

Making Music with Words at WSF



The World Social Forum held in Mumbai from January 16 to 21, 2004 was a very exciting opportunity for us to broaden the outreach of our publications. We decided to book a stall to exhibit and sell our books, booklets and video films. Madhusree Dutta, one of the key local organisers of the WSF, persuaded SPARROW to organise a literary event for the Nukkad

Neruda stage as well.

Planning a literary event like an open street corner event was a challenge that we took up quite enthusiastically. Poet and writer Arundhati Subramaniam, agreed to help in organising the event and also agreed to moderate one session. The other session was moderated by Atul Tiwari, the well-known Hindi film scriptwriter. Called *Urban Medley*, the event was structured in a way that poetry and fiction readings were interspersed with music. Amarendra Dhaneshwar, Amit Chaudhuri and R K Das brought music into the programme. While Dhaneshwar rendered the poetry of Kabir in music, R K Das enthralled us with his 'Baul' music. Amit Chaudhuri took us to the realm of classical music. The writers were drawn from both English and regional Indian languages.

For some in the audience, who relaxed under the big, shady trees listening to music and poetry, the event came as a respite from the protest marches and all the other frantic activity at WSF. The highlight of *Urban Medley* was when a member of the audience—a young woman from Uganda, Hilda Twongyeirwe Rutagonya, volunteered to come up to the stage and share a poem written by an activist friend back home.

At the end of the day, the sun was setting and it was time to leave the Nukkad Neruda stage but no one wanted Amit Chaudhuri to stop singing. The readings of the entire day blended with the last notes of his song which rose above all the noise and sounds of excitement and mingled with the energy generated by the WSF.



Eunice De Souza reads her poems at *Urban Medley*
Photo by Priya D'Souza

SPARROW Telugu Volumes Released

The two volumes in Telugu (*Alajadi Ma Jeevitam* and *Jeevitam Oka Prayogam*) were the last in the series of seven volumes brought out by SPARROW under its Translation Project. The Telugu volumes, edited by Volga, the well-known Telugu writer and Secretary of Asmita Resource Centre for Women, were released in Hyderabad on the 7th of March 2004 by Ruth Manorama, the eminent dalit activist.

Editors' Note

This is the second newsletter from the Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women through which we share women's thoughts and actions and our work of recording and archiving them.

SNL has covered this time some aspects of our oral history and video recording projects and also two excellent lectures given on the SPARROW premises by Dr. Geraldine Forbes from SUNY at Oswego and the Argentinian scholar Elizabeth Jelin.

The book we have taken for review this time is entitled *The Stream Within*. In a way SPARROW is also trying to keep the hidden streams of women's history flowing and visible through its various projects. SNL is one way of revealing this stream within every woman who has chosen to think, act and express herself.

If you have something to share, do write to us at sparrow@bom3.vsnl.net.in

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Read about India's pioneering feminists and their definitions of feminism **P 2**

SPARROW's exciting project on women's literature in 19 regional languages begins in Karnataka **P 3**

Argentinian Scholar Elizabeth Jelin talks about her research on memory and repression in Latin America **P 5**

How I Became a Feminist: Defining moments in personal histories



Dr Neera Desai



Dr Vina Mazumdar
Photo by Vishnu Mathur



Flavia Agnes
Photo by Mukul Kishore

SPARROW has completed three films as part of the Global Feminisms project—an ongoing collaboration with the University of Michigan. In the first film, Dr Neera Desai, the pioneer of Women's Studies in India, talks about her brand of feminism. "I understand feminism in one way as a struggle against exploitation. But my feminism also tells me that one need not be assertive, one need not be very loud in one's behaviour and yet one can be firm in one's view point and that has made some people doubt whether because of my exteriority, because I wear a sari which is a very traditional type, I do not have short hair, I do not wear the modern dresses and I do not perhaps smoke also or drink, I may not be as feminist — but I don't know for me, these are the exteriors. I have my own values, I have my own behaviour pattern, and I have my own ways of expressing my concern for the solidarity of women."

