

THE NEWS
ON SUNDAY

SECTION

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Special Report



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**Internationally
recognised women**

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Dialogue About to be 'jettisoned' 22-23 Literati Zia Mohye

Shahzia Sikander

Creative expression

Acknowledged as one of the most celebrated artists of her generation

Shahzia Sikander is acknowledged as one of the most celebrated artists of her generation and one who showed promise from her formative years.

After graduating in miniature painting from NCA, she opted for Masters in Fine Arts from Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Shahzia has exhibited at a number of prestigious galleries and museums — her solo exhibitions at Whitney Museum in 2000 and at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington in 1999 are two that stand out. There is also a long list of articles and essays on her work published in reputable art publications.

A matter of great pride for the art-viewing public here, the incredible success of a Pakistani painter does merit an analysis of sorts. As a matter of fact, there is more than one factor responsible for the success story called Shahzia Sikander. The remarkable level of her academic skill and formal sophistication apart, it is her subject matter and its placement in a broader context that brought it so successfully to the realm of global art.

She began her career at a time when the West was experiencing a renewed romance with the East. Political conflicts, cultural upheavals and the spread of globalisation forced the West to 're-discover' the East. And thus a huge demand for everything oriental/Islamic — including art.

This in many ways helped Shahzia living in the US to avail an audience for her work. Despite all the complexities of identity and displacement, her aesthetic concerns and pictorial innovations made her work a unique experience for majority of the people. She introduced new concepts and challenged Western notions about the division of art and craft; and the separation of the mainstream from the periphery.



Unlike some other young angry artists though, she did not choose to acquire a rebellious tone. A tone adopted to stay in the coveted position of being 'marginalised'. Sikander opted for a broader vision and a permanent solution: by remaining a part of the mainstream art of the West, she could contribute in a substantial manner.

Her acceptance in the 'domain' of Western art — with reviews frequently appearing in

New York Times, Flash Art, Art News and Art in America — is a sign of change in its structure of power politics. It is because of her that miniature, a genre hitherto thought of as nothing more than a craft, is recognised as a significant and parallel mode of creative expression. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it was after Shahzia's example that exhibitions of other miniature painters were arranged in the art capitals of the world.

Back home her success has had an impact of a different kind. Undoubtedly her work, both at NCA and later in the USA, opened up a range of possibilities for young practitioners of the miniature art. One remembers the scroll she displayed at her degree show, in which, presumably for the first time, a contemporary artist had extended the scale of miniature and expanded its visual vocabulary. Her work was based on a series of episodes from the painter's personal life, inducted with a variety of techniques, materials and pictorial devices. This, a major piece of work, proved a breakthrough not for the painter's individual practice, but carved a new way for generations of miniature artists to experiment in multiple directions.

With all that success, glamour and fame attached, an admirable quality of Shahzia Sikander is her attitude towards her art. In a recent visit to Lahore, she spoke about her work in a passionate, clear and realistic manner. The talk served as a source of inspiration for many students and young artists.

Her more recent work comprises large-scale installations and computer-based images which, besides having an aesthetic link to traditional art, suggest her innovative frame of mind. And denote the personality of the artist, always in search of unknown vistas as pointed out in her own words:

"Outline the space I am about to leave

A void, no longer mine, borrowed maybe

And then she takes over".

—Quddus Mirza

Editorial

The News on Sunday marks the international Day for Women this year with a list of ten women who have won international acclaim for themselves with their work.

It was because of the space constraints that we decided to focus on individuals who are still active in their respective fields. This doesn't mean that we are in any way disrespectful of the legacy of those who may have withdrawn from the scene, but whose examples continue to urge

Inspiration

and encourage others on the path to excellence.

As is common with such endeavours, we decided to restrict ourselves to a certain number and then realised what we were



Bapsi Sidhwa **Success story**

Renowned for her four English-language novels

She has the poise which few have, she moves with the grace which in any case is a necessary element for a dancer



Bapsi Sidhwa, today renowned for her four English-language novels, had to actually force her way to the national stage.

Sidhwa had finished two novels, 'The Bride' and 'The Croweaters', but had no ready publishers. In 1978, she decided to play the publisher herself and went public with 'The Croweaters'. Fame followed immediately. 'The Croweaters' was published in India in 1979. A British edition of the same novel came out in 1982, and an American one in 1983.

