



SPARROW

SOUND & PICTURE
ARCHIVES FOR
RESEARCH
ON
WOMEN

SPARROW

newsletter

SNL Number 11

March-April 2007

Publication Number 52

Published by

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Girgaum, Mumbai - 400 004
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This Newsletter is published with the support of HIVOS

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Cultural Festival

See report inside

[Editor's Note]

This newsletter is the last one which will be brought out with the support of HIVOS. Elsewhere in this newsletter we have written about our partnership with HIVOS. When there is an end there is also a beginning, so this newsletter marks an end as also a beginning.

The three months from January to March have been busy months in terms of completing projects. The cultural festival **One River, Many Streams** organised to celebrate art and cinema from the North East and Orissa was an event that taught us a great deal, and there is a report inside on it. The experience of shooting the film on transgender women was an enriching one. There is a short note inside on this interesting project and also a review of a book of photographs on the transgender experience. Neera Desai's book *Feminism as Experience: Thoughts and Narratives* was released on March

14, 2007 and it became a celebratory event with Dr.Vina Mazumdar coming down all the way from Delhi to release the book. Inside are some photographs and a note describing the occasion.

In a strange way this newsletter has been taken over by mothers. Three mothers who played a major role in the life of their families passed away by the time this newsletter went to print. And Ira Pande's extremely well-written book on her mother Shivani has been reviewed in this issue.

Dr. Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh, who is a great friend and supporter of SPARROW, is the guest editor of this issue of the newsletter. Shoba is the Head of the Department of English in S.I.E.S. College, Mumbai, and has been part of many of the activities of SPARROW for several years now.

Do write to us and do visit our website.

0.2 Cultural Festival

One River, Many Streams

SPARROW has been planning a cultural festival for a very long time to showcase regions like the North East and Orissa in order to dispel the illusion of an unvaried national identity. There is a great need to posit against this myth of a defined national identity, other identities of women and men that exist within the rubric of nation. SPARROW feels that now, more than at any other time, images that question the notion of uniformity and shatter illogical and contrived definitions must be presented in a manner that they continue to exist as valid parallel images which are as much a part of our country. If this is not done, there is the danger of marginalising other cultural contexts that are very important for broadening one's view of life, women and politics. Cultural festivals such as these are important to expose people to concepts and lives that are not part of their experience. SPARROW sincerely hoped that when exposed to images, voices and sounds other than those they are bombarded with every day through the media and their education, it may result in a new awareness and understanding of, and a new sensitivity to other areas of experience. It may also serve the purpose of expanding their vision of life as it is lived in this country.

The cultural festival which we finally organised with the support of HIVOS and with the collaboration of National Film Archive of India, Pune, and venue partners Fun Cinemas, was a modest attempt to break this notion of one single national identity, for where defined identities begin to emerge they also define women in specific ways. The films short-listed for this festival were chosen with the purpose of revealing the lives of women. They explored the everyday life of women and their functional life both inside and outside the family. The films also dealt with family relationships and the space women occupy within the family system. Film Directors Jahnu Barua, Manmohan Mahapatra and Aribam Syam Sharma were generous with their time in helping to choose films for this festival. Their support made it possible to structure the film section of this festival. Apart from films there were music and dance performances, and there were paintings and arts and crafts from Mizoram brought by Zaithangpuii Vuvangtu and Klanghro Khuma.

The popular Hindi and other language directors, actors and other artists are known to many, as some of them are cult-figures. SPARROW felt that it was very important to present artists and technicians from other languages and fields as people before such an audience. This may enable them to include in their existing memory of faces and people, images other than those they see every day. With this in mind, SPARROW invited Preeti Saikia, wife of late B.N. Saikia, the legendary film-maker from Assam, film-makers Aribam Syam Sharma,



Shabana Azmi inaugurating the festival

Photo by: Priya D'Souza



Zaithangpuii with arts and crafts from Mizoram

Photo by: Priya D'Souza



Students from Manipur Nritya Kendra performing on the inaugural day.

Photo by: Priya D'Souza

0.3 Cultural Festival

One River, Many Streams



Jarjum Ete speaking on the concluding day
Photo by: Priya D' Souza



Klanghro Khuma and Zaithangpui with the paintings
from Mizoram *Photo by: Priya D'Souza*



Sunita Bhuyan performing on the concluding day
Photo by Priya D'Souza

Oken Amakcham and M A Singh from Manipur, actors Malaya Goswami and Bishnu Khargoria from Assam, actor Yengkho Roma from Manipur, and film-makers Bijoy Ketan Mishra and Bijoya Jena from Orissa. SPARROW also took this opportunity to honour A. K. Bir, a film-maker from Orissa, Vishnu Mathur, a film-maker who has been a great support to all film projects of SPARROW, and K. S. Sasidharan, Director, National Film Archive of India, Pune. The festival was held over five days from January 26 to January 30, 2007. The venue was part of the Fun Cinemas multiplex complex.

