



**SPARROW
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SPARROW

newsletter

SNL Number 20

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

[Editor's Note]

Unusual rains have upset many things in Mumbai this year. But rain or shine, SPARROW keeps its schedule of SNL for it is a window to our activities.

This SNL has a guest writer Sonal Shah, who is an urban planner by profession and has taken numerous courses in gender, development, labour and globalisation and has good writing and editing skills. She had approached us some time last year saying she would like to volunteer to do some work for SPARROW. She is currently working in Ahmedabad but was interested in doing a short internship with SPARROW. We thought it would be interesting if she could edit an entire SNL for us as a guest editor. But as there was not much time we decided she could do a series of articles for SNL. The current issue carries a review by her of the documentary film *Mia Mahadev*. SPARROW publications and visual material went to Stockholm in October. There is a note on that trip along with a report on the interesting AIDWA conference which took place in April. Vacha has been doing some wonderful work with young girls living in bastis or slums and there is a review of the book the trust has brought out recently.

Sexual minorities have begun to fight for self respect and dignity and there has been a spurt of activities initiated by several groups which have been covered in this issue.

We also pay homage in this issue to three women scientists, a Tamil writer and a historian of the Dalit movement whose life and work will remain a legacy for the coming generations.

Mia Mahadev (2010)

Mia Mahadev is an 18 minute documentary on a 25 year old egalitarian friendship between two lower middle class men, one Hindu (Bharatbhai) and the other Muslim (Hassanbhai), in the walled city of Ahmedabad. Both are small time business men. Bharatbhai has an informal shop and Hassanbhai sells goldsmith's tools. The documentary also highlights Mia Mahadev Inquiry Centre, an informal resource centre established by them to provide information and help people locate addresses in the old city. This sensitive film comes as a breath of fresh air amidst oft heard, uncritical and unapologetic comments from educated Amdavadis—such as “2002 riots were important to put the Muslims in place”; “they scared the terrorist elements in the Muslim community”; “they deserved it for burning the train at Godhra” etc. While there have been films (albeit few) that have represented the violence of the communal riots in 2002, I have not come across any that have portrayed “positive” examples of communal harmony. The film fills this gap; it portrays an



Mia Mahadev (2010)

Directed by Aayush Patel, Mit Jani and Prateek Gupta

Produced by Nazariya

unpublicised, bottom-up, positive example of communal harmony involving ordinary people and ordinary lives.

This film has been directed by three volunteers of Nazariya, Ahmedabad: Aayush Patel, Mit Jani and Prateek Gupta. Nazariya is an initiative of Drishti, an organisation focussing on the arts, media and human rights issues. Drishti provides a platform for alternative representations of our reality in order to empower marginalised communities and critique mainstream media. Nazariya was started in 2005 to engage with the youth, provide a platform to express and voice their views on social and political issues through documentaries and short films, and in my opinion create a sense of responsibility towards our society. It has initiated 26 film clubs in numerous colleges in Ahmedabad, organised seven film festivals (Women's Film Festival and Peace Film Festival) and discussions. Aayush, Mit and Prateek have been associated with Nazariya since 2005 and have participated in almost every event or workshop. They were assisted by Drishti

during the making of the film. They underwent training in camera work, preparing a storyboard and editing as well as conceptualising the script and the story.

The narrative begins with the camera retreating and entering the streets of the walled city, emphasising its hustle-bustle and the proximity within which people from different religions live together. It then leads us to Pankor Naka to Bharatbhai's informal shop. Through individual narratives, it touches upon four major aspects— (1) background of the friendship between Bharatbhai and Hassanbhai; (2) background and aim of forming Mia Mahadev Inquiry Centre; (3) instances of their friendship, respect for each other's religion and an egalitarian outlook; and (4) the importance of their friendship and Mia Mahadev Information Centre (MMIC) through testimonials from members of other communities i.e. a Sikh shop owner, a Gujarati Jain businessman, young Muslim worker and young students from West Ahmedabad/Nazariya volunteers.

