

*A Lifetime of
Puppetry
&
Performance*



Lakshmi Ammal as Akshaya Kumaran,
a character in a mythological play.
Photo taken during performance



Muthulakshmi



S K Latha



Kanthammal as Arjuna
Photo taken during performance



Saroja



Kanthammal



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Sushmita Banerjee. Khorshed Gandhi & Shahjehan Aapa.



[Editor's Note]

For a while now SPARROW has been doing oral histories and archiving folk arts and folk artistes. In this issue of SNL we include details of some of the women artistes from Salem district, Tamil Nadu. Mu. Harikrishnan, founder of Kalari, an institution to document and promote folk arts, has been recording some excellent oral histories as a part of Kalari and also along with SPARROW. This issue carries an interview done by him of Jeya Chellappan, a shadow puppeteer and also a therukoothu artiste. Kalari has contributed some photographs from its archives for this SNL.

Like many things Nita Mukherjee does, *Voices from the Inner Courtyard*, a book on the music of Rajasthan and the life of Leela Somani, made its appearance quietly. Similarly Pe. Muthulingam has taken painstaking efforts to collect the songs of the Tamil diasporas and has published a book of archival value. Both the books have been reviewed in this SNL.

We have lost many important lives in the period between the last issue of SNL and this issue. The loss of women and men who have contributed to make our lives worthwhile in many ways, is always an irreparable loss. The only way to respect their work and their lives would be to continue their work and celebrate their lives. This SNL pays homage to fifteen people who have dedicated their lives to make this world a better place to live in.

Do write to us and do visit our website www.sparrowonline.org.



[In November 2009 I had gone around Salem District to meet folk artistes and puppeteers. The folk artistes whom I visited belong to street theatre groups called Therukoothu in Tamil—Theru (street) Koothu (performance). Normally the contribution of women to therukoothu is not recognised. I visited and spoke to women who played strong male roles and who have troupes of their own.]

The first therukoothu artiste I visited was Kanthammal at Vanavasi, Salem District. Kanthammal is 45 years old. She basically does male roles in street theatre plays all of which are from Mahabharata. She lives in the village Vanavasi with her husband Pachchiyappan and performs all around the district. Her father's name is Pazhanivelu and her mother's name is Pachchiyamma. Her father was her guru. She has been performing from the age of 9. She has six sisters: Elder sisters: Pazaniyamma, Valliamma, Parvathi, and younger sisters: Madhamma, Salamma and Thangam. Only Madhamma does female roles.

Kanthammal is famous for her roles as Arjunan (Arjun) and Aravan both characters from Mahabharata. She said that street theatre performers referred to as koothadigal in Tamil, are respected in their villages. All castes can be members of a troupe but marriage will be only within castes. She herself belongs to the Nayakkar community. She got married into a family of performers. Her husband Pachchiappan used to do the role of the announcer (kattiankaran) normally a comic role. But he could not give up his sleep and do overnight performances. He is now a bangle seller who goes from village to village selling bangles.

Kanthammal sang with her father playing on the harmonium (he was quite drunk) some of the songs from the plays along with one of her sisters.

At Kalikavundanoor I met Lakshmi Ammal. Lakshmi Ammal is no more. She passed away soon after our meeting. She lived in a small asbestos-roofed house with a room and a kitchen with her husband D.Rudhrayya who was also a performer. Lakshmi Ammal was about 75 and her husband was 94 years old. Lakshmi Ammal had traditionally played male roles in mythological plays. She comes from a family of performers. Her grandmother Kanthayee and her elder sister Poovayee and elder step sister (Her Father's first wife's daughter) Ammini Akka had an all female troupe of their own called Kanthayee-Poovayee-Ammini Akka Settu. (Settu in Tamil actually refers to a performing group. It is a distortion of the word 'Set' in English.) Lakshmi Ammal's father was also a performer and his name is Ramasami Kavundar.

D.Rudhrayya was a Brahmin who was attracted to street theatre. He had a wife and children and Lakshmi Ammal was his second wife. They have no children and after his first wife's death it was Lakshmi Ammal who had brought up his children. He was very old and she took care of him although she herself was old. She told me she used to have long hair but that she had shaved her head sometime back because she had made an offer to god. She was supposed to have looked at herself in the mirror after that and exclaimed, 'Oh, all my hair is gone!' and strangely after that her hair had not grown. When I met her she had taken to making costumes and other accessories for various artistes and hired them out and earned money from that. The costumes looked heavy with embroidery and studded with fur and stones for the male roles.