The second film documents the experiences of Dr Vina Mazumdar, former member of the Committee On The Status Of Women in India and the force behind the Centre for Women's Development Studies. Mazumdar talks about a vast range of experiences, from her student days at Oxford to teaching in the universities of Patna and Berhampur. She reveals the limitations of the bureaucracy when it comes to changing policies to empower women.

"There was no real consciousness of the women's issue as such. And that's why the whole exercise of the Committee On The Status Of Women in India came as such a terrible shock. It's that terrible shame and outrage—that we claimed ourselves to be highly

Films being made for the Global Feminisms project are for pedagogic purposes. They will be made available for screenings in colleges, universities, women's organisations and any other group that may be interested in viewing them.

educated professional women, and social scientists at that, and we knew nothing about the lives of the overwhelming majority of women in this country—both, the lives that they had inherited, and the lives that they were facing in contemporary India," she said.

The third film explores the odds and inspirations that shaped Flavia Agnes, a fiery women's rights lawyer who has written extensively on issues of domestic violence and minority rights. Agnes, who overcame her own domestic hell and put herself through college at the age of 33, has lucid ideas about how the law can change things for women.

"The whole question of rights doesn't depend upon legislation—making new laws, more perfect laws, more feminist laws. I think the future lies in more women being aware of their rights. More women articulating their rights. More women struggling for their rights in courts and better lawyers strategising for these women so that these rights get actualised. And I think my struggle has been in the direction of creating feminist lawyering in courts at a small level. I think district, town, trial courts or even beyond it, at a local level, at panchayats, that's where women's rights are located. They are not in Delhi, they are not in Parliament and they are not in commissions which bring in new statutes."

Making The Leap to Women's Regional Literature



SPARROW has launched a project to document the lives of women writers and collect their works. We envisage recording dialogues with about a hundred women writers spanning 19 Indian languages. The project will explore issues that women writers grapple with, in a patriarchal society. Entitled *Literature Leap*, the project made its beginning in Karnataka. This space in our newsletter is dedicated to women writers from the various regions of India and their stories.

Ganga Padekal is a well-known Kannada writer of the eighties. She lives in Vittala, a tiny village in the South Kanara region. Padekal's writing is simple and the stories are close to her realities, reflecting and questioning the orthodoxies of the Brahmin family that she grew up in and the one that she was married into. Ganga had only studied till the seventh standard. But there were lots of books at home and she was encouraged to read. She was married off at 17. As was the custom, her family members decided on a suitable groom. Ganga's older brother, however, had one reservation. During his visit to the groom's house, he had noticed that there was not a single book or newspaper in that house. The family did not think that this was something to be concerned about as the groom's family was well off and the marriage went ahead as planned.

For Ganga, this complete absence of reading material was a shock. The women either spent their time gossiping or in the kitchen. It was unheard of for them to read. Ganga would steal bits of newspaper wrapping on household items bought from the shops. "I would smooth out the crumpled papers and read them in secret," she said. She begged her husband for some reading material. "When we finally subscribed to two Kannada magazines, a war broke out at home. But once the magazines started coming, everyone in the family began to read them. I would always be the last one to get to read them," she said laughing. "And I used to read late at night, after all the housework was done, so they would scold me for burning the lamp so late at night and squandering

the oil. That is the kind of atmosphere in which I was living," she said. Ganga began to write when her husband finally moved away from the joint family and they were able to set up house by themselves. Things were not easy. The couple worked very hard on their farm during the day. At night, Ganga would sit in the kitchen with a small oil lamp and write her stories. "Initially, I used to earn 30 or 40 rupees for a story. Then the money started coming by cheques. I did not even have a bank account and had to open one in my name. Even this caused problems as my relatives felt I was becoming too independent," she said. Ganga's husband did not pay much attention to her writing. As the troubles on their farm mounted, he fell ill and had to be hospitalised. The hospital demanded a deposit of Rs 2,000. "I ran to the bank. There was no one else who could help us. I had saved all the money from my stories and royalties from books and I brought it to the hospital. When my husband saw that money, his eyes filled with tears. It was the first time in our marriage that he had acknowledged me as a writer," she said.