The festival was inaugurated by the well-known artiste Shabana Azmi and concluded by Jarjum Ete, Chairperson, Arunachal Pradesh State Commission for Women. Poet Arundhathi Subramaniam compered the festival. Award-winning films were brought in especially for the festival from the National Film Archive of India, Pune, and the Directorate of Film festivals, New Delhi. Everything was well-planned and extremely well-organised. Classical Manipuri dance by students of Manipuri Nritya Kendra and vocal and violin recital by Sunita Bhuyan on the inaugural and concluding days respectively, were well-appreciated performances. The guests



of honour from the two regions were national artists whose work had been awarded. And yet the response from the Mumbai public was anything but encouraging. North East and Orissa were not regions they were interested in. In fact, one of the members of the audience who had come to see some other film in the multiplex saw the artifacts from Mizoram and commented, "These don't belong to India." Even the media's response was cold.

The cultural festival organised by SPARROW, the first of its kind, made very little impact on the Mumbai public. We now feel that not just one festival of this kind but several are needed to awaken a public lulled by the sex and gore of Hindi films and a warped notion of nationhood. But we are still holding our heads high for we feel it is better to have organised such a festival and failed than not to have organised it at all.

— C S Lakshmi

0.4 A Film & A Book Release

Degham: On Being a Transgender Woman

For sometime now SPARROW had been considering making a digital video recording of the transgender experience. We had collected some print material on the subject but what encouraged us to venture into the project was a phone call we had received two years ago from Bangalore from Revathi who asked us if we could train her to do interviews of other transgender women whose experiences she wanted to record. For some reason this training did not happen. But sometime later we received a letter from Priya Babu who had set up a small organisation called Sudar for the development of transgender women and for articulating through plays their life experiences. In the last week of February and the first week of March we recorded the experiences of Revathi, Aasha Bharathi, Narthaki Natraj, Priya Babu and Kalki. Normally, SPARROW's video recordings are done in the homes and offices of people whose lives we record. In this case, the problem was that these people did not have a space they could call their own or a space they felt they belonged to. Except for Narthaki Natraj who lived in a regular rented flat, the others did not have a regular place they lived in. So we decided to use neutral spaces to shoot them in. Revathi was interviewed in theatre director Mangai's house and Aasha Bharathi spoke about her life in the dormitory that she runs for transgender women. Priya Babu narrated her experiences in the village in which the Tamil Nadu government has allowed them to build a colony for themselves. Her organisation has recently rented an office in Chengalpattu and part of the film was shot there. Narthaki had shifted into her new flat with great difficulty and we managed to shoot part of her portion in her flat. Kalki works as a Communications Facilitator in the Svaram Musical Instruments and Research Station in Auroville. In the quiet surroundings there, she spoke about what it was to be a transgender woman in her soft but firm voice. The unit which included Director Vishnu Mathur, Cameraman R. V. Ramani, Sound Recordist Jayant Pradhan and poet Kutti Revathi managed to create a warm and relaxed atmosphere in which conversation was possible. The film is currently being edited.



Narthaki Natraj



Kalki



Revathi



Priya Babu



Aasha Bharathi

Feminism as Experience

The much awaited book entitled *Feminism as Experience: Thoughts and Narratives* by Dr. Neera Desai, one of the trustees of SPARROW and a pioneer in Women's Studies, took a long time coming due to several reasons. With an introduction by Neera Desai in four parts and twenty-four narratives, the book took a while to be prepared for print. But on March 14 it was released by none other than the pioneering Women's Studies scholar, Dr. Vina Mazumdar. In an eloquent speech Dr. Vina Mazumdar said that the narratives in the book present a *rainbow collection* "in terms of ideologies, arenas of activism and the dynamics of the changing historical-political context." In her talk, Neera Desai referred to the narratives as "open-ended articulations" and described her effort as a modest attempt to understand the motivating factors which can make an individual work for a larger cause. Dr. Roshan G Shahani and Dr. Shoba V Ghosh read excerpts from some of the narratives. SPARROW took this opportunity to exhibit two of its blown-up, large-size posters, which were part of an earlier exhibition entitled **Marching on the Roads: Making Oneself, Making History.**



Dr. Vina Mazumdar releasing Dr. Neera Desai's book.



