



SPARROW
SOUND & PICTURE
ARCHIVES FOR
RESEARCH
ON
WOMEN

Publication Number 55

Published by

Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women
The Nest, B-101/201/301, Patel Apartment,
Maratha Colony Road, Dahisar (E),
Mumbai-400068
Phone: 022 2828 0895, 2896 5019
E mail: sparrow@bom3.vsnl.net.in
sparrow1988@gmail.com
Website: www.sparrowonline.org

Editor:

C S Lakshmi

Co-editor:

Malsawmi Jacob

Publication Co-ordination:

Pooja Pandey

Printed at :

Mouj Prakashan Griha,
Khatau Wadi, Goregaonkar Lane, Girgaum,
Mumbai - 400 004
Phone: 022 2387 1050

This Newsletter is published with the
support of Stichting de Zaaier, Utrecht

SPARROW

newsletter

SNL Number 14

August 2008

| | |
|---|-------|
| Editor's Note | 01 |
| A Nun Named Compassion: Sister Karuna Mary Braganza | 02 |
| – Malsawmi Jacob | |
| Gauri Deshpande: A Distinctive Voice | 03 |
| – Josna Rege | |
| Ending His Play: Vijay Tendulkar | 05 |
| – Shanta Gokhale | |
| Events: Exhibition, Workshop & Talks | 06 |
| Book Review: <i>Barbala: Eka Hotel Gayikechi Atmakatha & Mazhe Gane Mazhe Jagane</i> | 08 |
| – Sharmila Sontakke & Vaishali Gaikwad | |
| Homage: Lakshmi Devi Naidu, Anuradha Gandhi, Gnya Susheela, Nirmala Deshpande & Dr. Sarojini Babar | 09-10 |
| – Malsawmi Jacob, C S Lakshmi & Sharmila Sontakke | |

ON THE ANVIL
HOT IS THE MOON & DEGHAM
FOR DETAILS SEE PAGE 07

[Editor's Note]

This issue of SNL has been delayed due to various reasons, the major one being that the shifting of our office left us with a lot of backlog of work and it took us time to settle down in the new building. Meanwhile we got a little lucky and Stichting de Zaaier of Holland has agreed to support the publication of SNL for the next two years. It is just a little silver lining but it gives us a perspective to see the dark clouds we are under.

From this issue of SNL we have decided to do a regional round so that the issues and projects SPARROW is dealing with in several regions can be brought to light. The current issue concentrates on Maharashtra. It is appropriate to begin this issue with a profile of Sister Braganza known as Karuna whose life SPARROW is planning to document. There are also profiles of two important writers of Maharashtra whose writings have totally broken stereotypes where women are concerned. We have also chosen for review, the autobiography of Vaishali Haldankar, a bar singer, and a biography of Sulochana Chavan, who was known as the queen of lavani singing. The issue also covers events that took place in Mumbai which SPARROW covered and in our homage page, we pay respect to women from different parts of India who have done dedicated work in their lifetime.

Do visit our website www.sparrowonline.org which we are trying to update and do write to us.

A Nun Named Compassion



Sister Karuna Mary Braganza has been awarded Padma Shri for social service. She was christened twice. As an infant she was called Mary Braganza. Later, the Jharkhand tribals among whom she worked for over a decade renamed her 'Karuna' which means compassion. She is understandably glad to bear that name. Sister Karuna is well known for her selfless service for the poor and her championing of education. The

works and achievements of this dynamic nun are many and far reaching.

Mary Braganza was born the fifth of ten children. She grew up in a comfortable bungalow in Bandra, Mumbai. While a student in St. Xavier's College, she became active in social work, taking part in social service and mission camps in the villages of Talasari. She also developed an interest in theatre and utilised her talent in staging many good plays while working in Sophia College.

When she was 21, while dancing in the moonlight at a party, she received a call to serve God, India and the poor. So she decided to become a nun in order to do this. She acquired a life long passion to work for the people of rural India and the tribals.

After completing her Master's degree, Mary Braganza took her vow in England in 1950. On her return to India, she taught at Sophia School, Bangalore, for several years. She developed her skill as an educator during these years. From 1959, she taught in Sophia College, Mumbai, as lecturer and Head of Department of English. She later became Vice-Principal and in 1965, the first Indian principal of the college.

During her tenure as principal in Sophia College, she initiated several activities and changes. She made the move to induct lay staff to administrative posts, which were earlier occupied only by priests and nuns. To commemorate the silver jubilee of the college in 1966, it was decided to start a BSc course. The Bhabha Institute of Science was constructed according to this decision. The college students also worked with Warli tribals as part of a social work and leadership training project at Kosbad under her guidance. This was an expression of Sister Karuna's passion for uplifting the people of rural India.

