

MALLIKA'S MAHABHARATA

A great family of nation-builders, scientists, artists. So why is Narendra Modi hounding Mallika Sarabhai? asks MIRA KAMDAR

It is impossible in Gujarat these days to avoid the smiling face of Chief Minister Narendra Modi. In this pre-election season, his image is everywhere, dominating shining posters that now adorn even the smallest villages. *Varsh ek. Siddi unek* (One year. Many achievements), extolls the legend below Modi's towering figure.

Modi is nothing if not an image-master. The Gujarat Government's website is a hymn of unbridled celebration of "the leading state in the country". Modi is portrayed as a modest, "middle-class" man, devoted to the people of Gujarat; a hard-working technocrat whose "closest companion" is his laptop computer.

There is no mention of the fact that under Modi's leadership communal violence was allowed to rage for months after the Godhra killings in February 2002, that cases filed in the aftermath of the many horrors committed against the Muslims, have been allowed to languish or have resulted in blanket acquittals so glaringly implausible as to prompt the Supreme Court to demand the cases be re-heard or moved out of Gujarat. Nowhere does the website mention the campaign of fear, the systematic silencing of dissent that has been waged in Modi's Gujarat against any and every critic.

The corruption of the lower judiciary in Gujarat has reached such a level that, for a mere 40,000 rupees, bogus charges can be filed against no lesser personages than Abdul Kalam or VN Khare—an event so shocking it prompted the Supreme Court Chief Justice to ask: "What is happening in Gujarat?"

What is happening is the calculated creation of a climate of fear and intimidation enforced through abuse of police and judicial power. Those who won't toe the official line, who stand up for equal justice under the law, are treated as "anti-social and anti-nationalist". Or called what has become the worst insult of all in Modi's Gujarat: a Muslim. When Sangh forces staged a demonstration against



Mallika Sarabhai as Draupadi in Peter Brookes' Mahabharata; (Below) with father Vikram Sarabhai

human rights lawyer Girish Patel, the demonstrators could find no baser slander than to chant: "Patel, you Muslim!" Modi is fond of proclaiming: "Ahmedabad is no Juhapura"—the city's Muslim ghetto.

But the jewel in this crown of thorns is certainly the incessant, ridiculous and groundless harassment of one of Gujarat's most famous citizens: Mallika Sarabhai.

"Fear is one of their favorite weapons. People are petrified of what Modi and his goons will do," lamented Sarabhai when I met her in Ahmedabad recently. "People don't realise this isn't about me. I am a symbol for them."

Clearly, if Mallika Sarabhai—internationally renowned dancer, actress, choreographer and champion of human rights, the daughter of no less a national hero than Vikram Sarabhai—if she can be silenced, bankrupted, harassed into oblivion or exile, then what hope have mere

mortals of resisting?

It seems the old adage that "no good deed goes unpunished" is nowhere more true than here. A list of victims of Modi's silencing tactics includes Nafisa Ali and Dr Ahmed Shakhil, who ran camps for refugees from the violence when the government did nothing.

However, what really matters to the Modi government is money, and those who won't simply let bygones be bygones with regard to the messy business of ethnic cleansing, are blocking the money parade. That cannot be tolerated at all.

Last September, in a speech on the occasion of the 'Vibrant Gujarat Global Investors Summit,' Modi said, "If you plant a rupee in the Gujarati soil, you might be able to get a dollar in return!" The CM asked: "What is unique about Gujarat?" and answered that it is "its reasonable and peaceful labour culture" where "the man-days lost in Gujarat due to labour strife

are the least in India..."

A cowed labour force aside, like the state's inter-linked rivers project, rupees seem to flow not only into the state's soil but into the pockets of its Bajrangi politicians; out of the palms of the pious into the

Mercedes of Gujarat's many godmen and the new temples popping up all over.

Which helps to explain why Mallika Sarabhai has become a special target of the Modi government: Her very existence as a person of conscience who uses her

considerable status not for personal gain but in defence of the core values that once made Gujarat truly great—the quest for truth, justice and a life of dignity for all—is inconceivable. She is a living rebuke to a society gone cynically corrupt.

