

Choices From Silence....



Arangamallika



Bama



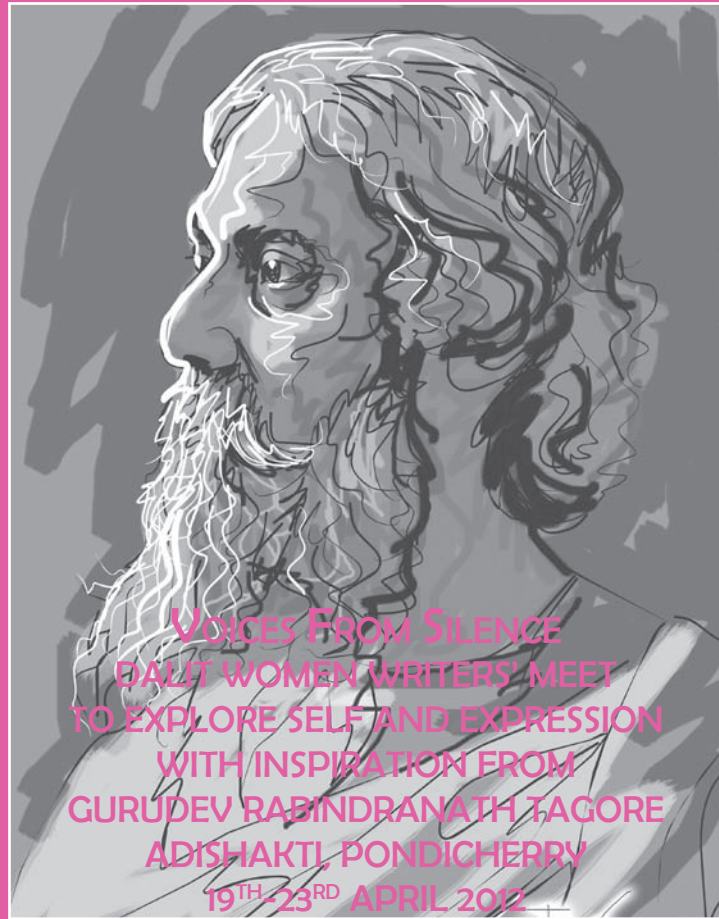
Sukhirtharani



Kavin Malar



Kalyani Thakur Charal



Du Saraswathi



Urmila Pawar



Chandraben Shrimali



Dr Jyoti Lanjewar



Manju Bala



Joopaka Subadra



Smriti Kana Howlader



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[Editor's Note]

This special issue of SNL is a double issue that covers the Dalit Women Writers' Meet held from April 19th to 23rd. The Meet was made possible with funding from Sahitya Akademi under its Tagore Commemoration Grant Scheme. It turned out to be an extraordinary event of solidarity, sharing and learning. In the pages inside we give the details of the Meet and the effect it had on all the writers. The Adishakti campus at Pondicherry provided the perfect setting for such a Meet.

This issue also carries three book reviews and homages to many women who have made our lives worth living. We usually say that when women like those for whom we pay homage here pass away, it calls for a celebration. These women have lived exceptional lives which have made women's history what it is today. Many of them have shared their life and work with SPARROW. SPARROW takes pride in archiving their life and work. But even while we celebrate their life and work, at times, losing them fills our life with a void that can be dealt with only by keeping their memories alive.

Do visit our website www.sparrowonline.org and look us up on Facebook and do write to us.

JAB WE MET

Ever since the Writers' Meet we organised at Kashid beach resort in 2008, SPARROW has been thinking of organising another writers' meet. This time we decided to organise a different kind of meet and wanted to work on an idea we have been having for quite a while now. The idea was to have a Dalit Women Writers' Meet. We felt that there was a great need for exploring self and expression from a gender and caste perspective. Even while we were working on this idea, the Tagore Commemoration Grant Scheme was announced. We felt that it would be interesting to set this meeting in the context of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's writings which centred on gender and caste issues. We decided to call the Meet, 'Voices from Silence.'

3-D MEET

We worked out a very different concept of the Meet. We decided to plan the Meet more as a camp to bring together Dalit writers

at opening up of their life and expression possible and situating their life and expression in the context of Tagore's works *Chandalika* and *Laboratory* and their resonances.

The 3-D methodology was intended as one that would dissolve tensions of interacting with one another and generate a camaraderie that would open up dialogues. In an atmosphere where the Indian woman is being defined in specific ways, it was important to reveal Indian women in other cultural contexts, functioning, thinking and acting differently. We strongly believed that if this was not done, there was the danger of marginalising other cultural contexts that are very important for broadening one's view of life, women, history and politics.

The methodology proposed is one of arranging a different kind of a meet and linking with it a process of sharing, learning and communication. This is an open method that allows sharing and learning at various levels and is a participatory method. It is also a method that combines several aspects and unifies them as a reading,



Jab We Met

from various regions. It was conceived as a 3-D (Dialogue, Debate, and Develop) Camp, which would create a space for communication and sharing. While the purpose of the camp was to bring together writers from many regions, some regions and some languages became pivotal in the actual Meet.

The reason for making the Dalit writers and the languages they write in the pivotal area in this exercise was that we decided the core subject for discussion and dialogue will be caste and gender, a subject chosen with inspiration from Tagore's works *Chandalika* and *Laboratory*.

Women writing from the position of caste and their life experiences and expression have not received the attention they should in terms of tracing contemporary literary history and the context of that history. The aim of the camp was to make an attempt

writing and sharing experience that creates awareness in the process of execution.

We decided to link many activities with the camp so that it becomes a multi-layered one. Theatre performances, screening of films, readings and discussions, meeting writers and publishers in and around Pondicherry were included in the camp programme. In this context, we felt that the participants—about 12 in number—must be those who feel that this expression camp would be an important dimension of their creative work. There would be no pressure to have results or obvious declarations of transformation. The idea was to create a space for sharing.

We wanted to structure the camp in a way where meals would be provided in a common dining room and independent living rooms provided. The venue must be in a surrounding where nature walks,



Campus



Adishakti

reading facilities with a small library of select books and journals and film-viewing facilities would be possible. There would be a room to work in with writing tables. The daily sessions would be planned as talk-sessions, read-sessions, write-sessions and share-sessions. The talk-sessions would be an extended breakfast session where some chosen people every day would talk about writing and being a writer and comment on Tagore and his works included for this camp. Every talk session would be followed by a read-session where there would be readings from the works of the writers. The share-session would be an extended dinner session where some select invited guests would share their work and ideas with the participants and interact with them. The evenings would be free time for the writers to go for nature walks or go around the city. One evening, however, was set aside for a theatre performance.

A SPACE TO BE

Space plays a very important part in the lives of women. Given a certain space, women can bring out from within, what they never knew was there. Maybe one does not want to break into poetry or colours or music but would like a space to just be — to look out of the window and stare at a flower or a squirrel. Creating such a space can create dialogues, communication and a sharing which may not otherwise be possible. The idea of a shared space even while having a private space to retire to was the notion that was at the heart of this extended and exploratory activity structured as a 3-D camp. This camp was planned as a five-day camp and we thought we would do it in March 2012.

In our plans space was very crucial. The Adishakti campus seemed to be the ideal space to have our Meet. It was simple and elegant with a beautiful auditorium and it had a team of professionals who were warm, friendly and efficient. Veenapani Chawla, the Director of Adishakti, was most willing to cooperate

with us to make the Meet planned as a camp a great success.

Once the venue was decided we were all set to contact the writers once the grant from Sahitya Akademi (Ministry of Culture) came through. But there were surprises in store for us.

DEALING WITH FURIOUS CYCLONES, FAMILY AND FLIGHT SCHEDULES

The grant did come through. But along came the Thane cyclone on 30th December 2011 that devastated the Cuddalore and Pondicherry area. It looked like it would take at least three months for the Adishakti campus which was hit badly by the cyclone, to be put back to shape.

Although we considered changing the venue and tried to look at other venues elsewhere, the advantages of holding the Meet in the Adishakti campus were far too many for us to think of another venue. It looked like it would take at least three months for Adishakti to be put back in order. The last week of March seemed a good time to hold the Meet.

So we began to contact several writers over the phone. The initial response was heartening but March did not seem to be a good time for many. Children's exams for some, teaching commitments for others, family functions, project deadlines for some others... It looked like we would never arrive at a date for the Meet! Finally April 19th to 23rd was arrived at which seemed to suit everybody.

At the outset we had almost twenty writers who were going to participate. But at the end we had 12 writers from 6 languages participating in the Meet. Including the organisers there were 16 people on the whole.

Train tickets were practically not possible for it was holiday season and the tickets had been booked three months in advance. So we thought we would stretch our budget a bit and book flight tickets for those who were travelling long distances. And that is when all hell broke loose! We booked some Kingfisher tickets only to cancel them in

the last minute for we were worried Kingfisher may cancel the flights given its problems for there was news everyday of cancelled flights and stranded passengers. And we had to book flights in a way that everybody would arrive at Chennai and take a van from there to Pondicherry. Coordinating the flight schedules was not easy but the writers were very supportive. The Kolkata flight was an early morning one and unfortunately the day the flight was booked was declared a Bandh day. So Kalyani Thakur Charal, Smriti Kana Howlader and Manju Bala had to reach the airport the previous night but they never complained.

And then there were some cancellations. A particular writer had to rush to the US to be with her daughter and she forgot to tell us! Another writer was so sick that when I rang her up and she picked up the phone I thought it was a gentleman from her house speaking. I began to explain that I wanted to talk to the writer and she explained it was indeed she who was speaking! Another writer's son fell ill and she could not come either. But she could not tell us till the last minute about it. Another writer on whom we had banked spoke enthusiastically throughout only to tell us at the end that she could probably come just for an evening. We had to tell her that it would not work. One writer had unexpected office work, another had a sudden bout of ill health just when she had planned to book the ticket and two others had to decide not to come because they had commitments they could not cancel although they had thought they could reschedule them, it was not possible.

And that is how we became a group of 12 writers and 4 organisers which made 16 of us. And that is also the reason why the Meet became a close, intimate, warm and friendly one where everyone could bond well.

PREPARING FOR THE MEET

While choosing Tagore's writings we had chosen *Chandalika* and the story *Laboratory* to which we now added the film *Laboratory* based on Tagore's story *Laboratory* which talks about a Dalit woman taking charge of the laboratory of her scientist husband. The story was written by Tagore a year before his death. We bought the book in which *Chandalika* was included and bought a copy of the film.