'The Bride', which was actually the first novel that Sidhwa had written, was first printed in Britain, in 1983 — the story based on the incident of a runaway bride that Sidhwa said she had to tell.

Her next two novels to be printed, 'Ice-Candy-Man' (published as 'Cracking India' in America, and adapted for a film titled 'Earth') added to her reputation as being the writer of "luminous prose... with words chosen as carefully as pieces of inlay in a marble wall" and slowly.

Along with a growing readership, came recognition by the Pakistani state and international organisations. Besides being a recipient of Sitara-e-Imtiaz, she has won many an international award, and has also taught at Columbia University, the University of Houston, and Mount Holyoke College and Southampton University in England, etc.

As all success stories must be explained in terms of personal qualities and circumstances that shaped these qualities, much effort has been spent on identifying the traits that distinguish Bapsi

Sidhwa from other writers of the time — with such un-literary words as 'objectivity' used in discussions of her work. In her own words, she has a "natural inclination to see humour even in tragedies" — which critics generally agree is the mark of a brilliant story-teller. At another place, she is quoted as saying that being a member of a minority community in Pakistan, she could see things more objectively than others.

Bapsi Sidhwa was born in Karachi and brought up in Lahore on either side of the partition in 1947. That she belonged to a minority, may have helped her being easily 'ignored' or disowned by the vocal majority in Pakistan who are prone to view most honest attempts at writing as attempts to violate their faith in purity. She might even have been mistaken for an Indian writer in her home country — something which could perhaps still be established by a survey of casual readers in Pakistan.

In the ultimate analysis though, it is her subjectivity, her sensitivity to the subject she has chosen to write on, together with her love for being precise yet subtle in her description of certain situations that she has written about, that makes the internationally acclaimed mix. It is true of her, and true of all writers of 'merit'. The precision comes after a writer works at her or his craft, and should usually include a course on how to write on a subject without necessarily stirring a public controversy (as opposed to the always acceptable *adbi tnazaat* or literary controversies).

— Asha'ar Rehman

, thy name

missing out on. But what we are looking for in the end is inspiration and promise as held out by the brief profiles of the individuals we celebrate here, and not for controversy.

With so simple an objective as this, the worst we can do is to over-elaborate ourselves here. But perhaps the readers need to be reminded of the weaknesses and preferences of those who have been instrumental in bringing this Special Report to you. We at TNS remain

entranced by the brilliance of art, and the four women that we have selected from the field of fine arts for inclusion on our roll of honour today, together with a fifth one who happens to have taken us on a parallel history course, is a reflection of this bias that we share at TNS. This is not an

attempt to undermine the services of those who could not make this list, but just. Nor is it an attempt to in any way promote the stereotypes that we are so keen to throw out of our life. We are trying to fight taboos, both old and new. This is why we believe that too much of balancing

could spoil it all. It is nice to be in the company that we have carved for ourselves here. We like the mix, but have not put in any extra effort to come up with a list with the right balance — achieved on the basis of how many we pick from which profession, this time.

Nahid Siddiqui

All grace

Nahid Siddiqui burst on to the national scene with her television programme *Payal*. She looked pretty and she had the energy to attract the attention of those who were not known to admire classical dance. She had to leave the country in the late 1970s and shift to England, but this dislocation did not dim her enthusiasm to be the very best in her field. In fact there was some advantage in this adversity as she was exposed to a much larger world and was able to see and critically imbibe the work of some of the greatest dancers not only of South Asia but of the entire world.

In exile the two broad categories of dance as part of a *thumri* or a narrative and pure dance were mastered by her. She gradually acquired the ease and elegance to render most difficult movements appear effortlessly executed. She had the poise which few had, she moved with the grace which in any case is a necessary element for a dancer.

Our classical dances are extremely stylised and have

evolved a definite language of their own and many choreographers who have attempted to seek a new idiom have come to grief by reducing it to being merely illustrative. Perhaps being fully aware of this familiar pitfall and by keeping the story line very loose, she mixes that with pure *kathak* numbers, to let no one remain in doubt that all her innovations have grown out of *kathak*. The link with tradition is more than emphasised by her experimentations.

She choreographed *Rung*, a dance of four which was meant to be a tribute to the creative genius of Amir Khusro. These innovations in *taranna*, *sool fakhta* and *qawwali*, the forms usually attributed to the Amir were given an interpretation of the visual form of dance by her.