The film has a simple story line and the events narrated in the film are used to build Hassanbhai and Bharatbhai's characters. This has been done by narrating an event, stating the expected reaction, expressing either Bharatbhai or Hassanbhai's differing stance and their rationale behind it. For example, it is mentioned that the riots following the anti-reservation agitations in 1985 (event) in Ahmedabad served as a catalyst for their friendship. A group of Hindu men wanted to remove Hassanbhai's *laari* (vendor cart) from the *pol* (a colony or a cluster of houses where people of same caste, profession or religion live) as he was the only Muslim vendor (popular communalist reaction). Bharatbhai and other Hindu men informed him so that he could escape in time. On numerous occasions when Hindu miscreants came, Bharatbhai and other Hindu men stood in his place and said that the shop belonged to the *pol* and that it could not be burnt (different stance). This narration is followed by Bharatbhai saying that a Hindu should help a Muslim in distress and vice versa and that our humanity is more important than our religious identity (rationale).

Another example: it is difficult for a stranger to locate addresses in the narrow and numerous lanes of the walled city (event). It is common practice for people to charge money for providing information (popular reaction). However, even though Bharatbhai and Hassanbhai come from modest backgrounds, they do not take any money to either help people locate addresses in the walled city, or find lost children or lost wallets. They have also formed Mia Mahadev Free Water, which gives free water to passersby (differing stance). Their rationale is that “money earned in this life will be spent whereas a kind deed will reap fruits for generations” (rationale).

The film is deliberately “apolitical” and “political” at the same time; apolitical because it steers away from the larger religious political environment—debates/opinions/views about the communal riots, terrorism etc. Bharatbhai and Hassanbhai requested this as they did not want to face any repercussions for having expressed political views. Yet it is political at the same time because it highlights myriad ways in which Bharatbhai and Hassanbhai have subverted the communal discourse in their everyday lives—by naming their resource

centre Mia Mahadev; assisting/helping/watching out for each other and others irrespective of their religions; by Bharatbhai keeping the keys of the neighbouring Muslim shop owners and the dargah, which he opens every day; by visiting each other's houses during their festivals; by Bharatbhai and his family who are vegetarian eating at Hassanbhai's house from the same vessels even though they are non-vegetarian etc. The film builds the foundation of an abstract concept—communal harmony through everyday experiences—gestures and acts of Mia and Mahadev.

However, the narrative is weak in three areas. It focuses more on Bharatbhai than on Hassanbhai. The film gives instances of how Bharatbhai as a Hindu embraces and respects Islam. Similar instances are not presented for Hassanbhai. For example, it is not clear what role Hassanbhai plays in Mia Mahadev Inquiry Centre. His contributions were absent, or if as a Muslim man belonging to a minority community, he chooses to "stay behind the scenes", then that should be brought out. His conversations were shot in what seemed like his home, a private space rather than a public space or his shop. In this film, it is important that both characters appear as protagonists, both are equal receivers and contributors, or if one of them cannot due to socio-political circumstances, then that needs to be explained.

One also observes there were no women in the film—what did women around Pankor Naka or in the walled city think of Mia Mahadev? The communal riots in 2002 created extremely violent masculinities. What did women in the walled city/eastern Ahmedabad think of Bharatbhai and Hassanbhai and the masculinities they represented, especially Muslim women? As C S Lakshmi rightly pointed out that such friendships exist between women too and these need to be represented. Maybe there could be a sequel to this film which would bring out this aspect.

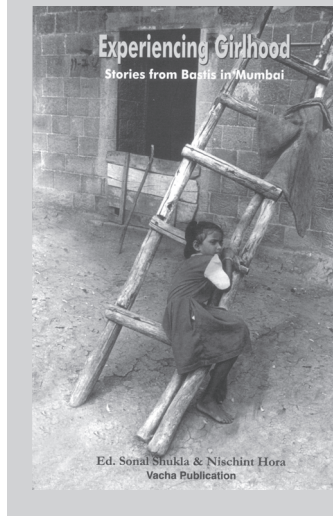
The film was screened on 23rd October 2010 at Natarani in Usmanpura, Ahmedabad. Both Bharatbhai and Hassanbhai were present for the screening as well as the discussion afterwards. The audience to a large extent included residents of west Ahmedabad (including friends and supporters of the young film makers). Most of the questions posed to Bharatbhai and Hassanbhai were related to how their relationship was affected by the 2002 riots; what did Hassanbhai think of the recent judgment on Ayodhya; why the Inquiry Centre was called Mia Mahadev; how have their families reacted or responded to their friendship etc. They became like specimens under scientific scrutiny. Why do we need justifications of their friendship? Was it so hard to believe for "us", the educated audience of west Ahmedabad, that two men, one Hindu and the other Muslim, could be friends? I think Bharatbhai and Hassanbhai, Mahadev and Mia probably represent numerous other people, both men and women, in the old city who share similar relationships. Are we skeptical because we live in segregated environments?