"People can't understand why I'm not on the take, on the make," Sarabhai mused when we last met. "They can't understand why I don't keep all my money as a dancer..."

The Modi government forgets that Mallika embodies the proud Gujarati tradition, the Gandhian tradition, certainly, but also that of her indomitable ancestor, Anusuya Sarabhai.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. visited India, he is said to have remarked: "I come to India as a visitor but I come to Ahmedabad as a pilgrim." It is difficult to imagine the great civil rights' leader making that same pilgrimage today without a divided heart: with reverence for Gandhiji, but with sadness also for the utter destruction of almost everything the Mahatma stood for.

A *Non Resident Gujarati*, Mira Kamdar is Senior Fellow, World Policy Institute, New York. ■

THIS IS MY KARMABHOOMI...



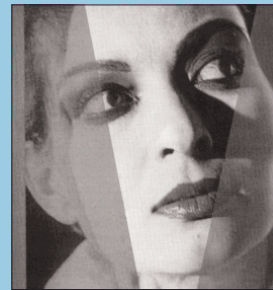
Mallika Sarabhai's interview with Batuk Vora

When did you start zeroing in on social issues and use the arts to bring attention to them?

How did it begin? Did it begin when I was 12 and decided that I would follow my father's footsteps in making my own decisions about what is right and wrong in life irrespective of whether they were acceptable to society or not? Or when I realised that privilege meant using all you had to help others who didn't? When I decided to quit a lucrative film career because I didn't like the people involved? When I stood up to authority or refused to be cowed down by "better sense" in the face of injustice? Or when, as a dancer, it made more sense to me to

dance about the horrors of caste violence than of bhakti and the love for Shiva?

I have been brought up in a family where people have fought for what they thought was justice and truth. My great aunt, Anasuya, fought for the rights of mill workers. My aunt Lakshmi, my grandmother Ammu, my other aunt Mridula, my cousins Subhashini and Srilata—they all fought for others, for what is right. I suppose I have done it ever since I can remember, though using the arts for activism started



after my work with Peter Brook, who made *The Mahabharata*, seeing the extraordinary effect that my interpretation of Draupadi had on women across the world.

What is your ideal, personally, and for the country?

There is a saying that is no longer valid. When dalits in a village get their eyes gouged out for daring to look at their 'betters', which is the smoke and which the fire? When young women get acid thrown at them because they refuse advances from men, which is the smoke and which the fire? Alas, today, where there are real fires we no longer want to see the smoke...

My India is one where we can live as Indians, in truth, under the Constitution, unafraid, in equality and dignity. All of us. I am putting to test how far I will go to help

'See that these restrictions are removed as she is not a criminal' Supreme Court

CHRONOLOGY OF A KAFKAESQUE JOURNEY



March 14, 2002. Mallika deposed before the Minorities Commission.

March 20. Deposed before NHRC.

● A peace meeting was called in April by Mallika. Venue was originally Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Ahmedabad, but they backed out due to threats. Meeting was shifted to Gandhi Ashram. About 300 participants from all over India, including senior Muslims, gathered. The po-

lice arrived. They were given a one page write-up on the peace meeting. At lunch, Medha Patkar arrived. No formal invitation had been sent to her. In an hour, members of BJP, Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and Congress, with VK Saxena of the National Council for Civil Liberties, attacked Medha and tried to attack Mallika. She escaped. Medha was protected by Prakash Shah, leader of the Movement for Secular Democracy and the police. Some journalists were beaten up. Later, hooligans out-

side Mallika's Darpana Academy shouted abuses, threatening to burn down the institution. They were patronised by a leader who is now the home minister of Gujarat.

● Mallika started getting death threats. She and her two children went underground. She had to leave the country for two months.

● Darpana staff get threatening calls.