Dr. Vina Mazumdar receiving a gift from Dr. Neera Desai at the book release function, March 14, 2007, Mumbai.

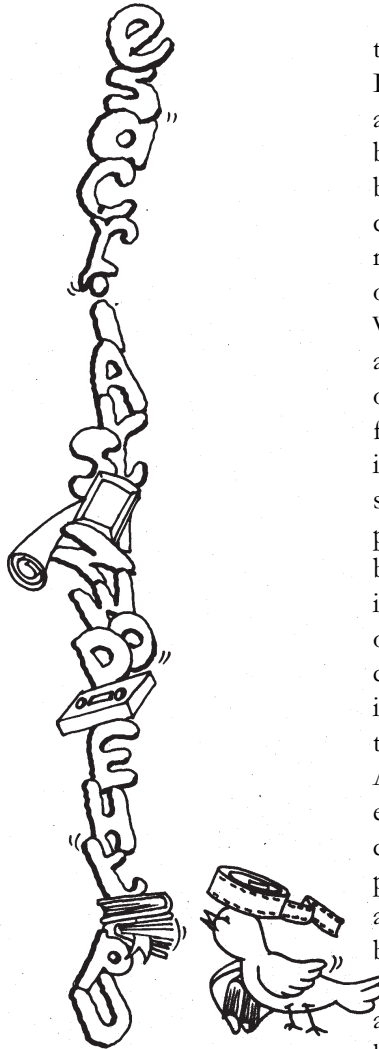
Photo by: Priya D'Souza

0.5 Notes & Comments

Our Partner HIVOS

SPARROW's association with HIVOS began sometime in 1997. With March 2007 this ten-year partnership comes to an end. We do feel a sense of loss for at a time when no one understood the need or purpose of a women's archives HIVOS had faith in our work and came forward to support our activities. SPARROW was lodged in a small room then and later we shifted to a slightly bigger office and earnestly began our work. At present we have twenty-five people working with us and are functioning from a larger space although it is a rented one. In these ten years we have grown as an organisation and have a sizable archival collection we can be proud of, comprising of oral history documentations, video recordings and a variety of print collections. We have published books and we have held workshops and cultural festivals for which we have had a good response. And even where we have failed, we feel that the failure is not because of something we have left undone but because archiving and outreach activities for the purpose of conscientisation is a long and tedious process where immediate results are not possible. We have friends and well-wishers in many places who appreciate our work. All this has been made possible because of the support and encouragement given by HIVOS and the immense faith HIVOS has had in the kind of work we want to do.

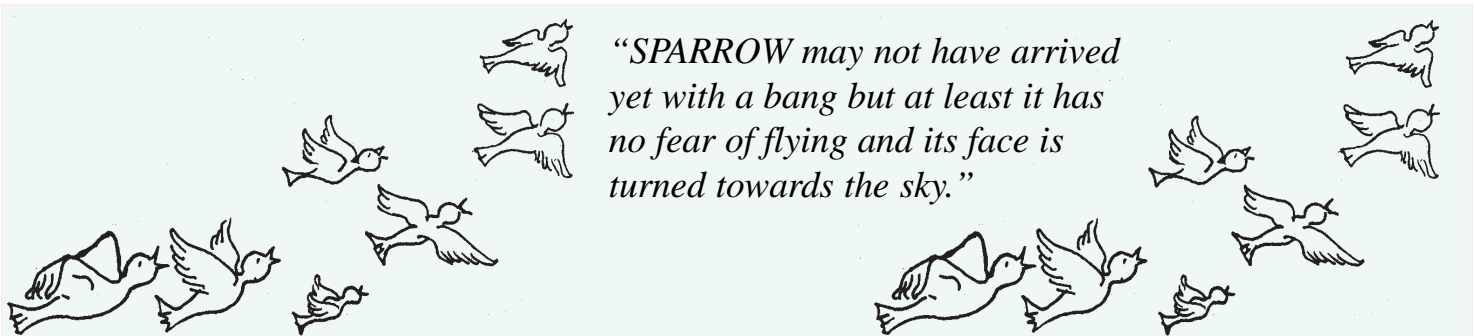
When we began our work we were inexperienced. We remember when a senior accountant came from HIVOS to check our methods of accounting and asked us where we kept our petty cash, we proudly showed her a pink chocolate box in which we kept our petty cash! We have come a long way since then but we have still kept that chocolate box with us for luck.