We began to prepare an extensive reading kit for the participants with a short note on Tagore, both the texts of Tagore and commentaries, articles on Dalit literature, interviews with writers. Soft copies of the entire reading material were sent ahead of time so that discussions and interactions become fruitful. An actual kit was also prepared with the book which had the *Chandalika* play and hardcopies of all the reading material including a booklet in English and other languages on Urmila Pawar brought out by SPARROW. We wanted the reading material to be the foundation of the entire Meet opening doors for dialogue and interaction.

We prepared two Power Point Programmes, one introducing the writers with a photograph and short introduction and another one with sample writings of each writer in the original language and English translation with a voice over reading the English text. We felt that with the text appearing on the screen in large letters



Urmila Pawar, the Marathi writer whose writings reflect Dalit experiences of living. In Urmila's narration of her life, one can see many stories and in her stories, one can see her life.

Amhihi Itihas Ghadawala: Urmila Pawar and The Making Of History, July, 1998

and a voice reading the text, it would be easier for people to follow the text. The second Power Point Programme was part of the entire Meet. We also chose films to be screened along with other parts of the programme and a play on a spirited Dalit woman to be staged the first evening. The play was *Molagapodi* by the Kattiakari group directed by Srijith Sundaram.

Coordinating with us from Pondicherry was the Adishakti team and writer, publisher and Dalit activist Ravikumar.

For the writers and all of us to know and understand expression it was important to meet other writers and publishers in and around Pondicherry. We decided to include Professor K A Gunasekaran, Ravikumar, Ki Rajanarayanan, Yazan Aathi and Mini Krishnan. 85-year old Ki Rajanarayanan is not a Dalit writer but belongs to a small village in Tirunelveli district and all his stories are woven around this village and many of them have women as central characters. He currently resides in Pondicherry and is a great raconteur of his own experiences and that of others. Professor K A Gunasekaran is the author of the first Dalit autobiography entitled *Scar*. Ravikumar as stated above, is a Dalit activist who is also a writer and a publisher. Yazan Aathi is a Dalit poet and activist who is a teacher in a school in Ambur. Mini Krishnan is with OUP and has already brought out two anthologies of Dalit writings in Tamil and Malayalam.

Thus we planned the Meet as a Meet where there would be some serious writings to read as preparation for the Meet. There would be films to view to understand the Dalit experience in various parts of India, open conversations sharing life and experiences and writing. There would also be occasions to share ideas and thoughts, time to rest and reflect, sing and dance and enjoy and also open up one's writing world to that of other writers and their languages and also discuss Tagore and his times and also talk of how Dr Ambedkar was an inspiring figure in each one's life. The exchanges were not to be dry and academic but thought-provoking and informal and warm in nature.



Ravikumar



Prof. KA Gunasekaran



Ki Rajanarayanan



Yazan Aathi



Mini Krishnan

EARLY MORNING TELEPHONE CALLS AND LATE NIGHT CHATS

I reached Adishakti two days earlier to work with the Adishakti team to make all the preparations. But the Adishakti team had already efficiently carried out everything that SPARROW had specified. In the Kashid Beach Resort writers' camp we had put different language writers in one room and initially there was much protest. But at the end of the workshop everyone appreciated this unusual rooming arrangement which opened up an entirely different communication among writers. We followed this arrangement in the Adishakti campus also.

Early morning on the 19th, came the call from Du Saraswathi saying she had arrived and that she should be picked up from the bus stop. Saraswathi was the only one coming from Karnataka. All the others had dropped out and their bus tickets had to be cancelled. Saraswathi has an authoritative way of speaking and I was looking forward to meeting her to find out how this person with an authoritative voice looks! An early morning cab had been arranged to pick her

up and I went myself to pick her up. When I saw her I burst into laughter for there stood before me a slightly older version of the young Sarasu/Sarasi I knew some twenty-five years ago. We had spent a lot of time talking about women's issues and women activists, walking all around Bengaluru and sitting in parks. She was surprised that I had not recognised her voice.

I showed her to her room and then got busy with the theatre group that arrived around 10-30 a.m. for the evening performance. There were twenty-five of them and there were three transgender women in the group, one of whom was Living Smile Vidya who I was familiar with for she had written a very moving autobiographical account of how she became a transgender. The group had started their journey very early in the morning and looked tired. But they began rehearsing immediately. They were looking forward to not only the evening performance but also the chicken biryani we had promised for lunch!

In the evening arrived a van load of excited writers along with Pooja, Priya and Aarti who had successfully managed to coordinate transporting them from Chennai to Pondicherry. But they were late by an hour and a half. The evening schedule that was to begin to at 5 p.m. could start only around 7 p.m. All of them loved the campus and if they were a little apprehensive about a totally different language writer sharing their rooms, they did not voice it.

Thus the evening began with a lot of excitement and informality which set the pattern for the entire Meet which did not rigidly stick to the scheduled programme but made it a flexible one which made everyone comfortable.

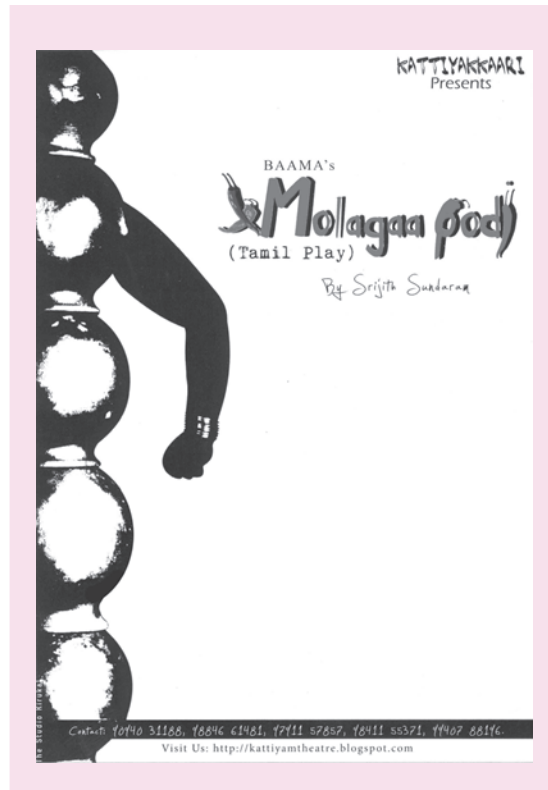
The inauguration began with a couple of songs by Smriti Kana Howlader in her resonant voice that set the tone of the evening.

The writers were welcomed and then introduced with a power point programme after which the play *Molagapodi* was performed. Although subtitles were not available all the writers enjoyed the play.

They were all given their reading kits and realized there was much reading to do although they planned to chat through the night.

Our initial plans were to begin every day early as April is a very hot month and we were all in non-AC rooms. But Adishakti worked on a different schedule as their workers had to come from faraway places. So we did some rescheduling and arranged the screening of the film *Laboratory* before breakfast the first day.

After breakfast on the 20th began conversations with Bangla writers. **Kalyani Thakur Charal** spoke



passionately about what it was to be a Dalit and a writer; she spoke about her father with great respect, admiration and emotion. According to Jaydeep Sarangi who has translated Bangla Dalit writers, until the early 1990s, Dalit voice in literature did not find its place in Bengali literature and women especially were positioned much below in the hierarchical ladder of caste and sub-caste. Among the Bengali Dalit women writers, Kalyani Thakur's name stood out prominently.

Kalyani said that she had seen oppression and exploitation in the name of caste and had experienced poverty. Her father, originally from Jossore, Bangladesh, migrated to Bogula in 1949. Her father's benevolence was well known. People used to come and meet him. He worked for the cause of people. He was a non-teaching staff of Bogula College. He was a follower of Matua dharma. Chandranath Basu who was known as the 'Gandhi of Faridpur' used to like her father. Her father was instrumental in spreading education in their locality. There were a couple of books in Bengali on his philosophy of life. Her father shaped her thoughts, Kalyani said. Her mother was not highly educated but she was very supportive of her children's education.

Kalyani also spoke about her early diary notes and early poems and how poems came easy to her. She also spoke about prejudices at the workplace and how caste was a constant factor in her life. About Tagore she said that the play *Chandalika* was a play set in the context of Buddhist philosophy. While she appreciated Tagore, the person who inspired her most was Dr B R Ambedkar.

After the conversation she read out one of her poems in Bangla and the other translated poems were shown on the screen with a voice over reading them.

The conversation with **Manju Bala** followed. Manju Bala writes poems and plays. She is a member of the Dalit Sahitya Sangastha and joint secretary of Chaturtha Duniya Patrika & Editor of *Akhon Tokhan Patrika*. With her short hair and jolly nature Manju looks like a school girl. But when she began to speak about Dalits and their life she became extremely serious and when she spoke about rituals and how they bind women and how a widow is generally treated, she was in tears. What she was trying to say was that as women all of us share certain experiences. She also spoke about how children are socialized to believe in caste. Manju Bala read out one of her poems in Bangla followed by a reading of her poems in English.

The next conversation was with **Smriti Kana Howlader**. She is a trained musician and has done her Sangeet Visharad in Classical and Nazrul Geeti. She is a radio artiste for folk songs. She is considered an expert in Dalit songs. She is the editor of *Jana Jagran* magazine. In 1993 she received Dr Ambedkar Fellowship from Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Akademi and has attended several Dalit conferences and performed. She writes her own songs, writes poems and stories and also composes music.

Normally no Dalit meeting is considered complete if Smriti Kana does not sing one of her songs. So this conversation also began with one of her songs. After the song everyone felt close to Smriti Kana. Smriti Kana spoke generally about Dalit life and why she

feels it is important to write the songs she is writing and singing. She read out one of her poems and the English translations were read out after that.

The Bangla writers with their candid conversation and songs managed to make the rest of the writers eager to talk and share their life and experiences. So **Chandraben Shrimali** came next to converse and spoke easily and with humour about her life and her writing. Chandraben Shrimali is a renowned writer in Gujarathi. She has several published books to her credit and has been seen as the spokesperson of Dalit women. She has received many awards and prizes in the competition held by *Samkalin Daily* (Indian Express Group). She is also the editor, publisher and owner of *Chahna*, a weekly newspaper from Gandhinagar. She is the first Schedule Caste Woman MLA from 1985 to 1990 for 7, Dasada Constituency, Dist Surendranagar, Gujarat.

Although Chandraben's laughter is infectious, beneath that veneer of humour, her narration of the life of Dalit women was very moving. She spoke about her supportive husband who is no more, and her family and her work as an MLA. She also said that her story *Stairs* which is about a Dalit tenement where a staircase is broken and a full-term pregnant woman who keeps complaining about it finally slips on the staircase when she goes to fetch water and has a miscarriage, was an autobiographical one.

Chandraben also said that Tagore had been extensively translated into Gujarathi and that she was more than familiar with him. About being a writer she said jokingly that whenever she was somewhere the people always referred to her as an ex-MLA and that she does not like to be an ex-anything. No one can refer to her as an ex-writer ever for she would never stop writing!