I also visited puppeteers who have been doing puppetry as a family tradition in which women play an important role. At Periya Seeragapadi, I met three from one such family of puppeteers. Muthulakshmi got married at the age of 15. She started learning puppetry from her father-in-law Semmalai who is known as the king of puppetry in this area (Bommalaatta Venthar), at the age of 18. She first started learning Lava-Kusa story from Ramayana. She gives voice to female puppets and does puppetry with female puppets.

Saroja is the daughter of Semmalai. She got married at the age of 18. She came back to her parents as her marriage did not work. She says her marital home was not as cultured as hers and even their language was coarse and she could not put up with that. She came back at the age of 25 and she does both female and male roles in puppetry.

Latha is the daughter of Muthulakshmi. She is 34. She plays the mridangam. She got married at the age of 16 with the condition that she should be allowed to perform. At one point the mridangam artist for a particular performance could not come and they called her and her in-laws would not allow her to go. She said that she had to save the honour of her grandfather as he was old and came away and never went back. This was within six months of her marriage. She was pregnant with a child when she came back. She is now a Balvadi teacher and is also a puppeteer.

Her daughter Nitya is now in college. Latha's elder sister Yasodha who served us snacks and tea is very much interested in the art but she is married to a police inspector who is dead against it and so she does not even say that she is interested. Her daughter Sowmya is a teacher.

In their family there is a lot of respect for women. And in the village they are respected. They travel for performances and in whichever village they go to perform, they often request the village women permission to use their toilets. It is difficult but they feel that puppetry is a heritage they have to preserve.

While doing the puppetry they wear jingles which are 3 kilos, on each foot. Each doll weighs about 15 to 20 kilos. They say that this art of puppetry was brought by an artist from Rajasthan. They do mostly mythological plays but of late the government uses their art for family planning and other propaganda for the government. They get about Rs.8000 per performance which lasts about 8 hours. In a year they get 40 performances. Latha has a brother who is also part of this and who is also a Siddha doctor and an astrologer.

An interesting meeting was with the woman leather puppeteer, Jeya Chellappan, who is also well-known as a therukoothu artiste. Meeting Jeya Chellappan was very important as she is the only leather puppeteer who is a woman. I met her in Ammapettai, where she lives, on 21st November 2009. She looked sad for she had had a stroke and was paralysed in her right hand. Around April 2009 a long interview was done by Harikrishnan, the editor of Manal Veedu magazine and the founder of Kalari, an institution for teaching, researching and documenting folk arts and folk artistes in Salem district.

Jeya only sang some songs as she could not demonstrate her art. She spoke well of the men of the family who were sitting around and who also sang. But later Hari told me that her husband had treated her badly and had often battered her. But her interview with him was more about her art than her personal travails although she does talk about the economic and social problems of artistes like her.

A shadow puppeteer has to use all fingers and toes for the puppetry and when a woman takes it up it is a difficult profession to keep up. She has to work even when she is ill or fully pregnant or even immediately after delivery sometimes. She had told Hari that at those times she would bleed heavily and she could literally feel the big clots of blood coming out of her body.

At the end of our meeting the men demanded drinks and money was given which some wives sitting there promptly took away as otherwise they would never see the money once the men go to liquor shops. Most men in these professions drink heavily and the women have to mind the family and take care of the finances.

