

PERSONALITY OF THE WEEK

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IQBAL MALIK

Ex Rea IHE

"I learnt my mothering from monkeys"

Ex lecturer / Reader IHE DU

People take Iqbal Malik for anything but a scientist. Sighs this zoology professor, who looks quite stunning in a long, rust-coloured silk kurta: "They call me a dancer, a theatre artist, a painter, but never a scientist. When I tell them that I happen to be just that, their eyes pop out. Is it a crime for a scientist to look good?"

What makes Iqbal such a different stroke is her dogged deviance from the mainstream. A scientist, she looks quite the dumb brunette. Upwardly mobile politician, Satyapal Malik's wife, she hates the political ball game. No test-tube babe cloistered in the lab, she is out in the open experimenting with real, wild monkeys. She agrees: "If there is one thing that I have resisted all my life, it is copying. I want to be an original." A PhD in selected behavioural traits of free-ranging monkeys, Iqbal has emerged from the conventional bounds of pure science, applying her research to bettering monkeys' lives and fighting for their freedom as well as making friends with her subjects of research who now accept her as their own. Accompanying her to the Tughlaqabad range, one is surprised to see them flocking around her, pulling her hair, sitting on her lap, eating out of her palm.

The romance began one sunny morning 13 years ago when she plonked herself at the

This former professor, who attracted the spotlight when she took up the cause of the Tughlaqabad monkeys, believes in being original in whatever she does

By Anshu Khanna

Tughlaqabad shooting range to observe the rhesus monkeys. "I already had a job as a professor and it was not compelling for me to do research. (But) I did not want to be restricted to a lab. Having lived part of my life in small towns like Jalandhar and Meerut, the love for the wilds was very strong in me." Besides, her family used to spend their summer vacations in hill-stations, "where for a good two-three months we would live with nature, internalising the beauty of this earth." While on holiday, Iqbal would also "sit for hours observing monkeys who abound in the hills. I think they entered my subconscious right then."

Of her first day at the 14th century fort, Iqbal says: "I was tense, apprehensive. So were they. I was an alien to them, a human who was probably here to harm them. So they came close to me, tried to scare me off, snarl at me. I just sat there. I

made no move at all either to befriend them or scare them. You see, in such field research, it is important to become a fixture in their environment. After a (few) days, the animals begin to accept you. You no longer pose a threat. And then you slowly, slowly keep decreasing your distance, as I did between the monkeys and me."

What subjects did her research hinge on? "I was basically interested in their daily activity pattern, their spatial distribution, their social hierarchy and fusion in groups and above all the mother-infant relationship. I choose rhesus monkeys for research as they are unique to our region. Besides, we are lucky that they are actually free-ranging which is rare globally." It was all this that made her research work extremely rare and precious to primatologists internationally. "Very few people have 13 years of data on any one group of monkeys. So, I do get a lot of respect internationally."

She also grew personally as a result of her research work. "The rhesus monkeys are so close to humans. I learnt my mothering from monkeys as I was carrying Dev Kabir when I started my research. They are so well organized socially with such dignified leadership that I feel our politicians can learn a few things from them...The bond between mother and child is strongest. The mother monkey knows how much freedom to give to her child and when to retrieve it back from danger. I was mentally prepared to be a mother myself after seeing her. I



Iqbal Malik relaxes in her colour

waded through my son's upbringing which was totally based on the relationship a monkey forces with her child." And it is this mother-child relationship among rhesus monkeys that has made Iqbal fight tooth and nail every time trapping has occurred in the ranges and mothers have been separated from infants. She recalls: "As Delhi grew and Tughlaqabad came into the purview of human habitat, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) was pressurised into clearing the monkey population from that area. So one fine morning the MCD's trappers landed up there and ruthlessly began trapping the monkeys. Mothers were separated from children, some babies died of hunger and then I got wind of it from my field workers. I rushed to the ranges, picked up all the abandoned babies and took them to Town Hall where the monkeys were trapped. I enrolled the help of the police and sat there with my workers till midnight when my monkeys were released and the mothers were united with their babies after which we released all of them back in the ranges."

Subsequently she taught MCD workers the fine art of trapping.



fact, most of my clothes have been picked up from villages around Tughlaqabad and even the car I drive has been with me for the past 12 years.

"I was very upset with Satyapal when he after leaving Charan Singh's party joined Indira Gandhi. I am against political elitism and that was one move that Satyapal repented later." However, in the Malik residence politics does not play an important role, although it was politics that brought the two together. "When I was doing my MSc in Meerut, Satyapal was president of the college union and one day he stopped all of us from attending classes. I got angry and said that I had come to college to study and intended to do so." The fire in her enchanted Malik and soon he convinced her to stand for elections. "I became the secretary (of the union) and we began associating closely. Though I never realised how fond

PHOTOGRAPHS: PHAL S GIROTA/FOTOLOOK

ully, but inexpensively, decorated house

"I helped them relocate the monkeys in the wilds close by without breaking groups or families because an individual from a broken group will eventually harm humans entering its life and act with inbuilt aggression." She has helped in relocation projects at Rashtrapati Bhavan and Hindon Airport.

"It is we humans who are at fault. To begin with, we treat the monkeys as god, Hanuman avatars, giving them food to eat.

And then later when we stop and the beast opens our fridge to help himself, we panic. I request everyone, don't pamper monkeys."

Iqbal is also a passionate animal rights activist. "Animals are being poached every other day. They are being exported to labs where they are put to the worst torture for the sake of our preservation. Scientists pour bottles of kohl on their eyes to see the impact, they are made to swallow a whole lipstick till they

are sick. Why force-feed a whole lipstick? Humans don't swallow a whole lipstick. Why pour a whole bottle of kajal? We don't apply so much of it. It's cruel and insane. I don't wear a single cosmetic that has been tested on animals."

What does she feel about Indian politicians, considering hubby Satyapal happens to be one. "At present I am very disgusted with politicians. A majority of them are disheartening and I strongly feel that perhaps we should just handpick a few good men and make a party." And would Satyapal be one of them? "I think so. Satyapal is a principled man who, like me, believes in an egalitarian society. I am opposed to the politics of elitism that reserves 200 acres so that a 0.01 per cent can play golf on." But, is she not part of that 0.01 per cent? She begs to differ. "I am not saying that there is no economic disparity; there is bound to be in a democratic society. What I am opposed to are kitty parties, golf clubs and dripping diamonds...a culture I am certainly not part of. My house may be colourful but it is not expensive. It is totally stripped of all social pretensions like porcelain and crystals. I don't go shopping every day. In

Satyapal was of me till I came home for holidays and he followed me all the way to Delhi." What ensued was a whirlwind romance that culminated at the altar. There was no objection to the fact that she was a Sikh and he a Jat. "My mother-in-law, a real rustic soul, loved the thought of having such an educated daughter-in-law. In fact, she still listens to all my programmes on radio and boasts about me to all the people in her village."

To begin with she tried to fit the image of a typical politician's wife. "I was greatly involved with the movement of Jayprakash Narayan. I even courted arrest and staged dharnas, but I soon realised that that was not what I wanted to do." So she engrossed herself in the world of monkeys from where she has been observing her husband's political progress. "We like to give each other a lot of leverage. Yes, we do have open discussions and I do give him advice but after that the decision is totally his." However, one time when she did try to alter his decision was during the Mandal riots. "I was mortified. All those young kids who were dying were my students. I told Satyapal to resign immediately." of inclusive schools rather than exclusive schools.



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