For years her mind had been occupied with the stark similarities between the basics of *kathak* and the dances broadly categorised as being inspired by mystical practices. She had been very observant of the dance techniques of the *malangs* who let themselves go in their abandon



to seek communion with the ultimate reality.

This strain of creative thought took her to Maulana Rumi music and dance. The more she observed the whirling dervishes the more she was convinced of the similarity in rotation, the spinning movements, so full of energy and so much an integral part of *Kathak*. The postures were the same and so were the basis on which revolved the entire movement. The extremely fast spins symbolised movement through which the dervishes made their contact. She discovered her Muslim background in which dance like other artistic forms was also a heavily thought out and deliberated upon expression.

In her creative journey she widened the scope of the traditional *kathak* by experimenting to incorporate contemporary themes into the very stylised idiom of the *kathak*. This she achieved without losing the ritualised movements which she had creatively integrated and it is through these ritualised movements that the moment of abandon strikes.

When she was invited to choreograph at the Royal Ballet in Britain a few weeks ago it was as if her talent and contribution had been recognised in the very capital of dance.

—Sarwat Ali



Asma Jehangir A ray of hope

A fight against injustice requires
commitment and courage

Asma Jehangir, one of Pakistan's most famous human rights advocates, was born to a family with a history of human rights work. Her first fight for the supremacy of human rights was at the age of 18 when she filed a writ of *habeas corpus* for the recovery of her father who had been arrested by General Yahya Khan in 1971, for being a member of the Awami League. There has been no looking back since then and Asma has been an active figure in Pakistan's

public life.

After completing her law degree in 1978, Asma got together with a few fellow activists and lawyers including her sister Hina Jilani and the result was the country's first law firm established by women. This group also helped form the Women's Action Forum (WAF) the same year.

Asma has had the privilege of serving as the chairperson of the Pakistan Human Rights Commission. In 1998, she was appointed Special Rapporteur of the UN

Commission on Human Rights. Currently an advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, she is also director of the AGHS Legal Aid Cell, Lahore which began by providing free legal aid to women and has expanded now to interface with several groups from civil society. Her organisation also runs a shelter for women, called Dastak.

In the words of an Indian journalist: "She is not a human rights 'activist', she actually acts! She has more courage in her right thumb than have all the rest of the 'activists' and 'higher ups' in their hands."

Asma's journey to fame has not been smooth. She has remained a highly controversial figure in the country for being a staunch critic of the Hudood Ordinance and the country's blasphemy laws. Her willingness to relentlessly defend victims of rape, women seeking divorce from abusive husbands, people persecuted in the name of religion, her work on the issues of child labour, and her continuous criticism of political parties and of official policies, have exposed to criticism from certain quarters, and even greater risks. She survived an assassination attempt by an armed terrorist group in 1994 and was the target of a sticker campaign in Lahore the same year.

Explaining her position in a press release issued at the time, she said: "I am a target because I have defended people accused of blasphemy. as a lawyer we should have the independence to defend anyone."

Asma's work has been recognised both nationally and internationally with a number of prestigious awards to her credit. To name one, she was awarded the 'Millennium Prize', which is given out by the UNIFEM (the United Nations Development Fund for Women) in collaboration with the non-governmental organisation International Alert in 2001. Asma also has to her credit publications like 'Divine Sanction' and 'Children of a Lesser God'.

—Shahzada Irfan
Ahmed

Ayesha Jalal

The living ideal

Her claim to fame is as an
academic and scholar

The fact that it was a woman who had authored 'The Sole Spokesman' never really became a subject of discussion as the book became available in the country after 1985. It was like a breath of fresh air in the academic wasteland where no serious scholarly work was thought possible, ever, least of all in the supposed centres of learning — the universities. This one too came from

another university in another land; it was Ayesha Jalal's doctoral thesis at Cambridge University.

In a country where historical scholarship was literally unheard of, some Pakistani scholar choosing to rethink the country's past was indeed a refreshing thought. Giving a chance to hope — again. Overturning long held assumptions about partition, shattering the official 'grand narrative' of Pakistan and



proving with historical data how Jinnah's politics was not rooted in religion or how he twice rejected the 'mutilated, moth-eaten model' that eventually became Pakistan, the book soon came to be recognised in line with the few other scholarly works produced by the likes of Hamza Alvi and Dr. Feroze Ahmed.