Harikrishnan uses the pseudonym Thavasi Karuppusamy for the interviews he has done with folk artistes. He has put together his interviews of folk artistes in a book entitled Arungkoothu published in 2010. The interview done with Jeya Chellappan is a part of that book. Harikrishnan is a folk artiste himself and hence the folk artistes he interviews talk to him about their art and their life without any hesitation. It is normal for people to refer to a younger person as Thambi (younger brother) in conversations in Tamil. Jeya also addresses Thavasi Karuppusamy as Thambi several times in this conversation. C S Lakshmi]

A Conversation in Tamil

Jeya Chellappan in Dialogue with Thavasi Karuppusamy, April 2009



[Jeya Chellappan is a leather puppeteer and a therukoothu artiste. She lives in Ammapettai, Bhavani Taluk, Erode district. She is well-known in Namakkal, Erode, Salem and Dharmapuri districts as a leather puppeteer and also a therukoothu artiste. Of all the folk performing arts leather puppetry is the most challenging and the most difficult. Jeya has been doing leather puppetry singlehandedly for the past more than

50 years. Despite age greatly changing her and her life and restricting her activities a great deal, she lives a life dedicated to the art she has taken up and has not lost interest in her art. She has with her many bags of sowing seeds of an art that is slowly disappearing. Before they rot with no one to receive them they have to be sown in a fertile land. Thavasi Karuppusamy]

Thavasi: At what age did you begin to do the leather puppetry play?

Jeya: That may be when I was some seven or eight years old. At one point my father lost his voice and no sound would come out of this throat. There was no way to pursue the profession. It was difficult to bear the pangs of hunger. He did not know any other profession. Once he just took the bold step of putting up the tent and announcing a show and he also distributed the tickets. A big crowd collected. The background drums were being played loudly. He just could not sing a line. I was playing around and he called me and made me sit on his lap. He was moving the leather puppets and he whispered the song in my ears and asked me to repeat it after him. That is when this madness caught on to me.

Thavasi: Before you it was your father, was there anyone before him who was doing leather puppetry?

Jeya: Yes. Father, grandfather great grandfather; for seven or eight generations this has been our family profession.

Thavasi: What are the stories you have done and how many stories have you done in leather puppetry?

Jeya: Death of Guruputhran (Shravan, whom Dasaratha had killed mistaking the sound of his filling water from a river for the sound of an animal drinking water), Birth of Rama to the entire *Ramayana*, and from Yayathi's marriage, to Dharma going to the heaven covering the entire *Mahabharatham*; then the story of Nallathangal. Harishchandra's graveyard canto, the wedding of Nala and Damayanthi and so many such stories we do.

Thavasi: You were only doing leather puppetry in the beginning; later you have also been performing therukoothu. How did this shift come about?

Jeya: Leather puppetry is a very fine art. Even though it is an art which is after my heart, one has to singlehandedly take upon the responsibilities of ten characters. From the buffoon puppet who enters first to all the male puppets, female puppets, and every other thing one person must speak the dialogues and also sing while also handling the leather puppets. Once you sit with folded legs on the sitting plank with the cymbals to keep the rhythm in your right hand and the leather puppets in the other, then all the five elements of your body must coordinate and work. It is a job that takes a lot of you. As times changed people became more interested in therukoothu. Wherever we went people asked us to perform therukoothu. I went along with that trend. Moreover, in therukoothu, you have to take up only one character and the work is easier. But every now and then in some villages they would demand that we do leather puppetry. And we would happily do a leather puppetry show then.

Thavasi: In therukoothu, did you do a male or a female character?

Jeya: That depends on the story. I can perform both male and female characters. Sometimes we also perform particular characters as per the wish of those who ask us to perform. If it is the episode of capture of cattle in *Mahabharatham*, I would take on the character of Uttarakumaran. And my husband would do the eunuch's (Brihannala) role. If it is the marriage of Pavalakkodi then he would be Alli and I would be Arjuna, and if it is the slaying of Padmasura, then I would be Mohini. If the story taken is that of Nallathangal I would take up the role of Nallathangal and he would be [the vamp] Mooli Alangari.

Thavasi: When you dress for the character, how many kinds of powder do you use? Is there any rule that a particular character must use a particular colour powder?

Jeya: We use it in a certain way. Muthu vella (white), manja gobi (ochre), neelam (blue), sevappu (red) senthooram (dark red)—these are the colours used. If it is the role of Aravan in *Mahabharatham* or that of Hanuman we use green powder. If it is a god or the role of Bhima, blue powder is used. If it is Kali or Draupathi, we use red powder.

Thavasi: How many rhythm combinations do you dance? Are they different for male and female roles?