Ganga said she also derives great satisfaction from the fact that students are now writing Ph.D theses on her novels. "It eases the pain and regret that I have of not having had the opportunity to study further."

When we went to interview Ganga, she was visiting her daughter's house. We requested her to go back to her house, some 30 miles away, to get her photo albums. There was just a moment's hesitation after which she went and got the albums. Later, Ganga wrote to us that she did not have the bus fare to go to her village and had to borrow from her daughter. But when SPARROW bought all her books, it more than covered her expenses.

Ganga Padekal now does Kannada transcriptions for us and has become a part of SPARROW.

The *Literature Leap* project is unique in that it is multilingual and spans the whole of India.

The oral history recordings of women writers will be complemented by collections of visual material as well as their literary works.

SPARROW aims eventually to develop a comprehensive digital database on women writers in India.

Photographs and Women's History

Dr Geraldine Forbes talks about the kind of questions that we can ask of photographs to explore their potential as historical documents



Group Photo, Maharani Girls High School at Darjeeling, 1912
Photos from Dr Geraldine Forbes Collections



Bharat Scouts Group, students and teachers of Crosswaithe Girls College, Allahabad, 1929

How much information can you get out of an old photograph?

Dr Geraldine Forbes, distinguished teaching professor of History and Director, Women's Studies Programme, State University of New York at Oswego, talked about the kinds of information that photographs can yield, in a recent presentation at SPARROW.

Dr Forbes has been engaged in research and writings, which are of special significance to India. Her publications include *Women in Modern India* and *Positivism in Bengal*. She is the Series Editor of *Foremother Legacies: Autobiographies and Memoirs of Women from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America*. She won the Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Prize in 1979.

"My research on women's lives began three decades ago, when I was editing Sudha Mazumdar's memoirs for publication and wanted to understand the historical context of her life. Because conventional archives had not preserved women's records, I contacted individuals and discovered many had kept personal archives that included organisational records, letters, newspaper and journal articles and often, photographs. At some point it struck me, that these were valuable historical documents," Dr Forbes said.

For instance, the photograph of Maharani Girls High School (1912) is very important because it was the first school where Indian girls were allowed to leave their hair loose. "Parul Bose, the daughter of

Hemalata Sarkar, said that it was important to understand the subtle problems of families that wanted to send their daughters to school. Loretto House in Darjeeling, for example, did not admit Indian girls. Other schools had very clear rules about dress. Parul was sent to an American (mission) school to change her 'habits'. This school also insisted on tied or braided hair. This was a complicated issue because the morning bath involved wetting one's hair which was then left loose to dry. Hair was conventionally tied in the afternoon. Additionally, most of these schools required uniforms. While adjusting to a different dress was difficult, it was less problematic than the tied hair rule, which flew in the face of conventional ideas about cleanliness," Dr Forbes said.

Another photograph, taken in 1929, shows women members of Bharat Scouts. The women are wearing sari uniforms and salute differently. Annie Besant replaced the original pledge with a new patriotic one, 'God save our India.'

Dr Forbes said photographs are not easy documents to work with and that historians should not impose meanings on them. "The stories I am telling of people's recollections of their photographs should be sufficient to challenge any notion we have that we can 'read' photographs without a great deal of hard work," she said.

— Shefali Srinivas

Memory and Repression in Argentina

Argentinian scholar Elizabeth Jelin, who is also a visiting professor at Princeton, visited SPARROW to share her research on memory and the Human Rights Movement in Latin America.