Unlike other funding agencies HIVOS tried to maintain a close relationship with its partners. In the initial years, it was easy to communicate and interact with HIVOS. In recent times it has been more difficult for the process seems to have become more formal which may be due to changes in the nature of its work. But that has not discouraged us as we have continued with our work in the same spirit with which we began. We have gained some stability as an organisation and hopefully that will give us the courage to go on. At this point we would like to thank HIVOS for its support, but about the nature of funding in general we would like to make a few suggestions. When organisations which are not project-oriented but are in the process of becoming institutions are chosen as partners, the initial ten-year period is the test period when the organisation has to prove its mettle. Once that is done its continued stability must be taken care of in the form of a generous corpus fund so that the work already accomplished does not suffer. A ten-year partnership does have a certain emotional content to it even though it is not directed towards specific individuals. A partnership should not “end” in that sense. Like a musical note it should leave its resonances behind.

In our first annual report we wrote that when a fledgling sparrow decides to fly the sky is the limit. And we have termed the year 2006-2007 as the year for picking up speed. Obviously we are not fledglings any more. The sky does seem a long way off and our partner HIVOS is moving away to do other things but we have the strength gained from ten years of partnership which will keep us going.

— C S Lakshmi



“SPARROW may not have arrived yet with a bang but at least it has no fear of flying and its face is turned towards the sky.”

0.6 Book Review

Diddi: My Mother's Voice

By Ira Pande



“More than a mother she was for us a difficult sibling, an eccentric, much older sister who belonged to a different generation”

Ira Pande, *Diddi...*

This book is Ira Pande's tribute to her mother, the renowned novelist, short-story writer and columnist, Shivani. It is equally a search, an attempt to 'unravel the enigma' of a woman whose relationship with her family was

a passionate and often turbulent one, and who articulated the most secret parts of herself not in her real-life bonds but in the fiction she wrote. How, then, does one set out to reconcile the mother and the celebrated writer?

Ira Pande attempts to do this through a nuanced and, at times, truly brilliant interweaving of her own memories with the writings, both fictional and otherwise, of her mother. Pande recalls ruefully how she and her siblings treated their mother's literary reputation rather casually, perhaps even resenting that it stole her away from them. It is only after her death that she discovers the synergetic relationship between her mother's writings and her life. Writes Pande, "In the same way that she left a bit of herself in each of her children, she left bits of herself in every piece that she wrote."

This book is, therefore, an intricate tapestry of memory, short stories, autobiographical essays and stirring obituaries that Diddi wrote for loved ones. To read it is to understand not only one woman's life, but also the times of transition through which this life was lived out, and the extraordinary cast of characters that peopled this life.

The richest portion of the book is the one that traces Diddi's childhood years. Born into a proudly Brahminic clan in the Kumaon, Diddi's early years were both colourful and troubled. The conflicting forces of tradition and modernity, the collapse of the feudal joint family structure, the comedown in family fortunes with the early death of her father, and the unusual access to education that the girls of this family had, all shape the extraordinary subjectivity of this woman and her sisters. Particularly poignant is her relationship with her mother and grandmother—women of great strength and endless generosity, but also of uncompromising conservatism in matters of ritualism and gender entitlements.

A traditional marriage and motherhood bring a new set of challenges, and for Diddi writing is the path to survival. It was a means to "liberate herself when she—like all romantic dreamers—encountered the complexities of real lives, real people." On re-reading her mother's stories after her death, Ira Pande uncovers their seething subtexts related to marital and familial anxieties.

And after the loss of her husband and the moving away of her grown-up children, Diddi moves to her beloved Lucknow. During her final years she holds court amidst a circle of colourful and fierce loyalists—Hamid Bhai, more devoted than any blood brother, Ramrati, her maid and constant companion, and a myriad others from different religions and class backgrounds. Flamboyant to the end, fiercely independent, often lonely but unwilling to admit it to her own children, Diddi dies as she lived—dramatically, resolutely resisting pity, and with a ready quip even on her dying breath.

In sum, *Diddi: My Mother's Voice* is an engaging, often deeply moving book whose greatest strength lies in the manner in which it extends the genre of women's life-histories. Loosening the division between fact and fiction, between the enquirer and object of enquiry, this work gives powerful articulation to the complex forces that leave their impress on relationships of mothers and daughters in specific historical contexts.

— Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh

Book details:

Diddi: My Mother's Voice

Ira Pande

2005

Published by Penguin Books, New Delhi

Number of pages: 216

Price: Rs.250

Kaaya: Beyond Gender

A Window into the Lives of a Transgender

Community



“Just for today, I am the queen in her parlour...”

This is a quite extraordinary and often disquieting photo-documentary that takes us into the lives of a community both persistently marginalised and obsessively imaged in the popular consciousness. The transgender communities, whom we tend to subsume under the undifferentiated category of *hijra*, haunt

0.7 Book Review

the margins of our social existence and consciousness as objects of our fear, derision and loathing. They are both invisible and necessary to us, for they constitute the most definitive Other against whom we secure our sense of self and ‘normality.’

In a remarkable experiment, SAHARA (a Delhi-based centre for care and rehabilitation) and the Centre for Media and Alternative Communication (CMAC), funded by the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), worked to empower a transgender community to appropriate the right to self-representation. In other words, it was an experiment in “Imaging the Self.” We are told that Parthiv Shah of CMAC “worked alongside the transgender community, teaching them to use cameras... [to] help create an exhibit and book that ...revealed their lives.” Each of the participatory subjects was asked to choose certain photographs she had taken and create a narration for each. It is these photographs and framing narrations that are reproduced in this publication.

Three informative and ethically engaged prologues by the facilitators of the project preface the book. They provide some insight into the complexly structured subaltern world of the transgender. These are followed by verbal self-representations by some of the subjects. Brief and starkly matter-of-fact, these are profoundly disturbing narratives of familial and social rejection, sexual exploitation, and the uncertainty of lives lived under the constant spectre of AIDS-related death.

Above all, they are expressions of pain and anger in the face of society’s denial of humanity and dignity to them. “They should accept me as I am,” asserts Bhanu, while Neha asks, “Does being human refer to only a man or a woman?” In a patriarchal order, structured round bi-polar notions of sexuality and gender, the transgender must necessarily be relegated to the margins or the crevices of society. This book is designed to unsettle our assumptions of mandatory heterosexuality, and to offer us a window into a world where indeed there is great pain, but where there is also love and desire and aspirations.

It is the photographs, with the appended comments, that take us beyond the rhetoric of suffering to reveal to us human beings living, loving and dreaming at the far reaches of the social order. The recurrent preoccupations in the visuals are the family, the home, friendships and romantic/conjugal love. It is with a sense of shock that one realises that to those who are utterly marginalised there is no greater desire than to replicate the ‘normal’ world in their own lives. Desire is shaped in the image of that other, more privileged, world that has no place for them.

And, so, there is the picture of a Bobby in a scrupulously neat and proudly decorated home. Her comment is, “After looking at this photograph I have realised that I have everything that is required in a household and that I’m looking after my family like a woman.” Another of her favourite photographs is

one that shows her drying her hair after a bath “like all other females.” In another, she reclines on the bed “like a housewife.” Conjugal, wifely devotion, dedication to the home and family—these are the roles aspired to, roles that feminism would dismiss as regressive and socially legislated.

How, then, does one read these visuals and comments? Are self-representations necessarily liberating or are they often deeply inflected by normative desires? More fundamentally, what does liberation and empowerment mean to different people from different locations?

Perhaps the most compelling and, yes, disturbing aspect of the photographs is their representation of the body—the *kaaya* referred to in the title. The body of the transgender is marked by an almost excessive femininity. It lounges languidly on the bed, drapes itself over a loved one, droops coyly, poses sensuously and invites the eye of the camera in a stylised and at times almost parodic exaggeration. At other moments it resorts to an aggressive assertion of its femininity. There is a particularly startling picture of Bobby and a friend thrusting their exposed breasts at the viewer, and another that captures a naked body bathing under a tap.

The feminist reader/viewer of these images is faced with some difficult questions. Do these pictures objectify the transgendered body and turn it into a site of voyeuristic curiosity? Or, is the deliberate foregrounding of the ‘sexed’ body an act of assertion and subversive appropriation by those who are seen to belong to no sex at all? Finally, is the viewer’s discomfort only a symptom of bourgeois squeamishness?

The one thing that is clear is that this unusual and often problematic publication forces us within the women’s movement to question our understanding of femininity, and of the nature of empowerment itself. Equally, it forces us to acknowledge that we have been unable or unwilling, for the main part, to include the transgender communities in our struggle for a more just order.

— Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh

Book details:

Kaaya: Beyond Gender

A Window into the Lives of a Transgender Community

2005

Published by GTZ, SAHARA & CMAC, New Delhi

Number of pages: 72

Price: Not given

0.8 Homage

C V Alamelu: A Mother to Remember



Alamelu, my mother, was born on March 15, 1915. As was the custom in those days, she got married at the age of eleven. She had four children, two girls and two boys. As if to make up for what she herself had never had, she educated her daughters and stood by them in all their decisions. She had a resonant voice and used to play the veena. She filled the life of her children with music,

exotic food, literature and laughter. She never allowed considerations of caste or creed to enter her world of love and affection. She lost her husband when she was sixty-four but did not lose heart. She raised her grandchildren and she continued to be active and strong till the end reading, marking and cutting articles on home medicine and cookery, writing letters, sewing, embroidering, learning, discussing politics and watching programmes she liked on the television. Even two months before her death she could write to her daughter and tell her, “You seem to be annoyed with me about something. Tell me if I have done anything wrong. I can correct myself.” Two weeks before she could be ninety-two, on February 26, Alamelu passed away after a fall in which she broke her hip bone. Mothers like her touch their children’s lives so deeply that they can die only physically.

— C S Lakshmi

Dayaben : Bai to All



Dayaben Babubhai Vaidya passed away on April 5, 2007. She was 92. A prayer meeting was organised by her family in Mumbai to pay tribute to the departed soul. Many people who came in touch with Bai narrated their experiences of her unconditional love to all and her compassionate and caring nature. What impressed me the most was the creation of a

live image of Dayaben by her granddaughter Vidita through photographic visual presentation and narration of bed time stories told by her grandmother. Dayaben was a woman of principles, strong convictions and independent thinking. Even at the young age of twelve, Daya did not allow her family to tattoo her name on her arm as was customary in those days. Family circumstances did not permit her to study beyond the Seventh Standard but she used to read a lot and write poems. She married Babubhai who was a journalist and freedom fighter. She lent full support to all his endeavours throughout his life. She actively participated in prabhatpheris during the freedom struggle and later used to recall many patriotic songs. Dayaben was a very devout person and felt that her inner strength came from her immense faith in god. The warmth and strength of her personality enveloped each and everyone who came into her life.

— Divya Pandey

Malathi: Fire-creepers Flowers



Malathi began to write poetry when she was in school. That was poetry written for fun, to entertain a few friends. She says in her preface to her second poetry collection entitled *Fire-creepers Flowers* that it was when she became middle-aged that she felt goaded to do something different such as jumping from a mountain, or turning over a mountain, or smearing herself with slush, or reaching

out to touch the sky. Instead, she began to write poetry. Two of her collections have been published so far. Malathi worked as the Chief Accounts Officer in the Telecom Department. She had a long career and had just recently taken voluntary retirement in her early fifties, to take time to enjoy her grandchild (adopted by her daughter) and to write more poetry. Unfortunately, her kidneys collapsed and she died in March 2007, carrying with her so much of poetry unwritten. One is reminded of the last two lines of her poem entitled *Loss of Speech*: “Let there be silence/ You don’t have to speak any more.”

— C S Lakshmi

Kamal Bhagwat : *Rinanubandha*



Kamal Bhagwat was born in February, 1922. She always wrote her name this way without putting the husband’s name in between, although she loved him a lot. In fact, theirs was an ideal unit. She had studied only up to the Sixth Standard when she got married to my father. But she was very confident of herself as a woman. My father was progressive and open-minded and my

mother tried to imbibe these values till the end. She was a bit authoritarian though. That is how she was brought up as a daughter. As such, she always was the boss in our household. But a loving and caring boss. We children often had arguments with her. Devoted mother that she was, she agreed to disagree, always maintaining her dignity.

When her kidneys failed she suffered a great deal. Against her wishes we admitted her to the hospital. But that did comfort her a bit. And she began sharing her ideas on life. “Don’t strain yourself beyond a point. I made that mistake”, she told me. “What is your maintenance department doing? The patients are wearing torn clothes. I will give you donation to improve all this”, she was heard telling the nurses. “How come you are doing so much for me? This is what is known as *rinanubandha* (inexplicable bonds),” she told the ayahs who were taking care of her. She happily chatted with all her visitors. Asked why she was feeling so relaxed, she answered, “I was constantly worried about small and big things in the house. Now I am free of those worries. I am so independent.” Freed from all her domestic obligations, thus, Kamal Bhagwat died peacefully on March 23, 2007.

— Neela Bhagwat