Jeya: In leather puppetry you need to have knowledge. In therukoothu that is rare. It is mostly what you learn from



watching. There are twelve rhythm patterns and seven rhythm combinations that we do now. For both male and female roles we use *Adi thalam* (of eight beats) and *Ata thalam* (of fourteen beats). *Rupakam* (of six beats), *Oradi Chapu thalam*, *Rendadi Chapu thalam* (*Chapu thalam* is a category of *talam* that can be played in different beats of seven or five) and *Nondi Sindhu* (a traditional folk tune with uncomplicated rhythm), *Tripata thalam* (of seven beats), and *Otha Jampa*, *Rettai Jampa thalam* (variations of a rhythm with ten beats) and so on. It is the same rhythm for both male and female roles. But if you are doing a male role, even if it is a woman doing it, it should be forceful; it should blend with the rhythm. If it is a woman's role, even if it is a man doing it, it should be graceful, not going against the *sari* that is worn.

Thavasi: You have played many characters. Which is the character that brought you name and fame?

Jeya: It is the role of *Sita* in the *Lava-Kusa koothu* that I was known for, *Thambi*.

Thavasi: In your *jama* (group) you have donned the role of women. Have there been women performing in other *jamas* as well?

Jeya: *Thambi*, how can you ask so casually if there have been other women artistes who have performed? In my *jama* there were women like myself, my mother-in-law *Pappa*, my sister-in-law *Kaliyamma*, *Angamma* and *Kurumbanuru Putti*. In the *settu* (group) of *Ponnivuttu Mandaiyan* there were two women performers, *Chittayi* and *Pavayi*. And in *Salem Kondalampatti* there was a separate women's *settu* known as *Poovayi Settu*. There were *Latchumi Kandhayi*, *Pavunamba Rajamani*, and *Chellamma* who performed in

that group.

Thavasi: Really? Could you tell us about them in detail?

Jeya: *Thambi*, before marriage I knew only leather puppetry. My father got me married into a family in *Mottayangkoravamoodu*. My mother-in-law *Pappa* taught me *koothu*. There was one *Lakshmi*, who taught me to dance the rhythm combinations. She is still alive and she makes costumes for the male parts and lives in *Mecheri Kalikavundanoor*. There are many drum players who have run away half way through a *koothu* unable to cope with her fast paced rhythm combinations. Similarly, in her family, her grandmother *Poovayi*, her elder aunt *Kandhayi*, her younger aunt *Chinnayi Pavunamba* are not only great performers but they are also well-known. A crowd would gather just to watch *Pavunamba* sitting with one leg crossed over the other, with a hand bag hanging from the hand and lighting a *Scissors* cigarette. Anybody can do the role of *Dharman*, *Biman*, *Arjunan*, *Aayan* (*Krishnan*), *Duryodhanan*, *Duchasanan*, *Ayman* (*Abhimanyu*) whether it is a man or a woman. But to please the audience playing the role of the buffoon is not easy for a woman. When our *Kaliyamma Ramakkaravatha* plays the role of a buffoon the audience would laugh and laugh till they got sore in their stomach. Her dialogues would be so erotic... there is no one to talk like her today.

Thavasi: What has happened to all of them? Where are they? What are they doing?

Jeya: They performed till there was strength in their bodies. They produced children to fill the house. They sold the jewels they wore to do the customary things for them. Now they have no house or space to call their own! Nor do

their bodies have the strength! Like nomads they wander about selling chilli powder in various village market fairs in Mecheri Vanavasi, Nangoli and so on.

Thavasi: Do your daughters or sons perform koothu?

Jeya: I have seven daughters and two sons. One son is a truck driver. Another son plays the drum for a jama in Salandapuram (Jalakandapuram). The daughters were all married off in due course. We did not want any of them to be in this profession. Do you want to know why? Those days when I used to do leather puppetry and after the show when I came out of the tent, people would gather saying the blessed woman who does leather puppetry is here and they would bow before me. While performing koothu we would stand along with men and change our costumes and hold them at times. There was no wrong conduct anytime anywhere. Everyone was very decent. Even though we did not have much money we were respected where we lived. In a village there will be the houses of hundred farmers. The parayars and chakkiliyars were some ten or twenty households. Not wanting to give up traditions, these poor people would pool in money from what they have earned working hard throughout the year and arrange for a performance on some religious festival or the other. The sons of these farmers who are college students cannot bear that and they bring women from Salem Kallangutthu and make them do naked dances, Thambi! You are like my son, I feel so ashamed to even utter these things before you. But they kept a plastic tank above and a pipe was connected to it to bring water down to a tub and a naked woman was made to stand in the tub and they asked her to pour water on herself [and sing and dance] at one place. And they say she was dancing in a realistic way to a cinema song. People who see this may think we are also performers and ask us to do something similar. What will happen to our honour then? We did not want anything to do with it and that is why I have given it up.