The *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*—the organisation of mothers whose children “disappeared” during military rule in Argentina, has become an international emblem for the human rights movement in that country. The children of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* were kidnapped and nearly all of them murdered by Argentina’s military in its dirty war against the Left from 1976 to 1983. It was also part of a bigger secret plan called Operation Condor, devised by the military dictators of Latin America to kidnap, exchange or “disappear” political refugees from neighbouring countries.

Argentinian scholar Elizabeth Jelin, who visited SPARROW recently, is researching public memories of this period of repression. Jelin is a professor of Sociology at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Research Director at the Institute for Social and Economic Development (IDES), and senior researcher at the National Council for Scientific and Technical Studies (CONICET).

At SPARROW, Jelin spoke about a project she led on the effects and outcomes of the years of military dictatorship in South America entitled *The Collective Memory of Repression in the Southern Cone and Peru*. The project, involving over 60 young researchers from around Latin America and North America, examines the social effects of state violence and terror against its citizens, the contestations over testimony as evidence and the elusive nature of truth. The project spanned six countries, because as Jelin says, “the repression was co-ordinated and the human rights movement was co-ordinated. One cannot say that what happens in one country is independent of what happens in the other.”

The oral testimonies of victims and relatives provided valuable information about names and situations in which people were kidnapped. Jelin said this was the basic information that went into the commission that was formed to deal with the disappearance of persons and it became the basis on which prosecutions were prepared in the trials of the military.

Jelin also discussed the dilemmas of making the material available to the public and the boundary

that exists between personal and public memory. “Can the photograph of a tortured woman’s body be kept in the public domain? Will it not be twice violated?” she asks. The research project asks tough questions about the material collected and strives for meaningful preservation of public memory.

The project also takes into account official military documents that are now turning up in old buildings, or being sent anonymously to archives and documentation centres. Slowly, history is reconstructed by matching personal testimonies with official military documents.

Human rights activists were also able to persuade the United States to declassify state department documents on Argentina. In 2000, the US complied, declassifying 5,000 documents including reports of the ambassador and military attachés.

“So when you put together the private archives of people and the public documents that were found, you could have a total picture,” Jelin said.

The researchers comb these documents for glimpses of truth and to analyse military policies and communications during the dictatorship. “For a while, the slogan was ‘We want to know the truth.’ Truth trials were conducted, where the relatives of victims tried to learn as much as they could about each case. Because of amnesty laws, there could be no punishment,” Jelin said.

In the eighties, the themes of repression, exile and memory were everywhere—in cinema, literature and the arts. The human rights movement, too, began to emphasize the role of memory, Jelin said. “Memory, because people in society are dealing with memory and we as analysts, as interpreters, want to face that challenge to see how different groups of people handle that past,” she explained.

The title of the commission’s report on the human rights violations was ‘*Never Again*,’ Jelin said. “When you say ‘never again’, what you are asking is for memories of the past that are important for the future. Memory is the meaning that we give to that past today.”

— Shefali Srinivas

Meeting Avabai Wadia

First woman lawyer of erstwhile Ceylon and a pioneer of the Family Planning Movement in India talks about her life



I am not into nostalgia." This categorical statement might seem an anomaly, coming as it does from a 90-year old woman and one who has recently published a 700-page memoir. But read her book—*This Light is Ours: Memoirs and Movements* and meet her personally—as we did—and you will know how this paradox works.

Avabai Wadia combines a keen sense of the past with an equally acute sense of the present. We felt it emanating from everywhere—her home, her person, her conversation. Avabai has lived history and though she is too modest to make such a claim—has created history as well. A pioneer of the Family Planning movement in India and abroad, president of the International Planned Parenthood Federation for two terms, author of a carefully documented volume, the first woman lawyer of erstwhile Ceylon, recipient of the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan—the catalogue of achievements is endless. She interacted with pioneering women like Annie Besant and Margaret Sanger, met presidents and prime ministers. Yet, Avabai is never intimidating. And that's because of her commitment to common, humble people which has not faltered for 60 dedicated years. "I treasure these contacts, their innate courtesy and culture... I never ever thought of them as being uneducated

though they were illiterate."