But 20 years later, it seems, there was no looking back for Ayesha Jalal. Exactly five years after her first book, another study of post-independence Pakistan came in the form of 'The State of Martial Rule — the origins of Pakistan's political economy of defence'. The casual drawing-room discussions — as well as the political slogans on the streets — about the role of military and civil bureaucracy in decision making within the state as well as

the nexus they had come to establish with the international system in London and Washington attained an authenticity after this work.

By now Ayesha Jalal had moved to the third continent; nothing new for it was at the Wellesley College in the US that she had graduated before she went on to Cambridge. At a time when it was unusual for Pakistani women to go to America for studies, she managed to go only after the college offered her a full scholarship. She was teaching at Wisconsin-Madison in 1990 and was a Kucin Scholar, Harvard academy for International and Area Studies.

Coincidentally perhaps, another five years and Jalal produced another work, 'Democracy and Authoritarianism in South

Asia: a Comparative and Historical Perspective'. She then co-authored 'Modern South Asia' with Sugata Bose. Her most recent book is 'Self and Sovereignty: the Muslim Individual and the Community of Islam in South Asia since 1850'. Between 1998-2003 she was a MacArthur Fellow. Now a Professor of History at Tufts University, she has also taught at Columbia University and Harvard University.

She also received a MacArthur Fellowship (commonly called the genius grant), worth \$265,000 and establishing her reputation as one of the most innovative scholars in the history of the region. She is now working on a project entitled 'Partisans of Allah: Meanings of Jihad in South Asia.'

Not all of Jalal's works received similar acclaim

though and she has been criticised for some of her later works. But she has been in the news for some other reasons too. At Columbia, she claims, enrollment in her South Asian courses doubled from 1991 to 1995 but she was denied tenure in 1995, which she thinks was done at the behest of Indian lobby that objected to a Pakistani woman teaching Indian history. She sued the University alleging religious and ethnic discrimination. A federal judge dismissed the case, labelling the evidence of bias 'thin' though 'suggestive'.

Ayesha Jalal's claim to fame is as an academic and scholar, irrespective of her gender. She may do us all proud but for the women of this country she remains an inspiration.

— Farah Zia

Benazir Bhutto

On her terms

The most memorable impact Benazir Bhutto had on the people of Pakistan was when she returned to the country from exile to a rousing welcome in Lahore in April, 1986. Politics of the country was never to be the same again and a young educated woman — having already completed a BA from Harvard University in 1973, another BA from Oxford University in 1976 and graduate degree from Oxford in Foreign Service in 1976-77 — was set to rule an Islamic country for two terms.

Benazir didn't have much going for her then — she was evidently uncomfortable conversing in Pakistan's national language; she had been in exile for many years of her life; she was thought to have little understanding of politics under military control; and she was educated, young, unmarried and a woman — all handicaps as far as succeeding in politics in a country such as Pakistan.

But she was steadfast and the influence of her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, helped her rise above these issues. Riding on an anti-establishment wave, Benazir led her Pakistan People's Party to victory in the November 1988 parliamentary elections and was invited to become the country's first woman prime minister.

What followed is a long story of intrigue and conspiracy. Many believe democracy was new and the hiccups were more than normal — others blame an inept group, of men, surrounding Benazir to be responsible for her inability to live up to the euphoria preceding the first general elec-

tions in more than a decade. Others yet have one name to blame for all that went wrong — Zardari — the man she chose as her husband and the man accused of running the country on his own.

Benazir Bhutto's first government was dismissed on corruption charges in 1990. Then started another era of survival for Pakistan's first woman prime minister as she led a formidable opposition to Nawaz Sharif's government. According to her close aides, this was a crucial time for Benazir on a personal as well as political front. Her dependence on her mother, Begum Nusrat Bhutto was the greatest at this stage in her life.

Benazir's steadfastness paid off and she spearheaded PPP to a second electoral victory in the October 1993 general elections to be given a second tenure as prime minister of Pakistan. Unfortunately the fate of her second government was no different, which was dismissed in November 1996 by her own chosen President Farooq Leghari. This tenure was marred by one of the worst personal loss for the prime minister when her only surviving brother, Mir Murtaza Bhutto was killed in an exchange of fire with law enforcement agencies outside his Karachi residence.

Her associates believe this single event had an impact the Bhutto clan simply could not withstand. Following this event and her second government's dismissal from power, Benazir and her party has been undergoing another 'survival' period.