Two other academic steps were taken with Sister Braganza as the driving force. One was Sophia Polytechnic, and the other was Sadhana School for the mentally handicapped. The first was a practical oriented education and the other an effort to educate even those considered uneducable by society. Post-graduate Science courses were also started during this time. Under her dynamic leadership academic life of the college flourished. New departments like Sociology, Psychology, Biochemistry, as well as Sophia Junior College were opened. She also took personal interest in the students and remembered each by name, even

when the enrolment rose to 1800.

During the early eighties, Sister Braganza set her eyes on the wider field of education. She was concerned about education at the national level. She served as secretary for All India Association for Christian Higher Education for the next six years. She moved to Delhi and worked with more than 200 colleges all over the country.

At the end of this term, she finally realised her long-cherished dream of working directly for the tribals in rural India. She was invited to teach English and improve the quality of education at St. Joseph's College, Torpa, in South Bihar, now Jharkhand state, in 1998. For the next twelve years, her vision and inexhaustible energies had free exercise. On landing there, she was struck by the poverty, malnourishment and wretchedness of the life of tribals of the area. She learned Mundari tongue, the main language. She started adult literacy programme and spread awareness of community rights and responsibilities. She started the Centre for Women's Development (CWD) at Torpa in 1990. One of the projects of CWD was Women's Thrift Group in 49 villages. Each group member contributed a sum of money, as small as two rupees a week. As the funds grew, they could take loans from it and start income generating activities.

A large hostel for the girls of St. Joseph's College was also started during this time. A primary teacher training institute, a balniketan and an English medium school were also established at Torpa. Balwadis and women's groups were set up in different villages as well. Sister Karuna also initiated a unique study that mapped and documented indigenous herbs of the district.

Sister Braganza's successes in improving the lot of the tribals angered the exploiters. They started accusing her of trying to convert the tribals and Dalits. Not content with this, they resorted to physical harassment. The hostel where she lived with 95 college girls was attacked by armed goons. The police post across the road turned a deaf ear to their cries for help. It was an old priest with an old gun who came to their rescue. The terror campaign continued, but Sister Mary did not give up. She networked with other parties working for tribal development.

Her efforts brought on social change as well. In one village, the menace of alcoholism was tackled by talking to the brewers to stop their trade. Two of the three brewers quit it and started other business. The third person refused to listen, but that only strengthened the women's resolve to bring in change. As a result of Sister Mary's drive, a total of 5,000 women have been mobilised into self help groups and taught how to organise and defend themselves.

Sister Karuna had a Sabbatical in 2000 in Pune. She could not be idle even then. She joined hands with the Sophia College ex-students who were working for street children and other causes. Then she moved to Mumbai and revived the Ex-students' Association there, serving as its director for the next five years. Her gift for networking and deep commitment to rural India led

to collaboration with SCESA and SHARE in rural outreach projects such as sanitation and health, water harvesting and education. Being an educationist at heart, she still helps out rural schools in distress. She helped revive a Sri Lankan school wiped out by Tsunami and a secular education trust school in Maharashtra broken down by floods. Along with other educationists, she helped to relocate the Sri Lankan school and re-established the Goregaon village school as the Zainab Tobaccowala Secular School. She continues to be a support and inspiration to the teachers there.

Sister Karuna is based in Pune since June 2006. She is 84 now, but is still actively involved in taking care of the elderly and in social outreach.

This nun named Compassion richly deserves the award with which she has been honoured.

— Malsawmi Jacob

Sources: *Times of India*, 7 May 2008, *RSCJ International*, 29 February 2008 & *Outlook* magazine, 18 December 2000

Gauri Deshpande: A Distinctive Voice



In Marathi or in English, in person or in print, the prolific poet, fiction-writer, and translator Gauri Deshpande (1942-2003) has a distinctive voice: strongly feminist, wryly humorous—usually at her own expense, confident yet self-critical, irreverent yet steeped in tradition, cosmopolitan yet grounded in her love for language and place. No matter who or where her audience is, she is bound to challenge their assumptions, producing both discomfort and delight.

In 1993, as a postgraduate student preparing with trepidation for our first meeting at the University of Poona's English Department, where she was teaching postgraduate courses, I carefully donned a traditional Pune sari to meet the daughter of the illustrious anthropologist Iravati Karve and the granddaughter of the illustrious social reformer D.K. Karve. To my embarrassed surprise, a tall, lanky, imperious-looking woman dressed in torn trousers came striding toward me and grasped my hand in a firm handshake. We became friends quickly, thanks to her openness and generosity, and my husband, son, and I have fond memories of our visits to her house during our stay in Pune, as we all ate and talked non-stop, and played fast and furiously competitive card games (the game of "Running Demons" I shall forever associate with Gauri Deshpande) with her and her daughters, son-in-law, and grandsons. Back in the United States a decade

later when I heard the sad news of her untimely death over the internet, I could hardly imagine returning to Pune without her there.