Chandraben read out parts of the story *Stairs* in Gujarathi and the English translation was read out after that.

The lunch that followed was filled with laughter and a warm camaraderie.

After lunch was the screening of the film *The Hidden Story* by Sikha Jingan. This documentary is the story of four peasant women from different parts of India.

The poignant documentary prepared the ground for listening to two very important writers from Marathi whose life and struggles made the hot afternoon seem like a much longer one than it was.

Urmila Pawar has been associated with SPARROW for many years now. She is a Marathi writer whose stories are based on Dalit experiences of living, working and existing. Many of her stories are derived from the pain, agonies and difficulties of living as a woman and as a Dalit. The frank and direct manner of her storytelling and the earthy language she uses in her stories have made her a controversial writer in Marathi. But there is more to Urmila Pawar than just the controversies raised by her stories.

Urmila Pawar is a self-made woman. She was born in Panaswale village in Ratnagiri district and later her family shifted to Ratnagiri. Urmila was the youngest among seven children. Her father, who was a school teacher, died when Urmila was in the Third Standard. Her mother, who was uneducated, brought up her children by weaving baskets and selling them. After passing her Matric, Urmila

joined the Public Works Department. She did her MA privately later. Urmila's autobiography *The Weave of My Life* has received very good notices and is an example of the kind of person and writer she is.

Urmila Pawar spoke about her mother, how she used to weave bamboo baskets to educate them, about her life as a writer and about caste being a constant factor in her life, never to be forgotten or set aside. She said that Tagore was not an unfamiliar person. She said that *Laboratory* and its dealing with a Dalit woman and her life and her daughter was interesting. She read out parts of her autobiography after which an English translation was read out.

Dr Jyoti Lanjewar who spoke after Urmila, about her writing and life is one of the foremost Marathi women writers, widely acclaimed and much anthologized and also a pioneering Dalit woman poet today. A noted critic, poet, columnist, activist, short story writer, biographer, linguist, feminist scholar and academic. She has authored more than 15 books and remains one of the leading voices in modern Indian poetry today.

Jyoti Lanjewar spoke about her family and how it was a family that had dedicated itself to the cause of Dalits

inspired by Ambedkar and how her mother was a passionate follower of Ambedkar. Her mother, Shuddamati Bondhate, had worked in Baba Saheb's

movement and had been in the forefront in meetings and marches for justice for the Dalits. She was the president of the Samata Sainik Dal and Jyoti Lanjewar was the secretary. When Jyoti's brother died in one of the protests to rename Aurangabad University her mother had said that if she had another son she would gladly offer him for the cause. She died saying Jai Bhim and Jyoti became emotional talking about her mother. As a university lecturer and head of the Department of Marathi she was able to not only teach Marathi literature but also be a prolific writer. Her determination seems to have begun early for a poem she wrote as a young girl goes thus:

*Don't underestimate me
I may be wearing bangles*

*But they can turn into weapons
Anytime*

Her famous *Mother* poem was read out by her and then three of her poems in translation were read out.

Speaking about their mothers, Urmila and Jyoti had kindled memories of mothers and daughters in the hearts of everyone there and the afternoon that seemed to hang heavy now began to feel like a womb of comfort. At the end of it a cool evening breeze began to blow and the first day ended with soft exchanges, sharing of anecdotes about families and mothers, some loud laughter and quiet reflection.

The Open Heart with Hot Chocolate session in the night after dinner, reflected the day's shared experiences and the writers were eager to interact with guests Mini Krishnan and Ravikumar.

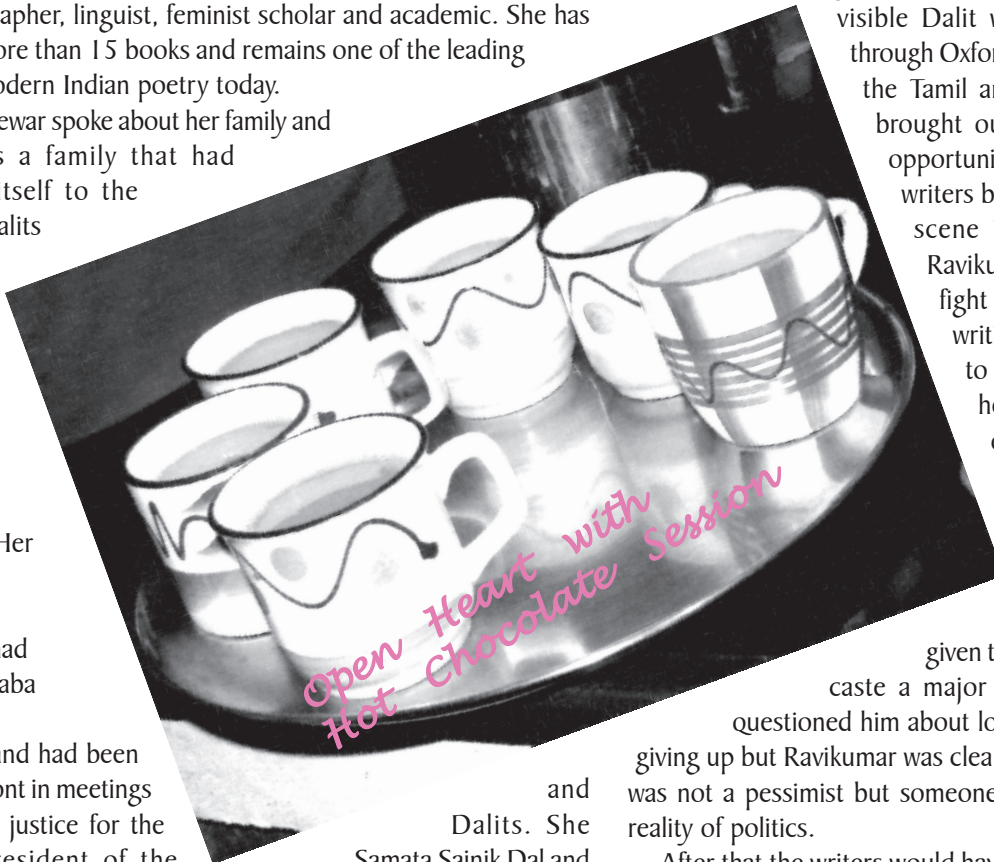
Mini spoke about her interest to promote and make visible Dalit writing in all Indian languages through Oxford University Press and about how the Tamil and Malayalam anthologies were brought out. She was happy to have an opportunity to meet all the writers and the writers began to talk about the publishing scene in their respective languages. Ravikumar spoke about his efforts to fight for the Dalit cause and about his writing and publishing of magazines to promote Dalit literature and how he entered politics with some kind of idealism to fight for the Dalit cause. He frankly agreed that he did do whatever was possible but that many compromises had to be made and he wondered if things can change

given the present mindset that had made caste a major factor in elections. Saraswathi questioned him about losing hope and chided him about giving up but Ravikumar was clear about his stand. He said that he was not a pessimist but someone who wanted to understand the reality of politics.

After that the writers would have been ready to retire for the day one would have thought. But they were making plans to sit in their rooms and chat through the night. They had to be gently reminded that they must open their reading kit and try and browse through some of the material.

COMING CLOSER WITH CONVERSATIONS

The second day of conversations began with **Joopaka Subadra**. She has a post-graduate degree and is currently Deputy Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Secretariat, Hyderabad. She writes short stories, poems, essays, book reviews, reports and songs. She writes a regular column in *Bhumika*, a feminist monthly magazine. She has translated Bama's *Sangadi* into Telugu. She is editor of *Nallaregadi Saallu*, a book of short stories of Madiga sub-caste



women. She is an editorial board member of *Dalit Voice* and *Udyoga Kranthi*. She is currently a research fellow at Anveshi Research Centre working on Dalit Women Governance in Panchayat Raj. She has several awards to her credit and is Founder Member of MATTIPOOLU (SC, ST, BC Minority Women Writers' Forum).

Subadra is an extraordinary person whose photographs show her as a very serious person. She is an extremely serious person when it comes to talking about Dalit life experiences but otherwise we always saw her singing aloud, dancing and laughing, encouraging others to join her. She was a person who believed in fighting for justice but also celebrating the moments of being together with other writers whose life experiences she could relate to.

Subadra detailed how in her childhood she always felt that the text books did not reflect the life around her. The parents and children in the text books were not the parents and children she knew. She wondered about this often. She said that Dalit women saw everything in the context of their life and their life was very different from what was seen as mainstream. She spoke about her poem on the sari pallu to explain how even a sari pallu meant something else to Dalit women. She also spoke about her continuing to work to make the voices of Dalit women and their lives heard. Her book of stories of Madiga sub-caste women is one of the efforts in this direction.

Her poem on the sari pallu was read out in Telugu and translations of her poems were then read out.

Subadra's poems had electrified the atmosphere. So **Du Saraswathi** had to come and add some laughter to it. Du Saraswathi has been associated with the Women's Movement and the Dalit Movement for the last 25 years. She is an illustrator, a theatre artiste and a writer. She has written two poetry collections and an autobiographical account. Saraswathi is also a good mimic. So we asked her to start her session with some mimicry. She readily agreed and mimicked cries of different vendors on the street and the others burst into laughter. Then she acted out men smoking in different postures and manner and there was a fresh burst of laughter. After that even the travails she spoke about did not seem so bad. She spoke about her work with sweepers, her autobiography and the column with a rural girl as a main character she writes to talk about various issues. She also said that Tagore had been extensively translated into Kannada and was a familiar writer there. She spoke movingly about working with the sweepers and about how much remains to be done.

As a part of the interaction after Saraswathi's conversation there was also a short introduction to other Dalit writers who could not come. The moving story of a young innocent Dalit boy who worked as a servant written by B T Jahnvi was referred to and told in detail.

It was time for a film and SPARROW's film on Vithabai, a Tamasha artiste, was screened. Just before the screening the much-awaited Bama arrived. She could not join us earlier because she could not get leave. The other writers were eagerly waiting for her for all of them were familiar with her works. So when she arrived there was great excitement. Then they all settled down to watching the film and were moved by Vithabai's narration of her life and the struggles she underwent.

