

## Taking Time To Stare As Long As Sheep Or Cows



Jaya Bachchan and the SPARROW Trustees at Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai

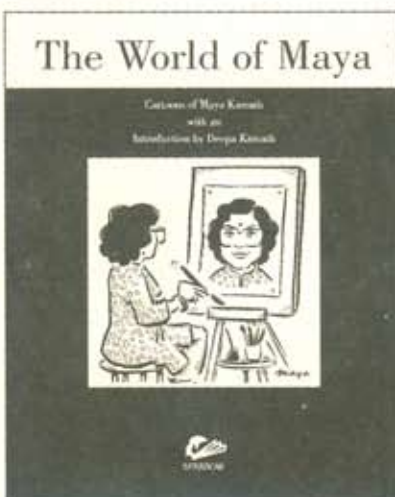
With due apologies to poet William Henry Davies, we rewrote a line from his poem and used it as the title for the Maya Kamath exhibition. Caricaturing is an important political act and this form of social criticism has been used to comment upon gender issues, politics of the nation and international politics. Those who took to cartooning have been mainly men with the exception of Maya Kamath and Manjula Padmanabhan. At SPARROW we have been great admirers of Maya's cartoons. After her demise, Maya Kamath's family entrusted SPARROW with the task of archiving her cartoons. When the cartoons began to arrive in huge bundles, we felt that the only fitting tribute to a cartoonist of her stature would be an exhibition and a comprehensive book of her work.

The exhibition in Mumbai was organised in collaboration with the Cymroza Art Gallery. The exhibition was planned like an installation instead of framed cartoons hung from the wall. Different objects were chosen for different themes like international politics, media etc. There were balloons shaped like a missile, a T V and other interesting objects, hanging all around with cartoons printed all over them. The walls were covered with flex sheets splashed with current news items on



Photo by Vishnu Mathur

which Maya's cartoons were superimposed. Some people believe that a cartoon loses its relevance after it is read once. We wanted to show how timeless Maya's cartoons were. Hence a design that reflected this aspect. A group of young people who work under the banner Made Designers helped SPARROW to achieve what we wanted. In their visiting card, the 'e' in 'Made' literally hangs separately from the rest of the word and one tends to read it as 'Mad'. But we have always claimed that to do SPARROW work what people need is a lot of imagination and also a little madness! Made Designers had that perfect combination.



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## Editors' Note

Another newsletter from us in which we share our work and our experience of recording and archiving women's lives, thoughts and action.

One event we had looked forward to and worked hard for was the exhibition of Maya Kamath's cartoons and the book entitled *The World of Maya* with her cartoons. We give you details of both in this SNL.

The Global Feminisms project has completed three more digital video documentaries. We report on them in this SNL.

We keep meeting and talking to women who have made history in different ways. This time we report on a rare artiste and an even rarer nationalist who has lived the life of a true Gandhian.

There is also the review of *A Life in the Balance*, a sincere effort at writing her life by Leila Seth.

Do write to us. Your comments and suggestions are most welcome.

If you want to know more about SPARROW visit our website at [www.sparrowonline.org](http://www.sparrowonline.org)

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Jaya Bachchan inaugurated the exhibition and also released the book on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January. Amarnath Kamath, Maya's husband, accepted the first copy of the book. The gallery was filled with what seemed the entire Mumbai. It was a joyous occasion but also an emotional one for some of Maya's close relatives. At Delhi, SPARROW collaborated with India International Centre and Brinda Karat, General Secretary, AIDWA inaugurated the exhibition on 15<sup>th</sup> of February. Manjula Padmanabhan, the well-known author and cartoonist received the first copy of the book. The inauguration was well attended and many important people associated with Women's Studies graced the function and appreciated the exhibition. Unlike Mumbai, we had a steady stream of viewers throughout the exhibition until the last day. We also received some good press notices. Preparations are on to take the exhibition to Bangalore.

