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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

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*Special Issue:*

Reminiscences by C S Lakshmi, Dr. Vina  
Mazumdar, Dr. Usha Thakkar, Dr. Divya  
Pandey, Dr. Geraldine Forbes and  
Mihir Desai

Articles in homage to Kamala Das and  
Santha Rama Rau by Dr. Josna Rege

Homage to Gangubai Hangal, Sister  
Collette, D K Pattammal, Leela Naidu,  
Rajmata Gayatri Devi and Nalini Pandit

# SPARROW

## newsletter

SNL Number 18

September 2009



**CELEBRATING**  
*the life and work of Dr. Neera Desai*

23.09.1925-25.06.2009

### [Editor's Note]

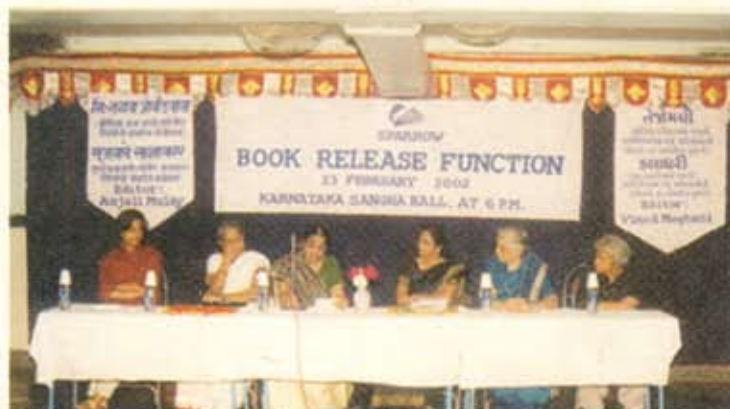
SPARROW'S LAST TRUSTEE MEETING TOOK PLACE, AS ALWAYS, IN Dr. Neera Desai's house. She was unwell but insisted that the trustee meeting should take place as usual. She was waiting for all of us in a crisp cotton sari as was her wont in every meeting. She had gone through the agenda; her comments were ready. So were the tea and snacks she had asked her long-time companion Jeeja to prepare. She chaired the meeting, made her points and then retired. That last meeting was an example of the way Neeraben lived her life and faced her death—everything taken into account; all preparations done and ready for the next move. This special issue is to celebrate who she was and what she stood for.

Ever since its inception and all through the following years Neeraben's commitment to SPARROW and its work never wavered. This special issue is also to announce the dedication of our library to her memory; the library will now be known as The Dr. Neera Desai Memorial Library. See inside for a longer note on it.

Women who make history are not immortal, unfortunately. In this issue we pay homage to Kamala Das, Santha Rama Rau, D K Pattammal, Gangubai Hangal, Leela Naidu, Gayatri Devi, Sister Collette and Nalini Pandit all of whom have contributed to women's history in their own way.

## A Woman Called Neera Desai

IN 1978 AROUND JULY, I moved from Delhi to Mumbai. I had completed my project on Tamil women writers and the manuscript was typed and bound and I was eager to share it with those who were going to be involved in promoting the new discipline of Women's Studies. One name that I had with me was that of Dr. Neera Desai. Vinadi (Dr. Vina Mazumdar) whom I had met in Delhi before my departure had suggested that I meet her. I took an appointment with her and met her at the SNDT Churchgate campus. She was the head of the Department of Sociology. This initial meeting did not create any sparks. She was polite, warm and kind as she always was, but I was twenty years younger than her and was aggressive and upfront and it was obvious that I was not the kind of person she could relate to. She directed me to meet her colleague



Neera Desai at the book release function for Marathi & Gujarati volumes, February, 2002

Dr. Maithreyi Krishna Raj, which I did and after that I was a regular visitor at the Research Unit and later at the Centre in Juhu. Maithreyi and Jyothi Randive in the Research Unit became my closefriends. I did occasional projects for Dr. Neera Desai and interacted with her during women's movement meetings and other such occasions but we kept a polite distance from each other.

It was towards the end of her term at the Research Centre that I went to her with the idea of a women's archives. She was enthusiastic about it but it did not take off for several reasons. But in the course of the discussions we came close to each other and we began to share many personal details with each other. I did not still fit into her concept of a feminist which is why I was left out of the number of feminists she interviewed for a project she had undertaken. Our methods of working were different and our experiences were different. These barriers in our friendship broke one afternoon when she read out to me what she had written in Gujarati about her life. She had by then retired but still visited the Centre regularly. She was more relaxed than usual and seemed to have all the time in the world. When she finished reading, something melted within us and we realised that

despite all the differences in our views and attitudes, we would be friends. It was after this that I invited her and Maithreyi to discuss the setting up of SPARROW (Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women). The name did not quite fit into the stereotype of names given to women's organisations at that time. But Neeraben liked it because it was different and once SPARROW was registered in 1988, she became its ardent supporter.

When a painting exhibition was held in 1992 to raise funds, Neeraben visited the gallery enthusiastic like a young girl and when we rented a small room in Juhu after the exhibition she climbed its narrow wooden staircase to inaugurate it. In the students' workshops we conducted in the later years Neeraben was an eager participant and speaker who spoke about her life and ideas with young people



Amarnath Kamath, C S Lakshmi, Jaya Bachchan, Neera Desai and Diya Pandey at the exhibition & book release function of *The World of Maya*, January, 2005

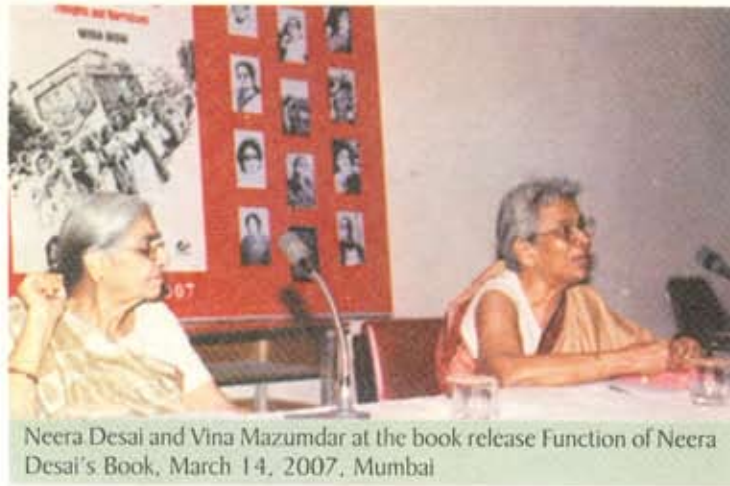
in a quiet and firm manner which inspired them. I particularly remember the communal harmony workshop we held in 1994 when the students at one point began to accuse the older generation for making a mess of the nation which they had to now tackle. It was Neeraben, the oldest member in the group, who gave a reply to that. She pointed out that no one generation can take the blame for that would be a simplistic way to look at things. She explained that she herself had been in the national movement and that at that time she and her fellow fighters had accused the generation before them. She told the young eighteen year old boy who had remarked that he would not do anything that can make his child point a finger at him, that there was no guarantee that his child would not blame him for something or the other. "All blames are shared at all times, for history is a process; there are no easy divisions in terms of age," she told him. Clad in a sari worn in the Gujarati style with flowers in her hair, she had that way of quietly flooring you with the most radical ideas.

The initial funding SPARROW got from HIVOS was given because persons like Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishna Raj were associated

"Now I am ready to pack and leave."

with SPARROW. And the ten years that followed the grant from HIVOS were the most crucial years in the growth of SPARROW and Neeraben closely followed and monitored all the moves that were being made. She put forth her views and advised on various issues in every single trustee meeting. When we wanted her to be part of the Global Feminisms project, she not only agreed but was most cooperative. And she saw the completed film in the SPARROW office and rang up Vishnu Mathur, the Director, and told him he had done a wonderful job.

