

## Remembering Raj Thapar

Raj Thapar, cofounder with her husband, Romesh Thapar, of the monthly journal *Seminar*, which provides a forum for free discussion of problems, national and international, died of cancer on April 10, 1987. Raj's commitment to ideas of social justice and human freedom was evident in her lucid and concerned writings in *Seminar* and elsewhere.

She was also deeply involved with children's literature and had written several books for children in English and Hindi. Two of the better known are *Introducing India* and *Seventh Daughter of the Sun*. She had worked on the children's magazine *Toy Cart* and also served as chairperson of Bal Bhawan. In her last years, she was planning a foundation for children's media and literature that should be child centred, and free from the hidden agenda of preaching to children.

I was not one of Raj Thapar's close friends. It was only in the last five years that I got to know her a little. That little was enough to imprint her in my mind as a woman of immense charm, intelligence, dignity and grace.

A communist in her youth, Raj grew critical of the party's opportunism and authoritarianism. In 1959, she and Romesh launched *Seminar*.

The *Seminar* office with its pleasant atmosphere, conducive to discussion and conversation, reflected Raj's personality. She was always there at her desk, a picture of command and control. Over the last 28 years, she edited and proofed each of the 332 issues of *Seminar* that appeared, and continued this work even in the last few weeks of her life.

The Emergency brought forth the

best in her political instincts. Formerly friends of Indira Gandhi, she and Romesh refused to succumb to the one party, one person rule. *Seminar* was one of the few journals which closed down during the Emergency rather than submit to precensorship. It resumed publication only in 1977.

Through *Seminar*, she kept herself informed about many things that affect our lives today—communalism, ecology, women's issues, cultural genocide, economic change. She intervened in and was part of the national debate. Her writing always held the attention with its immediacy, descriptive power and conversational quality.

Besides her own impending end, her life's most critical ordeal was the ordeal of Delhi in November 1984. I met Raj Thapar many times during those days. When I read what she wrote about the scars on Delhi's soul, I was reassured that I was not alone in my madness, that it was not mad to be mad.

"How do you do it?", she wrote. "Yes. How is it done? You take a stick, wrap some cloth around it, dip it in a mixture of kerosene and some other deadly stuff, and you hurl it into a lifetime's work, a shop, a taxi, a mud hut, a scooter. Then you catch the inmates, you chop off their hair and amidst gleeful shouting, you hurl them into the raging fire, one by one...What sort of monster can do this? No one bred on nonviolence and meditation and *shanti*. So, were all these meaningless words, defeated and buried under the onslaught of the values of today? ... And when you recognise amongst the vicious faces some belonging to the ones that rule



you, and you see the police, meant to protect you, pass by the raging fire in jeeps, frightened or conniving with the killer squads, where do you go? To which place, to which person, to which wall? ... Let us begin to look into this and punish the identifiable guilty ... For it is not a Hindu-Sikh problem alone..." (*Lokayan Bulletin* 3(1)1985).

Raj was one of those whose youth coincided with the youth of independent India. One whose idealism never vanished, pained though she was by the decline in standards of political behaviour.

I shall always remember Raj as a remarkable woman, a remarkable human being,

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