— C S Lakshmi

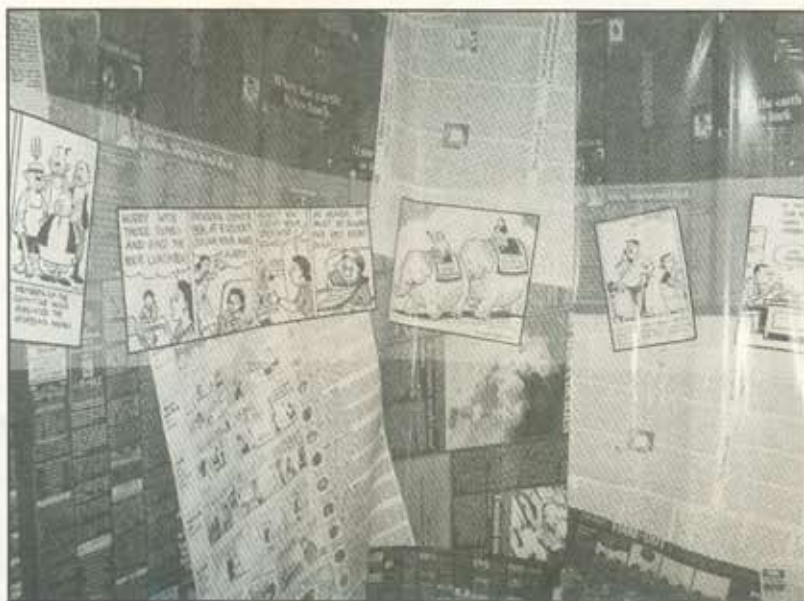


Photo by Vishnu Mathur



## Leela Baipadittaya, A Bhagavata in Yakshagana

**Y**akshagana is one of the folk performances of Karnataka. It is also called *bayalata*, which means performing in the open space. Normally the plays are performed through the night until the early morning hours. Yakshagana is an enchanting blend of music, dance, costume and dialogue. Coming down as heritage from the 15th century, it has been perfected as a complete theatrical form. Themes or *prasangas* are usually drawn from epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata and even from folk stories.

Songs written by folk poets and set in the Yakshagana style, have a distinctive flavour. The bhagavata who sings these songs, sometimes reaches the fourth octavo and keeps the audience spellbound. He is the sutrdara or the controller of the performance. Sitting a little behind centre stage

Leela Baipadittaya was born in an orthodox Brahmin family in Kasargod district. She could not continue her studies beyond the 9<sup>th</sup> Std. But along with other girls of the family, she was also trained in Carnatic classical music. Soon she was married to Harinarayana Baipadittaya, a professional chande (a musical instrument played in Yakshagana) player. He was also a teacher and trained Yakshagana aspirants in singing and dancing. Under his guidance Leela also learnt to sing for Yakshagana and *taalamaddale*, another variation in the Yakshagana performance. Leela first performed *bhagavatike* in 1979 before well-known Yakshagana stalwarts and was acknowledged and accepted by them. Thus started Leela's professional life as a bhagavata and since then she has never looked back.

As Yakshagana is regarded as a traditional art

“ಶರಣ ಶ್ರಮ, ಶ್ರದ್ಧೆ ಹಾಗೂ ಸಾಕಷ್ಟು ಗಂಟೆಗಳ ಅಭ್ಯಾಸದಿಂದಷ್ಟೇ ಭಾಗವತಿಕೆ ಸಾಧ್ಯ. ನಮ್ಮ ಮಹಿಳೆಯರಲ್ಲಿ ಮೊದಲಿನ ಎರಡು ಗುಣಗಳಿದ್ದರೂ ಅಭ್ಯಾಸ ಮಾಡಲು ಸಮಯವ ಕೊರತೆಯಿದೆ. ಈ ಕಾರಣದಿಂದಲೇ ಹಲವಾರು ಪ್ರತಿಭಾವಂತ ಹುಡುಗಿಯರು ಭಾಗವತಿಕೆಯಿಂದ ಹಿಮ್ಮೆಟ್ಟುವಂತಾಗಿದೆ.”



“*Bhagavatike* needs determination, hard work and hours of practice. Our women have the first two abilities, but no time to practice. Several talented girls had to retreat because of this.”

facing the audience and using jagate, a musical instrument, the bhagavata sings accompanied by two other musicians. Seated thus on the stage, throughout the night, he directs the play. Though in recent times women artistes are able to perform as vigorously as men on stage, they have been unable to perform *bhagavtikke* or the art of the bhagavata. Attempts by women have remained mainly experimental. The only person who has provided a ray of hope for women aspiring to be bhagavatas, is Leela Baipadittaya, who has been performing *bhagavtikke* for the past twenty years.