The afternoon session began with **Arangamallika**. Arangamallika is a professor of Tamil in Ethiraj Girls' College, Chennai. She has a poetry collection and an essay collection to her credit. Her poetry is laden with images that are part of everyday life like bus journeys, fields of crop, mud pots and menstruation. Often wind and water appear in her poetry as if to lighten the burden of life but they only blow away dreams and flood ordinary lives. She writes about desire and in one poem evokes mythological images of Kama being burnt by Shiva. Sometimes her words can kill but Arangamallika would argue that when life can give death to some, words must too, for her words arise from very deep within her life and her circumstances. Arangamallika is a diminutive figure and is a great orator but is known as a person who keeps aloof otherwise. But the first two days in Adishakti had affected her positively for she began to speak with warmth about what it was to go to school and college with the tag of caste and how her mother encouraged her to study. She also spoke about how she had grown up in a Brahmin household and how she did not feel discriminated in that sense within a familial atmosphere. In the work place caste did figure sometimes but she has learnt to deal with it. As a single person she spoke about how difficult it was to find a partner in life and how sometimes life is filled with loneliness. Her poem *Land* was read out in Tamil and other poems followed in English translation.

The youngest among the writers was **Kavin Malar** who had also helped us with coordination. She is a young journalist from Nagappattinam. She lives and works in Chennai and plays a very active role in fighting for justice for the Dalits and for other underprivileged. She has written a few stories and poems and works with the Tamil magazine *Ananda Vikatan*. Kavinmalar began by talking about her mixed parentage. Her Muslim father and Dalit mother's marriage was one of the few inter-religious marriages conducted by Periyar himself. So she had grown up in a political atmosphere and she used to sing and speak on progressive platforms. The mixed parentage did not directly affect her but it did create identity problems at times. She considers herself both an activist and a writer. As a writer she does not specifically write about the Dalits but about relationships, youth and living as a single woman in a big city. She said that her story *Dissolving Shadows of the Night* was autobiographical. Even as she was explaining how the story spoke about two friends and how marriage affects their friendship, she began to choke with tears. The intimate atmosphere of the Meet had made all the writers come together in the off-session times and young Kavin Malar's tears moved everybody. Kavin Malar quickly gathered herself and her story was read out in Tamil and English.

Sukirtharani, a much-acclaimed poet, came next to share her life and her poems. Sukirtharani holds an MA and MPhil in Tamil. A qualified teacher, she works in a government school in Vellore district. She is currently pursuing an MA in English. She has four collections of poems to her credit - *Kaipattri en kanavugal* (2002), *Iravumirugam* (2004) *Avalai Mozhipeyarttaal* (2006) and *Thiindappadatha Muththam*. Sukirtharani is a rare poet whose poetry can speak about angst with unusual imagery and language. Her poems on body, desire, longing and frustration are infused with words with no embellishments

that plunge in like sharp knives. She is considered one of the most promising poets of present times.

Sukirtharani began by saying how her caste affected her even during her school days. In school she had insisted on removing the Christian middle name she was given and wanted to be known only as Sukirtharani which did not denote any caste or religion. But others knew her caste and she was always relegated to the back benches and often sat alone there. It was difficult to get over the humiliation of it all. Sukirtharani paused here to come out of those memories. She spoke about how she loved Tamil language and how writing offered her great solace and how she wears her identity with pride now. She also spoke about not having many friends and being single. Tagore as a literary figure was known to her although *Chandalika* and *Laboratory* were new texts to her. Sukirtharani's Tamil poem was read out after which her poems in English translation were read out.

The post dinner Open Heart with Hot Chocolate session began with Smriti Kana singing one of her songs. It became very interesting with Ki Rajanarayanan, Professor K A Gunasekaran and Yazan Aathi participating in a spirited session of stories, personal anecdotes and singing and dancing. Professor Gunasekaran had brought an artiste to accompany him on the drum and at the end of the session he began singing the songs from his plays. Sukirtharani and Subadra got up to dance. The mood to sing and dance continued even after the guests had left.

BAMA'S LIFE, BAMA'S STORIES

Bama is recognised as a writer who has brought a forceful Dalit voice to contemporary Tamil Literature. She worked as a teacher for seven years and later joined a convent to serve as a nun. She left the convent in 1992. She works at present as a teacher in Ongoor, which is near Uthiramerur, where she is based. She has published three novels, *Karukku* (Thorny Edge of the Palm) (1992), *Sangathi* (News) (1994) and *Vanman* (Malice) (2002) as well as two short-story collections, *Kisumbukkaran* (Troublemaker) and *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum* (A Grandfather and a Buffalo) (2003).

A session with Bama was the most awaited one. On the third day Bama began talking about her life softly and when she began to speak about how she joined college with just what she was wearing and waited for her mother to come with her trunk and how her mother came looking tired and worn out, as always when she talks about her mother, her eyes became wet. Then she spoke about leaving the convent and the period of great depression when she wrote her first novel. She said that caste continues to remain a factor to deal with even now when she has a house of her own and is a respectable teacher. Despite education and a career, she has chosen to lead a life isolated from the rest of the village for the problems of dealing with people are too many and too emotionally exhausting.

Bama's session seemed to open a flood gate of tears. Arangamallika hugged Bama and began to cry and a few others joined while Urmila consoled them saying, 'Don't cry we are all

in the same boat.' It seemed as if words that had remained frozen in the minds for several years were brought out in the Meet and brought together writers from different parts of India.

Talking about the Meet, Urmila said that she was happy she came despite her ill health and that she was thrilled to meet writers like Saraswathi and Bama. Jyoti said that April was a month of loss for her for she had lost her son in the month of April but this April Meet would change her way of looking at the month as a month of loss. Kalyani said that all the trouble they took of reaching the airport the previous night was written off with the words spoken in the Meet. Manju Bala said that what people spoke did move her deeply but that she would not like anyone to cry. There was a heated exchange on whether tears meant weakness and everyone said that emotional melting should not be seen as weakness. Smriti Kana spoke about resisting caste in everyday life and said how during Durga Pooja upper caste girls were dressed as goddesses and her daughter used to be called to play the drum and how she refused to send her. All these factors need to be told again and again, she said. Subadra spoke again about the education system not reflecting the reality around and how much needs to be done. Kavinmalar said that she had learnt a lot from the Meet and that she was inspired to write more. Sukirtharani said that she was going to write another collection of poems which she would dedicate to all the writers in the Meet. Arangamallika said that the Meet unlike so many other literary Meets she had attended had broken her reserve and had made her mingle with others and speak to them warmly. She said she liked this change that had come about in her personality. Bama commented that the Meet had given her a sense of belonging, of being needed and wanted.

While Tagore's *Chandalika* and *Laboratory* were appreciated as texts that had triggered off the conversations on caste, gender and expression, the other dimensions that the Meet took of speaking across languages, of staying within close contact in a space that allowed them to converse, discuss, debate and reflect, were much appreciated. The Meet has been digitally documented and is currently being edited.

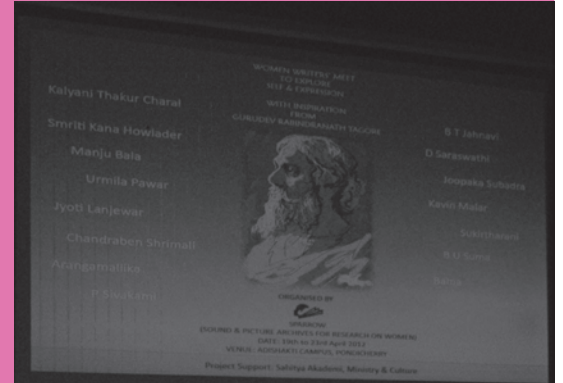
The Meet came formally to an end early next morning when all of us got into the bus to go to Chennai to reach our respective destinations. Each writer carried with her the reading kit and the gift of two books: *Two Buddhist Plays* by Rabindranath Tagore and *Tamil Dalit Writing* edited by Ravikumar and R Azhagarasan. Bama had left the previous evening and Saraswathi the previous night. Everyone felt that we needed a Meet like this every year where we could come together to converse, share and let go.

As the bus came out of the gate of Adishakti campus, all of us knew we were going back to our usual routine of work and everyday life, but as we looked out of the bus window at the passing scenery, each one of us was carrying with her memories of words spoken and laughter and tears of five wonderful days.

—C S Lakshmi



Hot Chocolate Session with guests, Mini Krishnan & Ravikumar



Smriti Kana Howlader inaugurates the Meet with songs



Writers posing for a photograph



Joopaka Subadra & Kalyani Thakur Charal



Concluding session & discussion



C S Lakshmi in conversation with Manju Bala



A scene from the play Molagapodi. Living Smile Vidya performing



C S Lakshmi in conversation with Sukirtharani



Joopaka Subadra talking about her life and writing

KALYANI THAKUR

24

What a nice game it is
Lalgarh, Lalgarh
A play with green and red

The red blood of
Bodies black
Makes the green grass
Of jangalmahal red

What a nice game it is
Between green and red

(Translated by Shrish Roy)

ARANGAMALLIKA

LAND

Land –
Fields rippling with harvest,
Gentle morning breeze of abundance for some,
expanding at times
like Bharati's prayer for a piece of land.
Blood-sucker of labourers,
Bestower of a day's meal too,
Tireless supplier
of crops plants creepers trees,
Alchemist
transforming tenants
into landlords,
Nourisher
feeding caste-fury
to the upper castes,
A promise
in times of election.
Land –
for the Dalits
a foetus-killing
melting hot liquefied iron.

(Translated by C S Lakshmi and Arundhathi Subramanian)

JOOPAKA SUBADRA

SARI-END—NOT A RAG TO KEEP SENTRY ON MY BOSOM

Having clung to my hunger,
My sari-end hangs on my belly
Like deity Maisamma at the embankment

When I become a stream of sweat working for wages,
My sari-end would blot the sweat on my face as breeze
When I bundle the star-like grains, tubers and granules in
my sari-end,

It twinkles on my head like the moon.

When wearied having worked in the fields and crops,
The sari-end offers me relief as a cloth for napping on the
floor.

When my sorrow drizzles from eye to the sky,
My soiled sari-end takes me to into its bosom like mother
Wiping off my tears.

When my irate husband fumes and frets on me,
I readily find it handy in the fists like a lump of butter
To wipe off my tears.
The sari-end, a rag that is—
It's the first casualty
In the hands of the man within and the man outside home
To drag me for molestation.

In the rain, my sari-end forms into an umbrella of flowers
of cassia
Keeping the lock of my hair warm.
The sari-end becomes a warm bonfire fondling my cheeks
and ears
As a wrap on my shoulders.
It provides a shade on my face
At the sunlight in the hot noon or the whips of sunstroke.
It shields me from the biting chilled looks of the sunlight.

When I fetch water,
It becomes a rounded-pad below the water-pot on my head.
It burns its fingers when used as a cloth at the mud
stove.
Forming into a pouch,
It fondles my child when I'm at work.
It lick dust on my body as a cow would lick its just born calf
It forms into a drape over the wet menses-cloth

If the rag of my sari-end is a clarinet around my waist,
The songs of plantation, weeding and threshing
Would give it chorus.