While Gauri Deshpande was unquestionably one of the most important and innovative writers in contemporary Marathi literature, and was well-known and respected throughout India and among scholars of Maharashtra, she began her career writing well-received poetry in English. She published three collections with the Calcutta Writers Workshop and edited a collection of Indian poetry in English in the late sixties and early seventies, but then switched over to writing fiction in Marathi and made her name with her novellas and her translations. At the time of her death in 2003 she was relatively unknown beyond India; however, that was changing, since her work in English had been gaining greater exposure throughout the 1990s. One of her Marathi stories was translated into English and anthologized in the important two-volume *Women Writing in India* published in 1993, and her first collection of short stories in English, *The Lackadaisical Sweeper*, was published in 1997. Several of her important Marathi-English translations were also published or re-issued in the late 1980s and 1990s, including Sumitra Bhavé's *Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell their Story* (1988), Jayawant Dalvi's searing social critique, *Chakra: a novel* (1974, 1993), and Sunita Deshpande's *...and Pine for What is Not* (1995), a controversial memoir by the wife and secretary of the popular Marathi playwright P.L. Deshpande.

Like Gauri Deshpande herself, her stories confound readerly expectations—whether the readers are Indians or non-Indians—of Indian society, and specifically of women, and the stories are often profoundly unsettling, jarring the reader out of complacency. In addition, they continually shift perspective, from India to the United States and back, from gender to caste-class, from mother to daughter, from the rational to the emotional, from the abstractly philosophical to the earthly physical, and back again. Further, the categories themselves are unsettled, as women resist femininity, Indians refuse to behave in a stereotypically "Indian" manner, and the direction of global flows are reversed, as Americans migrate to India and become entirely assimilated.

In *That's the Way It Is (Ahe he ase ahe)*, the story published in *Women Writing in India*, the utterly rationalist first-person narrator gains a new perspective on herself at middle age, in a chance meeting with an old friend, an American long-settled in India. As she goes literally and figuratively to buy glasses to correct her far-sightedness, she discovers that she has understood nothing at all of life and love. When her friend observes, "You really do need glasses to see up close" (475), his comment prompts a shift in perspective, as the narrator, remembering so many incidents in the past, realizes that he has loved her silently ever since their childhood, while she has remained oblivious. "And suddenly, I *saw*...I was all wrong; I had missed my way in life. My constant arrogant insistence— "What I say is right!"—

had kept me from knowing what is was that others understood about life. I didn't let myself know. All *this*" (475-476). This capacity to be at once opinionated and self-critical is typical of Gauri Deshpande's writing.

In the title story of *The Lackadaisical Sweeper*, two newlywed upper-middle-class wives, one Indian, the other American, stationed in Hong Kong with their businessman-husbands, meet and become friends as they take their daily morning walks. At first the American woman appears to be stereotypically brash and self-involved, the young Indian woman (aptly named Seeta) equally stereotypically meek and submissive. However, the Indian wife's unquestioning submissiveness to her husband's demands leads her to betray her American friend's open confidences about her husband's business dealings. Learning from Seeta that her American friend and her husband are Jewish, Seeta's businessman-husband is able to use anti-Semitism and his wife's inside information to force the couple to flee the country, grabbing their real-estate holdings just as the property market is booming. The reader's disgust shifts from the uninhibited sex talk of the American woman to the unethical behaviour of the Indian woman. And then, in a characteristic shift, Gauri Deshpande gives a silent, sullen street sweeper the last word. Every morning the American woman has greeted him as they pass him on their morning walks, trying in vain to elicit a response from him. In the closing scene, Seeta greets him and he answers back, to her delight, though she understands nothing of what he has said. In her parting shot, Deshpande leaves us with a view from below: "It was fortunate that she did not know Cantonese" (28). Wealthy, sheltered Seeta's naiveté does not excuse her from complicity with her husband's land-grab plot, neither does it excuse her total ignorance of the sweeper's point of view. The reader is left pondering the sweeper's judgment of Seeta, who may be a virtuous Indian wife, but is not a good human being.

In *Map*, a tribute to Edward Said, a middle-aged woman reclaims her body as her own territory after a love affair has ended. The story draws upon the postcolonial critique of colonial thought as a gendered discourse that designates the colonised as female, a blank canvas passively desiring to be conquered and mapped. Her ex-lover was the colonial explorer cartographer, drawing the map of her body in his own, exoticised terms. As in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, where the "Orient" as represented by the European Orientalism bears no resemblance to actuality, but is a projection, a "will-to-power", of Europe itself, in Deshpande's story, the female first-person narrator now recognises "that the me in his mind had nothing to do with the me in my mind" (55). Taking pleasure in self-discovery at last, she declares, "it's my body now and my map" (61). In my view, Gauri Deshpande's refreshing frankness in discussing the female body and female sexuality is never offensive, because patriarchal representations of women use a language of power and domination, while hers use a language of love and self-acceptance.