As a professional Yakshagana singer, she has served in many Yakshagana troupes known as *mela*. Leela is the only woman bhagavata in the domain of male singers and has won the appreciation of the masses. In a normal performance, she usually starts at 9.30 in the night beginning the performance with Ganesha sthuthi, a prayer to Ganesha, and sings throughout the night until the final prayer in the early hours of dawn.

with religious links, a woman bhagavata was not easily accepted. Leela had to face a lot of criticism and snide remarks and discrimination. But Leela has not let criticism and comments affect her. “Every social and cultural transformation has to undergo this process. I will create a path for a new generation of women bhagavatas,” is what she says. And she has taken up the difficult task of being a professional bhagavata and touring with the *mela* for six months in a year.

Today Leela Baipadittaya is recognised as one of the finest bhagavatas in Yakshagana and has won several awards. “Amateur theatre encourages girls to perform on the stage but not in *himmela*, which is singing and playing instruments at the back of the stage. As per my knowledge, besides me there is no full fledged woman bhagavata around.”

Meeting Leela Baipadittaya opened a window to the life of an extraordinary woman pursuing an extraordinary profession.

—Tulasi Venugopal

## Freedom for Oneself, Freedom for the Nation



**E**ighty-six year old Dashriben Chaudhary—Adivasi from Vedchi village near Surat in Gujarat—is a living legend of the Indian freedom struggle. As she begins to talk one gets drawn into the powerful narrative and almost relives the past

along with her.

Dashriben's maternal grandfather, Mr. Jivanbhai Dabarbhai, was a teacher and a social reformer greatly influenced by Gandhian ideology. In fact, he brought khadi into the Adivasi talukas of Surat. Her father, Revati Lal Chaudhary, was a freedom fighter. Dashriben was brought up in a joint maternal family because as per practice in the Adivasi Chaudhary community, her father joined her mother's family as *ghar jamai* after his marriage.

Growing up in this progressive environment, Dashriben started wearing khadi from the age of six. When Gandhiji gave the call to boycott government school education, Dashriben's education was stopped. After sometime her maternal uncle admitted her in Ranipara Kanya Vidyalaya, a school started by Kasturba, Mithuben Petit and others that imparted basic education with a nationalistic perspective.

Dashriben met Gandhiji in person in 1926 when she was eight years old. Gandhiji came to bless the fourth khadi convention cum exhibition organised in this area. When he visited Dashriben's house, she welcomed Gandhiji with a khadi garland made by her. Gandhiji picked her up in his hands so that she could garland him. Gandhiji noticed Dashriben wearing ornaments and told her to live a simple life. From that day onwards, Dashriben has not worn any ornaments. Many women who participated in this convention donated their ornaments to the Indian independence movement.

During the Bardoli satyagraha in 1928, she actively participated in a team organised by her father, campaigning against excessive land tax imposed by the British government and giving the call to join satyagraha. It is worth noting here that the Adivasis were the first to join Bardoli satyagraha; the Patels came later. Initially Patel farmers were reluctant but their wives promised support if Vallabhbai Patel became their leader. Gandhiji then told him to lead the Bardoli satyagraha and that is how the sobriquet

Sardar Patel has come to be associated with his name. That the struggle was initially led by Adivasis is a fact that has been forgotten by history.

After Bardoli, Dashriben actively campaigned for salt satyagraha and civil disobedience movement. She participated in picketing against foreign cloth at Surat and was detained by police and a case was registered against the participants. When the police officer enquired about her whereabouts, she said, "Bharat is my village and struggle for independence is my work." She refused to apologise for her action. Consequently, she was sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment. She was moved from Surat to Sabarmati jail and from there to Yeravada jail. Here she met many well-known women leaders such as Kasturba, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Mridulaben Sarabhai. She became very close to Kasturba Gandhi. Dashriben taught Kasturba reading and writing in three months' time. When Gandhiji received a hand written note from Kasturba he was surprised. He wrote a note to Dashri praising her for accomplishing a task that he could not do in so many years.

Dashriben married another freedom fighter, Shri Kanjibhai, in 1944, in an unusual style. There was no officiating Brahmin, no procession, no ornaments, and no lavish food. They exchanged khadi garlands, presented self-woven khadi clothes to each other and took a vow to remain faithful to each other. Both worked as teachers in Ranipara School following marriage. After Independence Dashriben completed her formal education but Kanjibhai decided to manage the family lands and took up cultivation. They have two sons. The elder son is a lawyer and the younger son has a degree in Mechanical Engineering.

