

The Sounds of Silence

By RICHA VARMA

Have I ruined your life?" Hillary Clinton had asked Anasuya Sengupta, a reticent Delhi University student, during their short meeting in 1995.

By reading out Sengupta's poem, "Silence," in a speech at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation during her visit as U.S. first lady, Clinton had turned the young poet into an instant, though reluctant, celebrity. Sengupta was just a fortnight away from her undergraduate exam in economics at Lady Shri Ram College for Women in New Delhi when Principal Meenakshi Gopinath asked her to write a poem to welcome Clinton.

The media clamor was repeated in 2003 when Sengupta figured in Clinton's memoir, *Living History*, and a chapter was named after the poem.

"I couldn't get the poem out of my head," Clinton wrote in *Silence Is Not Spoken Here*. "The poem struck a chord with the audience members, many of whom were touched that I would draw on the thoughts of a schoolgirl to evoke the condition of women everywhere. Anasuya, lovely, humble and shy in the face of all the publicity her poem generated, was astounded that women all over the globe were requesting copies of it."

Sengupta, who has not copyrighted her poem, says "...Since it was a gift from my college and me to Mrs. Clinton, in a sense, she has rights over it, too...of course I strongly believe in attribution and acknowledgement of every kind. And Mrs. Clinton has been so generous in her acknowledgement throughout the lifetime of this poem."

During her recent visit as secretary of state, Clinton invited Sengupta to an interaction with Delhi University students. Sengupta, who is a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, happened to be in India on holiday when she received the invitation.

This time around though, she was better equipped to handle the attention.

For more information:

Anasuya Sengupta's blog

<http://blogs.sanmathi.org/anasuya/>

Remarks by Hillary Clinton at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation

http://clinton4.nara.gov/WH/EOP/First_Lady/html/generalspeeches/1995/3-29-95.html

"Everybody was clamoring, 'The poet's here, the poet's here,' and I was thinking, 'You know, I now have a life beyond poetry. In fact, I have a life beyond that poem,'" Sengupta says.

Sengupta's journey since her first meeting with Clinton 14 years ago has been anything but silent, though poetry, she says with regret, occupies very little of her time now.

"It's been a journey of extraordinary turns.... As best as I've been able to over these years, I've tried to take the road less travelled. I've tried to do what felt right for me to do rather than what was necessarily convenient," she says.

While doing her research in India from 2001 to 2007 for a D.Phil in politics, she headed a UNICEF (India) partnership with the Karnataka state police on issues of violence against women and children. Besides working with organizations across India on gender equality and religious fundamentalism, she co-edited *Defending Our Dreams*, an anthology of young feminists' analyses and experiences.

An Indian citizen, Sengupta has been associated with the Global Fund for Women as director of programs, Asia-Oceania. Based in San Francisco, the fund works exclusively for women's human rights.

In her meetings with Clinton over the years, Sengupta confesses to harboring a lingering regret. "Even then and even now, she finds my name difficult to pronounce.... I know the point is the thought behind it. So it's fine.... There are people in Berkeley who go on about Indian names being difficult and we have a bit of a joke. There's a professor who's called Bob. So we just say, 'Bob is too difficult...we'll call you Subramanian.'"

Have the ideas expressed by her in "Silence" changed over the years?

Too many women in too many countries



R.C. RAHEJA

... speak the same language of silence...

"I still think there are many silences in a woman's life. I don't think all women's lives are always silent. I don't think I meant it even then," says Sengupta. "Part of the struggle that all of us have, both as young women and as women who fight for equality and social justice...is to break the silences, when the silences are those of oppression, violence and abuse."

"Silence" was, in fact, inspired by "Heritage," a short poem she wrote when she was 16.

Heritage

I will come when I can walk beside you

And talk of ambitions

With an easy tongue.

I will not look at your feet

And drag my heritage behind me

Through the dust of my grandmother's silence.

"It has a different tone and voice, but with much the same underlying theme," she says. "In some ways, I like it much better."

Sengupta, who is proud to embrace the label of a feminist, says that over the past 14 years, she continues "to find it extraordinary that a woman and political figure of Mrs. Clinton's stature would not just remember the poem..., but be so gracious in acknowledging it. Perhaps it has to do with the issues the poem raises—every woman, after all, must have her silences to bear, and to break."



"Heritage" has been printed with Anasuya Sengupta's permission.