April 16, 2003. Under the authorship of VK Saxena, *Sandesh* carried a story about Mallika having de-

frauded students of lakhs and that she was a traitor against Gujarat. Manushi Shah's name was not mentioned, but the receipts of other students were reproduced. The same story was given to UNI, PTI, but only *Indian Express*, Mumbai, reproduced it. Threatening calls continued. The story mentioned that Saxena has sent letters to the CM, the home minister and the police to start inquiries in the 'racket'.

April 23. She filed a complaint against two local

Gujarati dailies in the Press Council for their 'derogatory and unethical' publication of reports against her.

July 2003. Inquiries started under additional police commissioner who demanded that all members of the group should file affidavits about the student tour. Five gave affidavits that no fraud was committed. Mallika received a letter with 23 queries; she gave the answers.

● A charity commissioner's inquiry started. They spent a week looking at the 'books'.

Inquiries came to an end by July as no clarifications were sought. CC's report was informally shown to Darpana's finance in-charge and given a clean chit. He was told that the report can't be given due to "pressure from a minister".

19 August 2003. Press Council ruled in favour of Mallika and asked both newspapers to publish proper apologies for all the lies written. *Sandesh* published a tiny apology but *Gujarat Samachar* published nothing. **October 18.** Mallika was



The Witch-Hunt

Batuk Vora
AHMEDABAD

If the witch-hunt during American McCarthyism is still kicking in any 'democracy', it is in India, specifically in Gujarat. In post-war US, those hounded included Arthur Miller, Charlie Chaplin. In Gujarat, it's the liberals. And, of course, Mallika Sarabhai.

In Modi's 'lab', Mallika has been hounded without

respite. Framed under absurd charges by an ex-student, she was declared guilty and hung by the Gujarati media, had her passport taken away, and was barred from leaving the state without the court's permission. On Monday last, the Supreme Court asked the government to "see that these restrictions are removed as she is not a criminal..." "...Sometime one gets an impression that

she is being prosecuted for approaching the court."

Even now, Mallika may face arrest. She is on anticipatory bail. Every few days she stands before a sub-inspector of Naranpura in Ahmedabad to prove that she is back from her an out-of-town trip. Despite having submitted over 100 pages of back accounts, receipts that explain every rupee spent or received by her Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, neither has a chargesheet been framed, nor the case dropped.

Here's how the prosecution was launched: Mallika was accused by Manushi Shah, a part time student and member of the cancelled student tour to Brazil and the US, in the FIR filed with the Naranpura police station stating: Dr Mallika Sarabhai along with others, collected Rs 330,000 (US \$ 7,100 approx) from the complainant on the pretext of sending to America and committed offence of cheating and breach of trust by not sending her and others and retaining a portion of the money. These charges are offences under IPC sections 120-B, 114-34, 420 and 469. She organises tours illegally to America and other countries by collecting lakhs of rupees by acting as a tour organiser."

The FIR says all monies due to Ms Shah were returned, and the fraud lies in misleading her into thinking she could immigrate illegally and then preventing

her from doing so.

In April, seven months before the case was filed, on the basis of a letter by one 'VK Saxena', and with the blessings of Gujarat Home Minister Amit Shah, the state government constituted a police and charity commissioner's inquiry based on a newspaper report on the cancellation of the tour. Mallika and the Darpana Academy were reported to have cooperated with the authorities and there was no malafide intention. The inquiry came to a halt. Later, that the Daler Mehndi episode provided an opportunity for them to file a case. VK Saxena, leading a dubious pro-Narmada NGO, 'National Council for Civil Liberties', is said to have played a leading role in this case.

There are reports that Modi's right-hand man, Amit Shah, and law minister Ashok Bhatt, are personally taking interest in the case. I was a witness when during the prime minister's visit on April 4, 2002 to Ahmedabad, Mallika (and this writer) came across Bhatt in the lobby of the circuit house annexe, where he verbally attacked her threatening that he would see "how she could dare 'investigate' some NGOs in the name of defending human rights!" He had warned of dire consequences.