From 1972 Dashriben has been receiving the freedom fighters' pension of Rs. 4000 per month. Dashriben is still very active, travels by bus and manages her life very well. She does not seem to have given up learning. She has learnt to play the casio and with great enthusiasm played our national song for me. However, she is very unhappy with the erosion of Gandhian ideology in national politics. She feels that poverty has increased because education in rural areas does not impart basic skills and knowledge about rural industries. According to her, Gandhiji's dream of gram swaraj has not yet happened.

— Divya Pandey

## Personal Histories, Public Spaces: Defining Moments

**S**PARROW has continued its work in the Global Feminisms Project—an ongoing collaboration with the University of Michigan. In this issue of our newsletter we bring you some excerpts from the oral history documentation done of three women who have spoken and shared their life and work experiences with us.

Anjum Katyal, the editor of *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, spoke to Mahasweta Devi, one of India's foremost writers. Her trenchant, powerful fiction has won her recognition and several other literary honours. She was awarded the Padmasree in 1986, for her activist work among the dispossessed tribal communities. In 1980 she started editing a Bengali quarterly, *Bortika*, which she turned into a forum where marginalised people who had no voice elsewhere, could write about their lives and problems.



*SPARROW Collections*

In the film, talking of women's movement, she says that it is not something restricted only to women's rights but an important part of the whole issue of human rights. She would like to remain connected to the larger movement of people's resistance.

In the second film, C S Lakshmi, a Tamil writer and

researcher in Women's Studies and currently Director of SPARROW, spoke to Mangai. Mangai is the pseudonym of Padma who is a theatre director and a Professor of English Literature, at Stella Maris College, Chennai.



*SPARROW Collections*

As a member of All India Democratic Women's Association and Chennai Kalai Kuzhu, Mangai actively took up several issues relating to women and presented them in the form of street theatre and stage plays. Later she became the key person in a theatre group called Voicing Silence. This group has scripted and enacted a range of issues from female infanticide to recasting women characters from epics. Her Tamil plays raise many issues on gender, theatre and language that belong to debates within feminism.

Talking about a play she did about a military rape in Tripura she says that when they did the play one major concern was how to portray or represent rape on the stage. So they devised the method of not showing the rapist and the act of rape but the terror of it. Mangai feels that "feminist theatre should not stop with just the content question..."

In the third film in this series, Urvashi Butalia a publisher, writer



*SPARROW Collections*

and an activist, spoke to Shajehan Aapa, a fiery activist from Delhi. The death of her daughter Noorjehan, who died due to dowry harassment, gave Shahjehan Aapa the reason and the courage to venture out of her house seeking justice for her daughter and for many others like her daughter. She is currently the President of Shakti Shalini, a women's organisation in Delhi that deals with counselling and redress of grievances.

In the film, while talking about her life as an activist she says, "When we talk of experiences, I feel mine was a very worthy experience. I got a chance to learn a lot and also to bring people on the right path... At one time it was considered a big thing to stand with men and talk as their equals. It was difficult for a woman to ask, who are you, from where have you come, what are you doing? But today she walks along with him shoulder to shoulder. Today when I look back at my journey I feel that there will be a time when all the daughters, sisters and the girls, will learn much better things and will do much better things than us and move ahead."

—Panna Roy Choudhury

## A Life in the Balance



“*The process of writing has been one of contemplation—about words and the nature of language, about the history of my times, about my chosen or chance profession of law. It has also been one of introspection, of trying to understand how I became who I am.*”

—Leila Seth

Why, we might begin by asking, are women’s autobiographies so important to the women’s movement? Is it because this genre (a significant ‘speech-act’ by a woman) uncovers the political dimensions of personal experience, confronts the contradictions of existing gender roles, and inspires a critical sense of female identification and solidarity? An autobiography by a woman as eminent as Leila Seth has meaning for us not so much because it validates one woman’s exceptionalism, as because we find nestling within it a ‘representativeness’ that resonates with the shared realities of women’s lives.

