

# Benazir Interviewed

## — Extracts from Newstrack



We reproduce here some extracts from an interview with Benazir Bhutto by Brian Wahlen, on **India Today's** December 1988 Newstrack video cassette. The interviewer got Benazir to talk in a way that communicates at a human level with the viewer. Newstrack has carried interviews with a number of eminent political personalities. Most of them emerge as opportunists mouthing empty phrases, and giving almost computerised answers to cover up their political horsetrading. The interview with Benazir stands out for its dignity and straightforwardness, except on the tricky issue of Pakistan's relations with the superpowers where she resorts to the usual rhetoric to cover up her compulsions. Benazir, like any politician, must have many faces. The Newstrack interview does not appear to be a typical one. Here, she comes across as endearingly sophisticated and dignified — a rare breed among politicians today. However, this does not provide sufficient basis to assess the political direction she is likely to take, given the compulsions under which she operates. Therefore, we present two articles, one by an Indian, the other by a Pakistani, presenting different points of view on the nature of the change ushered in by the reestablishment of democratic government in Pakistan.

*Here you are, a 35 year old woman, mother of a two month old child; and a Muslim, in a very conservative society. Isn't it a very extraordinary position for a woman to be in?*

I don't know. I suppose, on the one hand, it is an unusual phenomenon. On the other hand, as far as I'm concerned, I never thought of myself as a woman fighting for a place as a woman, but really as a person who was caught up in a dictatorship, which radicalised so many families. People who were apolitical became politicised and as a consequence we threw our all into the struggle against the dictatorship.

*Nonetheless, you are a woman, and don't a lot of Pakistani men find it surprising?*

Well, I'm sure there are some who must be finding it surprising but there's another side to the picture. Whereas in the West, women do tend to have more rights and don't have the same air of deference but fewer of them attain high political office, in the East, women in general may not have

equality or may not have so much confidence, but the respect that there is for a mother figure or a sister figure surmounts all other considerations.

*To some extent, was your involvement in politics involuntary initially?*

That's right. It was more a sense of loyalty and duty to my father. He was fighting for his life and I wanted to stay in Pakistan and help him fight for it. After his assassination, it was a sense of loyalty to his followers, those who were in jail and were looking towards the family to provide leadership. And then it became a loyalty to the mission for which they were fighting. There were all the time goals, which changed somewhat but ultimately ended up being the goal to see democratic and constitutional rule restored.

*That must have been a very sad time which you narrate in your autobiography 'Daughter of the East' when you were not allowed to meet your father, to touch him when you met.... Was it those experiences which motivated you?*

Sadness doesn't motivate you. Anger

does. They treated us so shabbily that it gave birth to anger that you can't accept being treated like this. When I was in jail it used to be one long day going into another. If somebody had been kind to me, shown any kindness at all, I think I would have broken. But when people are mean to you, it steels you.

*Has Zia's death purged some of the anger and bitterness you felt?*

It wasn't so much his death as the end of his era which was like a burden being relieved. Because while he was there running the dictatorship, it was a tremendous burden. He had to be opposed because if he was not opposed it would mean that he had triumphed. So the ending of his era was like the lifting of a burden.

*How much of a sacrifice was it agreeing to an arranged marriage?*

Well, I always grew up thinking I had to make all my own decisions. I always saw myself as an independent person and independence came from making your own choices. So I could never have imagined that I would have an arranged marriage.

But there are so many different obligations, and ultimately I ended up leading a life where decisions were made for me. Coming into politics — the decision was made for me; even going into exile — the decision was made for me because of my own ill health; and when it came to my personal life, the decision again was made.

Politics consumed me so much and I had to be so careful that I was not associated with anyone because of the possible scandal. Even in the West when people get to know each other there's so much public interest that many relationships go awry. In a Muslim country with my political obligations, it was something I couldn't accept.

*Why are you so honest and straightforward about it? If you said that although it was an arranged marriage, you were deeply in love with the person before you married him, no one could contradict you. Why do you tell the truth about it?*

I don't know. It's not been put to me that way. I grew up in an era when people laid their cards on the table, and were straightforward. Sometimes I'm told I'm too straightforward, and I shouldn't be. So I don't know if it's a fault or not. But I'm very happy in my marriage now and I'm really glad I married the person I did.

*How does your husband feel about the way you frankly discuss your marriage?*

(Laughing) Oh, he doesn't like me talking about our private life, he doesn't like me talking about the child. He doesn't like it at all. That's why I don't discuss my personal life. I remember before the baby was born, everyone wanted to ask me about the baby and I was under censorship not to speak about the child.

*Will politics always come first for you?*

I don't think politics for me has been a passion. I remember my father saying it's a romance, but for me it's a sense of duty, an obligation. I'd really like to see the country on Constitutional grounds but the helter skelter of politics does not have an appeal. I've always been more attracted

by the foreign office or a job where there is intellectual stimulation. But not the political or personal helter skelter life and the security, and not knowing what's going to happen next.

*Jinnah and your father, though devout Muslims, were secular in their attitude towards the State, whereas Zia took the State towards Islamisation. Which way do you incline?*

That's one way to see the question. But I see it another way. I don't think Zia really propounded the theories of Islam. Rather than Islamisation of society, we saw a militarisation of society. But he couldn't say it was militarisation, so he kept using



**Benazir shortly after her father was hanged**

the name of Islam. As far as Islam itself is concerned, it's never been a point at issue in Pakistan. We're all Muslims and the Constitution of Pakistan, which the PPP gave the country, is an Islamic Constitution. The first principle of PPP is that Islam is our faith.

But our political derivatives from interpretation of Islam are of a democratic society whereas General Zia tried to reinterpret it in terms of a militarised society. So I don't think it's so much Islamisation but it's more what does Islamisation mean? Does it mean the cruelty and repression of the Zia years or does it mean tolerance, brotherhood and individual freedoms?

As far as theocracy is concerned, there are many different schools of interpretation in Muslim thought. Once you get into the definition of what an Islamic law is, you divide Muslims on the basis of sect and school, and you get Muslims killing Muslims because each one thinks his interpretation is correct. For me, the glory of Islam does not lie in the sight of Muslim killing Muslim but in the unity of the Muslim community. I think the unity of the Muslim community is achieved by the State not involving itself in the personal decisions of individuals but in leaving individuals to answer before God or before their own local clergy.

*Would you want to be genuinely nonaligned?*

I would certainly like to keep relations with the US, which are at an excellent level, going. Because we need assistance for economic development. Our vision of Pakistan is one of economic growth. The heart of the party programme is economic growth. But we think this will not preclude our developing better relations with the Soviets, now that they are withdrawing from Afghanistan, because their presence there had complicated the relationship.

*Would you like to build bridges between the West and the East?*

Yes, I think the world is becoming much smaller and it should be seen not in terms of divides but more in terms of one world, sharing common values. Unfortunately, so few countries in the East have democracy that democracy is considered a Western value. I think it's a universal value. Dignity to the individual or respect before the law is considered a Western value. I don't think that's right. I think it's a universal value. □