

Kamala Das, Veiled



I was reading in a recent [interview](#) of Kamala Das that she has, in fact, been wearing purdah, off and on for about 25 years.

I remember, I remember.

It was in Sri Lanka in 1983 when the great riots had broken out. The small community of Indian expats in Colombo had become collateral targets of the rampaging mobs. And we were all gibbering with fright. Those who could took the first Air Lanka flight back to India; those who couldn't held small councils of war, where strategies for survival were feverishly discussed.

At one of these, I remember, Kamala Das (whose husband was posted there as a senior World Bank official) interrupted the proceedings by saying she had the perfect solution. We all looked at her.

"I've got a special Pakistani suit made," she said simply, "If there's any trouble, I shall simply wear that. Nobody will even guess that I'm Indian."

This was a brainwave, which only a creative genius like Kamala Das could have thought up. After that every Indian in Colombo followed suit (no pun intended). A guy called Sunil Marya, who owned a *shalwar kameez*, was in great demand; all the Indian men there wanted to borrow his clothes so that they could have them copied by the local tailor as insurance. And for at least the next one year all the Indian men I knew there (myself included) took to wandering around in *shalwar kameezes*, trying to pass themselves off as Pakistanis.

Cowardice, as somebody once said, is the better part of valour.

I next bumped into Kamala Das at Colombo airport after a particularly harrowing phase of Sri Lankan political history. She was rather oddly dressed, in what looked like a night-suit with a *dupatta* thrown over her head. She gave me a big smile.

"How do you like my Pakistani suit?" she asked. (Oh, so that was what it was supposed to be.)

"Very elegant," I assured her, "Very elegant indeed."

"It probably saved my life," she said, "Our car was stopped by a mob, but nobody guessed that I was Indian, wearing this." She preened in that curious looking night suit of hers, and adjusted the *dupatta* over her head.

Yes, she was enormously talented, and enormously charming, but not -- to the best of my recollection -- the most chic of women.

Now that I read in her recent interviews that she feels "very safe" in purdah, I know exactly what she means. In fact, the purdah quite possibly saved her life once, back then during the Sri Lankan troubles.

Creative Director Anvar Alikhan worked in Sri Lanka for three years during the eighties.