The rag of my sari-end—



It's an inalienable part of my sweat and work and bed
 My pleasure and sorrow.
 As a companion, the rag of my sari-end
 Daubs the mud on my body in the path of my life

When is it that it hangs on my bosom?
 My sari-end is at work ceaselessly
 It's not a rag to keep sentry on my bosom
 It's not a burden on my heart
 How do I blame it in public?
 How could I survive setting it aflame?

(Translated by Dr K Purushotham)

DR JYOTI LANJEWAR

MOTHER

I have never seen you
 wearing one of those gold-bordered saris
 with a gold necklace
 with gold bangles
 with fancy sandals.
 Mother! have seen you
 burning the soles of your feet in the harsh summer sun
 hanging your little ones in a cradle on an acacia tree
 carrying barrels of tar
 working on a road construction crew...

I have seen you
 with a basket of earth on your head
 rags bound on your feet
 giving a sweaty kiss to the naked child
 who came tottering over to you,
 working for your daily wage, working, working...
 I have seen you
 turning back the tide of tears
 trying to ignore your stomach's growl
 suffering parched throat and lips
 building a dam on a lake...

I have seen you
 for a dream of four mud walls
 stepping carefully, pregnant,
 on the scaffolding of a sky scraper
 carrying a hod of wet cement on your head...
 I have seen you
 evenings, untying the end of your sari
 for the coins to buy salt and oil,
 putting a five-paise coin
 on a little hand
 saying "go eat candy"
 taking the little bundle from the cradle of your breast

saying "Study, become an Ambedkar
 and let the baskets fall from my hands"...

I have seen you
 sitting in front of the stove
 burning your very bones
 to make coarse bread and a little something
 to feed everybody, but half-fed yourself
 so there'd be a bit in the morning...

I have seen you
 washing clothes and cleaning pots
 in different households
 rejecting the scraps of food offered to you
 with pride
 covering yourself with a sari
 that had been mended so many times
 saying, "Don't you have a mother or sister?"
 to anyone who looked at you with lust in his eyes...

I have seen you
 on a crowded street with a market basket on your head
 trying always to keep your head covering with the end of
 your sari
 chasing anyone who nudged you deliberately
 with your sandals in your hand...

I have seen you working until sunset
 piercing the darkness to turn toward home,
 then forcing from the door
 that man who staggered in from the hooch hut...

I have seen you
 at the front of the Long March
 the end of your sari tucked tightly at the waist
 shouting "Change the name,"
 taking the blow of the police stick on your upraised
 hands
 going to jail with head held high...

I have seen you
 saying when your only son
 fell martyr to police bullets
 "you died for Bhim, your death means something"
 saying boldly to the police
 "If I had two or three sons, I would be fortunate.
 They would fight on."

I have seen you
 on your death bed
 giving that money you earned
 rag-picking to the *diksha bhumi*
 saying with your dying breath

Translated into English by
 Aparna Lanjewar Bos

"Live in unity...fight for Baba...don't forget him..."
and with your very last breath
"Jai Bhim"

I have seen you...
I have never seen you
ever wearing a new gold-bordered sari

Mother, I have seen you...

(Translated by Sylvie Martines, S.K. and Vimal Thorat and
Eleanorr Zelliott)

Jyoti Laxmiwar
Translated into English by
Aparna Laxmiwar 2020

SUKIRTHARANI

I TELL THEM UPFRONT

Peeling the skin of dead cows,
I shooed the crows away.
Boasted that I ate
fresh, steaming rice
when
really
I waited hours
to eat leftovers.

On the streets,
I skulked,
every time
my father passed by,
leather-drum round his neck.

Friendless,
I wept,
on the back bench.
When my teacher caned me,
I didn't reveal
father's occupation,
income per annum.

Now
If anyone asks
I tell them upfront
I am a *parachi*.

(*parachi*: A woman of the Dalit Paraya caste. The word is
used as an abuse by caste Hindus)

(Translated by K Srilata and Subashree Krishnaswamy)

DU SARASWATHI

BACHISU

Narasimha got up late. Usually an early riser, he was utterly exhausted with the work of the previous day. The 'Festival of Bengaluru' had generated a lot of garbage and much sweeping had to be done. Today he slept till afternoon. Rising at two, he had his meal and started for the market, where he would look for some wage labour as a coolie.

'Appa', his beloved daughter Lakshmi called out
'Yes dear?'

'Appa give me money if you have some. I have some, and I shall buy half a kg mutton and cook it for dinner.' Tears came to Narasimha's eyes as he looked at his pregnant daughter filling up the doorway. He had brought her home a week back. Since then, far from mutton, not even rice cooked with jaggery had been made. 'Curse this bloody poverty...'

Seeing tears in her father's eyes Lakshmi said, 'It's alright, leave it, Appa...'

'No, no, I have money with me; pregnant daughter at home and I didn't even ask what she would like to eat, so I was feeling bad...' He dug into both pockets and produced forty rupees totally, which he gave to her saying, 'Here, don't waste your money; buy the meat, just for yourself, and make it. The Mariamman festival is approaching: we shall cook more meat at that time and have it.' And he left.

It's not for me, Lakshmi was about to say. But she did not say it, as she wanted it to be a surprise. Instead she called after him, 'Appa, I will make half kg mutton and also ragi balls. You come home early, so that you can eat it hot.'

Narasimha was moved by her love. He retraced his steps and held her face in his hands and caressed her cheeks. 'I must have been your son in a previous birth,' he said.

'Appa is Appa, I must tell *Mama* to settle down here. Back there, is not even a piece of land, and no coolie work even as there has been no rain. At least we can be of help to Amma and Appa if we come here,' Lakshmi thought. She took a bag, fastened the door, and started for the mutton shop, ruminating. 'It is winter. I must not buy sheep's mutton, which is said to be 'cold'. It is not good for Amma, who leaves for work early in the morning. I shall buy goat's meat, cook it nicely and serve it to her hot. Poor Amma; god is so cruel not to have written a good life into her fate.'

She quickened her pace. At that moment the little one in her womb kicked hard, as if to remind her of its existence. She addressed it: 'Hey shut up! You'll get your share through me, why are you kicking up a noise?' She laid a careful hand on her stomach for a moment in reassurance before she moved on.

She bought half a kg of goat's meat from the mutton shop. Then she bought ginger and coriander in a small vegetable



shop, and in Kaka's shop she bought coconut pieces and chana dal. She came home and cut the meat into small pieces and smeared it with turmeric powder. She lit the kerosene stove and heated groundnut oil in a vessel, added onion, garlic and ginger to the hot oil and stirred it as it sizzled. Mixing the meat into this, she covered the vessel with a plate. As the meat cooked, she washed the grinding stone and ground a mixture of coconut, chana, coriander, bay leaves, garlic and ginger into a fine paste. 'This masala will give the meat an irresistible flavour; at least today Amma must eat her fill; she has not so much as touched the ragi balls for three days,' thought Lakshmi.

Lakshmi knew very well what makes Amma go off food. As a little girl she regularly accompanied her mother on the sweeping round, despite Amma's protests. Amma would want her to sleep a little longer, go to school. Stay back, Amma would say, 'Get up and wash your face and ask Grandma next door to comb your hair; eat roti and then go to school.' This was Anjinamma's daily morning chant. But Lakshmi ignored it. Fond of sleeping on Amma's tummy, she knew when Amma got up, and would rise with her. She did not like to be left alone at home. Deaf to Amma's instructions, she would follow her everywhere. If she was forcibly left at home she would cry at the top of her voice. Sometimes Amma would shout in frustration, 'I have swept roads with you in my tummy and kept you as a baby by the roadside as I swept. No wonder you can think of nothing but the broom. God has written the broom into your fate too. No school in your fate...' Yet, while she took Lakshmi with her she never let her touch the broom. In warm weather she made Lakshmi play under a tree while she worked. Sometimes Appa made a swing with a rope and a gunnybag for Lakshmi to play. After the sweeping round, Appa went to the market for coolie work, and Amma had jobs in two houses nearby where she cleaned vessels, washed clothes, and did the sweeping and swabbing. Lakshmi often followed her to these houses too, and then her mother fed her all the leftover eatables that she was given in these houses. Sometimes she went with her father to the market, where she got carrots and sometimes fruits. Appa would search the best in the waste and wipe it clean with the cloth on his shoulder before he gave it to her. Lakshmi laughed to herself remembering what her husband had said — 'Eating nice food in the city you are like a pure bred jersey cow!' Let him come here, she smiled, and I shall call him 'skeleton ox from the drought area' and pull his nose! She added salt to the meat. The mouth watering aroma of meat cooking with garlic and onion rose warm from the pot.

She gathered the ground masala from the grinding stone, washed the stone and collected the water also; and added the masala to the meat. The aroma of this will make Amma eat a bellyful, she thought. But when will her life be free from the brooms? Whenever Amma lifted the stinking dead cats and dogs she would stop eating for two-three days. She was able to only drink coffee, tea, gruel. She would not

touch food.

After the masala paste was added, the flavour of the meat filled the house. Appa will sniff it and say 'Merely to smell it makes me hungry. If I eat I can eat not less than two ragi balls.' Whatever I prepare it's nice for him. But Amma cooks tastier than me. She is good in whatever she does. I must tell her to prepare dry fish and fried *avarekalu*. Though she doesn't like the strong smell of fish, she will not mind cooking it for me. Again Lakshmi reflected, by god's grace if something works out *Mama* and I can settle here. It will be good for amma and appa.

At this very time Anjinamma was trying to gather all her energy into pushing the cart containing four plastic drums of garbage, up a slope. The garbage lorry stood at the roadside on top of the incline. Her shoulders were tired, thighs were shaking. She reached the lorry and told Obalesu sitting in it to lift the drums and empty the garbage into the lorry. Then she sat under a roadside tree to rest a bit.

Anjinamma is always neat. She pulls her hair into a tight bun and holds it in place with hair pins. Not a single strand ever falls on her face. The pallu of her saree is tucked tight into the waist so that it does not get displaced while sweeping. To tuck it tight she ties her under-skirt tight. On top she wears the green coat on which Swacha Bengaluru is inscribed. She does up all the buttons of the coat. Whether she sweeps the road, cleans the gutter, lifts the garbage, or plucks the weeds, she never makes her clothes dirty. Perfectly neat in her job, she maintains her personal neatness also, which is why people in the area call her for domestic work. She is small built. Generally her face is expressionless; but when she smiles her face is lit up and transformed. She stands straight with one hand kept behind her. Her speech is direct and forceful like an arrow. It is only when she speaks that one makes the acquaintance of the indomitable spirit in that petite body.