During the course of these years, I was able to persuade her to complete her project on feminists and feminism. In the year following Prof. A R Desai's demise, I had visited Neeraben for a signature and saw the photograph of Prof. A R Desai on the mantelpiece with



Neera Desai and Vina Mazumdar at the book release function of Neera Desai's Book, March 14, 2007, Mumbai

some mogra flowers in front of it and a card kept beside it declaring her love for him. It was his birthday. I stood there moved to tears and it was then that I told her to begin work on her book and SPARROW undertook to publish her book *Feminism as Experience*. Working on the book and the proofs later, brought us even closer. The release of the book in 2007, was also a momentous occasion. We released it in the SNDT Juhu premises in collaboration with the Research Centre for Women's Studies, the institution she had built along with her committed colleagues. She wanted very good food to be served, and wanted everyone invited, for she said that there was no marriage in her family that she could invite anyone to and that this occasion must serve that purpose.

All through these years when SPARROW went through several crises and I myself had several rough patches in my life, Neeraben was there to offer moral and emotional support. When the SPARROW building papers were registered (I had promised her that I would do it in her lifetime when she expressed doubts if SPARROW would ever find stability in terms of space while she was alive) she came to see the building from outside for she could not climb the three

floors and for the inauguration, as always, she came in her best sari. The saris were something we always joked about. She had had a fracture and then an angioplasty when Divya, Neeraben and I had to go out for some SPARROW work. The previous week there had been a Bengali sari exhibition at Dadar and Neeraben had bought two beautiful new saris. She wore one of them that day. In the car, she sat relaxed and commented, "Now I am ready to pack and leave." "You just bought two new saris last week Neeraben!" I exclaimed and she laughed out. "Who are you going to will your saris to?" I used to ask her occasionally. I once borrowed one of her beautiful saris and wore it for a year and then returned it to her. Even towards the end, she would let you inside her room only after she wore one of her favourite saris and looked presentable.



Neeraben & Maithreyi Krishna Raj signing the papers for registration of the new building, June, 2007

The day before I left for a conference to Norwich, I asked her if I could come and see her. "When are you coming back?" she asked. "On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July," I said. "Have a good journey. I will be here when you come back," she said. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of June I went to the internet room in the University of East Anglia and was alone there when I got the news of her death. I began to cry quietly for my friend. That afternoon we went to see the cathedral in Norwich which is almost as grand as the Notre Dame and I lit a candle for Neeraben on the globe-shaped iron candle holder. The cathedral had a maze where I saw some people walking and I walked the maze only to find out that the maze-walking can be done for many reasons including 'grieving a loss'. As I came back to the inner hall of the now empty cathedral, the evening song began softly and in that magical moment of the evening, I sat down with tears to bid goodbye to our dear Neeraben.

— C S Lakshmi

"All blames are shared at all times, for history is a process; there are no easy divisions in terms of age..."

## Remembering Neeraben

PROF. NEERA DESAI WAS THE most committed and outstanding leader of the movement to initiate and spread Women's Studies in India. She had assisted the work of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI – 1975) through her research, and became one of the initial respondents to the follow-up research sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR)—under the leadership of the late Prof. J P Naik who had been Member Secretary of the Indian Education Commission, which produced one of the most outstanding reports on Education and Development in Post-Independence India.

The CSWI's Report (*Towards Equality*) revealed the failure of the Constitution to alter the life conditions and socio-economic status of the majority of India's Women. The handful of women who had benefited (which included the members of the CSWI and the women scholars who assisted the Committee's work through their own research) all belonged to the educated middle class—still very much a minority in the Indian context.

Another issue that faced us was the growing influence of 'feminist studies' among some younger scholars who were better informed about the output coming from the Western, richer countries, than what the CSWI had reported about the *worsening conditions* of the poorer women—in rural and urban areas—even after independence and the adoption of an egalitarian Constitution. Most saw the fact that India was being ruled by a woman—but failed to see the spreading darkness below that light.

It was against this backdrop that a handful of us planned the inception of "women's studies from below". We were advised by Naik Saheb to avoid a "top-down approach—through action by the Government". In his opinion, what we needed was a "multi-pronged approach". "Use the friends you have within academia, from different disciplines, irrespective of their gender. Bring them together to discuss ways to *reawaken a concern for women's poverty, illiteracy and powerlessness—even so many years after independence from foreign rule, and despite having one of the most powerful women in the world leading the Government of the Indian Republic!*"

Though the planning responsibility was supposedly shared by a group—I discovered on my arrival that the *only magic that worked with the SNTD's bureaucracy and hide-bound rules—was a gentle request from Neeraben!* Buildings supposedly closed to men could house male participants for whom no alternative accommodation could be found—because Neeraben wished it. A group of students (which included both genders) putting up an exhibition which they had carried with them from Delhi could be allowed to work beyond midnight—because Neeraben assured the staff that 'Vinaben' will oversee the group and then ensure the departure of the few males who had to do the climbing jobs—to hang the posters/charts they had brought from Delhi. The outcome of that Conference was a democratic/collective decision by a large gathering of India's scholars—drawing from many discipline and both genders—to give birth to the Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS),



L to R: Vina Mazumdar, Leela Dube, Neera Desai with Hanna Papanek and a friend, Segovia, July 1990

members of which became the torchbearers for the spread of Women's Studies in India.

Unlike my own sister, Neeraben gave me full support to establish the CWDS and even functioned as its Chairperson from 1987 to 1996.

Staying with her in Mumbai was always an enjoyable and relaxing experience. We would sit up till late hours, talking about the past, present or future. No formalities were necessary.

We missed her at the Lucknow Session of the IAWS—where we as founders, were being felicitated. No one told me of her recent sickness till after she had passed away.

Goodbye, old comrade. We shall miss you, but having nursed my mother-in-law through the last stages of cancer, I, at least, will accept it as a release from physical agony.

— Vina Mazumdar

National Research Professor of Social Sciences,  
Government of India.

## A Life of Fragrance

"HOW DO YOU LIKE my new curtains?" I remember Neeraben asking me during one of my last visits to her home. The furniture in the room was rearranged and Neeraben was sitting on her comfortable chair, demurely dressed in a sari of pastel shade. There was an awareness of the end crawling near and yet there was zest for life that was overwhelming. Tranquillity and calm determination to face the situation, rather than helpless surrender to the fate were perceptible in her eyes. Dr. Neera Desai, Neeraben for many of us, remains a special person for what she was and what she stood for. When C S Lakshmi asked me to write about her, my spontaneous response was "of course". And yet as I sit to write words become fugitives, thoughts mingle with tears and an avalanche of memories overtakes.

I met Neeraben in mid seventies when I joined SNTD. Her pursuit of academic research and her commitment to Women's Studies were well known. She would invite some of us newcomers also to various workshops and discussions. I was amazed how she would make sure everything was in order, from the academic inputs to the arrangements for tea. Over the years I realised that she loved Indian music, had a good knowledge of music and it was a privilege to hear, rarely though, some lines of garbas from her. She loved literature, especially women's writings; Gujarati literature had a special corner in her heart. She was translating short stories into Gujarati in the last phase to keep her mind away from the persistent pain.

'We must generate material pertaining to Women's Studies in Gujarati, let us call our friends for discussion,' Neeraben had said to me some years back, and yet I feel it was only yesterday. This self-imposed task of editing a series of booklets on Women's Studies in Gujarati that we undertook proved to be an engaging exercise. There were many issues to attend to. To begin with: in English there is usually one word used to denote a female viz. a woman. In Gujarati, as in other Indian languages, there are many words for this. We found that three words are most commonly used—Mahila, Stree and Nari. How do we use them—interchangeably or specifically? How do we maintain uniformity of these words in the writings of many authors of our series? What is the word to express women's liberation—'Stree-mukti' or 'Nari-mukti'? Again what do we call Women's Studies—Stree-Abhyas or Nari-Abhyas? The word chosen had to fit in the context, had to be etymologically correct and at the same should not be jarring to the ears! Moreover, each booklet had its own questions. To give an example: what should the book on women and law contain—mere information or the understanding of the judicial decisions? Neeraben would delve deep into minute details of each question or issue and naturally we would end up talking for hours before writing even a page!

Her passion for secularism and human rights, and involvement in women's movement were remarkable. So was her passion for detective stories; Agatha Christie was her favourite and she loved to watch the DVD of the episodes of Murder She Wrote.