In *Insy Winsy Spider*, another story in the same collection (translated from the Marathi original *Bhijata Bhijata Koli*, a mother is forced to recognise her daughter's difference from herself. The mother is a highly-educated professor of Buddhist philosophy, as scholar of the Self who ironically seems to have little self-knowledge. She and her husband, also a philosophy professor who have named their daughter Maitreyi, "to help her on her way to greatness," are mortified when the daughter announces that she has no interest in studies and is going to get married, without even having done her BA. The next day, as the mother clears her mind to write an academic paper on the development of self-awareness in the 'self', the sight of her daughter chopping onions gives her a sudden revelation: while all growing children must learn to differentiate the 'I' from the 'not-I', she, in her self-involvement, has failed to differentiate herself from her daughter, despite her age and education. Like the spider in the nursery rhyme, climbing back up the water spout, "It was necessary to begin all over again... 'I' am not this Maitreyi" (125).

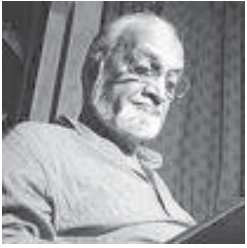
I want to close with a few personal reminiscences of Gauri Deshpande that might shed some light on how her mind worked. With regard to the title of the story, *Insy Winsy Spider*, she once told me that one of her professors during her postgraduate studies in English literature insisted that his Indian students read English nursery rhymes in order to become as fully immersed in the language as a native speaker. She herself was in complete command of English, confident enough to reshape it in her own image. With regard to her firm commitment to write in Marathi, she once observed with a wry smile how much more money she could be making if she were writing in English. With regard to her exalted caste status and eminent parentage, although she rejected many upper-caste/class social and gender norms, Deshpande loved the language and culture of her community. Talking to fellow-Marathi writer Ambika Sirkar, she once observed sadly that, with the passing of their generation, certain turns of phrase particular to their community would disappear forever. When we visited her in Pune, even as she offered her guests a cold glass of beer, she also offered us a tumblerful of a cooling green mango drink explaining that it had to be drunk at this particular time of year.

As Shanta Gokhale wrote soon after her death, "How could this strapping, handsome, vibrant, gutsy, intense and intellectually passionate woman have just ceased to exist? Gauri had an insatiable zest for living, for experiencing new places and people, for friendship, for loving and giving" (*Woman of Substance*). As a writer and as a person, Gauri Deshpande has left a gap in English and Marathi fiction and society that is not easily filled.

— Josna Rege

Associate Professor, Department of Languages and Literature, Worcester State College, Worcester, MA, U.S.A.

Ending His Play: Vijay Tendulkar



Vijay Tendulkar passed away on 19th May, 2008. The great Marathi playwright was many things to many people. To his contemporaries, he was the articulator of the most urgent questions of their generation. To his immediate successors, he was a rock-like reference point by which to assess their own work. To the young playwrights of today, he was like a place of pilgrimage. They put their offerings in his hands, confident that he would read them carefully, seriously, with a wide open mind, offering comments on what worked and what didn't. But to many others he was like a red rag to a bull. There are those who believed he was born to offend, insult and scandalise them. His plays of the seventies in particular, *Sakharam Binder*, *Gidhade*, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, made them wild with anger. Their intention was to gore him so badly that he would be unable to stand up again. But he always did, dusted his trousers, picked up his pen and wrote another play.

He was not a darling of the people. He was too troubled a man for that. He looked about him and saw a less than perfect society. He saw ruthless political power play, violence in all its forms, gender inequality, crass commercialism and shameless hypocrisy. He was not the one to say, how does it all concern me? Let me see how I can profit by the situation and keep my mouth shut.

Keeping his mouth shut was not on his public agenda. He was too passionately involved with the world to let things go by default. While he was outspoken to a fault in his public life, he said very little in private. He let others speak so that he could understand how their minds worked. His social concerns gave him the subjects for many of his plays while his understanding of the human mind gave him the ability to create believable characters.

In the gloom cast by Vijay Tendulkar simply ceasing to exist, there appears a luminous caravan of characters he has left behind for us. Created to explore questions that troubled him, situations that horrified him, and conventional ideas that did not convince him, he allowed them the freedom to be themselves. They grew into believable flesh-and-blood human beings who inhabit our world today as reference points.

Vijay Tendulkar delivered the keynote address for the biannual all-America convention of Marathi speakers five years ago. He spoke not about literature, drama or cinema but about the virtues of charity, generosity and kindness. He argued that more often than not, charity was motivated by self-interest. When the giver gave his name to his gift, he was telling the world, look how charitable I am. The same was true of those who did favours to others expecting them to be obliged forever. Such charity and such favours were better not done. It was a profoundly purist viewpoint which did not go down too well with many of his listeners. Some people suggested snidely that the speaker was likely not to be a practitioner of what he preached.

The fact is that Tendulkar was not preaching. He was merely stating facts as he saw them. A preacher, by the very act of preaching, puts himself above those to whom he is preaching. Tendulkar never did that. He always counted himself as one amongst many. He observed himself as he observed others. His autobiographical writings are evidence of his total honesty and candour in speaking about himself.