Thavasi: How many koothu performances have you given so far?

Jeya: We have performed hundred to hundred and fifty overnight koothu performances in a year. I have been doing koothu for the last fifty years. You can calculate how many performances that works out to.

Thavasi: Do you earn enough in koothu?

Jeya: Like they say, even if you work with all your energy there is no mat to sleep on, that is the nature of our profession. Then or now we just earn enough to fill our stomachs. That is all.

Thavasi: What is the point of doing a useless profession? A profession that does not fill your stomach: why should you force yourself to continue with it? Why can't you give

it up and take up some other profession?

Jeya: What you say is absolutely true. However you earn, whatever you eat, your body would comply with that. But the mind does not work that way, isn't it?

Thavasi: Every year the government announces pension and other kind of financial aids as part of welfare programmes for artistes like you. Many get those pensions. Why don't you try for that?

Jeya: Don't even mention it, Thambi! Like they say, empty boasts won't fetch grass for your buffalo. Someone like you told us about this and we have been applying for the past five years. We don't know where those applications have gone. The net result was that we lost five thousand rupees paying the Munsif, R I (Revenue Inspector), and Tasildar every year.

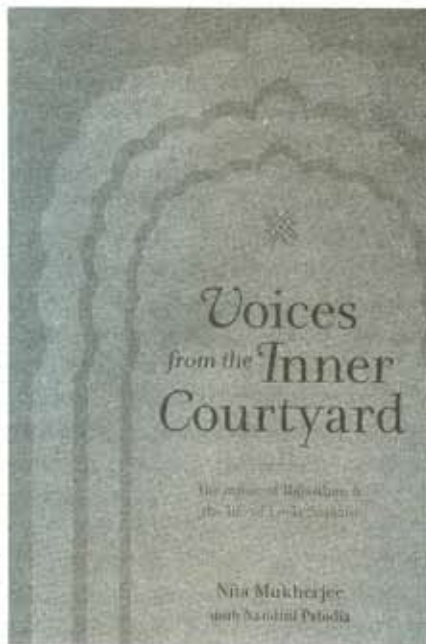
-Translated by C S Lakshmi from Tamil from the book *Arungkoothu*, Manal Veedu, 2010 edited by Thavasi Karuppusamy.

Congratulations!



SPARROW congratulates Rev E Pushpalalitha for being appointed the first woman Bishop by Church of South India. Pushpalalitha hails from a small village in Andhra Pradesh and belongs to a family of agriculturists and was ordained as a pastor in 1984. This appointment makes her the first woman Bishop of the Anglican family churches in South Asia. She formally assumed charge as Bishop of Nandyal diocese on September 29 at a consecration ceremony held at the historic Anglican cathedral in Nandyal.

Voices from the Inner Courtyard: The Music of Rajasthan & the Life of Leela Somani



Book details:
*Voices from the Inner
Courtyard:
The Music of Rajasthan
& the Life of Leela
Somani*
Nita Mukherjee with
Nandini Patodia
Shri Venkateshwar
Somani Charitable
Trust, Mumbai, 2012
(pgs 200)



Women have expressed their feelings through songs sung on various occasions and the inner courtyards of many homes have reverberated with songs sung during religious festivals, celebratory events and even through everyday chores. *Voices from the Inner Courtyard* brings these voices alive through a narration of the life of Leela Somani who is considered the Grand Dame of Rajasthani music, for investing a lifetime to preserve and promote Marwari folk music. She is admired by many for documenting traditional songs, publishing anthologies and recordings, writing new lyrics and setting them to music.