## Murders and Mogra Flowers

Joys of daily life are abundant and Neeraben knew about this treasure. She liked good vegetarian food; she could give her own 'healthy' version of popular Gujarati delicacies. She was always a gracious hostess. She would be particular about the saris she wore and ensured that the one she wore was right for the occasion. She loved flowers; a little string of mogra flowers was enough to make her happy. She would take it lovingly in her hands and tuck it neatly into her hair and enjoy its fragrance.

Now all that remains with us is the fragrance of her memorable life.

— Usha Thakkar

The Director of the Institute of Gandhian Thought and Rural Development, a program that is run from Mani Bhavan and also the Honorary Secretary of Mani Bhavan, Gandhi Sangrahalaya. She is also the Chairperson of Public Lectures and Cultural Events Committee of The Asiatic Society of Mumbai. She is also currently a trustee of SPARROW.

### From SPARROW Collections



SPARROW Trustees after registration of the new building, June 2007



Neera Desai lighting candles of hope during the inauguration of SPARROW building at Dahisar, January 2008

## An Open House and an Open Heart

I MET NEERABEN IN 1982 when my family shifted from Vadodara to Mumbai and I was looking for a job in a Research Institute. The memory of the first meeting with her is still very fresh in my mind. I met her in her office in the Sociology Department at the SNDT University's Churchgate campus. She was the Head of the Sociology Department and the Honorary Director of the Research Unit for Women's Studies at that time. She made me comfortable and asked me the purpose of my visit as I had not taken a prior appointment. I could relate to her instantly. When she saw my bio-data, Vadodara became a common link. She knew many people in the M S University of Vadodara where I worked for fifteen years at the Population Research Centre. Though I had already joined the International Institute for Population Studies (IIPS), Deonar, in Mumbai, I was exploring possibility of joining a Research Institute in the western suburbs near Andheri. She told me that the Research Unit would be shifting to the Juhu campus of the University very soon and that it would expand its activities with a grant from the Ford Foundation. She suggested that I should apply when a research post was advertised. She asked me if I would be interested in attending a lecture by Dr. Kate Young, a visiting feminist scholar from the Sussex University, UK. I did attend the lecture and thus I entered the world of Women's Studies, a new discipline at that time. Little did I know that the rest of my life would be linked to this discipline and to Neeraben who brought me into it. I joined the Research Unit as a Research Officer in 1982. I do not regret at all crossing over from demographic research to Women's Studies. Where else could I have had the fortune of working with two stalwarts like Neeraben and Maithreyi Krishna Raj. The decade of eighties was the peak period of the Research Unit which had by then become a Centre. It was throbbing with various activities. Neeraben was an inspiring leader. All of us, who joined under the Ford's programme, were systematically inducted into various activities of the Centre besides the research project that each one took up. Organising seminars, conferences, or any other event became the joint responsibility of everyone in the Centre. We all enjoyed working as a cohesive group. Multi-tasking was never a problem because it was accepted as one of the tools of enhancing our capabilities.

This was the place which provided me with opportunities to meet many well-known stalwarts in Women's Studies—academicians as well as activists. Even today I feel that the congenial atmosphere, participatory style of functioning and the cultivation of the feeling of belonging to the organisation has helped me grow personally. It gave me a personal sense of commitment to the Centre and its activities.

The bond I developed with Neeraben began with Women's Studies but over the years when we worked together, travelled together and often shared rooms during conferences, it became a deep personal bonding. During one such international conference at New Delhi in

1984 on Women and Household, when news came of my mother's death, Neeraben took hold of the situation and handled all the practical details of travel while I stood there too shocked and shattered to deal with the news. 30<sup>th</sup> February 1984 is etched on my memory as the day of my mother's death and also the day I found an emotional anchor in Neeraben.

Being a great scholar and academician is something anyone can be with hard work. But to be a good human being is not so easy. Neeraben did not treat Women's Studies as just an academic subject. Ideology without action was not something she appreciated. Keeping an open house and being open to every one's ideas whether they are old or young, and being personally involved in people's lives was the way she chose to live her life.

In the last couple of years I became very close to Neeraben. When I interviewed her on behalf of SPARROW, a new facet of her personality unfolded before me. I found out that even in managing her

family and her personal relationships she had never deviated from her convictions. In the last one year when she was diagnosed with cancer, even in the face of failing health she remained calm and never lost her courage. Even after her surgery for cancer our last SPARROW trustee meeting took place in her house.

Her home number and mobile number are still there on my cell phone. Sometimes I am tempted to ring up the number to hear Neeraben's familiar warm voice asking me "Kem cho, maja ma?" unmindful of her own illness.

— Divya Pandey

Trustee and Consultant, SPARROW.



Divya Pandey, Neera Desai & Maithreyi Krishna Raj at RCWS



Neera Desai with RCWS team

## I Called Her Ma

IT WAS ABOUT HALF past ten at night, 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2009. I was at my mother's place. She had lost her appetite completely since past ten days. She had eaten nothing. She had taken hardly any liquids. Just a day before we had put a food pipe into her and were expecting things to change for the better. I was in the living room with my cousins. My aunts and Jeeja, (house maid but also companion of several decades) were with her. Suddenly I heard my aunt shouting that my mother was going. We rushed inside but within minutes she passed away in our presence. I went numb. Lots of memories flashed in my mind.

My childhood memories bring back one thing again and again. Whenever I was sick or otherwise on holiday from school I would crave a lot for her to be next to me and insist that she remain at home and give me company. I really don't know what excuse she gave at her work place but most of the time she complied.

She liked to give an appearance of being a very strict mother but I saw through this soon and realised that if I sulked a little or appeared sad her tough exterior would crumble and I could have my way.

The closest time I spent with her was at the age of 11 when I tagged along with her to the US where she had a teaching assignment for a year. This was before the large scale immigration of Indians to the US began. It was just the two of us in a mysterious land, setting up a house, travelling, spending all spare time in each other's company.

I do not remember a single instance in my entire life where she overruled or even tried to overrule any of my major decisions, no matter how hard or wrong they seemed to her. Whether it was my decision to move out of the parental house at the age of 21 or to leave the ancestral solicitors' firm which was then run by her brother (and in which I was always welcome) or to be in a live-in relationship at a time when it was not an accepted norm. She may have disagreed with me but would always support me.

Her intellectual and activist credentials do not need restating by me. What I do vividly remember is that though both my parents belonged to a staunchly leftist background (my father more so) they never ever imposed their ideology on me.

What many people do not know is how close she was to her large family of brothers and sisters and their children. I have rarely seen



Neera Desai with her son Mihir in Rome, 1969

such a large close knit family. And this despite the fact that we never lived in a joint family. I remember about a year back when her cancer was detected; then onwards we used to have regular family meetings to discuss as to what we should tell her. How much should we tell her? She, of course, knew that she had malignancy and deep down also knew that her time had come, but despite the pain and realisation of the inevitable she hardly ever grumbled and still wanted to continue doing her work. She always felt that her mother, a housewife all her life, was the first feminist of the family.

During the last fifteen years however, she was very lonely and missed my father a lot, with whom she shared not just a close emotional but also an intellectual relationship. She tried to off set this by her involvement in various activities including her writing and interaction with various academics and activists. But still I don't believe she ever overcame the loss of my father or for that matter her brother Dakshesh.

At the ripe age of about 80 she learnt to operate the computer including the internet. Of course her time on computer was divided between doing her writing and playing computer card games which

she loved. Apart from reading activist and academic works, she loved reading fiction, both of serious and lighter variety. In my childhood, time and again I used to travel with her to a library at Breach Candy from where she used to pick up dozens of Mills and Boons novels. She gave up reading those later on and switched over to Agatha Christie;



Neera Desai with her husband Akshay Desai & son Mihir in Agra, 1965

each of her books she must have read at least five times.

My lack of belief in eternal souls, spirits and resting places stops me from writing the obvious about her death. The only thing I would like to say is, Ma, (as I used to call her) the love and affection you spread and your memories will never leave me or the others who came in contact with you.

