 20 scenes later, she was shown wearing a black sari. I asked: "Why show her in black?" They said: "Madam, she was raped." I screamed and shouted and said: "So what? Is she going to wear black all her life? In any case, she is the victim. She hasn't committed the rape." Later in the film, she throws up in the bathroom and I realise she is

the daughter to suicide by saying 'we are ruined.' So can I say something like 'Oh my god, what shall we do?' And they said: 'Yes, yes, you can do that.'" So, by playing clever little games, one can bring about small changes. People criticise me for this, but if better lines can be put in, even though the contour of the film does not change, I do not see why it should not be done.

Anand: Nowadays, there are films like *Coolie* or *Insaf Ka Tarazu* or *Bahu Ki Awaz* which seem to take cognizance of political issues. How do you react to these films?

Shabana: I react very, very angrily to them because they in fact reinforce the values that they pretend to attack. They are the more evil films. But I think a way can be worked out of the contradiction.

Today, even women who have been playing glamour kitten roles have begun

immediate answers to it.

I do not know my religion well enough to talk about it. I have to study it much more deeply. When I react against the Act, I react as a woman, as a person, raising her voice against exploitation.

Anand: Do you see what happened in Sanjay Gandhi Nagar as a turning point of sorts for you?

Shabana: Yes, as a turning point in my perception and my sense of responsibility. All my actions will have to be seen in the context of how far I have gone. I cannot close my eyes any more and say I was only concerned with this issue. Obviously, it is related to a number of other things and I don't know where it will go.

Anand: Sometimes, I feel caught in the role I am playing. One finds one lives up to the image because of what other people will say. Since one has done this, one must do that also, otherwise people will call one a hypocrite. So one can get caught in actions which one does not necessarily feel from the inside but which have become a part of the role one plays.

Shabana: Yes, but as long as you are constantly aware of that, you can be on your guard. A way can be found to deal with it.

Anand: In my case, my milieu is quite politically active. So I get peer group pressure to do the work I am doing. But I assume you would get another kind of peer group pressure, people saying : "Why are you getting involved in all this?"

Shabana: But the people whose opinion I value are the kind of people who constantly reinforce what I think are correct values. My parents and my husband are a very strong source of influence for me. From them I derive my strength.

If I had been married to a completely different kind of person, it would have created a very stormy situation for me. In fact, Javed has made me aware of the strong sense of guilt that successful

women feel in India. You are a success in your work but you are constantly guilty about it, so you underplay it. When you come home, you say: "Oh, all that success is for outside. At home, I am just this normal housewife, just your sister, or your daughter, so please don't think I am taking anything away from you by being so strong and being a person in my own terms." He stripped that mask and said: "Don't play a female act for me. You didn't have to be guilty about being a success."

After the hunger strike I told him I was very grateful for all his support. He said: "Shabana, you are using the word 'grateful' because you think in terms of me allowing you to be you." He said I should take his support for granted.

Strange things are happening to me. The whole thing is like a film. Here is this actress who works in many different films. And, slowly, her perception starts changing because of the kinds of films she works in. And though she has always said she is not going to be politicised, ultimately, she gets drawn in. There are times when a part and you become one. It doesn't happen with every part but with certain parts.

For instance, when we were doing *Paar*, in which I play a harijan woman who has been forced to migrate from the village to the city, there is one scene in which we sleep on the pavement. Artificial rain and artificial lights were being used and there was a lot of noise from the generators. We were doing it on an actual pavement in Calcutta where people were lying, asleep. I am getting gooseflesh as I am telling you this. There was one woman who was sleeping virtually next to me and she slept without stirring through that entire shooting. She must have been so tired after the day's work. It was something that moved me, pained me, very deeply.

Anand: When you went on the hunger strike, did you feel you were acting as an individual taking a stand, or did you feel connected to a large

movement which I can broadly describe as a human rights movement?

Shabana: Of course, I feel connected with the movement. I derive my strength from it. I am propelled by it, along with the current.

But I would like the country to reach a stage where any individual who raises his or her voice will be heard. I questioned myself about the hunger strike. Would I have gone on the hunger strike had I not been sure that such a big issue would be made of it? If I were not a well known person, just a voice in the wilderness, would I have gone on the strike? This disturbs me.

Anand: I don't think that's a correct question to ask yourself because I, for instance, definitely didn't go on strike to test my will power or because I wanted to die for a cause. For me, it was a good strategy, it was the last resort. The government was not willing to concede a very reasonable demand for a basic human right and I felt confident that going on hunger strike would force a response, would mobilise public opinion.

Finally, how do you feel about the future? Do you feel confident?

Shabana: Yes, most certainly.

Anand: Can you talk about what makes you feel confident?

Shabana: Because I think it's snowballing. All the issues may not be immediately related. But the final goal is justice and there are strong currents towards that. That's why I feel confident.

Even during the hunger strike, people who came to support us were not only those who work with slumdweller, but also people connected with civil liberties issues or women's organisations or against police atrocities. They were all united in the search for justice. So one didn't feel limited to one small issue. Don't you feel like that?

Anand: Yes, I definitely feel that everywhere in the country there are more and more struggles taking place with which I can get involved, of which I can feel proud, as an Indian, or, rather, as a human being. □