Tendulkar was a quiet man. He did not believe in a public display of emotions. One of the most poignant sights I recall was after his daughter Priya's untimely death. During a condolence meeting organised by her friends and admirers, he sat quietly, stoically beside her framed photograph while people paid their respects to her, shook his hand and went away. His own funeral was marked by the same quietness. In keeping with his wishes, the media had been requested not to photograph him or the funeral. Even the State's wish to give him a funeral that befitted his status as Maharashtra's leading, often controversial litterateur, one whose work had put India on the world map, was turned down. There were no rituals, no weeping, no speeches. Just a solemn and dignified farewell.

I mention all this because, to be a great playwright is one thing; but to be a man who lives by his principles till his last breath in our corrupt times is quite another. There was no disparity between what he believed and what he practised. The seamlessness of belief and practice extended to his work. Not in 50 years of writing did he write a single word that did not represent his honest beliefs, his impartial observations, his understanding of and compassion for all human beings, including criminals and other wrong-doers.

If one is to answer the question, what did Tendulkar give to the world of Indian theatre, the answer would be, plays that looked at life straight in the face without flinching. If one is to answer the question what did he give Marathi theatre, it would occupy volumes. But putting it in a nutshell, I would say, he gave Marathi audiences their first experience of realism. He created men and women of flesh and blood. He gave them a language that belonged uniquely to them. He gave actors the chance to enrich their idiom. Actors who were trained to project their voices, assume dramatic postures and declaim were totally lost when speaking his lines. There was no drama there, no flamboyant flourishes, no heightened emotions or hyperbole. His dialogue was understated. But the spaces that he created between words and lines carried more dramatic tension than the words themselves.

Realistic drama should bring the audience down to earth. The kind of mainstream drama that Tendulkar and his colleagues opposed at the beginning of their careers, was full of conventional notions and sentimental cliches of middle-class thinking. It flattered the middle-class by covering up its hypocrisies and endorsing all its values. Tendulkar did the opposite. He posed questions. Do you think we are peace-loving, civilised and non-

violent, he asked? Then here is *Shanatata Court Chalu Ahe*. Here is a woman who has been made pregnant by a colleague and abandoned. So what do we, her other colleagues do? We put her in the dock and peck at her viciously till she collapses from the sheer fatigue of defending herself. That is how we can be.

Do you think families are noble units of society? Then here is *Gidhade* (Vultures) in which a family of brothers, sister and father are ready to kill each other for the sake of property. Do you think marriage is sacrosanct? Then here is *Sakharam Binder* who offers shelter in exchange for wifely duties to women who have been thrown out of their homes by husbands who clearly do not think marriage is sacrosanct. Do we Marathis consider Peshwa rule our golden age? Then here is a little story about how our icon of statesmanship, Nana Phadanvis served his own ends by creating a monster called *Ghashiram Kotwal* who ran rampant over Pune city while his power lasted.

If these plays had been fantasies, the middle-class audiences would have remained unperturbed. But they protested violently because Tendulkar had got under their skins with his unnerving questions and had forced them to look at a less than flattering reflection of themselves.

Ashis Nandy puts succinctly what Tendulkar did to his audiences. Towards the end of his preface to Tendulkar's film script *The Last Days of Sardar Patel*, he says, "Tendulkar...never fails to make you feel that you have entered a dentist's chamber with an undiagnosed abscess in the molars."

People are afraid of dentists. Many were afraid of Tendulkar.

Tendulkar loved life to the hilt. He loved every cultural expression from classical music to wrestling. His creative energy was stupefying. In his fifty years of writing, he gave us something like thirty-two full-length plays, seven collections of one-act plays, five collections of plays for children, four collections of essays, four translations, two novels and eighteen film scripts.

There is nobody on the horizon just yet to replace him as a passionate observer and commentator on the state of our world.

— Shanta Gokhale

Exhibition, Workshop & Talks



Dr. Maithreyi Krishna Raj discussing with Giti Thadani



Giti Thadani addressing the audience.

A two-day photo exhibition and workshop cum talk on 'The Spiralling Matrix—excavations of feminine memories' by Giti Thadani was held on April 21-22 at the Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNTD University, Mumbai.

Giti Thadani is a historian who has been documenting and collecting information on women's symbolical traditions through iconography, texts, architectural and oral history. The talk is part of a project, the first of its kind, which looks at archeology, temple sites, iconographies, etc. from a feminine perspective and sees their implications at various socio-cultural levels and for the construction of gender and sexuality.

The topics of the talks were: 'Poly cosmological histories vs monotheism' and 'Exploration of gender, kinship, sexuality and their relationship with Shakti philosophies'. The issues dealt with in the talks are very relevant and important. The exhibition and workshop was developed through a process of many years of working with texts, travelling all over the country and combining the scholastic and the experiential approach.