— Mihir Desai

Mr. Mihir Desai is a Mumbai-based advocate practising in the Bombay High Court and Supreme Court. He appears regularly on behalf of labour and is co-founder of the Indian People's Tribunal on Environment and Human Rights. He is also co-founder of India Centre for Human Rights and Law and former editor of *Combat Law* (a law and human rights magazine). He is also currently a trustee of SPARROW.

## Memories Linger On



Neera Desai & Geraldine Forbes at her residence, 1987

HOW DOES one write about the life of an intellectual pioneer, an institution builder, and a dear friend? And where does one begin? My first introduction to Neera was through *Woman in Modern India*, a book I read as a graduate student; I met her in person in Delhi in 1975. Over the years, we met in Mumbai, Pune, New York, and Syracuse, and

travelled together to Baroda, Seneca Falls, and Oswego. She was a friend whose laughter, optimism, and passion for life inspired and energised me over many years.

In 2004, Usha Thakkar and I were asked to write an article for *Gender and History* on Neera for a series on “foremothers”: women who had written women’s history before the 1970s. Usha was an ideal collaborator. She had worked closely with Neera when they were both at SNTU Women’s University, collaborated with her on book projects, and shared Neera’s love of Gujarati history and literature. Rereading Neera’s writings and interviewing her, I began to appreciate her in new ways. In this remembrance of her, I want to pay homage to her professional life—the main topic of our article—and conclude with some vivid memories I have of her.

Talking to us about formative influences in her life, Neera returned repeatedly to her mother and father’s liberal attitudes and belief in her abilities, her education at the Fellowship School, and the atmosphere of Bombay. Gandhi, nationalism, humanism, diversity, and a concern for women’s rights all played a role in her development. In 1942, at age 17, Neera dropped out of Elphinstone College, joined the Quit India protests, was arrested, and briefly jailed. Living at the centre of women’s political activism, she became aware of the great contribution made by women leaders.

It was after she resumed her studies that she met Akshaya Ramanlal Desai, a sociologist with a keen interest in Marxism and the politics of the oppressed. Their courtship began at a political meeting and although Neera did not elaborate on what happened next, she smiled when she told us “we selected each other.” Their families agreed and in 1947, they wed.

Neera joined SNTU Women’s University in 1954, and three years later gave birth to her son Mihir. When I asked about the

difficulties of juggling her various responsibilities as wife, mother, housekeeper, daughter-in-law, university lecturer, and student (she completed her PhD in 1965), she admitted it was difficult but refused to elaborate. From our conversations it became apparent that she was deeply loyal to her family and was not about to complain about them for the historical record. Neera was also a very private person and she did not waste time complaining or gossiping. In her view, there was work to be done and jealousy, pettiness, and regrets would not help her achieve her goals.

We talked to Neera at length about her first book, *Woman in Modern India*, her MA thesis published in 1957. At that time, most of the books that included women celebrated their roles in the freedom struggle and their advancement in independent India. Defying convention, Neera proved Indian women had not been freed from gender oppression and that the mechanisms to reproduce and maintain inequality were alive and well. Asked about the genesis of her feminism, Neera recounted a story from her childhood when she watched a neighbour slap his wife over a minor incident. It was a stunning moment and Neera remembered it as formative. Gandhi and the women surrounding him also influenced her, and when she looked for a thesis topic, the status of women seemed an excellent choice. Had circumstances been different, she might have spent her life teaching, searching the archives, and writing history—women’s history.

The times, however, conspired against this scenario. SNTU had been recognised as a university by the University Grants Commission when Neera joined and was in the process of creating new departments and forging a new identity. Teaching Sociology to women students—many of whom were already married and from traditional households—Neera noticed her discipline’s silence about their issues. She began to read and teach about women’s issues, attend conferences, and debate topics associated with women’s rights. In 1968-69, she was named a Fulbright Scholar and spent nine months in the USA. Back in India, she returned to teaching and writing and in 1972 was appointed to the Social Task Force of the Committee on the Status of Women in India. Two years later, in 1974, Neera established the Research Unit for Women’s Studies—India’s first Women’s Studies program. This and the other programmes developed by the founders of Women’s Studies in

WHEN SHE REFLECTED ON Women’s position, she admitted the forces against gender equality were formidable. But as a feminist, she argued that despite grim news, there was always another story that would help us understand we cannot give up.

India were significantly different from Women's Studies programmes in the USA and Europe. Committed to change beyond the university, this new field wanted to influence political decisions and change the lives of women. For Neera, this began a life dedicated to building institutions: the Research Unit at SNDT Women's University, the Indian Association of Women's Studies, and programmes for rural development in Udwada, Gujarat.

In the years that followed, Neera's time was consumed with developing the Research Unit's collection, writing grant proposals, and overseeing projects. However, she still found time for research and writing. In addition to writing gender-sensitive curricula, Neera wrote essays on the family, feminist pedagogy and Women's Studies, and articles and a book on Gujarati history. Moving between four languages in her daily life, Neera wrote in two: English and Gujarati and was always aware of how little of feminist writing was available to non-English speakers. She pushed to have key works, e.g., *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*, translated into regional languages. Later, she took this project a giant step further and collaborated with Usha Thakkar on *Stri Abhyas Shreni*, a series of basic Women's Studies texts in Gujarati. Her last major work, on key figures in the development of the women's movement in Western India, was begun in the 1980s but was consistently pushed aside by other commitments. Neera returned to it in her retirement and *Feminism as Experience: Thoughts and Narratives* was published by SPARROW in 2007.

There is much more I could say about Neera's career, but I will leave that to others. At the end of this essay, I want to write about being with Neera. In 1983, when I was researching the representation of women in family photograph collections, Dr. A R Desai and Neera invited me to stay in their family home in Baroda. Baroda was hot, but the Desai home, equipped with talk-inviting verandahs and swings was extremely pleasant. We spent our days going through the Desai family photographs and visiting families with extensive collections, and in the evenings held what Neera called "seminars." Both Dr. A R Desai and Neera loved this project and my Baroda notebook is full of their insights. That was the only time I was able to spend hours in "seminars" with the Desais, but their openness to new ideas, encouragement, and warm hospitality was repeated time and again to me and to countless others.

A couple of years later, Neera and Maithreyi Krishna Raj came to the USA to participate in a conference at Sarah Lawrence. Next, they came to Syracuse and we arranged a trip to Seneca Falls. Following the tour, the 'distinguished visitors from abroad' were invited to visit to the historical society for tea with some of the people instrumental in the movement to have a Women's Rights National Historical Park. Neera and Maithreyi were looking forward to hearing the details of this struggle, but instead they were confronted with aggressive questions about "bride burning." As we drove home, Neera and Maithreyi talked about the difficulties of talking about gender oppression in the face of well-established assumptions. In India, they often confronted assumptions about the



Neera Desai addressing the American students during the Summer Workshop in Pune, June 2001

power women derived from a religion that included goddesses, while in the USA, they found it hard to convince people that many people loved their daughters and wives, and believed in equality. Although Neera found these encounters difficult, they underscored the importance of transforming the disciplines to represent the diversity of women and their lives. The Ivory Tower was not her dream, she wanted to make feminist concepts accessible and in the process, make a better world.

In 2001, when C S Lakshmi and SPARROW were hosting SUNY Oswego students for a three-week course on "Indian Women in History and Culture," Neera came to Pune to talk about her memories of the freedom struggle. At the conclusion of her talk, she asked the students to meet her in the evening for an informal discussion. Until then, we had packed every minute with a talk or field trip, hardly allowing the students a chance to sleep. In response to her coaxing, students talked honestly and openly about missing their families, unresolved problems, and their reactions to India. Neera said very little, but her presence filled the room. The students admired and adored her—one told me she had decided she would name her first daughter 'Neera.' What the students experienced that night was vintage Neera—a soft-spoken woman who seemed too gentle and unassuming to be a leader—taking charge of a programme and changing its direction.