Benazir leads a life in exile and her party — which contested the last elections in her absence — still managed to



come out as the single largest political party in the National Assembly. Benazir's PPP now sits in the opposition.

Benazir directs her party from abroad and spends most

of her time looking after her three children, delivering lectures and trying to convince the world not to support a military ruler in Pakistan. Her husband, meanwhile, contin-

ues to languish in jail, where he has been for more than seven years now on corruption charges.

— Adnan Mahmood



She has been
the great
survivor of
Pakistan's
political
turmoil

Dr. Nafis Sadiq For the extended family

Population Planning was a vague
concept in Pakistan before Dr.
Nafis Sadiq stepped in

Nafis Sadiq stepped in

Dr. Nafis Sadiq, the first Pakistani woman, and the only one, to have made it to the rank of United Nations Under-Secretary-General, in 1987.

Having devoted her time and energy for spreading awareness and evolving programmes about family planning at a national level during much of the 1970s and early 80s, Dr. Nafis Sadiq ended up serving as the Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) from 1987 to 2000.

Specialising in gynecology and obstetrics Dr. Nafis Sadiq began her professional life as a doctor. Later in her career she found herself deeply involved in family planning and public health issues in Pakistan. The United Nations appreciated her endeavour to create awareness about family planning in Pakistan and for her significant work at the government level in 1971. It was perhaps the devotion at an early stage of her career that set the pace of her work.

Dr. Nafis is of the firm opinion that there is a lot of room for creating awareness among the people, especially women, about how important family planning is for the health of women and to arrest the rising population graph. "Pakistan has not invested in girls' education. The gap between boys and girls is getting wider." Sadiq said in an interview with the Associated Press (AP) on the eve of releasing the Human Development in South Asia, annual report on women in the year 2000.

"[Population Planning] is a subject area which needs a lot of information and understanding and awareness creation," she said in an interview with the BBC online service as

the Executive Director UNFPA. "People around the world should look at this and then start to think 'what is the situation in my country? Can I do something about it?'" she said.

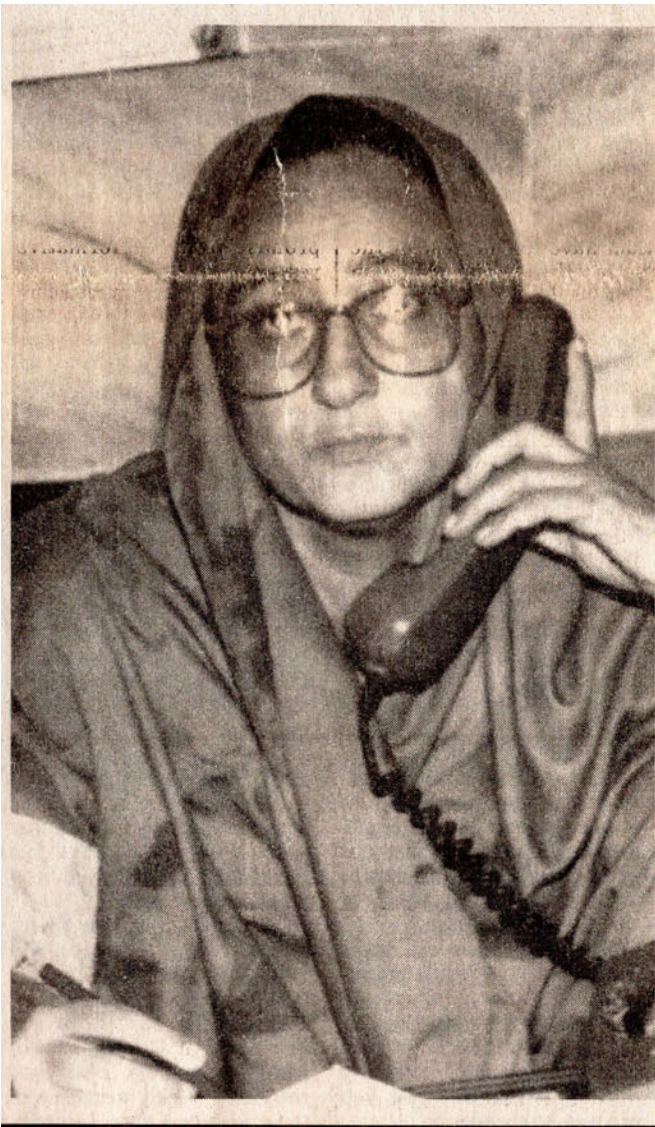
Besides getting many international awards for her services to improve the health of children and women worldwide, she is currently a member of the Board of Governors of the Foundation for Human Development and a member of South Asian Commission on the Asian challenge. She has also served as President of the Society for International Development (SID) for the period 1994-1997.