Congratulations!



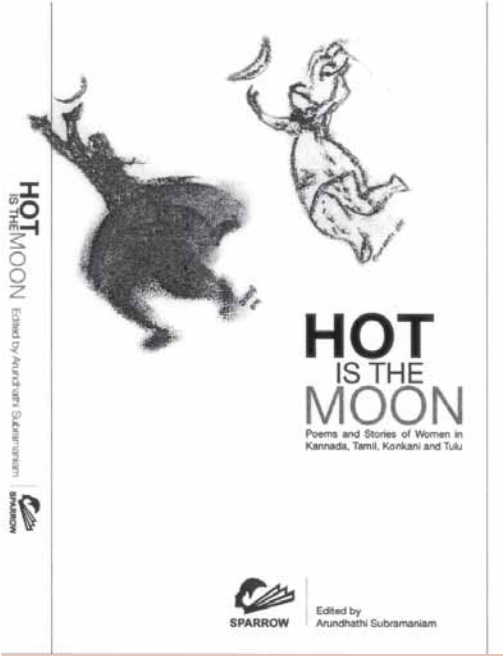
Heartiest Congratulations to Saroop Dhruv for receiving Dashiell Hammett-Lilian Hellman Award, 2007, for Courageous Writing conferred by Human Rights Watch (New York). We are proud of your work, Saroop.

Congratulations!



Heartiest Congratulations to K R Usha for receiving the best English language Fiction award at the Vodafone-Crossword Award 2007 for the novel *A Girl and A River*.

Publication



This book of 315 pages deals with different patterns, forms, rhythms and sounds that emerge from women's lives and their expression from different regions in India. It is beautifully designed with illustrations by Bharti Kapadia, the well-known painter. It is being published as a limited, hardbound edition. This is the first of five volumes to be published by SPARROW using the works of eighty-seven writers from twenty-three languages along with excerpts from interviews given by them. This volume has stories and poems from Kannada, Tamil, Tulu and Konkani.

Forthcoming Publication and Digital Video Recording of SPARROW

Digital Video Recording



Revathi



Kalki



Narthaki Nataraj



Priya Babu



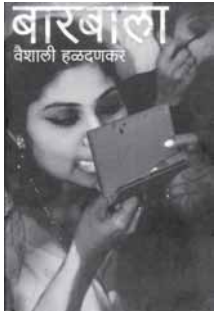
Aasha Bharathi

DEGHAM
தேகம்

A film on the transgender experience with Revathi, Narthaki Nataraj, Priya Babu, Aasha Bharathi and Kalki talking about the complexities of the body...

Barbala: Ek Hotel Gayikachi Atmakatha

By Vaishali Haldankar



This is a straight-from-the-heart account of the life of a bar singer, Vaishali Haldankar.

People have many misconceptions about bar singers and bar dancers. When the government of Maharashtra banned dance bars and began raiding them, many thought that it was a necessary action as the bar girls were generally seen as immoral. And people assume that names like Pinki, Simran, Dolly and Aarju and surnames like Singh, Khan and Sheikh are those associated with bar business. When a bar singer calls herself Vaishali Haldankar, a name they associate with the Marathi middle-class they are shocked. This autobiography challenges many such notions about bar girls.

Vaishali was born in a middle-class Marathi family. Her father was a Dalit and mother a Brahmin. Both her parents were classical singers but since they came from different communities they disagreed on many things and quarreled often. Her father had always wanted a son and when Vaishali was born he was angry. The situation improved a little later when her brother was born. Life went on.

At the age of eleven, a neighbour of her father's age exploited her sexually several times. This started the physical and psychological torture that continued for the rest of her life. She was in search of real love but unfortunately met many men who wanted her only physically. She gave up her education half way and fell in love with Dilip, a cineboard painter. She became pregnant with his child and then married him at the age of sixteen. She immediately had two sons one after the other. After marriage she used to live in a slum in Malvani. It was a shanty hut but it felt like a palace to her. They kept shifting from one slum to another living amidst poverty and depravity.

Dilip was an addict and worked according to his mood. Vaishali tried hard to keep things going. She worked as a Balwadi teacher, as a maidservant and in a screen printing unit. She could not stick to any one job for her husband suspected her fidelity and harassed her. Ultimately she started working as a bar singer in Hotel Khandahar. She had a flair for music, but lack of practice and lack of minimum requirements like radio and a stock of songs, made her go from one bar to another. Her husband, who was already suspecting her, now deserted her. Her troubles seemed to have no end. She began consuming alcohol and was gang raped by policemen. She sought an escape and she went to Osho's ashram but peace was not her lot. The final degradation was when her own mentally-retarded teenage son raped her.

