

INTERVIEW

“A DEMOCRACY CAN FUNCTION ONLY WITH A PLURAL VIEW,”

Says Mallika Sarabhai to **BHAVYA RAJ JOSHI AND NAMITA RAJESH**

Presently, how relevant do you think art is, as an instrument for social reform?

You know one of the greatest problems with arts in this country is arts funding. The corporate do not really fund the arts. The government has been but if you look at the previous time of the NDA, the artistes towed the line and got funding, got land and the rest did not, and I think that is one very clever of seeing what survives and what does not.

Your take on the stance that activism is more about commentary than action?

The problem is that the point of view from which we come, by definition encourages discussion and dissent. If you encourage discussion and dissent, then the time taken by the different parties to come to a consensus is very long. Hatred and an approach that ‘you will do what I say’, which is the RSS and BJP approach, is more efficient and faster. I have been saying it since 2002, that we (the ‘dissent’) need to put money into a think cum action tank and go on the same kind of interquote “War Footing”, otherwise this is not going to happen and that is what is happening. But by definition we are against that. So, it is a conundrum.

You joined the Aam Aadmi Party because you claimed that their values matched yours. Does that hold true even now?

Right now, I don’t know what the values of AAP are, that is one of the problems. My values, as far as transparency and so on were concerned, were very akin to what Arvind Kejriwal’s were. I was working with Arvind Kejriwal since 2008. So, I have been a part of the RTI movement, I believe in complete transparency and in governance. But when Kumar Vishwas made those very anti-women comments and somebody else made those very racist comments, I immediately asked: What are the non negotiable (issues) for AAP? And I still haven’t got an answer. I have not given up because now I think we need to step in and make those non negotiable.

Where do you think AAP is headed now?

I have absolutely no idea. I think everything is up in the air. It depends on how active are the groups that they have created, like Lalita Ramdas heads the gender group but they kept saying that everybody was so much in election mode that nobody was listening to them. Also, we need to figure out, what is happening at the state level because in Gujarat just the fact that I became a member seems to completely unnerve the party. I still haven’t understood the reason, whether it was because I was getting so much media attention or it was because I called a spade a spade, even if it was within the party. I do not know, I still do not know. So, yes I still think that a political space like AAP still needs to exist. I have now been outside the fighting segment for 30 years and unless we get into the political system, nothing is going to change.

Why did you not contest elections this time? Is it because of your experience in 2009?

No no no! Not at all! I think if AAP wanted me to contest, they should have given me enough time to build up a rapport with the people. If you are told six or eight days before the elections then you do not have time, and my conscience does not allow me to do it.

What is your idea of India?

Well obviously, I believe in this Idea of India and obviously I believe that any democracy can only function with a plural view. I am as concerned as everybody else but less shocked because I have lived in Gujarat under Mr Narendra Modi, we have had it since 2002 and the rest of India is getting a taste of it now otherwise it was out there. These kinds of conclave are good but they are limited. We need to get out to students, we need to get out to young people and show them an alternative, show them what this government is really going to be like. We need to convince people that having lots of money but not having the right to say anything you want is not a happy future. What is happening in Hong Kong right now is very much the case in India.

When civil society groups like this one talk about one mindset, and groups like the RSS also propagate one, albeit different mindset, what differentiates the two?

I do not think we are emphasising on one mindset. We are emphasising on lots of different mindsets. That is the problem, every single individual's right wherever she comes from, whatever language she speaks, whichever god she believes in or does not, whoever she wants as her partner, we are defending her and his right to be an equal Indian as anybody else and that is not like the RSS. That is how we are different; we are defending the rights for you to say exactly what you want and believe in exactly whom you want. I have no right as a fellow Indian to say that you are wrong. I can disagree with you but I cannot say that you are a lesser Indian because of that.