Neera was a good friend and an inspiration to many people. I loved her optimism, an optimism that persisted through the dark days of riots, pogroms, and even 11/26. When she reflected on women's position, she admitted the forces against gender equality were formidable. But as a feminist, she argued that despite grim news, there was always another story that would help us understand we cannot give up. We miss her, but she lives on in our hearts and minds.

— Geraldine Forbes

Distinguished Teaching Professor and Chair, Department of History, SUNY at Oswego. She is also one of the members of the Advisory Committee of SPARROW.



Neera Desai at the regional conference at USA as a part of celebration of their 200 years ERA Equal Rights Amendment , 1972

Neera Desai at the Holyoke Conference, USA ,1987

Neera Desai halts at Greece while going to USA to teach Asian Studies, 1969



Neera Desai receiving Best Teacher Award from SNTD, 1976

Neera Desai, Maithreyi Krishna Raj & others at the First Summer Institute of RCWS opening ceremony , 1983-84





Neera Desai at SNDT, RCWS, 1984



Neera Desai & Maithreyi Krishna Raj on the release of their book.



Neera Desai at Asmita Training Programme, 1997



Neera Desai with her husband Prof. A R Desai.



Neera Desai with others in one of the protest marches against beauty contests, 1987



Felicitation of Neera Desai, SNDT, November 2008

**C S Lakshmi:** What about the term 'feminism' itself? I'm asking because when you published your book 'Women in Modern India' you asked one of the women you admired most—Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay—to write the introduction. And in one part of the introduction, she says that this book is wonderful and she has done very good work but she says that the stand she is taking is a feminist stand. So I want to know how the term 'feminist' was understood at this time.

**Neera Desai:** Lakshmi, it's good, because I was from the beginning expecting that you should ask me this question since this has been, I think, bothering many people as to how this term 'feminism' was used and how it came in my book and if you ask me, I would definitely say that when in 1957 that book was out and Kamaladevi wrote a very beautiful introduction but with this proviso about feminism, and she labelled me as a feminist which I think—I consider it—as a very great tribute rather than as a criticism. You see, Kamaladevi was allergic to the term 'feminism', not after the fifties, but even in the forties she was allergic to the term, and she has categorically stated it elsewhere that: "We are not like feminists of the West, we are not anti-men, we are struggling for women's rights, but we want men and women to go together." ... I think that of all those, some of those leftists who have, who were allergic to the word 'feminism' was more because for them, economic independence, or economic equality was prior to gender equality. And so, for Marxism also, the destruction of capitalism was more important than destruction of gender inequality. And so for them, to emphasise these gender questions while this whole struggle for economic independence, national independence is going on, was, I think, diverting the whole history and that is how they were very much opposed to feminist movement because, feminist movement was highlighting gender inequality. And I would say that gender inequality at that time was not as sharply challenged as it was in the seventies. Actually, it was in the liberal framework [within] which they were challenging and they just wanted equal rights with men. They never challenged 'Why this?' or they never asked this question. The movement had never asked this question at that time that what is the root of inequality. They have been always talking like liberals because men and women are equal, because men have more rights, more opportunities to develop, we should have also the same and this is how the liberal framework and liberal feminism looked at the issue. Along with Kamaladevi—because one of the first statements came in the book called *Our Cause* edited by Shyamkumari Nehru in the late '40s, and there she has written one special article on Women's Movement in India at that particular [time]... and she is... she has categorically mentioned... Amrit Kaur also categorically mentions—many of them—Sarojini Naidu categorically mentions that we have nothing to do with feminism. In spite of the fact

that they were, while raising the women's issue, they were being challenged by the men.

**C S Lakshmi:** Neeraben, you have been writing a lot and speaking a lot about Women's Studies being a subject that is not purely theoretical. The understanding of Women's Studies has to come linked with action. I want to know whether this was a position taken by the Research Centre which was really your position because you started it or was it the position taken by all Women's Studies Centres?

**Neera Desai:** Lakshmi, the link with the action has been one of the important, I would say, features of Indian Women's Studies. The Western concept has always been from the beginning, more theoretical because they started with teaching Women's Studies—we have come to teaching Women's Studies much later. Even in the 1981 conference, the first conference on Women's Studies, which we held in the city of Bombay, at SNDT University, as far as the aims of Women's Studies were concerned, we have said that it is research, action and teaching. At least, Research Centre on Women's Studies and myself and some others, our colleagues particularly of my generation, we have always been feeling that Women's Studies has to be linked with action because without knowing the pulse of the situation, you cannot merely theoretically understand the subject or understand the problem. It is not merely the study—we are not merely interested in the theoretical understanding of the position, but we want to change the structure, change the system, change the laws and whatever it may be, coming in the way of women's status, and that is where I think, action comes. And it is at this point, I would say, that it comes in violent conflict with the mainstream subjects. Because they are, as I told you earlier also, that they state that social sciences have to be value-free. Now value-free means—because when you say that you have to change, then you have to have some values—change for what? Change of what? Change where? Now, all these things have to come if you accept that there is some concept, there is something in your mind, to which you want to goad all the action. And it is [in] this I think, that the action component is very important for Women's Studies.

**C S Lakshmi:** Neeraben, one linked question that I would like to ask is that when you speak very often and when you write, you use Women's Studies perspective and feminist perspective alternatively. For you, there's no difference. But I think that this is not the case with Women's Studies

Excerpts  
from  
the  
documentary  
film on  
Dr. Neera Desai  
produced under  
the Global  
Feminisms  
project by  
SPARROW in  
collaboration  
with The  
University Of  
Michigan.

Centres all over India. For you Women's Studies has always stood for feminist perspective. This feminist perspective must have evolved over the years with exchanges from various scholars from all over the world. Can you tell us about this, the journey of acquiring perspective?

Neera Desai: Surely, because, as you rightly said, I use the term alternatively, depending upon the context, and the perspective, whatever we might call it—Women's Studies' of middle-class women coming into the arena of work was coming, and therefore the perspective or feminist perspective—which I have derived has been over a period of time. And one of the books which had influenced me at that time was by Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein on women's two roles in society. Because for the first time this question—problem of conflict and adjustment and everything was being highlighted. And from that perspective, slowly I was developing this whole idea, and whole notion, that women's status has been affected by the patriarchal society structure and how, and to this concept, to come, I have travelled a long journey. And not that these terms were unfamiliar to me, because in anthropology, we do study patriarchy, and patriarchal and matrilineal and all that but this adequate perspective, it came to me over a period of time and in this, many experiences which I had undergone, helped, and one of the important exposures which I had was during three years—that is '77, '78, and '79, to '80, when I attended various conferences abroad and came in contact with the feminists who were looking at the issue from the whole question of patriarchy and capitalism; both. And that is how I was exposed to liberal feminists, the radical feminists and the socialist feminists.

So this was the exposure which I got, and through these exposures and then, before that, there was one experience which I had in our country that in '75, which was in a way, the year of emergency and in that year there was a conference in October, at Pune, organised by Gail Omvedt and others of women of more oppressed categories—and of course, the others had also come, but for the first time to attend such a gathering where prostitutes would also be there, where students will be also there where teachers would be there, where political activists would be there, it was also a very great experience for me....

C S Lakshmi: Neeraben, you have spoken at length about the past and the contemporary reality of the existence of women and the kind of stands that the feminists have taken over the years. But I know that you have also spoken about an emerging new solidarity. As a feminist, how do you see this new solidarity

emerging, from what quarters, from what areas of our experience is this new solidarity going to arise?

Neera Desai: I think that the new solidarity—I see glimpses of solidarity coming up and consciousness being raised, the group actions being taken at various situations. I have seen solidarity being built up in fighting communalism particularly; I have some experience and some information on the Gujarat riots and I know that there are young women and even younger girls who have been taking part in the rescue operations, in relief operations and they are looking at the problem not from the



Neera Desai with Vishnu Mathur & C S Lakshmi during the making of the documentary on her.

communal divide [perspective], but communal harmony. My own feeling is, and my own gut understanding is that—because this I also saw during the earthquake; the way in which young groups... I myself had gone there; so I could witness young groups and both boys and girls taking part in the entire rehabilitation, re-building of the Kutch area—and so, I personally think that we cannot afford to lose hope. We have to have hope in the goodness of the human

beings, in the need that everybody will have to survive to get—however the problems which are coming up. Because human rights has been right now one area where all the groups are combining.

