

Prakash



# DHARMENDRA'S WIFE DEFENDS HER HUSBAND!

The only time I'd seen her was in rare photographs printed in magazines. The only things I'd heard of her were mundane and dull ("She is the typical Jat wife. I-mind-my-own-business kind."). Still, I was dying to meet the lady.

For two decades, she had lived the life of a dumb door-mat at the feet of her film star husband. She had seen him flit from one woman to another, watched him drink himself to death, and yet remained staunchly behind him like a true *pati sevak*. Unrecognised and unhonoured, she stayed in the background making excuses for her husband's love for wine and women; mending his broken heart after each affair and working hard to keep her family and home from crumbling completely. So much so that when after more than twenty years of married life, her husband chose a second wife, she bore the hurt, humiliation and disgrace silently, without complaints. I marvelled at this real-life *sati-savitri* who preferred to let herself be branded the 'other woman', rather than raise her voice against her husband.

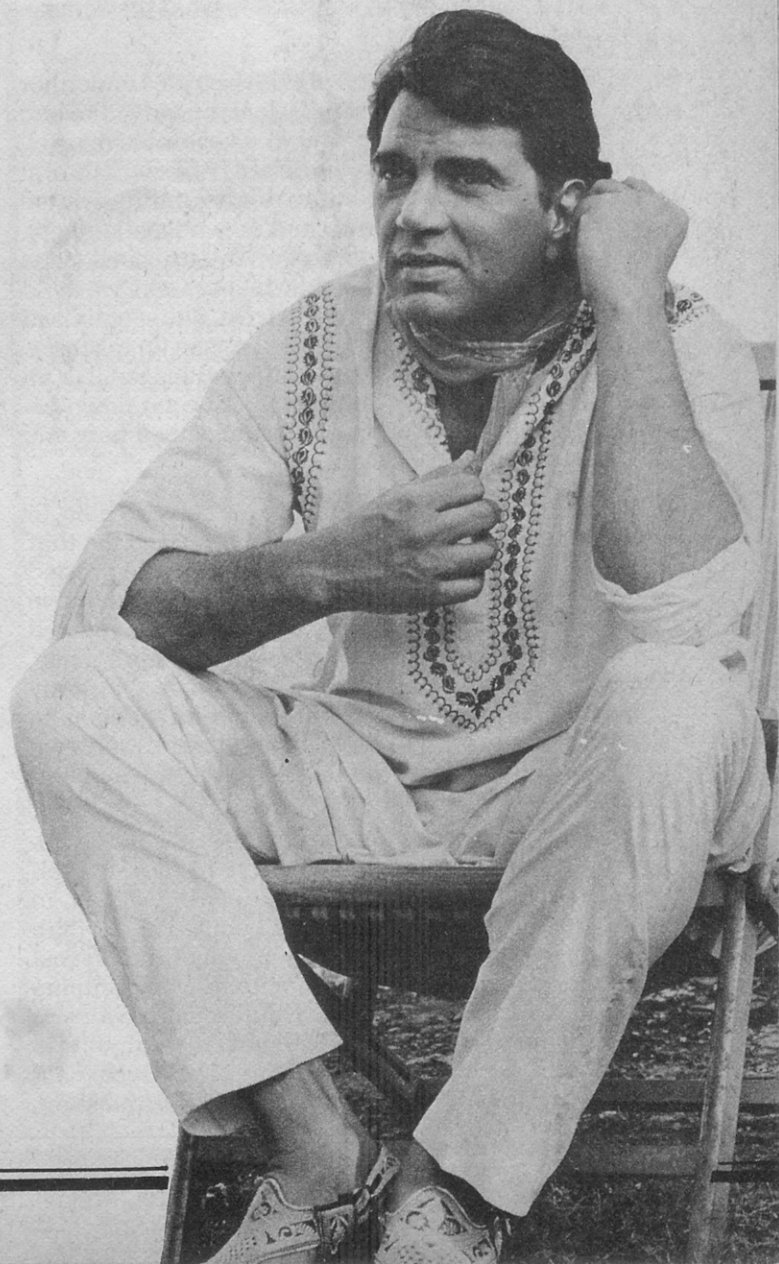
Yet, beneath the slavish devotion lay a thinking, self-respecting woman. Having been forced to share her only security—her husband—with another woman, she began making feeble attempts to create a life of her own, one that didn't revolve completely around the man who'd publicly pushed her aside for a more glamorous, more successful woman. Lately, I'd been hearing about her visits to the beauty parlour, her stylish new hair-cut, her joining Dimple Khanna and company for kitty parties, her occasional lunch and movie outings with her lady friends, even her presence at small *filmi* gatherings (like at Kalyanji's son's wedding) escorted by her husband's brother.

