

# Praying for Clinton

by SANDHYA NANKANI

In our family home in Pune, the television is reserved daily, between 7 and 10 am, for the use of none other than my grandmother. On weekdays, Meme (as we call her) is an ardent viewer of several devotional shows on the Punjabi cable channel – Sikh chants and services, filmed in various Gurudwaras around India, and folk beat bhajans that hail the mother goddess. When I am in India, I look forward to waking up to the sound of aarti bells, cymbals, the harmonium and sometimes, Meme's voice. And, I eagerly anticipate watching the slide show of emotions that passes over her face when she attends her TV services.

The morning after Bill Clinton's Air Force One landed at the New Delhi airport last month, I emerged from my room to find my grandmother sitting on her low, fake-leather chair in the living room, in front of the television screen. At first, it seemed like any other day. Meme's eyes were half-closed, her legs were stretched out on the low stool in front of her and her hands were folded, as if in prayer.

But, something was different. There was no loud music blaring in the background. And, instead of images of pilgrims or of Durga Mata, Meme's gaze was fixed on a tall white man with gray hair, dressed in a dark suit.

Bill Clinton? I did a double take. When did the American President become a part of my grandmother's daily pooja?

I watched with a mixture of amusement and disbelief as Meme folded her hands in namaste and bowed her head as a shot of Clinton, emerging from his airplane and descending to meet his well-wishers in Dhaka, flickered across our screen. My grandmother seemed happy to see him, so happy that she had cho-

sen to bypass her daily satsang to watch the live coverage of his visit to the Indian subcontinent.

Mind you, my grandmother is not the type who enjoys the endless chatter of political pundits. Nor is she the type who can sit through an address by any Indian head of state without fidgeting. Yet, that morning she was content to allow me to take over the remote control. She even listened to my aunt read to us from the morning newspaper about how Clinton had arrived in India with 200 foreign journalists, a delegation of diplomats and businessmen, 200 secret service agents, 100 U.S. Marines, 30 bullet proof cars, one dozen choppers, two U.S. army trucks and a labrador to snuff out explosives.

"President William Jefferson Clinton in the house," I wanted to shout out.

All that week, Meme continued to follow the news closely. She watched as roads were fixed and the streets were cleaned in the cities on "Rashtrapati" Bill Clinton's itinerary. She seemed taken by Chelsea — *Isn't she pretty?* — and by Clinton's mother-in-law — *Why did he bring his saas but not his wife?* She watched as the American president was accorded a green carpet welcome — the first ever for any foreign dignitary — at Gandhi's memorial, Rajghat. If we had Internet access at home, I'm sure she would have loved to visit the website Andhra Pradesh's net-savvy Chief Minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu created in honor of Clinton's visit to Hyderabad — or should I say Cyderabad? At [welcomeclinton.com](http://welcomeclinton.com), the photograph of the dhoti-clad American President would surely have amused Meme.

All week long, as Clinton waltzed across India, shaking hands, dancing, not-riding elephants and making po-



litically correct, charismatic speeches, Meme was fascinated by his every move. And, every time Meme saw Bill Clinton's face on the TV screen, she bowed her head and folded her hands, mouthing

a prayer.

At first, I thought that she was sending a prayer his way, as she does when she sees any of the many Indian swamis and gurus, the Dalai Lama or the Pope on television. "This Clinton fellow is not a holy man," I wanted to tell her.

My misunderstanding was quickly cleared away when my grandmother nodded her head sadly soon after. "Poor man, look at how serious and sad he is," Meme said as she watched Clinton walk down a red carpet. "Who can blame him? He must be afraid to visit India. Anything can happen to him in this country."

I understood then that my grandmother — a woman who has lived through the partition of India and the assassinations of more than half a dozen political and cultural icons in the subcontinent over the past 50 years — was not praying to the American president. Rather, she was praying for his protection and safety.

In Meme's eyes, each time Clinton walked on a red carpet, was garlanded, or shook hands with the Indian public, he was putting himself on the line. He needed all the prayers he could get.

When Clinton left India, one week later, Meme heaved a sigh of relief. "Shukur," she said, "Vecharo garib sukh saa pauto." In rough translation: *Thank you God. The poor man has reached his home happy and in one piece.*

I don't think any of Clinton's 200 secret service agents could have said it better!