My own feminism—I would definitely like to say something and end up the entire discourse—is that I understand feminism in one way as a struggle against exploitation. But this is exploitation of the gender. And it is overthrowing patriarchy and building up a society which will be free of the oppression. But my feminism tells me, somehow or the other, because of my upbringing, because of my middle-class background, or whatever it may be that—and that is my personality also—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 cut my hair, 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—some people may have those exteriors with them. 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 and my belief in solidarity and my belief in the younger generation is very, very firm and very solid.



...**THE FIRST INCIDENT** which I would like to recall is of 1942. Now all you know that on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August the Quit India Resolution was passed. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of August at night all the leaders were arrested and the entire Freedom Movement started. I passed my matriculation in 1942 June. I joined Elphinstone college in June. In August some of us left the college. We missed one year. It was absolutely a very different experience where in an elite college like Elphinstone college students were thinking of nationalism and courting arrest and blaming the Principal and questioning his right to call the police into the college premises. We said that we can tolerate his authority but that we will not tolerate

Excerpts  
from  
Dr. Neera  
Desai's  
narration  
in the  
students'  
workshop  
on  
Communalism,  
Violence  
and  
Women held  
from 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>  
June 1994

his calling the police to control us. In such an atmosphere, in 1943, February, when Kasturba Gandhi expired, there was a meeting, a public meeting, at Chowpatty. And all of us were arrested. The police employed very arbitrary criteria for convicting. Those who were in dresses were considered young and were released. Fortunately or unfortunately I had worn a sari. So, I was considered adult and put behind bars along with some ten or fifteen other people. So out of forty they chose us for jailing. By a strange coincidence my father's uncle who had brought up my father had come to Bombay during that period to receive the title of Rao Bahadur from the Governor. So he had come to take something from the Government against which I was protesting. It was a situation of conflict for my parents and for me. So my parents came to the jail and asked if they could ask for pardon for they were ready to pardon. I said 'No, I don't want to ask for pardon from the Government. I have not done anything wrong for which I have to ask for pardon.' My parents must have felt very disappointed.... But they respected my stand and somehow or the other this period of trial got over and I didn't ask for pardon and after some time we were all released. But this was something that gave strength not only to me but to my parents also....



.... **REGARDING RELIGION**, fortunately in our family, though my mother practised religion, she never asked the children to go to the temple or observe fast or any such thing. So that kind of liberal atmosphere was there. But my grandfather was a very staunch *Santhani*, but a very loving person. A *Santhani* is an orthodox Brahmin who believes in Ram Rajya and who is also part of the Ram Rajya Movement. Those in the Ram Rajya Movement were opposing the Hindu Code Bill. All those meetings used to go on in Bombay. He used to come for them. He stayed at our place.... My mother was not there at that time. So, I had to cook for him. He would not eat things cooked in water. So, I would cook everything with milk.... I would do all this. Then he would say, 'Now you come with me to the Ram Rajya meeting because there we want all of you to say something against the Hindu Code Bill.' Then I would tell him, 'No, I

can't come with you.' We would have a long discussion and I would explain to him that I was for the Hindu Code Bill. But then he would respect my view.... I have not been a crusader or been an aggressive person. Not that I deliberately planned it that way. But because being this way was part of my temperament....

## Santha Rama Rau: Interpreting India



**BORN IN MADRAS** on January 24, 1923, the journalist, travel writer, memoirist, novelist, and playwright Santha (Vasanthi) Rama Rau, died in Amenia, New York on April 21, 2009, at the age of 86. As the daughter of prominent civil servant Sir Benegal Rama Rau, she was educated in England and the United States. As an adult she also lived and travelled in Central, East, and Southeast Asia, Russia, Africa, and Europe, and eventually settled

in the United States. However, she always considered India her home.

From the 1940s through the 1960s Santha Rama Rau was one of the best-known Indian writers in the U.S., and one of only a handful who were actually based in the United States. In her 2007 monograph, *The Postcolonial Careers of Santha Rama Rau*, Antoinette Burton describes her as an early postcolonial writer and a "Cold War cosmopolitan." As a Western-educated Indian, Santha Rama Rau took on the role of interpreting India to the United States. She particularly considered it her mission to correct the exoticized, exaggerated, and stereotyped representations of Indian life and culture in America, such as those in Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927).

Santha Rama Rau wrote her first book, *Home to India* (1945), while she was still an undergraduate at Wellesley. It is a lively yet poised account of her return to India in 1939 at the age of 16 after a ten-year absence, and the two-year period of discovery and adjustment before her departure to the United States in 1941 to begin her studies at Wellesley. She arrives fresh from boarding school in England with a British colonial perspective on India, but soon becomes closely identified with the Indian struggle for independence through her mother Dhanvanthi Rama Rau's active involvement in the movement and particularly with the All India Women's Conference.

Santha's second book, *East of Home* (1950), begins immediately after Independence in 1947, when she accompanies her father to American-occupied Japan as his hostess after he was named Indian Ambassador to Japan. (Later, in 1948-49, he served as Ambassador to the United States.) In Japan, she finds that people are honoured to meet someone "from the country of Mahatma Gandhi" (6). She subsequently documents a long and life-changing trip throughout East and Southeast Asia, to China, Indo-China (Vietnam and Cambodia), Siam (Thailand), and Indonesia, with a small group of friends, one of whom, linguist and Kabuki theatre expert Faubion Bowers, was to become her first husband. Over the course of these travels, she comes to see herself as an Asian among fellow-Asians, rather than as a "Westerner."

Santha Rama Rau's two novels, *Remember the House* (1956) and *The Adventuress* (1970), are based on her experiences in India

and East Asia respectively. In the autobiographical *Gifts of Passage* (1961), she strings together a series of vignettes to chronicle her travels in East and South Asia, but also in the U.S.S.R. (where she visits an apartment once occupied by the writer Dostoevsky), Kenya (at the trial of Jomo Kenyatta), France (where she gets married), Afghanistan (where, stranded in a Kabul hotel *en route* to India from Uzbekistan, she acts as interpreter for Russians, Afghans, Syrians and an Indian), and finally, back in India again. In *This is India* (1954) and the lavishly illustrated Time-Life book, *The Cooking of India* (1969), Rama Rau continues her role of cultural interpreter by presenting her home country to American readers, at a time when Indian cooking and culture were nowhere near as well known as they are today.

Although as a working journalist she contributed to a range of periodicals from *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* to *McCalls* and *Reader's Digest*, Santha Rama Rau became best-known for her successful stage adaptation of E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, which had a long run in London's West End in 1960 and on Broadway, New York, in 1962. Although he had opposed earlier attempts to dramatize his novel, Forster himself approved Rama Rau's version, and British director David Lean drew upon it for his 1984 screen adaptation. Today, her best-known work is probably the widely-anthologized *By Any Other Name*, an autobiographical short story from *Gifts of Passage* which depicts the Eurocentrism and cultural arrogance of British colonial education in India. One of her last published works, *A Princess Remembers: The Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur* (1976) was co-written with Rajmata Gayatri Devi, who passed away on July 29<sup>th</sup>, at the age of 90, just three months after Santha Rama Rau.

As one of the early forerunners of today's many Indian writers in English, writing with a cosmopolitan perspective before the emergence of contemporary postcolonial studies, Santha Rama Rau blazed her own trail, and her work deserves to be re-read.

— Josna Rege

Associate Professor in the Department of Languages and Literature  
Worcester State College, USA. She is also one of the members of the  
Advisory Committee of SPARROW.

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## The Story of Kamala Das Suraiya (Madhavikutty)



THE INDIAN ENGLISH POET, Malayalam short-story writer, memoirist, and political commentator Kamala Suraiya—Kamala Das before her 1999 conversion to Islam and Madhavikutty to her Malayalam readers—died in Pune on May 31, 2009, at the age of 75. Kamala was born into a Nair family in Kerala on March 31, 1934, was educated at home, and, in her childhood lived in Kolkata where her father and

mother lived, with regular, extended visits to her beloved ancestral home in Malabar. Her mother, Nalappat Balamani Amma, was a well-known Malayalam poet, her father, V M Nair, former managing editor of widely-circulated Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi* and her great-uncle, Nalapat Narayana, were also writers.