Little reminiscences about her past fuse the extraordinary with the ordinary, the historical with the personal. Avabai made history when she got her law degree from London at the young age of 19—but what she likes to remember of that day was how her mother made the traditional *dhan-dar-ne-patio* to mark the auspicious occasion and how she wore a red Benarasi sari sent from Bombay when she received the degree. "I was so fond of it—really a beautiful sari." So vivid is her manner of talking, we could reimagine that event of a faraway time and a faraway place when as a teenager, with all her life before her, she stepped up in her bright red sari to receive her Law Degree. "There was a joy of life, joy in anticipating what was coming, a happy anticipation of the future." The future, however, took a different turn and law remained for Avabai, the road not taken when she turned through an act of "benevolent neglect" to family welfare.

Avabai held very definite views, whether on matters political, religious, social, or personal. If we could not agree with her—well we agreed to disagree. The Women's Reservation Bill, she felt, would only mean allegiance to party not to gender. The enforced sterilisation programmes during the Emergency were errors on part of over-zealous officials and not an erroneous government policy. She was dismayed that there was not a single statue in all of Bombay of Madame Cama, or for that matter any women at all—"as though women did not exist in public life." Equally firm were her views on the Zoroastrian Conversion-Conservation debate. "If non-Zoroastrians wish to become Zoroastrians they could. That's my view. And that's the only way we are going to deal with diminishing numbers."

We sat on with this gracious lady in her favourite turquoise sari and discreet jewellery. Her apartment, with its antique furniture and cherished treasures, its view of the sea and Hanging Gardens, was once upon a time a spacious bungalow. The uncanny feeling grew within us of being simultaneously in the faraway past and the immediate present. We asked Avabai if she missed the old Bombay but she cut short our clichéd trip down memory lane. "Happiness has no history," she told us. These, like many others, were words to remember her by.

— Roshan Shahani and Divya Pandey

The Stream Within: Short Stories by Contemporary Bengali Women

Translated and edited by Swati Ganguly and Sharmistha Dutta Gupta



The anthology *The Stream Within* has taken up the difficult task of attempting to trace the map of creativity of contemporary Bengali women writers. As Malini Bhattacharya puts it so aptly in her foreword, gendering creativity is a risky project. She says that in a roundabout way it may lead to a position where stereotyping, usually associated with patriarchy, returns through the backdoor. "Women's writings are expected to bear signatures of a particular kind," she says. And yet such risky projects are very important for as Malini Bhattacharya explains, the location of the woman writer is not only gender-specific but has also to be seen as being embedded in the categories of time and space. In other words, a gender-specific text has historical dimensions which make it a document of social history of a particular time.

The collection begins with a story by Sabitri Roy written in 1952. The protagonist Shakuntala, is a writer. The editor who comes to get a story from her realises that Shakuntala's writing is the least-valued activity in the household. Her writing is done amidst the taunts of a mother-in-law and the unending tasks of cooking and caring for two children. Her husband who is a professor does not read her writings for he is busy with his work. As the editor returns leaving Shakuntala holding her child with high fever, he wonders how she keeps the stream within flowing.

From there, the collection leads to stories which reveal so many aspects of writings of women. The stories don't pontificate on the lives of women nor do they have a message. They don't detail "reality" nor is there an attempt in any of the stories to make a woman into a particular kind of fighter or a rebel. Some of them are caught up in situations which don't offer much relief and yet they are not victims. They have ways of dealing with the hard realities of every day life and the oppressive ways of

a patriarchal society. They laugh and use their imagination to weave a different kind of life like Radha and Sarama, two working class girls in Chabi Basu's story or they just decide to break the routine of work one day to enjoy nature and refuse to cook like Radha in Purabi Basu's story.