*In Balance* is a sensitive, candid and engaging retrospective account of a woman who is, by any measure, exceptional. It traces the life-trajectory of “a shy and somewhat frightened girl, who neither felt fully at home in the world, nor comfortable about changing it,” and her transformation over seven decades into “someone who is willing to fight for change, though in a quiet manner.” The first woman to top the Bar exams in London, the first woman judge of the Delhi High Court, the first woman Chief Justice of a High Court in India, Member of the Law Commission—it would be easy to iconise Leila Seth and exalt her into ‘a role-model for women’. But Seth herself resists such canonisation, for she refuses to pontificate or cast her life in exemplary tones. She is sharp in her self-scrutiny, at times justifiably proud of her achievements, and often self-deprecatory without descending into coyness. To give an example of her humour and self-irony—Seth speaks of how the question “Who was the first woman Chief Justice in India?” was asked on one of the episodes of the quiz-show, *Kaun Banega Crorepati*; and she also tells us

that the contestant had no clue as to the correct answer!

Born to educated and progressive parents, Seth remembers her early childhood as a happy and secure, if an itinerant one, as the family followed her father’s several Railways postings. Her life-long passion for travel probably has its roots in this way of life. She speaks movingly of her father’s death when she was only twelve, and the resultant emotional trauma and come-down in the family’s material circumstances. The experience of homelessness and having to depend on friends gave her a galling sense of dependency and, perhaps, explains the persistent desire for independence and a home of her own that has marked her life since.

Marriage at nineteen and children soon after could well have meant a conventional life-script for her. But a move to London and her “straying” into the study of law was the point of deviation from that script. With great candour and characteristic humour she writes that her decision to study law was “not because of any love or aptitude for Law,” but because “the attendance requirements were not too strict” and would not interfere with her familial responsibilities! Of course, she went on to top the course.

To return to India was to come face-to-face with the nitty-gritty of life and the tough world of legal practice. Being viewed as a curiosity in a ‘male’ profession, having to confront the brutal realities of a sexist and caste-ridden system, and having her work trivialised because of her gender—all this marks her slow and arduous initiation into professional life. And, through it all, is the familiar struggle of a woman to balance the demands of profession and home.

Defly weaving personal narrative with social/political comment, the writer attempts to understand her life within the contexts in which it has been lived. She traces changes in the social, ethical and political fabric of the nation since Independence and expresses her distress at the culture of corruption that has become normalised. Her most trenchant critique is reserved for Indira Gandhi and the imposition of Emergency between 1975 and 1977. Seth speaks with disillusion of the manner in which during that period many among the judiciary (as from the press) compromised the system with their sycophancy, and of the profound tragedy that the severest blow to

democracy and freedom should have been struck by a woman leader.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid and the decisive right-wing turn that the nation has taken also comes in for anguished comment. Seth reiterates the distressing fact that has been realised by feminists—that women swayed by regressive ideologies and community allegiances can be the harshest oppressors of other women.

There is also much in the book that is warm and heartening such as Seth's happiness in a mutually supportive marriage, her pleasure in her children, her enduring friendships with women, and her deepening commitment to issues relating to women and children. After retiring from an illustrious career, Leila Seth now works for non-governmental organisations, and her special focus of interest today is the empowerment of the girl-child. She dedicates her autobiography to her little granddaughter, and ends her narrative with a poem she wrote for the girl child. Seth's vision for the girl-child is captured in the concluding lines of the poem:

*"Oh Father,  
give me a chance,  
Just give me a chance.  
Oh, mother,  
break the bonds of tradition  
And let me into the sunlight  
to dance...to dance...to dance."*

—Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh



## Performing Lal Ded

**A** *akshara* organised a series of events from November 25, to December 10, 2004 to stage an international campaign on violence against women and girls. The 16 days of activism involved formation of a human chain from VT to Hutatma Chowk, a public meeting, music concert, and workshops and activities. It concluded with a rally on December 10. On the same day, in the evening, *Akshara* organised another important event. They organised a theatre performance by Mita Vasisht called *Performing Lal Ded*.

Lal Ded was a mystic poet from Kashmir who was born in 1320 and lived seventy years in the valley of Kashmir expounding her philosophy of love. P N Kaul Bamzai writes that this period was a period of religious and moral fermentation in Kashmir when Buddhism had practically disappeared from the Valley. In this troubled period of political uncertainty and changing social values, the people of the Valley felt the impact of Islam. Both the Hindu and the Islamic traditions deeply influenced each other and there was a need for a new approach to religion and from this need emerged what people normally refer to as Medieval Reformers or Mystics. Lalleshwari or Lal Ded was the forerunner of these medieval mystics. People believe that "her sayings echo and re-echo to this day."