In an appreciation of Dr. Sadiq's services as Executive Director UNFPA, the board adopted a resolution on her retirement from the post. It appreciated "...her central role in bringing population and development issues to the forefront of the international agenda...". The resolution also noted that Dr. Sadiq had played a key role as Secretary General of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and her contribution to the ICPD+ 5 review that took place in 1999.

The report of the Executive Board (UNFPA) for the year 2000 reads, "The year 2000 marked a turning point for UNFPA. After leading the fund for 14 years, Dr. Nafis Sadiq retired as Executive Director.."

In her meeting with General Pervez Musharraf on her visit to Pakistan in the year 2000, she stressed on the need to merge the ministry of Health and the Department of Population Welfare, a step that she believes will make the difference in controlling the spread of HIV and managing health related issues.

—Ather Naqvi



Bilquis Edhi

The helping hand

Her goal is to help those who cannot help themselves

Begum Bilquis Edhi pursues a simple goal in life: To help people who cannot help themselves. Hand in hand with her husband, Abdul Sattar Edhi, she runs the country's largest charitable organisation — Edhi Foundation.

She was born in Bantva, a village in the Kathiawar Peninsular, on August 14, 1946. "I was made for Pakistan," she adds proudly. Bilquis' father Usman, who ran a bicycle repair shop, died when she was only ten. Her mother Rabia Bai took up teaching in a private school after the death of her husband, but switched profession to become a mid-wife after eight years. While mother was at work, young Bilquis took care of two younger brothers at home.

Was it the responsibility at home or simply lack of interest in academic achievements that kept her distracted from stud-

ies? She failed the matriculation examination that she sat for at the Urdu medium school, Ronaq-e-Islam, in Karachi. Thereafter she embarked on a much more fulfilling journey in life; as a volunteer at the Edhi Trust when she was only 18. "The 1965 war was on. Dead bodies with amputated legs or arms would be brought in dozens," she pauses and then reflects: "Those were difficult days. In fact, it was the experience of the war that chalked out the future course of my life."

In 1966, a bearded man in a khaki kurta proposed for marriage. "I accepted Maulana Sahib's proposal almost immediately. Even though he had proposed to seven or eight women before me and each had turned him down," she says in a very Kachi accent. In the next four years, four children — two girls and two boys — were added to the Edhi household. "Naturally, I was immature and carefree. My

mother brought up our children." After so many years, she has no regrets; together with her husband she has sailed through the times with single-minded determination, with a mission to serve humanity. "Our work is our life, take it away and we will not be able to live."

Abdul Sattar Edhi has extended unwavering support to his spouse. With only the financial matters of the Foundation under him, the rest of the charitable work is monitored by Begum Bilquis. Today, she runs a network of 750 ambulances with the help of her youngest son. "My son Faisal is in the process of acquiring 300 more ambulances to further strengthen the service. It is due to his hard work that the petrol bill that till last year amounted to Rs. 20 million has been reduced to Rs. 8 million."

Foundation's women specific departments fall under her; that include 17 Edhi homes providing shelter to 6500 destitute, mentally retarded and homeless women and about 10 nursing homes. At these centres every effort is made to

convince women that they can take responsibility for their own lives and must prepare for the future. Hence women are trained in different skills to be economically independent. "Women must be skilled to earn a livelihood," she believes.

So far she has handed over 15,000 newborn babies to needy parents. "One child a week is left at the gate of an Edhi centre. I personally interview the needy parents, and give preference to those who have lost a child or those who can offer a good standard of living to the adopted child."

She is not an ordinary woman. She is special, simple and warm. Her personality combined with the contribution in the welfare work of the Foundation has earned her acclaim at home and abroad. The Ramakrishan Jeidayal Harmony award that she received in New Delhi on December 10, 2003 is the latest in the long list of international honours that have been bestowed on her in the four decades of humanitarian service. In New Delhi she commented: "South Asia must strive for peace because war only brings destruction... It is high time India and Pakistan heal their wounds for a better future of the next generation otherwise they will not forgive us."