Of Kamala's seven poetry collections, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) are the most highly acclaimed. In 1985 her *Collected Poems* won the Sahitya Akademi Award. She was also a recipient of the Asian Poetry Prize and the Kent Award for English Writing from Asian Countries. Her short stories, written under the pen-name of Madhavikutty (her maternal grandmother's name), have influenced the short-story genre in Malayalam, and won the Ezhuthachan Award, the Vayalar Award, and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award. She published numerous collections, the first being *Mathilukal* (Walls) in 1955. Her first collection of stories published in English was *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992). Some of her abiding themes across the different literary genres are desire, death, motherhood, hypocrisy, sexuality, nostalgia for a vanishing past, social injustice, and relationships between the sexes, in and out of marriage.

Kamala Das' memoirs and commentaries earned her the reputation of being outspoken. Some were considered shocking by social conservatives, particularly *Ente Katha* (1973; *My Story*, 1976), in which she spoke openly of her sexual desires and her relationship with her much-older husband Madhava Das, to whom she had been married at the age of 15. Her husband died in the 1990s, and in 1999 she caused another stir by announcing her conversion to Islam and her new name of Kamala Suraiya.

Kamala always questioned socially-assigned labels and identities, and sought to express herself in her own terms. As Shahnaz Habib notes in her obituary in the *Guardian*, "Straddling many names was one way in which Das straddled multiple identities."

Even as she put on or cast off identity after identity, even as she fully inhabited her woman's body, she longed to lose all external markings of identity. In *Doubt* she wrote:

When a man is dead, or a woman,  
We call the corpse not he  
Or she but it. Does it  
Not mean, that we believe  
That only the souls have sex and that

Sex is invisible?  
Then the question is, who  
Is the man, who the girl,  
All sex-accessories being no  
Indication. (109)

Kamala Das had no patience with the language debates of post-Independence literary circles. In response to a questionnaire from poet, translator, and publisher P. Lal, she said, "I do not like to classify writers as Indians, English or Anglo-Indians. The language one employs is not important. What is important is the thought contained by the words... (102-103). In *An Introduction* she wrote:

I speak three languages, write in  
Two, dream in one.  
Don't write in English, they said, English is  
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave  
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in  
Any language I like? The language I speak,  
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses  
All mine, mine alone. (104)

Kamala's impatience with hypocrisy and compassion for ordinary people translated into social action. She ran for the Lok Sabha in 1984 and launched the Lok Seva Party in 2000. One of her last acts, just weeks before her death, was to donate her ancestral home to the Kerala Sahitya Akademi (Nambisan). Now she is gone, but her spirit and her unique voice remain, in her writing. Once again, the words of Kamala, from *An Introduction*: "Who are you, I ask each and everyone./The answer is, it is I."

— Josna Rege

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### Gangubai Hangal: A Small Woman with a Big Voice



GANGUBAI HANGAL WAS A small made woman but her voice in no way represented her personality. Her voice and performing style was anything but what is considered feminine. Her death on July 21 2009, at the age of 97, brings to end a life lived against great odds and a life that retained music despite all hurdles of caste, status and gender. In her

autobiography, *Nanna Badukina Haadu* (The Song of My Life) she gives a moving account of her life and the early years of humiliation and degradation. She often spoke about how male musicians could become "Ustads" and "Pandits" while women musicians always remained "Bais". Gangubai Hangal's voice rose from Hubli to write a new history of music for a nation. That voice is now no more but its resonance will always be in the air.

— C S Lakshmi

### Sister Colette: Lighting Lamps of Love



SISTER COLETTE, DUBBED Borivali 'Florence Nightingale', passed away at age 94 on August 13. She had dedicated 73 years of her life in serving needy people. Hundreds of poor families, AIDS patients and destitute children found new meaning in life due to her untiring efforts.

Sister Colette was co-founder of Karuna Hospital, which started functioning in the year 2002 after overcoming many obstacles.

Sister Michelle Pereira, executive director of Karuna Hospital, is reported to have called Sister Colette a disciplinarian with a golden heart. She

described her as a very brave person who never hesitated to take up challenges, and said that her dedication has turned a small clinic into a super-specialty hospital.

Sister Colette also set up a community centre in order to help the poor and destitute, to provide them with medical and financial help. The poor get free treatment here according to her wish.

Ashadeep is a home for the orphaned children of AIDS victims and for children suffering from the disease. It was started by Sister Colette, and there are 14 children living there. They all miss her badly.

Sister Colette will be long remembered by many for her life and deeds of compassion.

— Malsawmi Jacob

### D K Pattammal: The End of *Paattu*



PAATTU MEANS MUSIC IN TAMIL and very often Pattammal was referred to as *Paattammal*, the music woman. Most of us who grew up in the fifties grew up with the music of the three female trinities D K Pattammal, M S Subbulakshmi and M L Vasanthakumari. If MS was famous for her resonant and melodious voice, D K Pattammal was admired for her loud and

clear voice and crisp rendering. When *ragam*, *thanam*, *pallavi* singing which calls for complicated improvisation was considered a sole male preserve in concerts, D K Pattammal entered this male bastion and broke all myths about what women can and cannot sing.

D K Pattammal's first performance was at the age of 13. Born into an orthodox Brahmin family it was not easy for Pattammal to be a performing artiste. But her passion for music gave her the courage to face criticism and be a musician. Her rendering of Tamil songs especially the Bharati songs, has inspired and moved musicians and lay audience alike. During one of her concerts she sang many Bharati songs and saw a woman seated in front weeping throughout. She later found out that it was none other than Chellammal, Bharati's wife. It was not that she performed only for the connoisseurs of music, she could sing for anyone. Once her granddaughter Nithyasri, who is a well-known singer herself, came to visit her and found her singing soulfully for the woman who had come to sell brooms because she had requested her to sing.

Patammal was open to all genres of music. She enjoyed Tamil film music and particularly liked the voice of P. Susheela. She could listen to Michael Jackson and appreciate his music. "There is something in his music," she would say. Music erased all barriers and borders for her. Music remained her passion all through her life. Throughout the day she would keep humming one tune or the other like a child sucking on a sweet.

Pattammal's death on July 16 2009, at the age of 90, signifies not just the end of a musical tradition but also the end of the kind of people whose spirit, knowledge and humility have kept this tradition alive.

— C S Lakshmi

**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.**

## Leela Naidu: A Beautiful Life



**LEELA NAIDU, BEAUTIFUL** movie actress of yesteryears, died on July 28, 2009 at age 69.

*Time* magazine declared her one of the most beautiful women in the world. In 1954, while still in her teens, she won the Femina Miss India title.

Leela Naidu acted in *Trikaal*, directed by Shyam Benegal, in 1985. According to report, he recalls that she was

"delicate looking and beautiful" and "particularly good with children." He describes her as a caring person who took charge of younger actors during the shoots. When a child cried because her parents were not around, Leela calmed her. After that the child stuck to her as if she was her mother. He calls her a "wonderful person". Her last role in a film was in *Electric Moon* in 1992.

She did not act in many films because it was hard to get roles that did justice to her personality and talent. She had qualities that did not suit the Indian film industry. But she made her mark with the few films where she acted. She played the role of a rebellious young bride in *The Householder*. She became an icon for women's liberation in India after her non-orthodox role in *Yeh Raaste Hain Pyar Ke* (1963), based on the real life K M Nanavati vs State of Maharashtra court case, where a husband killed his wife's lover. The controversial role was refused by many actresses of the conservative 1960s, but Leela played it with élan.

She died after a prolonged illness in Mumbai.

— Malsawmi Jacob

## Rajmata Gayatri Devi: The Last Queen of Jaipur



**MAHARANI GAYATRI DEVI, THE LAST** queen of Jaipur in Rajasthan, passed away on July 29, 2009. She was known as the Rajmata of Jaipur.