— Sonal Shah

Note

I would like to thank C S Lakshmi, Gopal K Annam and Jordache Ellapen for providing critical inputs in the review.

Experiencing Girlhood Stories from Bastis in Mumbai



Authors: Sonal Shukla & Nischint Hora (Ed.)
Publisher: Vacha Publication
Number of Pages: 109

This book narrates the stories of girls and their mothers that Vacha Team (Vacha is a resource centre for girls and women) contacted in the course of their work. The girls widely differ from one another in their natures, attitudes, experiences, and community backgrounds. What is common among them, however, is that they all struggle under hardship and poverty, and they all live in the *bastis* or slums in Mumbai.

The main objective of the publisher in sharing these stories is to 'visibilise' the situation under which girls in *bastis* live and study.

Vacha runs girls' centres in *bastis* to help them acquire various skills and to give them space to express themselves. But a multi pronged approach and commitment from all sections of society is needed to bring in a change for the better in the lives of these under privileged girls. These needs are highlighted through the narrated stories.

The first group of girls were met by the Team during their Action Research, and the second group are from girls' centres of Vacha.

First there is Bunty, described as the *bindhast* girl. She talks a lot, is mischievous, spontaneous, and has a mind of her own. She is angry at the gender discrimination she faces at home. Her brothers had got new uniforms and new schoolbags, while she had to make do with old ones. But she promises to take care of her parents. Rama, who lives in impoverished conditions and a family where superstition is practised, is in poor health. There is little hope of getting education for her. Seetha studied in a BMC school till Standard VII, but failed when she joined a private school for Standard VIII. Her mother says, "Seetha has no head for studies."

In many cases, the girls had drunken, irresponsible and wife beaters for fathers. Some parents are separated. The girls have to work hard at household chores. But some of them do well in their studies. Others drop out.

The book is an interesting read and an eye opener on the lives of girls in the poorer section.

— Malsawmi Jacob

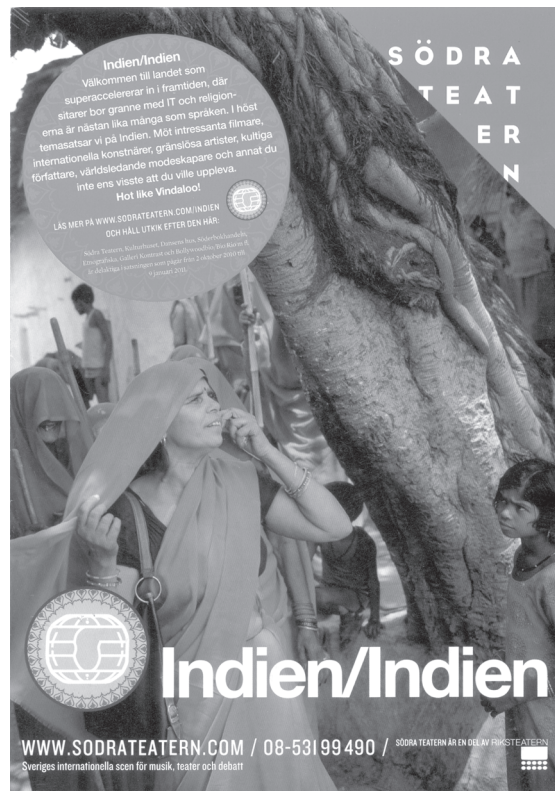
Taking SPARROW to Sweden to Attend the India Festival at Sodra Teatern

This trip happened rather unexpectedly. Anette Taranto from Sodra Teatern, Stockholm had actually contacted me because she had read my stories in Swedish translated by Birgitta Wallin and published as Flod. She was planning a programme with me as a writer and also a conversation with Urvasi Butalia and me on the women's movement and related issues. My stories were to be read out by an actress. Since the women's movement conversation was involved, Uravashi had written that she would bring the slides of the posters from the women's movement, a collaborative project SPARROW did with Zubaan. I got the idea of taking the film *Ten Women, Ten Lives, Ten Concerns* and the photos of women marching on the roads from *Marching on the Roads; Making Oneself, Making History* photo project just two days before leaving. Pooja and Sharmila, who have been with SPARROW since our insecure days when we had to shift the office practically every year, and who are by now used to delivering things even when asked at the last moment, immediately made a power point programme based on the photos and also got the posters of the film and the photographs printed. Once I reached there it became an entirely SPARROW programme for they did not have time for my stories; the actress also did not turn up for Anette did not know how to fit everything in. So it became an entirely SPARROW event in a way, which was wonderful.

