To Trust or Distrust?

CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES

The Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal, the country's premier cultural organisation plans to induct two additional members into its Trust, but has run into rough weather in the bargain, reports **MANOHAR KHUSHALANI**

To trust or distrust?

RECENTLY, when Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal, India's premier cultural organisation, went through its round of appointments of new trustees, it became the bone of contention for many an artiste. Guns were trained and charges exchanged regarding the filling up of the coveted and prestigious vacancies.

The first salvo was fired when the Central government announced the name of Alka Raghuvanshi, the former arts editor of *Pioneer*, Delhi, as one of its three nominees. The other two already appointed were M. F. Hussain and Prashant Mehta. While the other Delhi newspapers carried the news without comment, there appeared page and only she was in a position to answer the charges.

When asked why she had been branded a saffron-clad activist, she said, "How can I be saffron-clad when so many radical views were expressed in the arts page without any interference from my side? If indeed I am a BJP supporter, how come the Congress government is sponsoring my name? Actually, anybody who is not a part of the card carrying left cadre is branded a fascist and communalist by them. To my mind it is they who practise the worst kind of fascism."

Besides the Central government nominees, Bharat Bhawan Trust has trustees appointed by the state government which as a trustee has also turned controversial. Except for his occasional forays to Delhi for production of NSD plays, Prasanna has confined himself to a remote village Hegudu in Karnataka, where he has founded the Kavi Kavya Trust, which publishes a Kannada quarterly magazine *Rajuvatu* edited by Ananthamurthy.

In an open letter to the member secretary, Bharat Bhawan Trust, which was carried prominently by the Hindi daily *Jansatta*, Prasanna has charged that Ashok Vajpayi was casting aspersions about him. It referred to a fellowship which Bharat Bhawan had awarded on the project. According to



PRIZED MOMENT: *Alka Raghuvanshi receiving the award for*

a small news item in *Indian Express* reporting a statement, amongst others, by Vivan Sundaram, Anjolie Ela Menon, Dilip Padgaonkar and Praful Bijwai, objecting to her appointment following the release of her book on artistes by the President at Rashtrapati Bhawan.

The signatories blamed the HRD Ministry for it and went on to add that the trust was a symbolic entity not dealing with day-to-day affairs and so the most eminent people should be in it, quoting the names of previous trustees such as B. V. Karanth, Swaminathan and Mani Kaul. Alka Raghuvanshi, the former Chameli Devi Jain Award winner for outstanding women media persons, dismissed the report and called it "professional jealousy", since the report was filed by an arts editor and not a correspondent. "Why were so many entities concerned by a non-entity like me," she asked, "either they are non-entities or I am an entity."

Not known to mince her words, she went on to add that the problem with the so-called Leftists was that they hunted in packs. "Since they all get together, their collective strength is a formidable force, which is why they have been able to scare a lot of people. They tried to do that earlier. When we carried a story against Sahmat, they marched in a demonstration against me into the office of the then editor of *Pioneer*, Vinod Mehta." According to her, when Vinod summoned her to his office, they refused to talk, saying that they could not say anything in her presence since the charges were against her. Vinod, however, expressed his inability to discuss the matter in her absence, as Raghuvanshi was the one dealing with the arts

include Jaya Bachchan and Anand Patwardhan. Vijay Kichloo of the Sangeet Research Academy is the "music" nominee and Anshu Vaish is the secretary. Surprisingly, Ashok Vajpayi, Joint Secretary, Department of Culture, is a state nominee.

The trustees met last month to induct two additional members and amongst the many names discussed were Vijay Tendulkar, Ananthamurthy and stage director, writer, poet Prasanna. Interestingly, Prasanna is considered to be on the other end of the political spectrum — he is considered a Leftist (though he has of late been attracted to Gandhian philosophy). A suggestion regarding his appointment



DRIVING A POINT: *Alka Raghuvanshi, no mincing of words*

Prasanna, the most recent remark of his on this subject had been in a trust meeting where Vajpayi was trying to turn down a suggestion that he be made a trustee. Since the charge had been made in a forum, in which he could not defend himself, he had decided to go public.

"The trust has not bothered to find out the truth for nearly a decade after the incident," claims Prasanna. "I had felt honoured when Bharat Bhawan awarded the said fellowship and accepted it. Since the Fellowship was the first of its nature for Bharat Bhawan, they did not have a methodology for doing theoretical work." Accord-

outstanding women media persons from President Shankar Dayal Sharma

ing to him he sent quarterly reports for about a year, at the end of which he was asked to send an abstract in English, on the work done for the project.

That was the last he heard from Bharat Bhawan. They stopped sending him the Fellowship amount and did not answer his letters. On writing to B. V. Karanth he discovered that Ashok Vajpayi and Vijay Tendulkar, who had formed themselves into a committee to judge his work, had decided on the basis of the English abstract, that the work was 'sub-standard'. They in turn had decided to fail him.

Since he was then an activist working in the villages of Karnataka, and did not possess the resources needed to go to Bhopal or Delhi, he decided to defend his honour by publishing the work. "Fortunately for me," he adds, "a Kannada publisher who is also an eminent theatre personality in India, liked my work and offered to publish it. It was published as *Natak: Rangkriti* in Kannada. My published work is on modern Indian drama. This book has become a landmark in Kannada criticism since then. I sent a copy of my work along with a letter to Bharat Bhawan, under the fond hope that some day somebody who understood critical idiom would read my work at Bharat Bhawan and redeem my tarnished honour."

Much later, at the intervention of Ford Foundation, USA, which had founded Bharat Bhawan, he got his money. According to him, the Foundation felt that a fellowship was given to a person for his contribution and that it was in bad taste to 'fail' the scholar.

Prasanna, however, admits that in a chance-meeting he had with him, Ashok Vajpayi denied having said all this. Manjit Bawa, well-known painter and president of Bharat Bhawan, was critical of Prasanna having gone public on this matter. He also denied that Vajpayi alone made the charge. According to him "it was all in the files." He went on to add, "There are so many defaulters and it was only mentioned that Prasanna had not fulfilled his obligation. Prasanna's name was amongst the many proposed, and he should not feel bad if he was not selected. Prasanna, however, denies having any interest in the trusteeship. "In fact I was annoyed that my name was mentioned. Organisations like Bharat Bhavan are top-heavy and non-activist. It is really not my cup of tea," remarked Prasanna.

That criticism might be valid. Right now amongst the four streams of the trust, only 'Roopankar', headed by Manjit Bawa, is active with its *'Biennial'* — exhibition of contemporary and tribal arts. In fact 'Wahghat' (poetry) and 'Anahad' (music) have for long been dormant. However, during B. V. Karanth's tenure the fourth stream — theatre —was very active.

Ultimately it all boils down to personalities. Maybe public postures are taken on issues and ideologies, but the battles are totally personal. The trust really needs to take a long, hard and introspective look at its functioning and mandate. Granting recognitions or disbursing favours need not be the sole activity of this fountainhead of culture.