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Young and charismatic Uma Bharati is a member of the Indian Parliament, elected from her home state of Madhya Pradesh. She is also a spiritual leader and a sannyasini, having taken her vows Nov. 16, 1992, at the hands of Pejawar Swami of Karnatak. When this 32-year-old, staunch, saffron-clad Hindu female routinely addresses crowds of thousands, her fiery rhetoric ignites inspiration as well as love for religion and motherland. "How can this odd combination of spiritual sannyas and playing the shrewd game of politics exist together in a single person?" one might wonder.

The life of this Bharatiya Janata party leader was threatened recently when a bomb was planted and blasted in her house by unknown terrorists. She was not home at the time, and remained unhurt, but some of her family members were injured.

This is not the first incident of inflicting fire in her house. When she was four years old, her house was ignited due to the wrath of the local zamindar. The strange combination of spirituality and politics in her personality stems from her intense experiences that tell the tale of exploitation, corruption and injustice.

"As a child I was first political, and then I became spiritual, to seek solace from religion," Bharati explained in a July interview with Hinduism Today. She was in Los Angeles to give discourses on the Bhagavad Gita at the invitation of the Federation of Hindu Associations.

Bharati was born in the village of Tikamgarh, near Jhansi, India. "I have seen horrible instances of injustice and exploitation of the masses at the hands of the

feudal power holders. Even as a small child, I would react strongly against such episodes. My mind would set on fire when the zamindars would compel the villagers to work without pay," she recalled. Youngest in the farmer's family of six children, she lost her father when she was 11 months old. At the age of four, the local zamindar summoned her mother for some work in his house, and the mother refused. As a result, the powerful village zar set their family home afire and also made false accusations against Bharati's mother.

"Such incidents nourished my mental makeup. My radical mental reaction to those would be to become someone like Robin Hood to alleviate the suffering of the victims," Bharati said. "If I were not a small child then, and if I were a youth, I might even have resorted to Marxist thinking."

Instead, the pious man who used to give discourses on Ramayana at the local temple became her inspiration. "I resorted to God to give me solace, to empower me from His loving power," she said. Gifted with many talents including sharp memory, she would remember his discourses almost verbatim, and at age six, she started delivering her own version of religious discourses. "I just used the Ramayana story as a vehicle. My narrations used to have less devotion and more of an attack against injustice." Ramayana episodes like the Jatayu bird fiercely attacking the mighty demon Ravan, or the young Krishna lifting the mountain of Govardhan became her favorite impassioned narrations. "I was merely an agent, deriving my power from the Almighty, and then delivering it to the people who came for my katha." Her popularity skyrocketed, and people from near and far came to hear her. Most of her education is self education from reading and meditation, and she is often found quoting from Sikh, Muslim and Christian scriptures in addition to Hindu scriptures.

Bharati never had a formal academic or spiritual training. She was spiritual but did not believe in ritualism. In 1977 at age 16, she expressed the desire to take sannyasa from Swami Akhandananda of Vrindavan, but he thought that she was too young for that, and asked her to just follow Brahmacharyavrat. He passed away, and she started searching for another spiritual Mahatma. She found one in Pejavar Swami of Udipi Math, in his 70's, who is well known in Karnataka. "The tradition of his math dictates that sannyasa cannot be imparted to women, but he broke that tradition for me," Bharati said. "I am too independent to belong to any sampradaya. My Guru's math follows Madhvacharya's doctrines, but I do not abide by that tradition or those doctrines. My relationship with my guru is that of a spiritual father and I like him as a person, that is all."

Bharati's religious lectures, which she gave all over India and in many countries outside of India suddenly stopped in 1981. "My mother, with whom I was very close, died in 1981 and my mind in shock thought that everything was all over in my life. I went and lived in the same house that she had resided in. For three years I did not give any lectures and often thought of the futility of just giving lectures." She thought she had more to achieve and make a difference as a political activist than merely lecturing on religion.

From 1984, she started organizing political movements of resistance against injustice. As those became successful, people wanted her to enter politics. She did so, and was victorious in 1988 on the BJP ticket.

Amidst all the political game playing, she keeps on drawing strength from religion and her favorite deities. "I have a different relationship with each deity," she says. "I feel that Hanuman is my protector. He will protect me from danger. I draw the energy and vibrancy to fight against injustice from Goddess Kali. Lord Krishna is my friend and offers love. I get a soothing peace of mind from Shankar. When I do abhishekam on Shiva, I feel as if the cool water is bathing me in peace."

Here is how Bharati expressed her views when Hinduism Today posed some pertinent questions:

Hinduism Today: What is the inner value of ahimsa, non-violence?

Bharati: Accept the other person as an extension of your own being. Then there is no question of hurting the others, even if they are different.

HT: How can a seeker achieve liberation from rebirth?

Bharati: Liberation cannot be a goal. The desire itself can become a hindrance. When the desire dissolves, liberation will follow.

HT: What do you consider to be the ultimate spiritual attainment?

Bharati: Be one with the Ishwara. Know that the God's essence is in you and be one with him like a drop in the ocean.

HT: How can the Hindu swamis upgrade the state of Hinduism?

Bharati: The sadhus live elevated lives, therefore people believe in their word and tend to follow them. What saints can accomplish, the leaders can never do. They are the ones who should propagate concepts like widow remarriages and not exploiting the dowry system. In Indian history, the sages have been instrumental in bringing reform. Hinduism is the most logical, scientific and strongest religion on earth. It is ever fresh because it has assimilated so many diverse ways of thought within its resilient folds. It is anadi, that is, beginningless, and did not start with one person or with one book. Its survival over thousands of years is not an accident. It survived because it was fit, flowing with the times and not becoming stagnant.

HT: What can be done to improve the situation of women's rights in India?

Bharati: A woman must be given education, self realization as well as opportunity to use her abilities and education for herself and the society. Women do not have to act like men. They can become highly accomplished individuals retaining their inborn greatness and sweetness. A woman should not be subjected to a secondary status.

HT: What are your views on abortion?

Bharati: Prevention is better than abortion. But when people have lost self control, some measure has to be there to curb the problem of over population. I am totally against the rising practice of aborting female fetuses. How can you worship the Goddess in your house and then turn around and kill a fetus because it is female? Such people should not be allowed to worship a Goddess. Living together before

marriage should be discouraged and banned.

HT: How can Hindus come to peaceful terms with the Muslims of India.

Bharati: Communal harmony will prevail if Muslims give up their fundamentalism. Throughout history, the religious ethos of India did not involve any fundamentalism. It is against India's character, that is why India could accommodate in its social fold so many different sects and religions. n