As a realised soul, Lal Ded had shed her clothes and moved about naked, mocked by some people and worshipped by some others. She accepted both mockery and worship with equanimity. She is the only known Kashmiri poetess. People have called her a saint and a Sufi singer. She is a mythical figure whom both the Hindu and Muslim communities claim as their own. Her extraordinary life and the *vachs* that she sang have transcended time.

In a very unusual, subdued, non-dramatised performance Mita Vasisht was able to capture the essence of Lal Ded's poems and her personality. Her languid movements filled the stage like the quiet flow of a river. Mita Vasisht conceived the performance and it was designed and directed by Vishnu Mathur, a film director. The script for the performance was in Hindi, Kashmiri and English flowing from one language to the other smoothly and with ease. Mita Vasisht also sang some of the *vachs* in her resonant voice and the sound of the *vachs* filled the auditorium. The performance as the culmination of sixteen days of activism was another feather in the cap of *Akshara*. SPARROW felt that this unusual event must be covered and Priya D'Souza took some photographs of the event for SPARROW. The photographs are currently in the archives as a record of an unusual and imaginatively organised event.

— C S Lakshmi

## Death of Two Queens of Music



The year 2004 saw the death of two queens of music from two different musical traditions. Shoba Gurtu, the thumri queen, passed away on September 27, 2004 following a cardiac arrest. She was 79.

Shoba Gurtu was born in Belgaum and her mother Menakabai Shirodkar who was a trained dancer and singer, was her first guru. She later studied music from Ustad Nathan Khan, and Ghamman Khan. She was trained in the classical khayal form but later made the light classical forms of thumri and dadra, her domain in music. With her resonant and earthy voice, she brought a passion into thumri-singing which was her unique style. She has won many awards including the Padma Bhushan, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and the Lata Mangeshkar Puraskar.



The other queen who left us mourning on December 11, 2004 was Madurai Shanmugavadivu Subbulakshmi, M S as she was known. M S was a legend in her own lifetime.

There is no one who does not know the details of her illustrious life as a singer. Her childhood in Madurai with her mother Shanmugavadivu, a veena player, her film career, her marriage with Sadasivam, her devotion to Gandhi, the fact that her singing *hari tum haro jan ki tir* brought tears to the eyes of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who said that before a queen like her, what was he but a mere Prime Minister, her Meera Bhajans—all these details have become common knowledge to everyone who has been enticed by her music. She also lent her voice generously to many causes. M S won all the great awards possible, the last one being the Bharat Ratna.

When such queens die, we cannot replace them. We have to leave the thrones empty.

## Damayanti Joshi: A Life in Rhythm



The well-known Kathak dancer Damayanti Joshi died on September 19, 2004. The history of Kathak dance would be incomplete without the inclusion of this artiste

with her supple body, her expressive eyes and above all her creative energies.

Kathak, traditionally associated with court dancers in the 19th century, had been increasingly looked upon as undignified. Dancers like Damayanti Joshi had to divest it of all the elements associated with the court. Damayanti was one artiste who succeeded in giving this art form the grace and dignity it deserved.

Damayanti Joshi felt that her entire life and its meaning was contained in her dance. Madame Menaka, a renowned Kathak Dancer was mentor, guru and a second mother to Damayanti. Under Madame Menaka's guidance Damayanti was initiated into Kathak and with great grit and determination she chose dance as her career and life. Damayanti's style of dancing drew admiration from her own contemporaries.

Many prestigious awards were conferred on Damayanti Joshi including the Padma Shri. But dance lovers will remember her for her *Ashta Nayika* and for the rhythmic innovations she brought to Kathak.

## Parveen Babi



Parveen Babi was a student of Ahmedabad University. She became best known for her performances with Bollywood's biggest star Amitabh Bachchan in films such as *Deewaar*, *Shaan*,

*Majdoor* and *Amar Akbar Anthony*. On film she came to represent the bohemian Indian woman, unafraid to smoke or drink on camera at a time when these were considered taboo.

Parveen died a lonely person, her death as dramatic as some of the films she acted in.

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