I took the 5 a.m. flight but the flight left only at 6 a.m. The ticket had been booked by them in the Turkish Airlines and the tickets stated nothing about arrival time and other details. Anyway, I had gone early and managed to find the aisle seat I wanted. We reached Istanbul and there was a three-hour wait to take the flight to Stockholm. Istanbul is called the cultural capital of Europe and I can understand why. It is an extremely impressive city and even the airport is so beautiful. It is western and at the same time different. I wish my friend in Istanbul had been there and I could have stopped for a day or two on my return. During the wait they changed our gate and it was a rush from one gate to another and walking through long corridors. At the gate Shweta and Sampat joined me. Sampat is from Bundelkhand and heads a group called Gulabi Gang and has come out with her autobiography in Hindi. Her group deals with domestic violence and other issues of women. Shweta works with Zubaan and had

come as an interpreter for Sampat. Sampat is an activist from the rural area but since two films have been made on her and her Gulabi Gang is now known abroad and she has travelled to France and Italy, she has become a star. We were picked up by an Iranian cab driver at Stockholm. He took us to Drottningatan, a road where there is a Writers' Guest House. It is the same road where Strindberg's house is situated. Anette waited for us there with her daughter Miriam. She said that she had ordered food for us and I got busy taking out some of the gifts for her daughters and for her. Meanwhile she had explained to Shweta that she had ordered Indian food and that there was Indian food for the morning and later too! The guest house was like a well-appointed apartment with three bedrooms. The master bedroom was for me and the two smaller ones for the other two. Urvasi who was coming the next day was to be put up at a hotel nearby the theatre. The apartment had a kitchen with a stove and some tea, coffee, sugar and so on. Anette left after showing us the things. Shweta and I had a bath and meanwhile Sampat decided to sleep. There was no soap for this was a different kind of a place. Fortunately Shweta had brought a shower gel and later I used it. First day bath was without soap for me! Then we came to the dining area and saw a whole lot of food from an Indian restaurant and some more in the fridge! The hot parathas had been separated by thin tissues which had got pasted on to the parathas (probably meant for the next morning breakfast!) and became inedible unless

we wanted to eat parathas with the tissues. So we opened the nan and ate a little and opened a packet of rice (there were three of them) and there was palak paneer and some mixed vegetables (some three packets each) and we could hardly eat. Shweta was coming abroad the first time and she began to grumble that she had not come abroad to eat rice and palak paneer! Then I managed to get the ancient computer going and managed to turn the heaters in the room and learnt how to switch on the kitchen stove. The last one was to see if Shweta could light her cigarette with the hot stove since we found no matches around. Her cigarette kept getting burnt and not lighting up! Then we tried a piece of paper and that too got burnt. Then I sent her out in the cold to look for a shop to buy a lighter and she could not buy for they would not accept euros and finally she asked somebody for a light and smoked her cigarette. She came back feeling better. Meanwhile Sampat came out of her room feeling refreshed and demanding food. We showed her the



Sodra Teatern brochure highlighting the work of Sampat and her group Gulabi Gang

packets. Sampat is not quite used to serving herself food or generally taking care of her needs for she comes from a family where her needs are attended to. She has a daughter-in-law who is doing her MA in Literature. The first thing Sampat had told her was that she need not cover her head like married women normally do before elders. She had also told her that she could wear whatever clothes she wanted. She could choose to wear salwar-kameez but if she wanted to wear jeans Sampat would get them for her. The daughter-in-law naturally adores Sampat and takes good care of her. Sampat was a little nonplussed when she found out that she might have to make tea and warm up food by herself. The next morning I helped Sampat with her tea and we decided to avoid the Indian food and go out for breakfast but no restaurant would take euros and we could not change the cash for it was a Sunday. Finally there was a restaurant right next to the guest house where we managed to have good breakfast of Greek sandwiches with cottage cheese and fresh orange juice. Sampat said she missed her parathas and told us how when she went to Italy she had to literally live on orange juice because she was a vegetarian. The programme was in the evening and before that were several interviews for Sampat, me and Urvashi. I was really impressed with the way Sampat handled the journalists. A journalist asked her if all her five children were from the same husband she had married at the age of 12 or if she had separated and married again later. It was a personal question that had nothing to do with her activism but Sampat just told her all were from one husband. We told her later that she need not answer such questions and she told us that we need not teach her because she knew exactly how to deal with questions she did not like. She was right for she had been dealing with researchers and journalists for the past so many years and did not need our advice.