Mrs. Prakash Dharmendra Deoli was definitely showing signs of breaking out of her self-imposed exile and voluntary confinement within the four walls of her palatial home. The evolution, if belated, was welcome. The time, I knew, was just right for our meeting.

Meeting Prakash was an experience and an exercise in perseverance. She did not answer phone calls. And she didn't meet visitors (unknown) to her house. So fixing an official appointment with her was out of the question. I had to catch her unawares.

I hounded Dharam's Juhu bungalow for days. Every time I knocked at the huge gate, I was told that the *memsaab* was either asleep or out or having a bath. Being an old-hand at dealing with *filmi* people, these excuses naturally were too amateurish to put me off my trail.

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For the nth time, I knocked at the gate. The *gurkha* with his oiled hair, bored expression and monotonous drawl said, "Saab (Dharmendra) is out of town, Sonny saab (Ajay) is in *pardes*, Babuji (Dharam's father) is in Delhi (or Punjab or whatever) and *memsaab* (Prakash) is in the bathroom." I informed him that I had the whole day free and was at his *memsaab's* disposal. She could meet me at her own convenience. I also gave him a *filmi* line, "Hum intezar karenge."

The man went into a state of panic. "I don't know how long she'll take," he stammered. "Why don't you come back after four-five hours or perhaps late in the evening?" I refused to budge. When he realised that nothing would shake me off that day, he asked for my visiting card and disappeared into the house. He re-emerged with a pretty looking Punjabi lady who introduced herself as Ajay's aunty. "Prakashji is not at home," she said, obviously not having compared notes with the *gurkha*. "She'll be coming back late in the evening and will then be leaving for Delhi." I stared disbelievingly at her and before she could think of another excuse, I dodged past her and ran up the staircase leading to Prakash's room. Aunty and *gurkha* shouted and screamed after me to stop me. But before they could bodily throw me out, Prakash herself walked out on the landing to see what the commotion was all about.

Slim, of medium height, with dark circles under her eyes, Prakash was an ordinary looking lady. She had the kind of face one often sees in a vegetable market. She looked more the homely wife of a bank clerk than of a film star. Standing there clutching her untidy, printed nylon sari, she looked me up and down questioningly. She was obviously unaware of all my previous visits (present one included). In loud whispers, she was told who I was and where I had come from. She scrutinised me again and then instead of hauling me up for trespassing, she offered me a seat in what looked like an office (or perhaps a waiting room). She sat down beside me, feeling conscious of her uncombed hair and her unmade-up face.

It took her some time to compose herself and then, in a very firm but pleasant voice, she informed me that she didn't give interviews. "I don't talk to the press," she said in Hindi. "My English is not good and I have nothing to say." Speech over, she obviously expected me to take the hint and depart. When I didn't move, she added defensively, "I am a housewife. I love my home and children. I don't care what anyone has to say about me or the way I live. Everyone has their own lifestyles. I have mine, you have yours, so why point fingers?"

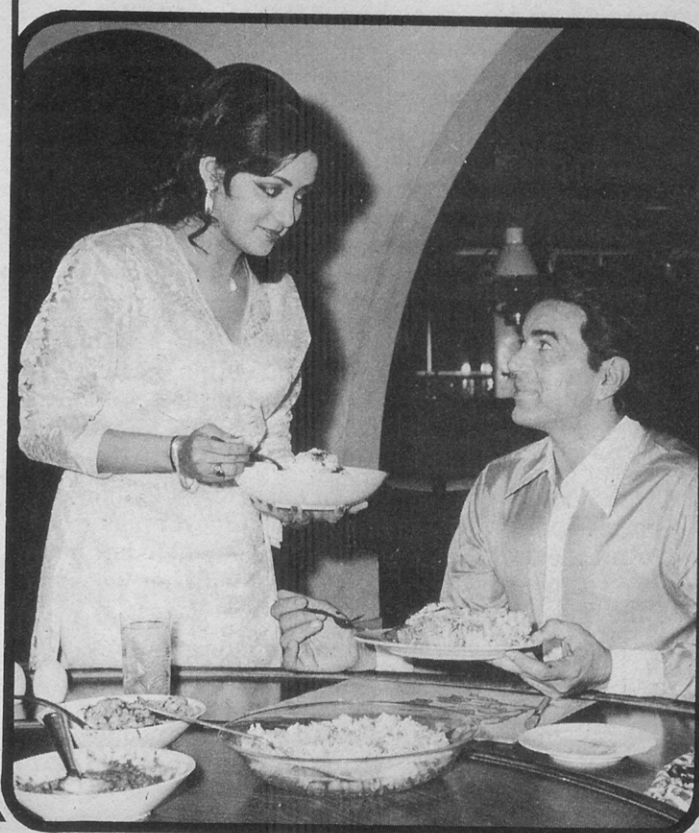
It wasn't defiance or aggressiveness, it was her vulnerability that made Prakash want to hide herself from the public eye. She found safety in privacy, in losing herself amongst ordinary beings rather than standing out as the chosen wife of one of the biggest stars of the day. There was something very genuine about her, a readiness to trust that must have been her undoing pretty often. My heart went out to Prakash. How could Dharam cheat on a simple soul like her? But before I could ask her the question,