Earlier Anjinamma, along with others, had worked at clearing the wilderness for developing the beautiful residential extension Vidyanagar, which had come up in the area earlier called Sannathimmenahalli. It had been full of thorny or poisonous weeds, ant-hills, mounds and ravines, congress grass, snakes, and varieties of insects, when she joined the job of cleaning this area 10-12 years back. Her salary was just 300 rupees. When contractors had come to Kullappa Palya slum to recruit people for cleaning work they had promised that the job would be made permanent under Bangalore city Corporation. The Narsimha—Anjinamma couple had been among many who joined eagerly in the hope of a permanent job. Ten-twelve years passed to the chant of 'a contract now, permanent later'. The contractors fished in the waters of innocent people's sweat, and caught the fish of profits using the contract as some kind of fishing rod with the worm of permanent job hooked to it. The contractors led a cosy golden life while the lives of poor workers were burnt as coal.

Pulling out big weeds to clear the land the workers never knew whether their hands would next touch a snake or shit... Unafraid of the snake, unshaken by the shit, they worked at clearing the vegetation and levelling the pits and troughs and made the grounds even. The land was developed into a beautiful posh extension but the lives of the workers remained unchanged. Even this drudgery did not kill Anjinamma's spirit. If unquestioning faith is the essence of devotion then one can call Anjinamma a perfect devotee, worthy of a place by her god.

Wages never flowed as fast as the workers' sweat flowed. Moving upwards slowly the wage level had reached 1000 and got stuck there. Comrade Unnikrishnan has been tirelessly telling the workers that according to the rules they must get minimum wage of 1800/- per month, and also gum boots, gloves, mask, PF & ESI. 'The owners are thugs,' he keeps saying, 'they give 1000 rupees to you, and get your thumb print and in the books maintained for the corporation they show it as 1500 rupees. They make profit out of poor workers' blood and lead five star life style. You should all learn reading and writing, and unite to protect your rights.' Unnikrishnan is 'Sameru' (lord) for Anjinamma, though he insists on being addressed as comrade. Anjinamma is as faithful to the struggle as she is to her god. She who worked so sincerely had a mighty heart and unbending spirit.

As she was sitting under a tree, her eyes began to water. She was not crying. This had been happening for the past few months. The doctor who examined her said that her eyes required an operation, after which she should rest for two weeks and avoid dust and dirt. Recalling this, Anjinamma thought, the maistri who would not even allow us to eat breakfast, and who shouts at us if we put our behinds to the ground even for a few seconds—will he give leave for 15 days? He speaks as if his boneless tongue wags without control. When Nariamamma asked for a new broom as it was worn out he asked her to remove her saree and use it to sweep. Can't he respect her age at least? Let him say such things to me, I will scratch his face with the back of the broom. If one takes leave for two days one is sure of losing the job, how can one get two weeks' leave? Particularly after the episode of Ayudha Pooja arathi he is looking for opportunities to get his own back at me. Anjinamma silently laughed remembering that episode.

How we fought for the new salary, went and met many big people many times, shouted so much in front of the corporation office. The Commissioner said it will happen; the Government passed the order for the new salary. Days moved ahead of the orders day but their salary lagged behind. Our footwear, legs, money, voice, everything got worn out. It was unbearable. She could not restrain herself when the inspector came for checking, and burst out asking the owner, 'What Samy (Swami), our salary came to the court, to the Vidhana Soudha, and also to the corporation, but we have not got it in our hands, we have not seen it

with our eyes. It is not a favour that we are asking for, Samy, we are only asking for the price of our sweat. You would be blessed if you give, we shall light lamps in your name.' The owner was furious and turned away as if someone had put chilli in his asshole. Later on how he shouted at and insulted her.

The day after the incident, Anjinamma was worried that she may lose the job. Instead there was a message from the owner to get all the carts to the next ward to do Ayudha Puja and take *bachisu*.

The workers were hopeful of the new salary also. When they went, all preparations for puja were ready and the worship was about to begin. However, they were not invited to join the puja or bring their carts for it. The owner watched them covertly with cruel satisfaction in his eyes. When arathi was made, the workers were ignored. Anjinamma quickly understood the insult and told the others 'Come, let's go back'. As they turned their carts, the owner said in a loud voice, 'For lifting the garbage they want the same salary as an office-goer. But just the word *bachisu* made them come here sniffing like dogs,' and he spat. Anjinamma had to swallow the insult but it was like poison.

The next day Anjinamma collected 10 rupees from each worker, and things needed for pooja were brought. They washed all their carts. They timed the pooja for the owner's arrival and offered arathi to him. He in his embarrassment had to put 200 rupees on the arathi plate. He wanted to leave immediately. Before he left Bagya offered him a small sweet packet with 50 rupees tucked in the rubber band. He took it and was about to give it to the driver, when Anjinamma politely said, 'Please take the gift from us poor workers, it is out of hard earned money, take it home and give your wife and children, let all of you be blessed.' Remembering the incident Anjinamma wiped her eyes. Because I don't cry, she thought, god has given me this eye problem to remind me that eyes are for tears.

Maistri came there, and seeing Anjinamma he shouted, 'We don't pay for simply sitting, get up and go to 7th Road; some dead thing must be stinking there, someone has complained.' She got up and went to 7th Road without uttering a word.

As soon as she entered the road the stink hit her nose. She quickly found the source. It was under the stone slab next to the gutter. She guessed how it had happened. The woman in the stone building always buys buns to feed the street dogs. To escape from the big dogs the little puppy has gone under the slab to eat and has got stuck between the slabs and died. No way to remove it with the broom: it has to be lifted by hand. God has again snatched away my two days' food, she said to herself, and let her hand into the hole. As the carcass had decomposed, it disintegrated as she tried to lift it, and only part of it came up in her hand. She shoved the slab to a side with the broom and pushed the rest of the carcass onto a plank; covered it with mud and threw it into the plastic garbage bin. The smell was

nauseating. She went to the public tap, took her bit of soap from its hiding place, and turned the tap open with her forearm to wash her hands. She washed them two-three times. Then she went to give attendance in the *must*, and left for her round of domestic work. By the time she finished her work in the two houses she was drained of all energy, physically and mentally. Dragging her aching legs slowly, she reached home.

Lakshmi was waiting on the doorstep. Seeing her mother she said in happy excitement, 'Wash your hands and feet, Amma, there is hot water.' Anjinamma felt through her fatigue, it is I who should be pampering her, instead she is looking after me. To assuage her guilt she murmured, 'Some *avarekaalu* is lying in the kitchen, tomorrow I shall come early; tell appa to get dry fish, I'll make a tasty gravy of fish and *avarekaalu* for you.'

Lakshmi's eyes danced as she thought of the treat that she had prepared for her mother. 'Amma, you can even have a bath if you like, I have heated enough water. I'll scrub your back for you.'

'I'll have a bath,' Anjinamma acquiesced. 'No need to scrub my back. But make some tea, I'll have it after my bath.'

It's time to eat and she wants tea, Lakshmi grumbled to herself. Not eating, drinking tea and coffee all the time has dried up her insides. Let her bathe and come, I'll make her eat well today!

She heard her father calling outside, and hurried out to greet him.

'Gently, dear, take care. I've brought jilebi and khara for you. Is your cooking done?'

Lakshmi winked. 'Amma does not know.' Narasimha nodded and washed his face as Lakshmi poured the water for him. Anjinamma came out after her bath and asked for her tea. 'No tea for you, you have become like a dry stick,' Lakshmi scolded affectionately. 'You come and eat.' She served out meat gravy and ragi balls on three plates and took her mother by the hand and seated her before a plate. She smiled mischievously. 'Didn't your nose get the flavour?'

Filled with the stink of dead dog, Anjinamma's nose could not discern the delicious aroma of the food that her daughter had cooked for her.

'Taste and tell me how it is.' Lakshmi's face bloomed with happiness. Seeing this, Anjinamma tried. She picked with her fingers at the ragi ball; but its texture felt like the decomposed body that she had handled earlier in the day. Tears welled up in her eyes. They were real tears of grief.

Not understanding the tears Lakshmi remarked, 'You must have that operation. I shall stay and take care of you. Eat, Amma, you won't enjoy the food if the ragi balls go cold.'

Narasimha was engrossed in eating, silently appreciative of his daughter's culinary skill. Except for the bent head and the steady sound of munching, he may have been meditating.

The daughter was fulfilling the hunger of the big tummy.

Anjinamma got up for water. As she was taking water from the pot, some spilt on the floor. She looked for the cloth to wipe it. Observing this Lakshmi commented, 'God has not written in your fate that you are to eat properly.' Before she could complete the sentence she felt a catch in her waist and the baby moving downward. Frightened, she shouted, 'Amma!'

Anjinamma went to her swiftly and held and consoled her. 'Don't be afraid. If you get pains twice more we shall go to the hospital.' But it seemed the baby had been waiting to taste the delicious meat before trying to come out. Narasimha broke his meditation and ran to get Ramanji's auto. Lakshmi's pains came again, more frequent and intense. She held on to her mother tightly, and left her only when taken to the labour ward. Without much delay Lakshmi's 'Chinna' arrived in this world.

The newborn had only two fingers in the right hand and three in his left hand. Those fingers too were not properly formed. The doctor pronounced that a surgery could be performed after three months, which would remedy matters to the extent that the child would be able to use his hands. Silence fell on the room. His three listeners were in wordless agony like a bird pierced with an arrow through the chest. The child cried loudly as if to break the silence.

Anjinamma pulled the arrow from her chest and spoke to the doctor. 'How much money would the operation require?' Narasimha, in the meantime, held the newborn against the warmth of his body and stroked his daughter's head gently.

After speaking with the doctor Anjinamma came up to her daughter and seeing her pensive face said, 'You must not lose heart at misfortunes in life, Lakshmi. When god gives us good things we take it with both hands; when he gives what is not so good we must accept that too and never refuse it. Only say to him, you gave me this, now show me the way to deal with it. My dear, the child will be all right after the operation; did you notice how active he is, how strong his voice when he cried?'

Lakshmi replied, 'Amma, I was pensive only because I was recalling how much you tried to make me go to school but I never heeded you; now there is no way but to send this child to school. You ask why? This child can only hold a pen in two fingers and never a broom. God has given this gift, why should I refuse?'

(Translated by Radha Arun & Du Saraswathi)

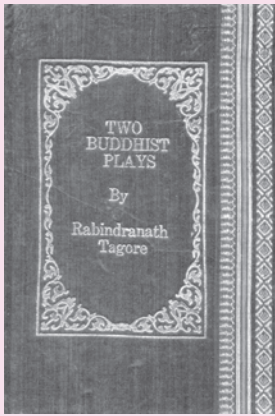
Bachisu: Tips or bakshish

Mama: Mama or 'maternal uncle' is also used for husband in communities in which it is customary to marry the maternal uncle, actual or removed.