After some more Indian food (palak paneer, dal and nan again!) for lunch the evening programme began with a conversation with Sampat and her work with Gulabi Gang. Shweta who did the interpretation for Sampat found it a somewhat daunting task for Sampat swore and cursed with every sentence to make a point and not all of them were translatable and it was amazing to see how what Sampat spoke in a raised voice with angry gestures became statements with contained anger in English. After Sampat's programme it was a conversation with Urvashi and me about SPARROW and about the women's movement in India. Urvashi spoke about the women's movement with clarity and lucidity as she always does and our interaction regarding the women's movement also went off very well. I found not only the time to show the entire power point programme of the photographs explaining how SPARROW had used double-decker buses to exhibit the photographs but also had time to show excerpts from the film capturing a little bit from what Sharifa, Mangai and Lata P M had spoken. The evening was a great success for SPARROW got sufficient exposure and I was also able to sell with the help of Birgitta some of SPARROW's publications.

What made the trip worthwhile was meeting an amazing woman like Sampat. SPARROW has already got some material on her group

and her autobiography will soon be part of our collection but it would be good to make her a part of our oral history collection. When I broached the topic with Sampat she told me with characteristic frankness that she was a busy person and that she would consider my request and keep it in mind. But what she told me next she had to withdraw immediately for she told me she was old and not able to work as much as she was expected to. I had to tell her that she was some twenty years younger than me after which Sampat was struck speechless for a while! She finally agreed to make time for an oral history recording soon. And on that happy note the trip to Sweden came to an end.

— C S Lakshmi



The 8th National Maharashtra State Conference of AIDWA (ALL India Democratic Women's Association) was held in Mumbai from April 23 to 25, 2010. Confronting globalisation, defending secularism and asserting equality were the core themes of the conference. The inauguration meeting was held at Adarsh Vidyalaya, Chembur. Rohini Gawankar, the president, gave an impassioned speech which set the tone of the conference. She began her speech saluting the three women martyrs of the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement: Meenakshi More, Dhamabai Suryabhan and Kamalabai More. Her speech was sprinkled with several interesting anecdotes which kept the audience spell-bound. An interesting incident she narrated was that of Ahilyatai's role in the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement and how for a demonstration at Flora Fountain she and other women with her broke the police cordon around them and marched ahead with the police following them! This inspired Acharya Atre to write a poem, *Ranaragini Ahilya Satyagraha Nighali*, in his weekly *Navyug*, calling Ahilyatai a soldier. AIDWA's national President, Subhashini Ali Sehgal, began her speech in Marathi much to the delight of the women from different areas of Maharashtra gathered there. Her talk centred on the themes of the conference touching upon economic issues like price rise and how much more needs to be done and how women must demand better governance. Despite the seriousness of issues to be discussed in the conference there was a sense of jubilation and celebration in the air with so many women gathered there eager to speak and share their experiences.

— C S Lakshmi

Opening Doors to Different Sexualities, Different Worlds

The making of the film *Degham* on the transgender experience has added a different dimension to SPARROW documentation. SPARROW had always been sensitive to issues of sexuality but making a film like *Degham* has opened new doors to individuals and activities involving lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders. In recent years many efforts have been made not only to legitimate sexual choices but also to take pride in making such choices. Revathi, Priya Babu, Aasha Bharathi, Narthaki and Kalki who were part of *Degham* belong to a generation of transgenders who want to fight for their self respect and dignity.