When the life of a towering personality like Leela Somani comes to be written by Nita Mukherjee who is a well-known name for documenting people and events, for helping set up archives and disseminate knowledge, then the result is like what we say in a Tamil proverb, honey being poured on a sugared canopy. It is a great combination and the result is a book like *Voices from the Inner Courtyard* which takes you through the life and work of Leela Somani while delving into the musical world of Marwar and the changing ways of life in contemporary India. Nandini Patodia, a scholar and social activist in her own right, has ably supported the production of this unique book which recreates the life of a woman and the music of a region.

Born into a prosperous Marwari business family, Leela could have lived her entire life revelling in prosperity. But the fact that she chose not to is what makes her what she is and what makes this book. Folk songs extend to many occasions and moods of the family and the community: births, deaths, weddings, rituals, festivals, seasons, food,

sleep, anger, relationships, love, and separation. The songs come out of the depths of living a life which is both binding and liberating. They describe the household environment and are sung while women do such household chores as milling grain, churning curd, working in the fields or putting children to sleep. The songs are composed in everyday language, transparent and direct but also metaphoric and allusive with images taken out of everyday life which add sensitivity to their form and meaning. The book covers many areas and aspects of folk music detailing the history, research and collection and documentation efforts of Leela Somani that have made this book possible.

According to Leela Somani, one of the reasons for the predominance of women's songs in Rajasthan is because the menfolk were always away—the Rajputs would be out at war, the *sahukaars* would be away on business or trade, even the shepherds and cowherds would be away in search of grazing fields for their cattle. Women would be left to look after the family. The women would express their longing and pent up desires in songs. In a song, a man of the house goes far away to make a living with promises that he would return soon but he is not able to keep his promises. His young wife voices her pangs of separation thus:

*You are my rain-bearing cloud,
Without you the monsoons have no meaning for me.
The roof of our house is old now,
The bamboos are giving way.
The bamboos are cracking my dearest,
Please do come back home...
You said you will return during monsoons;
You made so many promises
I have counted days and your promises so often
That the lines of my fingers have faded.
If you were at the distance of a well, I would have jumped across
But I cannot jump across the ocean;
If it were children, I would have kept them,
But I cannot hold on to my youth forever.
My dearest rain-bearing cloud,
Please do come home.*

It is extremely difficult to translate folk songs into English in a way that its seemingly simple structure and its dialect are not destroyed. Nita gives the original song in a phonetic form and then follows it with an English translation. The translation closely follows the original and with great expertise and precision using very simple words, it transforms the original song into a beautiful English poem. There is not a single song in this book which suffers in translation or is lost in translation.

The book is excellently produced interspersed with images, illustrations, photographs and anecdotes, designed by Rachita Dalal. This is a book one would return to time and again, to be inspired by the life of a woman and the songs of a culture.

— C S Lakshmi

Paradesam Pona Thamizarkalin Parithaapap Paadalkal (The Sad Songs of Tamil Diasporas)



Book details:
*Paradesam Pona
 Thamizarkalin
 Parithaapap Paadalkal*
 (The Sad Songs of Tamil
 Diasporas)
 Editor: Pe.
 Muthulingam
 Kayal Kavim Books,
 Chennai, 2012
 (pgs224, price Rs.160)

This book is one of the archival reprints undertaken by Pe. Muthulingam. The middle of the twentieth century is a very important period for the Tamils of Indian origin living in the mountain regions of Sri Lanka. This is the period when efforts were made to document the oral tradition of their ancestors. In the 1820s many Tamils from the then Madras Presidency came to work in the coffee, tea, rubber and coconut estates set up by the British. The history, tragedies and struggles of the journey and life in the estates were expressed by these workers in the form of songs and these songs were orally transmitted to the next generation which preserved them. Those who undertook the journey from India to Sri Lanka between 1820 to 1900 had come by small boats and catamarans. Many of them had perished in the sea. Among the survivors many fell for Malaria, some were attacked by wild animals during their walk from Mannar to Kandy through thick forests. Those who managed to survive these ordeals finally reached their destination to be recruited to work in the estates. These survivors left for their descendants the songs they sang on the sadness, disappointments and losses of their life. These songs and the struggles and historical events they depicted were preserved as oral inheritance. By the fifties many workers' unions were formed and concerted efforts were being made to improve the life of the workers. The representatives of the workers' unions felt the need to print the songs of their ancestors. The songs in memory were printed as small booklets. The present book is a collection of these small booklets which apart from songs of the ancestors also recorded the later events and life of the hill region.