Avarekkalu: A variety of beans, are a favourite food among Kannadigas. Owner: It is a colloquial usage in Bangalore for the boss in a private set-up. For example, the word may be used by a domestic worker to refer to the head of a household. Unnikrishnan uses the word to refer to the contractors.

Must: Place where the workers gather three times a day to give attendance.

Two Buddhist Plays by Rabindranath Tagore



Translated from Bengali
by Shyamasree Devi
Publisher: A Writers
Workshop Publication
Number of Pages: 75
Price: Rs. 100/-

Two *Buddhist Plays* by Rabindranath Tagore, translated from the Bengali by Shyamasree Devi, consists of *The Court Dancer* and *Chandalika*. As suggested by the title of the book, the two plays are embodiments of Buddhist teaching.

The Court Dancer (*Natir Puja*) has as its central character a girl named Srimati, a professional dancer and a devotee of the Buddha. Srimati has been chosen by the Buddhist Order to offer worship before the Buddha stupa on Vasant Purnima day. Knowing this, Ratnavali, the eldest princess, out of spite insists on making her dance at the same time and at the same place, and influences the king, who issues an order. This would have been sacrilege. But Srimati obeys the order, and turns the dance into a beautiful act of worship.

Several conflicts are presented in this drama. First, there is the conflict between the old religion and the newer one, which turns violent. Followers of the other religion kill the Buddhist nuns and monks. And at the king's orders, the dancer Srimati is also slain.

The conflict between detachment and desire is expressed by Queen Lokeswari. Her husband, King Bimbisara has abdicated, giving way to Prince Ajatsatru, who wants to rule. And Prince Chitra, her cherished son, has left home to become a Buddhist monk. "Some have offered flowers, some lamps—I have given away my family, my home.... Must I still offer puja? You uproot the creeper, and then ask for flowers?" she says bitterly. And she laments, "I am a widow, though my husband lives. I am childless though I have a son."

There is also the conflict of arrogance and class pride embodied by Ratnavali, the eldest princess, against religious devotion and human equality personified by Srimati, the court dancer, whom Ratnavali is bent on humiliating. Ratnavali is not able to accept that a mere dancer has become a devotee held in honour. She tells Srimati, "I don't intend to visit heaven with you as my tourist guide. I would rather have death than a dancing girl masquerading as a moral guide." And when a Buddhist nun is murdered, she casually remarks, "The Bhikshuni was killed by Devadatta's men. Why worry about it? Her father was just a farmer."

All these conflicts are resolved in the final scene. Srimati is struck down by a guard while asking for forgiveness at the same time. Queen Lokeswari throws down her jewels and chants the Buddhist mantra. And finally, even Princess Ratnavali falls down at the feet of Srimati's corpse. The Buddha has triumphed.

A striking feature of *The Court Dancer* is that all the main actors are women. Even the two guards at the palace garden are women. And though King Bimbisara, King Ajatsatru and Prince Chitra—major characters—are talked about, they do not appear on stage. Only the women are seen and heard. This is remarkable, considering that when the play was first written, it was still very rare for women to act in theatres.

Chandalika is a short play of only two scenes. It deals with the subject of untouchability. Prakriti, the main character, is a Chandalika. When she wants to buy milk from a milkman and bangles from a bangle man, the girls from her village tell the sellers "Shame on you. Don't touch her. She is a Chandalika. She is untouchable."

But Prakriti's life changes when a Buddhist monk named Ananda asks her for water by her well. When she replies that she is a Chandalika so her well water is impure, he replies, "I am a human. You are a human too.... Any water that soothes and cools the throat is pure." And he calls her "blessed maiden."

After the incident, Prakriti pines for Ananda and persuades her mother to bring him to her through magic spells. This causes him suffering. But when he arrives and she asks him to forgive her, he readily does so.

The theme of forgiveness, non-violence and equality as taught by the Buddha are eloquently brought out in the *Two Buddhist Plays*.

Chants, songs and poetic language are effectively used in both the plays. Besides, the plays conform to the Aristotelian classical unities—unities of action, time and place. But they do so in a smooth, easy manner, unlike the stiff form adopted by some neo-classical dramatists.

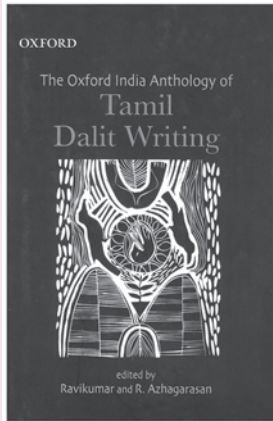
Thus, *Two Buddhist Plays* is of interest from different angles.
—Malsawmi Jacob

Congratulations to social activist **Ela Bhatt** for being selected for the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development 2011.

Ela Bhatt, founder of the NGO Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was selected on 19th November, 2011 for the award constituted by Indira Gandhi Memorial Trust by an international jury headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The award was announced by trust secretary Suman Dubey, who said Bhatt's life is "a lesson in dedication and commitment in caring for the under-privileged and weak, in devoting oneself to the welfare of others."

Ela Bhatt also founded the SEWA cooperative bank, the first women's bank in India. Dubey said Ms Bhatt has been selected for the award for her "lifetime achievements in comprehensively empowering women in India and elsewhere through grassroots entrepreneurship, access to shelter, healthcare, micro-finance, micro-insurance, skills, legal services, collective bargaining power and many other means, and thereby promoting equitable development and peace."

Tamil Dalit Writing



Edited by: Ravikumar &
R Azhagarasan
Publisher: Oxford University
Press
Number of Pages: 334
Price: Rs. 595/-

The Oxford India Anthology of *Tamil Dalit Writing*, edited by Ravikumar and R Azhagarasan, contains a collection of writings for over a century. The volume includes 78 selections and 41 writers from late nineteenth century to recent times. It covers poetry, fiction, drama, autobiography, biography, and archival and contemporary critical prose. The book may be considered the most representative collection of Tamil Dalit writing in recent times.

Tamil Dalit writing first established itself as a protest literature, but eventually went far beyond it, challenging stereotypes. In this volume both types—those written with strong Dalit consciousness and those with the wider scope of human condition—are included.

The book has eighteen odd pages of informative General Introduction where the editor Ravikumar traces the history of Dalit Identity and of political development in Tamil Nadu.

The poetry selection of this volume 'simultaneously affirms and interrogates the Dalit identity.' They not only capture the reality of Dalit life, but move beyond it to convey the totality of Dalit experience, of the ever present threat of caste-based violence. In this process, the poets harness the idiom and lore of their people for creating striking images. Here is a powerful example:

The 'dung milk'
my forefathers were given to drink
is what I'm vomiting
as poetry. ('Missing' by Yazhan Aathi)

The poets in the selection do not toe a generic line but use their individual voices in conveying the experience:

A wilderness of reeds....
where you can
wash your cattle
rinse your shit-rags
clean your arse

where we alone
may not fetch

Book Review

water. ('Pond Where...' by Ravikumar)

In terms of language use, some critics have accused Dalit poetry of relying on harsh and even abusive diction to convey its message. However, this is not true of all the poets. ND Rajkumar, for instance, does not believe in confining poetry within ideology and a look at some of his poems in this collection would refute the accusation. The simple but lovely poem 'My Son Wants Me to Buy Him a toy Car' for instance:

My son wants me to buy him a toy car
It's shut inside a glass case; so I give him
A play cart fashioned from palm fruit and twigs.

The short story of Dalit writers is often semi-fictionalised records of events. Hence they are true to life in a literal sense. Several of the stories in this book demand the reader's engagement and evoke their conscience. These are not meant to merely entertain or inform. 'Ailment' by Abimani is a case in point. Ravikumar's 'On Knowing the Truth' is a highly emotionally charged story whose beauty lies in its understated narration. JB Sanakya's 'The Force of Gravity' is another terrible yet beautiful sample that strongly appeals for human compassion and understanding.

On the other hand, stories like S Thenmozhi's 'Paychi Tree', Bama's 'This Man' and Azhakiya Periyavan's 'Eardrum' have a different kind of appeal. They showcase certain characteristics of the community with a humane and humorous touch. Imayam's 'The Binding Vow' deals with the villagers' superstition from which the pujari receives rich dividend. The story of a little girl called Maikkanni in an excerpt from Bama's novel 'Events' has deep pathos with a veneer of humour.

The Prose section consists of archival materials, speeches, autobiographical writings and scholarly articles. These writings are intellectually stimulating.

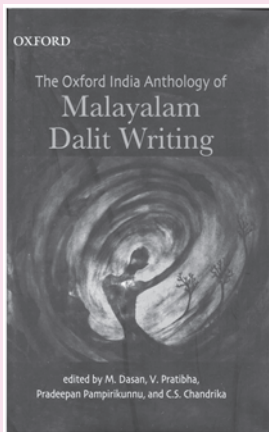
Veerammal's 'Ideological Difference with Periyar' is an autobiographical piece but written in the third person. Here she makes an interesting suggestion to promote inter-caste marriages to do away with untouchability. Bama's 'Karukku', describing caste discriminations and exploitation of the poor in convent schools, contrary to the religion's teaching, is disturbing. Caste discrimination practiced among Christians and the educational backwardness of Mohammedans are the objections made by Iyothee Thass against conversion to these religions in 'An Argument Against Conversion' from the Archives section. The Inspector General of Registration, Madras, had suggested that the only way for the 'Pariahs' to progress was to convert to either of those religions.

It is commonly admitted that translation from one language to another—and with it from the sensibility of one culture to another—is no easy task. The translator may be faced with a choice between making it read well in English and faithfully conveying the original sense. Perhaps in opting for the latter, in some parts of this book the language is a bit stilted and clumsy.

All in all, the anthology makes an engrossing read.

—Malsawmi Jacob

Malayalam Dalit Writing



Edited by: M Dasan,
V Pratibha, Pradeepan
Pamprikkunnu and C S
Chandrika
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Number of Pages: 322
Price: Rs. 595/-

The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing presents the works of writers from the early twentieth century to recent times, covering a period of over 100 years. The volume contains 55 selections of poetry, fiction, plays, archival prose and critical works by 36 Dalit writers and is edited by M Dasan, V Pratibha, Pradeepan Pamprikkunnu and C S Chandrika.

Malayalam Dalit literature draws its energy from engaging with anti-caste sentiments. Mainstream critics and reviewers, unable to understand or accept the truth of Dalit experiences and perspectives, often label their writings as 'bitter', 'biased', 'militant', 'angry', and tend to exclude them from 'serious literary' writing. Most Indian publishers get influenced by these views, resulting in the restriction of publication to Dalit writing. This anthology has given an opportunity to these long silenced and neglected voices from the fringes of Kerala society to be heard.