She was named among ten most beautiful women by *Vogue*, and was a favourite of society columnists and world photographers. She also holds the Guinness record for winning by the largest margin of votes for her electoral victory in 1962 when she joined politics. She won the seat again in 1967 and 1971 for

the Swatantra Party, running against the ruling Congress Party.

When the Privy Purse and royal privileges were abolished in 1971, Gayatri Devi was accused of breaking tax laws and imprisoned for five months in Tihar Jail. She bore the sentence with great dignity. After this experience, she gave up political career and wrote her autobiography titled *A Princess Remembers*.

Gayatri Devi was born as Princess of Koch Bihar, the daughter of Maharaja Jitendra Narayan. She did her schooling in India, but

finished her education in Switzerland and England. At the age of 19 she fell in love with Man Singh, the heir to the throne of Jaipur. Her parents initially opposed the marriage as Man Singh already had two other wives, but gave in to her determination.

The Maharani was an able equestrian and also learned elephant riding. One of her concerns was the welfare of Indian elephants, and was the patron of elephant family charity. She also revived and promoted the dying art of blue pottery. Besides all these, she started schools for girls' education in Jaipur, among which the Maharani Gayatri Devi Girls' Public School is prominent.

— Malsawmi Jacob

## Nalini Pandit: Death of a Great Scholar



**NALINI PANDIT QUIETLY PASSED**

away on July 26, 2009 at the age of 82. Nalini Pandit was a left-leaning intellectual noted for her examination of Gandhi's and Ambedkar's life, as well as her critique of globalisation. She wrote on Maharashtra's nationalism when she was just 28 years old. She wrote several other books but her major works have been on caste and class.

Nalini Pandit played a very important role in the cultural scene of Maharashtra. In 1998 when Pradeep Dalvi's play *Mee Nathuram Godse Boltoi* which glorified Gandhi's assassin, was to be staged in Mumbai and veteran Gandhians like Usha Mehta took a stand against it, Nalini Pandit supported them and gave statements that were highly critical of the play. She particularly objected to the use of the word *vadh* to describe the assassination of Gandhi. "No matter how good the production is, should we support a rabid communal propaganda?" she asked.

Nalini Pandit was professor of Economics at Podar College and later she retired as the Head of the Department of Economics at Dahanukar College. She remained active throughout her life. She was one of the scholars consulted to identify lecturers for the lecture series on Culture and the Making of an Identity in Contemporary India organised by The Asiatic Society. At a time when the city of Mumbai was caught in the swine flu virus panic and the papers were full of swine flu deaths, her death practically went unnoticed but those who have associated with her and have admired her scholarship know what a great loss her death is to the intellectual world of Maharashtra.

— C S Lakshmi

# The Dr. Neera Desai Memorial Library



Dr. Neera Desai  
(September 23, 1925-June 25, 2009)

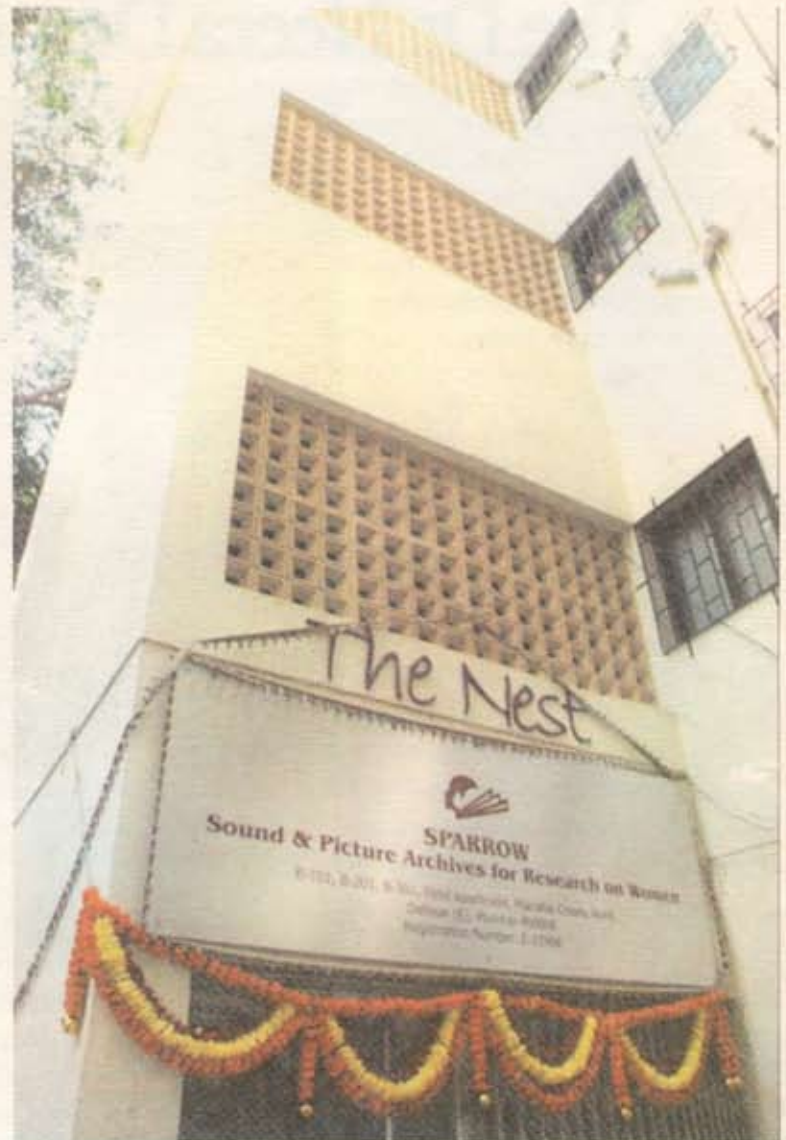


**DR. NEERA DESAI WAS INVOLVED WITH SPARROW LONG BEFORE** it was registered as a Trust in 1988. The founder of India's first Women's Studies research institution, SNDT's Research Centre for Women's Studies, Dr. Neera Desai was a passionate advocate for women's history and the preservation of the records necessary to write that history. After many years of discussion and efforts to find a university willing to develop a Women's Archives, Dr. C S Lakshmi, with the help and support of Dr. Neera Desai and Dr. Maithreyi Krishna Raj, conceived of SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women).

The plan to develop a women's archives that would house visual, audio, and print materials about Indian women was not consistent with the 1980s emphasis on development as a means of addressing women's issues. Dr. Neera Desai, however, was fully aware that knowledge about women's lives and experiences was important not only to enrich our understanding of women's history but also to guide public policy decisions.

She became one of the founder trustees of SPARROW in 1988 and became an enthusiastic champion of SPARROW projects. This meant participating in fund-raising events, such as the 1992 Painting Exhibition, sharing stories from her youth at the 1994 workshop on Communal Harmony, and monitoring projects. Until the last days of her life, Neera Desai helped guide and inspire SPARROW.

To commemorate her work with SPARROW and honour her contribution, the Trustees of SPARROW, Dr. C S Lakshmi, Dr. Maithreyi Krishna Raj, Dr. Divya Pandey, Dr. Roshan G Shahani, Dr. Usha Thakkar, and Dr. Shoba



## Current SPARROW Library Holdings

Photographs	14160
Media Ads	6771
Books in 11 languages	4888
Journal Articles	4448
Newspaper Articles	21025
Private Papers	274
Brochures	1983
Print Visuals	3578
Posters	1714
Calendars	120
Maya Kamath's cartoons	8000
Newspaper Cartoons	3042
Oral History Narratives	550

Venkatesh Ghosh, passed a resolution on July 24, 2009 to name the library at SPARROW *The Dr. Neera Desai Memorial Library*.

Those who would like to make a memorial contribution to *The Dr. Neera Desai Memorial Library*, could send a cheque marked to SPARROW as a donation giving name of the donor and address, stating purpose of the donation, amount and bank details.

*Positive change is possible only when we understand women's lives, history and struggles for self-respect and human dignity*