Prakash spoke instinctively, "He (Dharam) is the first and the last man in my life," she said. "He is the father of my children. I love and respect him a lot. What has happened has happened. I don't know whether I should blame him or my destiny for it. But one thing is certain, however far he may be from me, whatever might happen, but if I need him, I know that he'll be there. I have not lost my trust in him. After all, he is the father of my children."

Coming from anyone else, the words would've sounded *filmi*. But in Prakash, they only showed the naivete and helplessness of a wife who knows there is no way out of her predicament. Aware of the limited time I had on my hands, I decided to make the most out of our meeting. I asked Prakash where exactly she stood with the 'father of her children'. She said honestly, "He may not be the best husband, though he is very good to me, but he is certainly the best father. His children love him a lot. He never neglects them. He is even launching Ajay's career. Everyone thought that I had made a deal with my husband that he could marry Hema if he launched my son's career. That is not true. How can such a thing be possible? Isn't Sonny as much his son as mine? Doesn't he love him as much as I love him?"

While we were talking about her son, I asked her about the rumour that was making the industry rounds these days. Was it true that Ajay had attempted to assault Hema with a knife? "It's not true," she snapped, openly showing her resentment towards the rumour-mongers. "Every child wants his papa to love only his mother," she explained matter-of-factly. "But then, that does not mean that they want to kill any

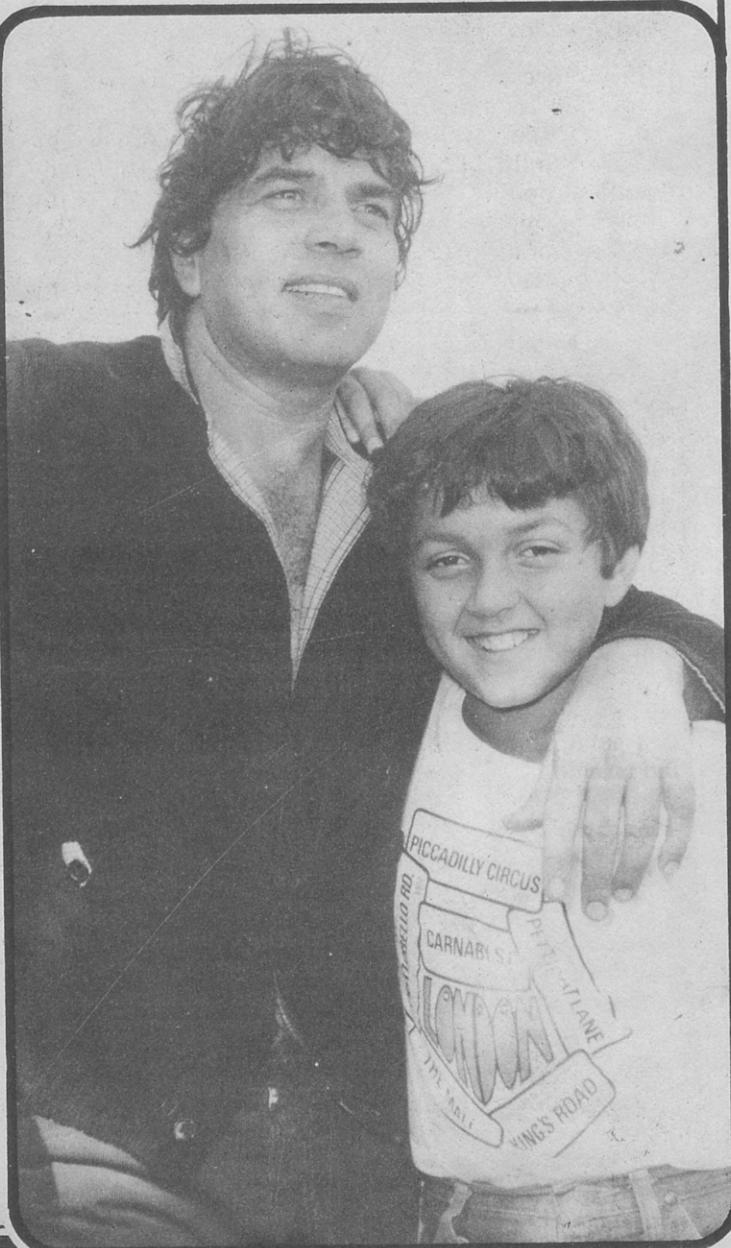
**"Why only my husband, any man would have preferred Hema to me!"**



