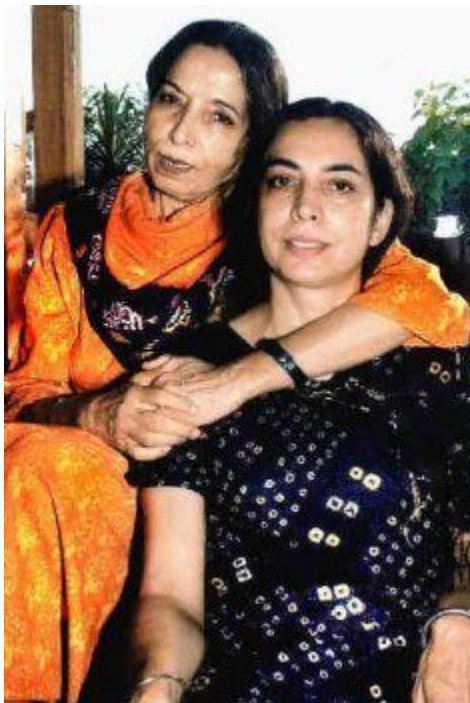


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## Like mother, like daughter

By ARUNA BHOWMICK



**AWESOME TWOSOME: Ajeet and Arpana Cour.**

THE WORLD knows her as a successful and somewhat aggressive woman. She and artist daughter Arpana are commonly perceived as a formidable pair. Yes, author-activist-social worker Ajeet Cour is allegedly a go-getter, who will go to any lengths to accomplish what she wants, and the ordinarily soft-spoken, mild mannered Arpana, reputedly no less wilful.

But get to know her, read a little of her writings, and Ajeet Cour the woman comes through as one contending with her life's gift, the searing pain spearing through her consciousness like a poisoned assegai. "Mere yehan jo ek dard hai, woh mujhse kehta hai ki tu dusron ka dard baant," says she, putting her hand on her heart.

Not fated for sheltered domesticity, life had to begin for this mother of two as a teacher and editor of business journal Rupee Trade, which she ran for 32 years, between the mid-`60s and `97-98. This taker of many beatings has many firsts to her credit.

She was picked by Indira Gandhi to go to Mexico with a kit of 200 books to celebrate the International Year of the Woman. Came the Directory of Indian Women Professionals, to which she was assigned. She was the first to insist on writers' visas from Pakistan, unthinkable till 1986, for an Indo-Pak Writers' Conference.

"After 10 months of waiting, however, there were 10 visas but only five NOCs from the Pak Government!" she rues. But she was undaunted. By 1987 she was fighting for a culture berth in the SAARC scheme of things, unthought-of till then. She not only established the FOUNDATION OF SAARC WRITERS AND LITERATURE, taking a Writers' Conference to Pakistan, but also managed to get it the status of the only SAARC-recognised cultural SAARC APEX BODY in South Asia. This pioneering achievement now faces rivalry from the Sahitya Akademi as they have only just woken to its potential!

Awarded in 1986 by the Sahitya Akademi for her autobiography "Khanabadosh", she muses, "The first crime is to be a woman. Second, to be a single woman. Third, a self-supporting woman, and the last and most incriminating, to be an earning, intelligent and self-respecting woman."

And though just such a woman she has nevertheless lived life on her own terms, from a docile little girl in pre-partition Lahore, to a romantic and passionate young woman who never set out to defy anyone. But life kept dealing its blows, and slowly, there emerged the woman of reckoning, the writer-social activist Ajeet Cour we know today. Only, minus one daughter, the 18-plus that she lost in an unknown hospital, among unknown people, in the burns ward of a hospital in Paris. She tries to compensate herself by providing food, education, vocational training, health and economic awareness to adolescent girls from the slums, a programme that has been on for the last 27 years.

Life may have been cruel, but friends have not. Surrounded by luminaries, she has had the unstinting support of the likes of Khushwant Singh, V.P. Singh, diplomat Kanwal Bakshi, legal experts KTS Tulsi and C.M. Oberoi, Dr. H.S. Rissam of Escorts, and many others.

Where has Arpana been through all this? Alternating between painting and supporting her mother in all that she , "besides all my other work as a professional artist." Having built life together, completing the building of the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature - established by Ajeet with a peer group of writers, artists and cultural activists in 1975 - within the Siri Fort Institutional Area "painting by painting", they count each one that sells.

Arpana and younger sister Candy were made to dabble in dance, music, sculpture, poetry, before choosing their vocations. Arpana actually chose her own name! Having painted since the age of three, she made her first oil at the age of nine, while learning from Surinder Chadda in East Patel Nagar. She learnt metal casting from Balakrishna Guru. Husain spotted her work in 1974, and liked it enough to include her in a show selected by him. There has been no looking back.

They live as they believe, chalking out their own path, taking and giving to the world what they feel it deserves. That's courage; and not everybody possesses it.