One of the prime objectives of the Hindutva brigade is to force Mallika to withdraw her PIL in the Supreme Court after the Gujarat killings.

The prime minister visited Ahmedabad on April 4, 2002. The state government tried to stop Mallika and other non governmental organisations (NGOs), including veteran Gandhian Chunibhai Vaidya, from meeting him. Through the good offices of a senior bureaucrat in the PMO, they succeeded in meeting the prime minister. The PM was surrounded by Narendra Modi, Arun Jaitley and some ministers. I was a witness to what Mallika Sarabhai told the prime minister: "You tell us Vajpayeeji, where are we now supposed to go from here? When such an open nexus between the communal extremists and the state government machinery has made life so unbearable here in Gujarat, where do people turn?"

The writer is a senior journalist

THE SARABHAIS

Institutions built by the Sarabhai family

- Calico Mills—Ambalal Sarabhai
- Jubilee Mills—Ambalal Sarabhai
- Jyoti Sangh—Mridulaben Sarabhai
- Vikas Gruh—Mridulaben Sarabhai
- Majoor Mahajan—Anasuyaben Sarabhai
- Kasturba Gandhi Rashtraiya Smarak Trust, Koba-Sarladevi Sarabhai
- Shreyas Foundation & School—Leenaben Sarabhai
- B.M. Institute of Mental Health—Gautam Sarabhai
- National Institute of Design (NID)—Gautam Sarabhai & Giraben
- Darpana Academy of Performing Arts—Mrinalini & Vikram Sarabhai
- Calico Museum—Giraben Sarabhai
- Ambalal Sarabhai Enterprises, Baroda—Gautam Sarabhai
- Centre for Environment Education—Keya Sarabhai
- Viksat—Kartikeya Sarabhai
- Chetna—Kartikeya Sarabhai

● The Self Employed Women's Association. SEWA was born in 1972 as a trade union of self-employed women. It grew out of the Textile Labour Association, TLA, India's oldest and largest union of textile workers founded in 1920 by Anasuya Sarabhai.

● Institutions built by Dr Vikram Sarabhai, pioneering scientist and visionary

- Ahmedabad Textile Industry's Research Association (ATIRA)
- Physical Research Laboratory (PRL), Ahmedabad
- Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad
- Community Science Centre (CSC), Ahmedabad
- Nehru Foundation for Development (NFD), Ahmedabad
- Ahmedabad Management Association (AMA)
- Sarabhai Chemicals, Baroda
- Sarabhai Glass, Baroda
- Suhrid Geigy Limited, Baroda
- Synbiotics Limited, Baroda
- Sarabhai Merck Limited, Baroda
- Sarabhai Engineering Group, Baroda
- Operations Research Group (ORG), Baroda
- Sarabhai Research Centre (SRC), Baroda
- Systronics, Ahmedabad
- Swastik Oil Mills Limited, Bombay
- Standard Pharmaceuticals Limited, Calcutta
- Thumba Equatorial Rocket Launching Station (TERLS), Trivandrum
- Space Science and Technology Centre (SSTC), Trivandrum
- Sriharikota Rocket Range (SHAR), Sriharikota
- Experimental Satellite Communication Earth Station (ESCES), Ahmedabad
- Satellite Communication System Division (SCSD), Ahmedabad
- Electronics System Division (ESD), Ahmedabad
- Microwave Antenna Systems Engineering Group (MASEG), Ahmedabad
- Audio Visual Instructional Division (AVID), Ahmedabad
- Remote Sensing and Meteorological Division (RSMD), Ahmedabad
- Indian Scientific Satellite Project (ISSP), Bangalore
- Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), Ahmedabad
- Indian National Satellite (INSAT)
- Satellite Launching Vehicle (SLV) Trivandrum
- Satellite Communication Earth Station, Arvi
- Fast Breeder Reactors (FBR), Kalpakkam
- Nuclear Centre for Agriculture, New Delhi
- Variable Energy Cyclotron Project (VECP), Calcutta
- Electronic Prototype Engineering Laboratory (EPEL), Hyderabad
- Bombay Electronic Corporation of India Limited (ECIL), Hyderabad
- Nos. 21,22,23,24,25,26 and 27 were merged under the Space Applications Centre after Dr Sarabhai's death in 1971. No. 32 was renamed as Vikram Earth Station after Dr Sarabhai's death in 1971