other woman who loves their father." She paused and then in a one-woman-to-another tone said simply, "I may not be very educated nor am I pretty, but in the eyes of my children, I am the best woman on earth. Similarly, my children to me are the most beautiful *bachche* in the world. I know all my children very well since I have brought them up. And I can say this with full confidence that none of my children can ever hurt or harm anyone."

They take after their parents, she pointed out. And whatever the current opinion of Dharam, Prakash everyone agrees is a harmless soul. In fact, she looks the kind who needs to be protected all the time. "I am learning to stand on my own," she admitted and then added very defiantly, "But why should I protect myself when I have my husband to protect me? I don't care what the world may say about the kind of relationship I share with my husband. Where I am concerned, I know that my husband is protecting all of us. He comes home every day and spends time with the

**"I don't say he comes home for me. But he comes home every day and spends them with the children!"**



children." She pondered for sometime and said honestly, "I don't say that he comes home for me. But what is important is that he does come home."

I was surprised at the coolness and ease with which she spoke about the other woman (Hema Malini) in their life. There were no tears, no bitterness, no jealousy. Prakash was matter-of-fact to the extent of being detached and unconcerned. To provoke her, I told her how violently I would have reacted if I were in her place. But Prakash merely nodded understandingly and to my utter astonishment said, "I can understand what Hema is going through. Even she has to face the world, her relatives and her friends. But if I were in Hema's place, I wouldn't have done what she did. For as a woman I can understand her feelings, but as a wife and a mother, I do not approve of them."

Her pity for Hema turned into anger when she hit out at the filmwallas for brandishing her husband's name. "Why only my husband, any man would have preferred Hema to me," she said bluntly. "How dare anyone call my husband a womaniser when half the industry is doing the same thing? All the heroes are having affairs and getting married a second time. Why have you come to interview me? Why don't you interview all those other wives?"

Her contempt for the film industry was understandable. "My father-in-law too is against film stars," she said justifying her resentment. "I know his own son is an actor, but then *Babuji* never wanted him to be one. If *Babuji* could have his way, he would see to it that the whole film industry is wiped off!" She added with a laugh, "But now there'll be one more addition from our family into the film industry—our son Ajay."

I asked her if she was scared of letting Ajay loose in the *filmi* jungle. "No," she murmured doubtfully, and then with renewed confidence added, "Because he is not alone, his father is with him." She fidgeted nervously with her sari and then whispered, "Ajay is in love with a girl in London and he'll be marrying her soon." I didn't have the heart to tell her that her big secret was already common knowledge in the industry!

Having spoken, she was panic stricken. She asked me, "Will you write all this in your magazine?" I nodded. "How much of *mirchi masala* will you add?" I assured her that I would report each word correctly. She smiled disbelievingly. I tried to reassure her, she retorted, "I don't read film magazines anyway. I don't have to. My friends read them for me. They tell me each and every item concerning my family. They even add their own *masala* while doing so." That was the only time Prakash sounded bitter. And before I could say another word, she got up and announced, "I have to pack my bags. I am leaving for Delhi tonight." Even before I got a chance to thank her for answering my questions, she vanished!

But now that I have met and spoken to Mrs. Prakash Deoli, I have changed my opinion about her. She certainly cannot be called Dharam's shadow or Hema's *sautan*. She is a woman of substance who can have her way but doesn't want to!