The poetic tradition of Kerala Dalits has its origin in the oral culture. Before they began to write down their poetry, they used to refer to their oral renderings as *paattu*, meaning 'song.' These songs were composed around three main themes: their daily labour, history and news (sung by professional singers), and ritualistic practices.

There was a sharp turn from these traditions in the works of Poikayil Yohannan. His songs were more individualistic, and directly addressed caste issues. He laments—

*About my race...
I see no alphabet
about my race....
The story of how
a people who lived from times long ago
in Keralam
came to be lowly on earth....*

The rest of the poets in the anthology differ widely in their craftsmanship and ideological stands. The poet Raghavan Atholi writes in a manner of the possessed ritualistic performer—

*Somebody cleans up the blood
on the claws of the vultures*

*that fall upon
the half-burnt corpses....
Children serve a banquet of justice
and go to their hungry death on the streets. ('Justice Cooked')*

*Dried up river and elusive tide
Menstruating goats
Rivers that never wash away the pollution.... ('Where Hunger is Sold')*

Some of the poets, on the other hand, experiment with loose prosaic forms. They put on a seemingly detached note even when it is packed with emotion:

*On the hillslope we had a lot of land....
Once returning from school,
Grandmother said
Child, you needn't go back there...
On what Achachan lost for a bottle of toddy....*

*Many days later....
I lost my amamma
... I found she'd left the vegetables and fish
On the banks and was down in the stream washing her face.
Not because she felt like weeping. (S Kalesh 'Not Because She Felt Like Weeping')*

Though short fiction was produced in Kerala around mid-19th century, Dalit short fiction emerged in the 20th century, in the period known as the 'Kerala Renaissance.' A characteristic of this period was zeal for social reformation. TKC Vaduthala's 'Sweet-offering at Chankranthy' included in this volume reflects this. Focus on class exploitation is another characteristic of this period. Paul Chirakkarode focuses on Dalit conversion to Christianity and its related problems, represented here by the story 'Nostalgia.' C Ayyappan, while exploring the Dalit identity, blends a unique craft and sharp intellect. He deals with the issue of Dalit elitism in the intriguing story 'Madness.'

The novel in Malayalam, first published in 1878, focussed on an explication and analysis of day-to-day life in Kerala right from the beginning. The excerpts from novels presented in this collection also follow the same trend. Excerpts from *When Shackles Break* by TKC Vaduthala and *The Pulaya Ghetto* by Paul Chirakkarode challenge the Pulayas to stand up for themselves in order to improve their status and living conditions. But in *The Festival at Muthan Kavu*, D Rajan affirms the traditional practices of Parayas.

In the drama section, A Santhakumar's *Dreamhunt*, a surreal tragic play is presented. And the Life Writings section contains excerpts from biographical and autobiographical writings. Mangrove planter Kallen Pokkudan's 'My Life' throws light on his struggles and the attitudes of people in the society.

While the book offers interesting and moving reading, the English language of some of the pieces is quite bad, hindering enjoyment. Barring that, this anthology is definitely worth a perusal.

—Malsawmi Jacob

Indira Goswami
November 14, 1942– November 29, 2011



Indira Goswami, noted Assamese author, scholar and Jnanpith award winner, popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami, died on 29th November, 2011, after a prolonged illness. She was 69. She was India's first Prince Clause Laureate and former professor in Delhi University.

Goswami was involved with various literary, educational and cultural organizations in various capacities. A member of Sahitya Akademi, she was also a member of the governing body of Delhi University.

She authored several award winning books. Her treatise 'Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra' is considered a literary masterpiece.

Goswami had also played a crucial role as a peace-broker when she offered to become a mediator between the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the government in 2005.

Condoling her death, Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi said the death of writer Indira Raisom Goswami was not only an "irreparable loss" to Assamese literature, but also to India as a whole.

—Malsawmi Jacob

Sharada Dwivedi
1942– February 6, 2012



Sharada Dwivedi, the Mumbai based historian and researcher, passed away on 6th February, 2012 after a brief illness. She was 69. Author of several books on the history and culture of Mumbai, she was also on the panel of the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee.

Considered Bombay's finest biographer, she loved the city with a passion. Through her writings, she brought to life the history and architecture of the city. She is credited with opening the eyes of many Mumbaikars to the history in their midst. Among her most famous works is *Bombay, the Cities Within* (1995).

She was the person anyone who wanted to know anything about the city's history would go to. From students to researchers, conservationists to journalists, she was the unquestioned treasure trove of the city's archives and she shared her knowledge with a spirit of generosity.

Sharada was also a champion of the city's heritage. She fought to save its heritage buildings. She tirelessly raised funds and much needed awareness. She was actively involved with the Urban Design Research Institute, Kala Ghoda Association and other citizen groups. She is survived by her husband and daughter. Not only her family, but many others will miss her. Her death is a great loss to the city of Mumbai.

—Malsawmi Jacob

Rani Jethmalani
1961 – December 31, 2011



Rani Jethmalani, social activist and Supreme Court lawyer passed away on 31st December, 2011 of terminal illness. Ms. Jethmalani, daughter of renowned lawyer Ram Jethmalani, worked relentlessly for women's rights. "She was a fiery social activist," her brother Mahesh

Jethmalani commented. "She was a crusader for women's rights. She was in the forefront in the Supreme Court to fight many cases about dowry, bride-burning," he said.

Women's rights issue was very close to Ms. Jethmalani's heart. She founded the Mahila Dakshata Samiti to campaign against the social evils against women. Commit-2-Change, a non-profit organisation, where she served as a board member, described her as a lawyer who made "most significant advances in the area of dowry and dowry-death related cases. Her innovative use of public interest litigation in criminal trials challenged societal and cultural trends."

She also co-founded the WARLAW (Women's Action Research and Legal Action for Women) to research and challenge the outdated traditions, and to make the implementation and practice of law more gender-neutral. She is survived by an adopted son, who is also a lawyer.

—Malsawmi Jacob

Homai Vyarawalla
December 9, 1913– January 15, 2012



Homai Vyarawalla, India's first woman photo journalist, died on 15th January, 2012, at age 98. She had captured the flag hoisting ceremony at Red Fort on August 15, 1947 and several historic events, and she was the 2011 Padma Vibhushan winner.

Homai was the only professional woman photojournalist between 1939 and 1970. Her presence in the male-dominated field was significant, as the codes of this profession largely continue to exclude women even today.

An obtrusive photographer who liked to capture her subjects in their natural poses, Vyarawalla has also covered the visits of Queen Elizabeth and former US President Dwight D Eisenhower. She took a number of memorable photographs during her career. Her favourite subject was Nehru, about whom she remarked that he used to be surprised at seeing her in his functions.

Many of her photographs were published as photo-stories in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Time*, *Life*, *The Black Star*, *Paul Popper* and numerous other international publications.

She also took a series of pictures on a day in the life of Indian firemen during wartime, right from receiving a distress call to sliding down poles into an appliance room, from picking up uniforms neatly arranged in rows to dousing the fire. It appeared in the *Illustrated*

Weekly of India in the 1940s.

Vyarawala worked under a different professional name and the identity she had chosen was 'Dalda 13'. The reasons behind her choice of this rather amusing name were that her birth year was 1913, she got married at the age of 13 and her first car's number plate read 'DLD 13'. She was in the profession for nearly four decades before retiring in the early 1970s.

—Malsawmi Jacob

Remembering Dr Leela Dube

March 27, 1923– May 20, 2012



Dr Leela Dube was exceptional in many ways as a feminist anthropologist. Known internationally for her contributions, what makes her stand out is the way she brought her sympathy for feminism with the rigour of anthropology. Conventionally anthropology studies exotic cultures—the Eskimos, or islanders in South Pacific and so on. The western

scholars who undertook observation and interpretation of the culture of others could not escape the biases of their own context. Though there were some rare exceptions, by and large their interpretations missed the indigenous nuances and the views of the locals and the meaning they attributed to various functions and rituals. Leela Dube marked a departure from this in two ways: one by innovative methodology and second by meticulous research. Her work always had a comparative aspect so that she could isolate what was different where. Feminist theory as developed in the west postulated universal patriarchy. Dube provided an important corrective by bringing features like kinship that mediated the relations between men and women in non western societies and how age also mattered. She used folk lore and systematic analysis of symbols used.

Her study of how ideology works on Hindu girls in patrilineal India was an eye opener. Her comparative study of South and South East Asia brought new knowledge about different kinship systems and how they affected women's status. She never failed to conclude that not kinship alone but other hierarchies like class and caste mattered.

Apart from being an outstanding scholar, holding many important positions in national and international commissions, what distinguished Leela Dube was her humility and human kindness, lack of arrogance and encouragement to young scholars. We have lost indeed a rare personality, a feminist friend. That she still published at the age of 88, the year before she finally laid down her pen, speaks for her tireless commitment to her creed.

—Maithreyi Krishnaraj

Mrinal Gore

June 24, 1928– July 17, 2012



Mrinal Gore, a veteran Socialist leader and activist, passed away on 17th July, 2012. She was affectionately nicknamed 'Paniwali Bai' for her efforts to bring drinking water supply to Goregaon.

The 84 year old former MP was a pioneer visionary. Influenced in her young age by Mahatma Gandhi's Quit India movement, she left a promising career in medicine and joined the fight for social justice, organizing the poor and the disenfranchised. For more than half a century, she was involved in campaigning for women's rights, civil rights and communal harmony.

Along with her husband, Kesav Gore, she worked at building better civic infrastructure for the masses. When she became an MLA in 1972, she took up issues like atrocities on farmers, Dalits, tribals and women.

Mrinal Gore will be remembered for her contribution in nation building and for helping the underprivileged.

—Malsawmi Jacob

Captain Lakshmi Sehgal

October 24, 1914– July 23, 2012



Captain Lakshmi Sehgal, a veteran freedom fighter, died on 23rd July 2012 at age 97. She was a part of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army. She commanded the Rani of Jhansi Regiment in the INA.

A doctor by profession, Sehgal was working as a medical practitioner and a social worker. She was awarded

Padma Vibhushan in 1998.

Lakshmi had chosen to study medicine because of her desire to help the poor, especially poor women. She received an MBBS degree from Madras Medical College in 1938. A year later, she received her diploma in gynaecology and obstetrics.

In 1940, she left for Singapore, where she established a clinic for the poor, most of whom were migrant labourers from India. It was at this time that she began to play an active role in the India Independence League.

Captain Lakshmi Sehgal has been called 'one of the lion hearted women that India ever had.' It is said that she 'fought like a tigress' in the struggle for Indian independence. In later life, as a practising doctor in Kanpur, she retained her indomitable spirit and was a major attraction in seminars and conferences.

—Malsawmi Jacob

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

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 2 copies of the book.