Rose, a transgender, has been successfully conducting a TV reality show in a Tamil TV channel based on interviews. Living Smile Vidya's autobiography has been translated and has received very good notices both in Tamil and English. Revathi's autobiography in English published by Penguin has been very well received. Much of what she has spoken has been covered in the SPARROW film. Revathi herself is now one of the directors of Sangama, a Bangalore-based organisation fighting for the rights of sexual minorities. There has also been a spurt of activities in the Sahodari Foundation of Kalki in the past two years. A group of transgender women including Kalki have been involved in several activities. In collaboration with WAVE (Women Aloud Videoblogging for Empowerment). The Foundation has also trained several transgender women to make documentaries. Kalki has been making short documentaries on the harassment transgender women face and on their tobacco chewing habit apart from covering events. She has also been making appeals to the media to present the transgender women with dignity and not to ridicule them for what they are and make them objects of humour or titillation. She has started a matrimonial website for transgender women and has also been appearing in several news programmes in Tamil and English actively promoting the cause of the transgender community. In the Leadership Programme held in the US in October this year, Kalki was invited by the US Department of State Bureau of Human Rights to represent the country. She was also invited by the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs for three weeks in October to visit Washington DC, Salt Lake City and New York to share details about her work with others.

Kalki is currently playing the lead role in a Tamil feature film called *Narthaki*, based on the life of a transgender. With Project Kalki of Sahodari Foundation she has launched several reach out activities. On 12th November the films of eight transgender women including Kalki were screened

in the Russian Cultural Centre in collaboration with Alliance Francaise de Chennai. One of the films by Kanchana called *Nambikkai* (Hope) was praised for its perspective and understanding of the life of a differently-abled person. The same films were earlier screened in Coimbatore also.

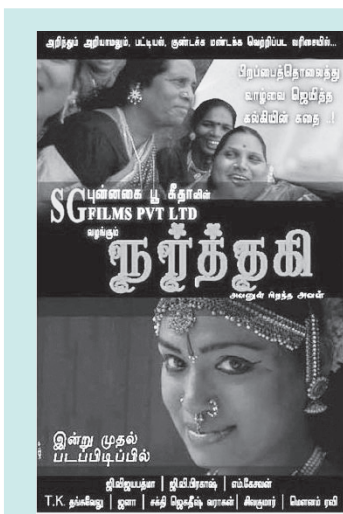
Apart from activities among the transgender community spearheaded by Kalki and others there have also been other activities highlighting the issues of sexual minorities. On 12th June was a poster show and post card launch in Alliance Francaise de Chennai called *Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness*. A Queer Poetry Reading festival called *Moziyudal* (Body Language) was also organised on 12th June in Chennai. On 19th and 20th of June there was a LGBT performance festival called *Nirangal* by Chennai Rainbow Pride. On 2nd July, 2010 there was The Queer Pride March in Kerala covered by Kalki in a short film called *Out and Proud*.

Bengaluru Pride and Karnataka Queer Habba 2010 was celebrated in November with a number of events. More than 12 events were scheduled starting from November 18th and culminating with a Pride March on 28th. On Nov 18th, Thursday, a novel Panel Discussion titled *Love Across Boundaries* was organised. The aim of the discussion was to bring on one platform activists dealing with several issues related to LGBT rights, Dalit rights, secularism and women's rights, to address the nature of love across seemingly 'forbidden' boundaries drawn and enforced by society which covered several areas like gender, sexuality, class, caste, religion and ethnicity.

Earlier on 6th November, Sumathi Murthy, Nithin Manayath, Beena Appu and other friends organised a touching programme in memory of Famila, a radical feminist, very active in queer politics and a Hijra who questioned all forms of hierarchy and feudal patriarchal systems within and outside the community. She was a beautiful person who had brought a new vision and dimension to queer politics. This is the second programme in memory of Famila organised by her friends.

Famila was born on 6th November 1980 and died in 2004 at the young age of 24. Famila identified herself as a Hijra, sex worker,

bisexual and a feminist. She was a board member of Sangama. She was also an active member in Vividha, an autonomous collective of marginalised sexualities and genders. She was also working in Sangama as a project coordinator for Hijras and transgenders. Her everyday life itself was a challenge to the hetero-normative patriarchal society. Many people during her time boasted about communal living but never



Kalki is currently playing the lead role in a Tamil feature film called *Narthaki*, based on the life of a transgender. With Project Kalki of Sahodari Foundation she has launched several reach out activities. On 12th November the films of eight transgender women including Kalki were screened in the Russian Cultural Centre in collaboration with Alliance Francaise de Chennai.

succeeded. She set an example for communal living by opening the doors of her house to several people who identified themselves in different ways. Famila not only identified herself as a Hijra but she also respected and accepted the true meaning of different sexual and gender identities. She went against her own community to accommodate all queer identities, especially the female-born sexual minorities.