Some of them like Kusum in the story of Nasreen Jahan, take their life into their own hands. Forced to marry a second time in order to go back to a husband who peremptorily divorced her, Kusum decides to stay with the stranger and not go back to her husband. Similarly, Motijan in Selina Hossain's story, decides not to break down before an oppressive mother-in-law and an uncaring husband who is hardly ever at home. She chooses a friend of her husband to father her two daughters. She declares this aloud when she is thrown out of the house for not producing a son. "Nestling against their mother's breast, Motijan's daughters stared back at the crowd with their bright, glittering eyes" ends the story. A woman is being thrown out of her house but here are two little daughters with bright and glittering eyes. That ending lifts the story to a different plane of life, where these little girls may write the story of their life differently.

In Mahasweta Devi's story, the tribals have to compete with elephants of the jungle for salt, the cheapest thing in life. In a totally different vein is Nabaneeta Dev Sen's story of Dushyanta and his womanising ways. It is a story delightfully told with total irreverence to the classic text of Kalidasa.

What makes this collection so readable is the choice of stories. The stories are not "representative" of a particular kind of woman or of a particular way of writing. Nor is there an attempt to grade the stories and choose the "best" of contemporary fiction. The result is a collection of thirteen stories which go in different ways and directions thus providing an expanded view of women's expression liberating it from rigid specifics of theme and language.

— C S Lakshmi

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The Many Faces of Suraiya



When she died on January 31 2004, Suraiya was 75 years old. But people remember her from her films and songs of nearly 40 years ago. Born in 1929 in Lahore, Suraiya Jamal Sheikh, went on to become one of India's highest paid film stars. She was one of those rare actors who sang her own songs.

Legendary composer Naushad Ali recalls that Suraiya entered the film industry when she was only nine years old, when she accompanied her uncle Zahoor to the sets of *Taj Mahal*. Filmmaker Nanubhai Vakil liked her instantly and decided to cast her as the young Mumtaz Mahal.

Even though she had not trained in classical music, Naushad liked her voice and was a mentor to her. Suraiya had participated in a children's programme on All India Radio. Naushad heard Suraiya on the radio and chose her to sing for Kardar's *Sharda* (1942). The young Suraiya had to stand on a stool to reach the microphone to sing

Panchi ja, picturised on the much-older heroine, *Mehtaab*.

In 1942-1943, Naushad also used Suraiya's voice in *Station Master*, *Kanoon* and *Sanjog*. SD Burman also recognised her talent early on and worked with her on many songs. Suraiya reached the peak of her career in the late forties with such hits as *Pyar ki Jeet*, *Badi Bahen* and *Dillagi*.

Perhaps her unsuccessful love affair with Dev Anand was the most publicised part of her life and came under great media scrutiny. However, she remained unmarried and withdrew from public life, almost Garbo-like in her pursuit of privacy. SPARROW pays homage to the memory of this enigmatic actress.

Poet and Painter Vasanti Mazumdar



We also mourn the loss of Marathi poet, painter and critic Vasanti Mazumdar. Born in 1940 in Karad, she studied in Ferguson college in Pune and completed post-graduate studies at SNDT University, Mumbai.

Photo from jacket cover of *Zalaal*

She was the author of two volumes of poetry, *Sahela Re* and *Sanehi* and many critical essays on

Marathi literature. She was also one of the founder members of Granthali, the well-known publishing house. Mazumdar received the Keshav Sut Paritoshik and Maharashtra Rajya Puraskar for *Sahela Re*. She was also awarded the Maharashtra Rajya Puraskar and Damani Puraskar for her creative work, *Nadikathi*.

Mazumdar's oil paintings have been exhibited at the Jehangir Art Gallery and other galleries in Mumbai. One of her works was also selected for the Lalit Kala Academy National Art Exhibition.

In addition to editing volumes like *Sri Pu Bhagwat: Vyakti aani Sampadak* and *Indian Heritage*, Mazumdar designed book jackets for the works of eminent Marathi writers.

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