MY KURUKSHETRA...

make that a reality in my own small way. The times I am passing through are my experiments with truth. This is my karmabhoomi, my Kurukshetra. Only time will tell how deep was my commitment, how far I was willing to go.

We live in a time when cynicism rules our lives. We have seen so many icons blighted, corrupted, sold out for greed and selfishness, that as a society we have become incapable of believing that some people do what they do because they think it is right. Not right for themselves, or their children or bank accounts, but right for all human beings. I think divisions of caste and creed, religion and gender, are ways in which we hide our fear of facing life and therefore of living life truly and fully. To hide behind the mask of my *gotra*,

clan or religion is to not face the world as myself, a unique individual able to take on the joys of being. It is to live in a trap, like the bird in the cage, we mistake imprisonment for safety. **How far does your desire to be admired lead you to defy social norms and political cynicism?**

I like to be respected, admired, thought as beautiful and talented. But I like even more to be able to wake up every morning with a burning wish to right some wrongs, to use that adulation to break walls of lies and silence that oppress groups, castes, clans or societies. Yes, I am uniquely placed, being the inheritor of the mantle of two families who have given their all to nation-building, to the pride in being Indian—but I do not think I am the only one so placed.

called by STAR News about the 'FIR'. She knew nothing about it. Over the next few hours every TV news channel interviewed her.

October 20. Mallika's lawyer called the APC who said there was no FIR. Police said there was and it has been sent to the court. A copy was not available at either place. Mallika went into hiding to avoid arrest.

October 21. FIR was obtained and anticipatory bail application done.

October 29. Anticipatory bail granted, with a surety, a

Rs 1 lakh guarantee, submission of the passport and a ban on travel outside Gujarat without court's permission.

November 1. Mallika went to the police station and handed over her passport.

November 11. The court gave an interim order to allow her to travel for the next two days only. It said that based on the prosecutor's vehement objections the court would consider further travel only on November 18 (for travel and performances on the 20 and 21). The prosecutor brought the charge of ille-



gal trafficking of human beings, a charge not filed by the complainant, and her alleged 'non-co-operation' to the police.

November 18. Prosecutor objected again saying that she was using her trips "to defame the Gujarat government" and the decision was put off till the day of the show in Pune.

November 20. At 11 am the court decided to grant travel permission. Court informally instructed her not to talk to the press as a serious view of this would be taken before granting her next travel plea on Nov 23. Court asked for hearing on Nov 22.

November 22. Court grants permission for travel to Delhi for TV work.

November 18. Mallika filed a quashing petition in the high court. Hearing set for Nov 25.

November 25. Quashing matter heard in the high court by Justice Akshay

Mehta. Decision was deferred to December 9. Mallika's lawyer Mihir Joshi demanded the complainant's presence.

● Meanwhile, new income tax inquiry on Nov 10, 2003. New inquiry by charity commissioner on November 10, 2003. New police inquiry on November 22.

December 17. Applied for permission in sessions court for a tour out of Gujarat.

January 1, 2004. Got permission for January 3/4 for several postponements. Delhi. For the rest schedule the hearing was on Jan 5.

January 2. Filed application

in sessions court to alter the terms of anticipatory bail. Next hearing of the sessions court scheduled for Jan 27.

January 5. Sessions Court gave permission to travel outside Gujarat from 7.1.2004 to 11.01.2004.

January 12. Sessions Court gave permission to travel outside Gujarat from 15.1.2004 to 31.1.2004.

January 22 & 23. High Court heard quashing after several postponements. Judgment reserved.

January 27. Session Court heard new bail application.