Famila was well known for her clear, straightforward and radical articulation of the struggle of marginalised sexualities and genders in many conferences and programs. She took a lead role in organising the 2nd Hijra Habba in Bangalore through the autonomous collective Vividha, mobilising more than 2000 people for the programme and collecting funds from the public to fight for the rights of marginalised sexualities and genders.

In the gathering organised on 6th November friends of Famila shared their experience of being with her. No such meeting in Bengaluru is ever complete without the songs of Sumathi Murthy who dedicated some songs to the memory of Famila.

— C S Lakshmi

Homage

R Chudamani: The Crest Jewel

10 January, 1931 - 13 September, 2010



R Chudamani quietly entered the Tamil literary scene in 1957 with a short story. Very soon she firmly established herself as a writer to be reckoned with but preferred to keep a low-profile. With her artist mother Kanakavalli and three sisters

to encourage her and an indulgent father TNS Raghavan who was an ICS officer, she began to spread her wings in the Tamil literary sky. Chudamani was a writer who wrote with great sensitivity and depth about human relationships and the corrosion of sensitivity. Her women characters confront life with great courage and fortitude; they sometimes get swept away when harsh winds blow but often they fight their way through. Her style of writing had a touch of poetry and was known for its poignancy, depth and clarity and above all for its concern for the human condition.

Chudamani belonged to that era of writers who were generous with their time and praise for aspiring writers. In her interaction with younger writers like me she was warm and open, always ready to read new writers and offer comments. Writers like me have spent long hours discussing literature with her and sharing our views with her. She was an unusual person who could offer her critical views in a gentle manner and accept even the most severe criticism gracefully. Physical pain or discomfort never deterred her from giving someone time to be with her and talk to her.

I grew up reading her and then befriending her, adoring her as a writer and as a person. She gave me a lot of space in our friendship

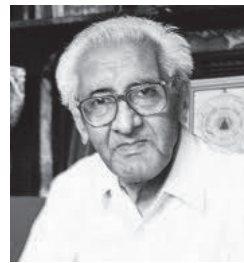
Homage

for me to grow and confront the world on my own terms. I met her as a young student in my MA days and ever since we have been friends. I was with her in her last hours and later when she breathed her last in the early morning hours of 13th September, a gloom descended on me knowing that such writers don't come into the Tamil literary scene every day. In fact, she is one of those rare writers for whom awards did not mean anything although she won many. More important for her was to write and live in a way in which she never lost her dignity as a human being. She lived and died with great courage. After her demise, there will always be a void in the lives of those who have known and loved her as a writer.

— C S Lakshmi

Bhagwan Das: The Man Who Pursued B R Ambedkar

23 April, 1927 - 18 November, 2010



When a historian of the Dalit movement and a close associate of Ambedkar passes away one feels a tremendous sense of gloom for one wonders if all the work he or she has put in has achieved the anticipated results. And one does despair knowing how much more needs to be done. Bhagwan Das is a

legendary Ambedkarite and there are not many like him left for us to interact with.

In 1943, Bhagwan Das was 16 and already a member of the Scheduled Caste Federation. He went to meet Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar whom his father referred to as 'Ummeedkar', the Harbinger of Hope. He had to wait seven hours to meet him but that meeting was the turning point of his life. The rest of his life was spent in pursuing Ambedkar's ideals.

During World War II Bhagwan Das worked in the Royal Indian Air Force as a radar operator and later he was with Dr. Ambedkar in the last years of his life, as his Research Assistant. Around 1962, Bhagwan Das began to compile and edit Ambedkar's speeches which came out as a four-volume publication called *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*. In 1983 Bhagwan Das testified on untouchability before the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. Bhagwan Das is considered one of the most reputed scholars on Ambedkarism and the issue of human rights of the scheduled castes. He spent his entire life travelling and speaking at various national and international platforms on Dalit issues and his perspective of their emancipation. Earlier this year Navayana published *In Pursuit of Ambedkar*, a book of memoirs of Bhagwan Das along with a one-hour DVD of conversations with him. Excerpts of the book are on the web and they tell us how little our history books tell us. Bhagwan Das has left us the legacy of his memories hoping we will know how to cherish and keep the legacy. The best homage to him will be to hold on to those memories and never let them go.

— C S Lakshmi

Dr. Rachel Reuben: A Veteran Naturalist 1934 - 1 November, 2010



Dr. Rachel Reuben, a renowned scientist and naturalist, passed away on 1st November, 2010 at age 76. She specialised in medical entomology, on disease bearing mosquitoes in particular.

