

bans, the colour of Islam. Then there were news of Taslima Ahmed and Salman Rushdie both with *fatwas* demanding their extermination on their heads. And murders of Catholic priests in Algiers by Muslim extremists; murderous assaults by members of the Muslim Brotherhood on foreign tourists in Egypt and of the Egyptian Nobel Prize winner Mahfouz recovering from near-fatal injuries inflicted on him by the same people — Muslim fanatics. I pondered: is it Islam which makes some Muslims fearless fighters and others fanatics who murder people in cold blood? Rushdie asked for pardon and even went through rites of conversion to Islam. Taslima has not written a word against the Prophet or the Quran, only against an intolerant society and is willing to face a trial if assured she will get justice. I have read Mahfouz's novels. Once again there is nothing whatsoever in them against Islam, only against a decadent Egyptian society. Is there no forgiveness in Islam for people charged with blasphemy? Yes there is — ample evidence of the Prophet himself forgiving people who had insulted him. It is today's self-appointed protectors of Islam who have given Muslims the ugly image of being a bigotted, intolerant and an unforgiving people.

Haryanvi puzzle

THREE things about Haryana always puzzled me: How was it that this arid, dusty region often visited by famines produced the best breed of cows and buffaloes? How was it that its semi-starved populace living largely on poor vegetarian diet produced the toughest and the most virile of men? And why Haryanvi women though they work-



Prem Choudhry

ed harder than their men folk accepted subservience to them and rarely sought escape by marrying outside their castes or eloping with non-Haryanvis? You can take it from me that Haryanvi Jat women are amongst the fairest of our land, walk ram-rod straight flouncing their *gharras* with regal disdain and though full of mischief, continue to cover half their faces behind their *ghunghat* veils. I found answers to these questions and much more in Prem Choudhry's *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana 1880-1990* (OUP).

Prem Choudhry teaches history in Miranda House and is currently a Fellow of the University Grants Commission with the Jawaharlal Nehru University. She is the daughter of Choudhry Hardwari Lal who was a couple of years senior to me at St. Stephens College. At the time most Stephenians thought Hardwari had the makings of the Prime Minister of India: he was an ardent nationalist, an idealist, ambitious and an excellent orator. He held many ministerial positions in Haryana and won his way to the Lok Sabha. Then the Jat in him got the better of his judgement. He was forever picking up quarrels with rival politicians and taking them to court. I spent a week-end with him when he was Vice-Chancellor of the Maharishi Dayanand University of Rohtak. He was toying with the idea of taking *Sanyas* and had begun

Pretty — Preeti

"I teach aerobics and computers at the blind school," I am also a sales agent for Granny," she said in a flawless English accent. "What's so special about that?" I asked.

"I am blind," she replied. "I want to write for the papers. I have placed articles in *The Times of India*, *The Pioneer* and *The Hindustan Times*. I want some guidance. Can you spare a few minutes for me?"

She came the next evening with another girl to guide her. When I opened the door to let them in, I could not tell which of the two had



Preeti Singh

impaired vision. I took the hand of the smaller girl. "It's not me," she protested. I apologised and took the hand of the taller girl and led her to a chair. I couldn't resist paying her a compliment. "You can't see yourself in a mirror but let me assure you, you are a most attractive young lady." She blushed and murmured "Thank you". I added "also vain. You wear lip-stick, and nail polish. You have a diamond pin in your nose." She spoke softly again "I may not be able to see myself but I want to look pleasing to other people."

The story of Preeti Singh is a saga of grit and determination in the face of tragedy. She was born in Amritsar in April 1959. Her father then worked for the State Electricity Board. Like other children when she was 21 days old she was vaccinated against small pox. But unlike other children she was one in a million in whose body the vaccine acted like slow poison. She began to lose her vision. By the age of six she was totally blind. She went to school Auckland House (Simla), Holy Child and Loreto Convent in Delhi. She did her tenth privately. And then got to work. Being of athletic build she joined an aerobics class and then became an instructor. She learnt how to operate computers and became a computer teacher in a school for the blind. She became a saleswoman for Granny's pickles: her turnover in one month was so high that she was given a permanent job. Though living with her parents and brother, she learnt to stand on her feet and earn a good living. Romance came her way. An Anglo-Indian boy, Keith Brown living next door in R. K. Puram started dropping in during the evenings to read to her. Six months later they were married and Brown moved into Preeti's parental home to become a *gharjamaae* — resident son-in-law. They had a daughter and a son. The marriage went on the rocks. In 1986 the two parted company.

Preeti leads a full life. She is up at 5 a.m. to get her children and her nephew ready for school, give them breakfast and pack their lunches. After they have left she takes her aerobic classes on the roof of the family home in Patparganj. The rest of the day is spent selling pickles, going to school for the blind and the R. K. Foundation to help people suffering from heart and lung disease. She rarely gets back home before 7 p.m.

"I want to tell people that if you have the will you can get over any handicap: the blind can lead as full life as those who can see." Preeti is 36 and uncommonly attractive.