A chance meeting with Varsha Kale, Bharatiya Bar Girls Union leader, changed her. The meeting and her counselling made her realise that she was not alone and that there were many other bar girls like her who were facing similar problems. This realisation gave her the determination to survive despite odds. At the age of forty Vaishali decided to study. Varsha Kale also inspired her to write her

story. In her preface Varsha Kale describes various bars like Dance bars, Orchestra bars, Ladies Bars etc. and how bar singers and dancers employed in these bars live. She also mentions that a ban on the bars may force the bar girls to take to full time prostitution as an alternative.

Vaishali relived her life of agony while writing this book and filled more than a thousand pages with her story. Varsha Kale, and the publisher, Mehta Publishing House, edited it and shaped the book. To some this book may appear sensational; others may find it shocking. But what the book really speaks about are the harsh realities of life.

— Sharmila Sontakke

Book details:

Barbala: Eka Hotel Gayikechi Atmakatha

Mehta Publishing House, Pune, 2006

Number of pages: 235

Price: Rs. 200/-

Mazhe Gane Mazhe Jagane

By Sulochana Chavan as told to Savita Damle



Mazhe Gane Mazhe Jagane is the autobiography of lavani queen Sulochana Chavan, as narrated to Savita Damle. Sulochana Chavan's name is an important name in the world of folk art. It was Acharya Atre, the famous writer, who called her Lavani Samragini in appreciation of her contribution to lavani music. Sulochana's lavanis are still very popular and she has won several awards. As early as 1965 she won the best Lavani Singer award for the film *Malhari Martand*. Many awards followed later including the Maharashtra Government award in 2000, P. Savlaram Gangajamuna Award and the Chandrabhagachya Tiri-Ichalkaranji Award.

Sulochana Shamrao Chavan was Sulochana Mahadev Kadam before marriage. She was born on 13th March 1933 in Girgaon, Mumbai. She was the fifth and last child of her parents. As a child Sulochana was naughty and boisterous, hence her family members called her 'Baban', which is usually a boy's name. She was not interested in studies; so she studied only till Fourth Standard.

What really interested her was singing. Sulochana started singing when she was just four or five. She took no formal training

but she used to sing in her school and in her village get-togethers. Once, Mr. Dandekar, who did the make-up in the village performances, took Sulochana to dance in a Gujarati drama. The organizers were so impressed with her song and dance routine that they paid her Rs.15 which was a big amount in those days. Her mother who always needed money to run her big family was happy and she requested Dandekar to get Sulochana more work and to also introduce her to the record companies which existed those days and gave breaks to several amateur singers.

Gradually Sulochana got many offers to sing. She sang in Hindi, Gujarati and Tamil films. In Hindi films she worked with stalwarts like Shamshadbai, Geeta Dutt, C. Ramchandra, Shyamsundar and Husanlal-Bhagatram. In the film industry people knew her as Sulochana K and she became so sought after that sometimes she recorded ten songs in a day.

After a while she started singing in Marathi films. Her first Marathi song *Sakhyare jadali preet tuzyavari* was composed by Shankarrao Kulkarni. She sang in many Marathi films but sang her first lavani in 1952 for Acharya Atre's film *Hichh Mazhi Lakshmi*. The song, *Mumbaichha calejyat gale pati*, was written by Acharya Atre himself and composed by Vasant Desai. In the same year she met her husband Shaymrao Chavan, who asked her to sing in the Marathi film *Kalgitura*, which he was directing and also acting in. They got married in 1953.

The real struggle began after the marriage which both the families opposed. Later her mother accepted the marriage and advised the couple to give live performances as a team. The husband and wife team with Sulochana singing and Shamrao accompanying her on the tabala became famous within a short period. Sulochana continued to sing for films also. But the real break came in 1962 when she sang the lavani *Mala mhantat lavangi mirchi* composed by Vasant Desai and written by Jagdish Khebudkar, which became a super hit. After this she sang only lavanis.

Sulochana gives all the credit for her success to her husband Shamrao. He passed away when this book was in its final stages and she missed him at the book release. But Sulochana is still her usual spirited self. She survived a major car accident in 1992 followed by three heart attacks. She is around 75 now but still has the zest to take up lavani performances if they come her way.

— Vaishali Gaikwad

Book details:

Mazhe Gane Mazhe Jagane

Publisher: Mudra Prakashan, Thane, 2007

Number of pages: 136

Price: Rs. 125/-

Dying to Change the Lives of Others: Anuradha Gandhi



Anuradha Gandhi, champion of the wretched and downtrodden, died of cerebral malaria on 12th April, 2008. By the time her wide circle of friends came to know of her death, she had already been cremated. She was 54.

A major in Sociology, Anuradha was involved with social activism right from her student days. She and a few like minded people formed the human rights organisation, Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR) after the Emergency, demanding that the State stop acting lawlessly with Naxalites. Thanks to her ability to convince people, the cream of Mumbai's intellectuals supported this demand. Playwright Vijay Tendulkar and reformist Asghar Ali Engineer were CPDR's president and vice president.