Dr. Reuben was born in 1934 and lived in Bandra, Mumbai. She was acquainted with Humayun Abdulali and Salim Ali, the famous ornithologists. She was associated with Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) for nearly 40 years. She was an active member of the Research, Publications and Membership Sub-committees of BNHS. She also served as its Honorary Secretary for two years and as a member of its Executive Committee for another two years.

Asad R Rahmani, Director, BNHS, in his tribute to her, says that she was one of the finest persons whom he had interacted with in his life and calls her “a fine scientist, a noble soul and an able administrator”.

Her death is a great loss to natural history research and to the conservation movement in India.

— Malsawmi Jacob

Dr. Rajeshwari Chatterjee: A Pioneering Scientist 24 January, 1922 - 3 September, 2010



Dr. Rajeshwari Chatterjee was the first woman engineer of Karnataka. She was a legendary figure in Bengaluru, much respected and admired. Her grandmother was the great educationist Kamala Basappa who became a widow at the age of 20 and pursued her education and later dedicated her life to promoting the cause of women's education. She set up an experimental school Mahila Seva

Samaj in Basvanguadi. Rajeshwari's uncle B M Srikantiah was a well-known litterateur and very encouraging of women's education. Rajeshwari had her early education in her grandmother's school. She later did her BSc (Hons) and MSc in Mathematics from Maharani's College, Bangalore.

She later approached Dr. C V Raman to work under him. Since she did not have a degree in Physics he refused to take her as a student but undaunted she joined the Electrical Technology department at Indian institute of Science as a research student in Communication Engineering. She met Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, her future husband, here. After two years she decided to do her PhD in engineering from the US and sailed to the US to do research in the University of Michigan. She returned and joined the Indian Institute of Science as the only woman in the faculty 60 years ago.

Dr. Rajeshwari has written several technical books but her first work in the sociology of science was brought out by the University of Nevada sometime back. Called *A Thousand Streams: A Personal History*, it is a lucid narration of her life, her science career and her times. She spent her later life trying to understand the science community and its concerns and the role of women in science. In

her homage to her, A R Vasavi says that she was a true Nehruvian scientist-scholar who truly believed that “knowledge and academia were to serve the larger interests of the society and the nation.” Vasavi says that she was concerned about issues of gender, caste and science and that she was particularly anxious to know how Muslim girls were faring in education and health issues. Seeing almost everyone climbing into the IT bandwagon she often pondered about the loss of intellectual power in the midst of technical research.

We tend to ignore great women scientists who have paved the way for other women and have been pioneers but Dr. Rajeshwari was not one to bother about awards. Although we may have failed to recognise her contributions to science, many awards came her way from academic and professional bodies.

Women like Professor Rajeshwari Chatterjee don't really die. They continue to live in the memories of not only their families but of so many women like us who have come after them for their lives are linked with that of ours through history.

— C S Lakshmi

Veronica Rodrigues: A Versatile Scientist and Leader 1953 - 10 November, 2010



Another noted scientist has passed away. Dr. Veronica Rodrigues died of breast cancer on 10 November, 2010. She was Senior Professor at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR). Born in Kenya in 1953, Veronica came to India in 1977. She did her PhD under Obaid Siddiqi on neurogenetics, and pioneered the study of olfaction in the fruitfly. She was Obaid's first student in the new area, and on the strength of her independent contribution on the subject, she was offered a regular position at the TIFR while doing her PhD.

Veronica then spent three years at the Max-Planck Institute of Biologische Kybemetik in Tubigen. After returning to her position at the TIFR Mumbai, she moved into the study of how the human brain develops. In all the studies she undertook, her abilities and hard work has made her group one of the major players in neurobiology of olfaction.

Along with her research, Veronica gently assumed many leadership roles, first at the Department of Biological Sciences at TIFR. Later she became the Chair of the Department of Biological Sciences at TIFR Mumbai and ensured that new faculty had all the resources and independence they needed to move forward in their Science. She finally moved to Bangalore in 2005 but still retained strong links with Mumbai. She was sensitive to the failings and boorishness of a male dominated scientific environment and skillfully protected herself from being road-blocked by it.

SPARROW had contacted Veronica several times for an interview which she had promised. But it was never to be. Her death is a great loss to the scientific community in general but also to a younger generation of women scientists who could have learnt a great deal from her life and from her work.

— Malsawmi Jacob