—Alefia T. Hussain

Maleeha Lodhi

Our own pace-setter

Prominent journalist and diplomat

Maleeha Lodhi is among those who have defied the Pakistani stereotypes. Articulate as a journalist, she brought the same qualities to her tenure as a diplomat.

"We ought to be able to be part of the 21st century's thrust towards co-operation — rather than towards confrontation, which has been our history," comments Lodhi, currently Pakistan's ambassador to the United Kingdom.

She has been her country's ambassador to the United States, a difficult assignment no doubt. Besides that she made her mark at institutions like London School of Economics and the Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad as a teacher of political science and public administration.

A Ph.D in political science from the London School of Economics obtained in 1980 marked the beginning of her career. She happens to be the first woman in Asia to serve as the editor of a daily newspaper. Her ever-increasing urge to work and excel in life can be well



summed up in words of a close friend of hers - Ahmed Rashid who described her in following words. "She has always been a workaholic since I can remember, which at times can cause problems for women because professional men don't expect women to be so driven in their careers. Women in our part of the world tend to be very thorough in their work because of the constant criticism they receive from their male counterparts."

And all that may not be as easy as it might look to an outsider, "People like me and Asma Jehangir, coming from a middle class family, have a hard time in breaking into the system," Maleeha says in an interview. Maleeha finds journalism to be the most challenging of all the jobs she has undertaken so far.

As ambassador to the UK, she is optimistic about the possibility of a thaw in the Indo-Pak relations. "The mood is upbeat and we are all feeling optimistic, although cautiously optimistic about the future," she said in a recent interview with BBC radio. Her leadership skills have also earned her a place as member of the United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Affairs.

Recipient of the 2002 Hilal-e-Imtiaz Presidential award for public service, she happens to be the only Pakistani selected by 'Time' magazine in December 1994 to be placed among one hundred global pace-setters who the magazine said would help define the next century.

—AN

Abida Parveen

The soul spokeswoman

She has matured into a singer capable of freeing, entrancing souls, encompassing the vigour of someone on a mission

Her ecstatic flight to being crowned the successor to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan should not flatter Abida Parveen's fans. She has other reasons to be known internationally, to be included in this list here of ten Pakistani women of our times who have really made their country proud. She has a cult of her own. She has been escorting people all around on their out-of-this-world journeys for long enough, breaking all kinds of barriers on the way.

Born in 1954 and raised in Larkana, Abida Parveen was greatly influenced by her father, who provided her with her initial coaching in music. Her husband, who died a few years ago, helped her carve a niche for herself domestically, before she was ready to take the world by storm.

Taking the oft-treaded career path of artistic expression in Pakistan, Abida started

off with the radio, and the response to her early performances must have played a huge part in her long time preferences. She gradually matured into a singer capable of freeing, entrancing souls, encompassing the vigour of someone on a mission. She has been appreciated for her ghazal singing too, but the kafi or the poetry written by the sufis of the subcontinent remains her forte.

Abida Parveen specialises in what in local parlance is called *khula gaana*. Roughly translated into English, it could mean a form of singing where the emphasis is on improvisation without taking away from the basics — which makes it a most difficult rendition to master. Devotional music, it is commonly called, and Abida Parveen's contribution to it has been hailed by experts and lay listeners alike:

"...the best devotional music has a power to commu-



nicate across racial and denominational divides, and Parveen's ecstatic flights are

no exception."

"Parveen could sing a shopping list and have an

audience weeping."

"Miraculous apparition for all doubters."

"(The) way she expresses through her voice the connection between love God and one's oneself answerable to God, is tremendous."

"The more I listen to her, the more I find my body and soul detached from this planet earth."

The provider of such soulful music, peace has to be the ideal Abida Parveen has been pursuing, both within and without. Indeed, she believes that the sufi strain that runs through the whole of the subcontinent — and is not unique to the border areas between India and Pakistan as some western writers would have us believe — sufism has a great potential to force the two neighbours into forging closer to each other.

"The basic tenet of Sufism is the same: love for God and your fellow brethren," says Parveen: "In different areas, different saints propagated this one message using the idiom of that area and its traditional music so the masses could understand. Once you understand the message, you will realise that basically we are all the same."

"With the two countries sharing so much common cultural and traditional legacy, peace will prevail one day. Sufi music will have a role in unifying them."

—AR