It would have been easy for Anu to become a successful academic. But in 1982 she gave up everything to take up the challenging task of dealing with the wretched conditions of contract workers in the new industrial areas near Nagpur and of Adivasis in the forests of Chandrapur. She and her husband Kobad lived in the Dalit area and worked relentlessly for the poor. She cycled every day to work under the scorching Nagpur sun.

Jyoti Punwani, who was well acquainted with Anuradha before the latter became a Maoist, writes in her obituary: 'I remember a girl who was always laughing, and who gave up a life rich in every way to change the lives of others.'

— Malsawmi Jacob

A Soldier Takes the Call: Lakshmi Devi Naidu



Lakshmi Devi Naidu, who was second in command of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the INA (Indian National Army) in Singapore, passed away on June 13, 2008. She was given a final send-off by a crowd that sang the national anthem, saluted her and shouted "Jai Hind". Lakshmi Devi Naidu richly deserved that final send off for she had dedicated her entire life to the service of the nation. A few years ago she allowed SPARROW to document her life and experiences. She had then said that when the INA was disbanded the soldiers were told that they should await the call from their commander. "I am still waiting," she had said with a smile. We are sure that she when she accepted the call of death it was still as a brave soldier. Lakshmi Devi Naidu carries with her a part of the history of the struggle for independence and women's participation in it.

— C S Lakshmi

No Compromise in Life: Gnya Susheela



Gnya Susheela passed away on 9th March 2008. Many people knew her as the person behind the magazine *Sundara Sagan* being published by her son, right from its initial days when he began to bring it out as a handwritten magazine. But Gnya Susheela was more than just a woman behind her son. Born in 1938, Susheela completed her school education and later her teacher's training with a lot of struggle. The silver cups she won in various essay and elocution contests and even the gold plated record of Nehru's speech that she won for her essay—which she could never listen to because she did not have a record player and in the small town she grew up in people rarely possessed gramophones— had to be sold off to fight the poverty in which she grew up. Even after her marriage when she worked as a school teacher, financial stringency was something she faced continuously. Throughout all this Susheela lived a life where she never compromised on her principles of self respect and integrity. Above all, she was a lover of Tamil and believed that she should raise her voice for the growth and spread of Tamil. She quietly died in her sleep and according to her wishes no rituals were performed and Tamil lovers who came to attend the celebration of the two hundred and fiftieth issue of *Sundara Sagan* which she had insisted must be celebrated, bade her a tearful farewell during the function.

— C S Lakshmi

A Living Gandhian: Nirmala Deshpande



Nirmala Deshpande, eminent Gandhian and Rajya Sabha member, passed away on 1st May, 2008. She was 79.

Nirmala Deshpande was a Member of Parliament since 1997. She was a recipient of Padma Vibhushan. Her life was dedicated to spread Gandhian values and to serve women and the

oppressed and the backward classes of our society. She rendered outstanding service to the country through voluntary work, initiatives for peace, the removal of caste barriers and communal harmony. Her peace initiative with neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan, was notable. She has been called 'friend of Kashmir' for her attempt to bring peace in that state. She even declared herself a friend of Maoists as she was also working to solve similar problems.

In her last interview, Nirmala Deshpande had asserted that the only way to bring about democratic societies and peace and prosperity is through Gandhian principles.

According to her last wish, an eleven year old girl, Shambhavi Mishra, performed the last rites. The country has lost a great leader in her passing away.

— Malsawmi Jacob

Walking Encyclopedia Sleeps: Dr. Sarojini Babar



Known as a walking encyclopaedia of Marathi folk culture and literature, Dr. Sarojini Babar passed away on Sunday 20th April 2008 at her Pune residence. She was 88 years old.

Born in 1920, in a remote village called Bagani in Sangali district, Maharashtra, she did her B A from Mumbai University and stood first. She later did her Ph.D on "Contribution of Women writers to Marathi Literature" from Pune University. She was part of India's freedom struggle and even went to jail. Post independence she continued to be active in public life. She was a MLA during the period of 1952-1957 and MP from 1964-1966.

Knowing her capacity to work hard and her sharp intellect, Yashwantrao Chavan, the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra, offered her work with the Committee on Folk Literature. She headed the committee later and lent a new status to folk literature. She began to use the media to popularise folk literature by presenting several programmes on All India Radio. With Shanta Shelke, a great Marathi poet, she presented a TV serial called *Ranjayee*, and her popularity reached new heights.

Apart from her autobiography *Majhya Khuna, Majhya Mala* she has several publications to her credit, which include children's literature, poetry collections, seven novels, two theses, thirty six short stories and many other works.

She was recipient of many honours and awards including a D.Sc. from Rahuri Agro University, the Tararani Award from the Tararani University of Kolhapur and D.Lit from the Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth.

In her demise we have lost a great researcher and a scholar of Marathi folk literature.

— Sharmila Sontakke

Do write to us if you come to know about a life, a book, a visual, a film or a song which you think must be documented in SPARROW.

For reviews please send two copies of the book.