It is interesting to note that the first person to not only document the orally inherited songs but also sing them and take the efforts to print them was a woman. Meeenakshi Ammal who was the wife of K Natesayyar, a pioneer trade unionist, undertook the major task of collecting and printing these booklets. She also composed songs of her own. Many followed her and they were all from the trade union movement and were the women and men leaders of the movement. Two women, Periakka and Krishnammal, later composed songs and also sang them on various trade union occasions. They were both leaders of the Democratic Workers' Congress. Their songs talk of the various unions and even mention Gandhi and Nehru and put their own stamps as composers. Periakka's songs talk of the continuing struggles to live a decent life after all these years. Her songs elaborate the everyday problems of water, no creature comforts and less wages. Periakka came back to India and died here but Krishnammal continues to be a daily wage estate worker.

These booklets were carefully preserved by one Pavalar Velusamydasan who was a composer himself. Before his death he passed them on to Ka. Pa. Sivam, a pioneering journalist who was editor of a Tamil daily *Malaimurasu* (The Drum of the Hills). They were finally brought to the workers' museum by the well-known writer Anthony Jeeva.

These songs have come a long way through many hands and through the memory and recall of generations. The songs are heavy with the weight of the burden of life in the estates and of the small joys of that life. The effort to reprint them taken by Pe. Muthulingam is indeed commendable for the songs recreate for us the life of Tamil diasporas in their own words.

— C S Lakshmi

Congratulations!



SPARROW congratulates Jyotirlatha Girija, a friend and patron of SPARROW, for winning the Kamban Kazhagam Writer's Award instituted by well-known writer Sivasankari. More power to your pen Girija!

A Nowhere Woman: Ruth Praver Jhabvala: (7 May 1927–3 April 2013)



Ruth Praver Jhabvala became a household name when her novel *The Householder* was made into a film by Merchant Ivory Productions starring Shashi Kapoor and Leela Naidu in 1963. Although Ruth Jhabvala had settled down in India in 1951 when she married Cyrus Jhabvala, an architect, and had written many novels by that time, it was the film and her association with it that made her popular in India. The film received good notices and set the ground for many more films with Merchant Ivory Productions. Ruth Jhabvala is the only writer to have won a Booker prize and also an Oscar. Although in an autobiographical essay, she has remarked that she “remained ill at ease with India and all that it brought into her life” she remained one of the writers much appreciated in India. The “heat and dust” of India has a way of bringing back people to its soil even when they go away to settle in other countries. Ruth Jhabvala continued to visit India even though she had settled down in New York. Maybe writers like her belong nowhere and everywhere. Her death at 85, is a loss for her readers in India.

In the Wonderland of Numbers: Shakuntala Devi (4 November 1929 – 21 April 2013)



When we were in school in the fifties in Bangalore, Shakuntala Devi was visiting many schools as some kind of a “performing mathematician”. While as school students we dreaded both math and our math teacher, Shakuntala Devi came to our school and told us math was fun. She could calculate numbers of any length in no time at all. While her math shows did not in any way reaffirm our faith in math it did make us realise that nothing is impossible; even math can (if not math teachers) be loved. She was called the “human computer” later. With Shakuntala also came stories about her life which were as fascinating as her calculations, if not more. Sometimes she narrated the story of her life as an introduction to her shows. She was born in Bangalore and belonged to an orthodox Kannada Brahmin family. Her father was some kind of a rebel and refused to be a Brahmin priest. Instead, he did something no Brahmin would dream of: he joined the circus where he worked as a trapeze artist, lion tamer, tightrope walker and a magician. He left the circus when he discovered her gift for calculations and maybe inspired by circus, he took her on road shows to perform as a calculating genius. Among her many books on

puzzles and numbers, *Figuring: The Joy of Numbers* is a book that many young people enjoyed reading. Many years after school and college, one tended to follow the life and work of Shakuntala Devi. She was still held in awe by the generations that followed. It was with some kind of a surprise that news of her being an astrologer was received by many. Kabir Firaque in his article in *Indian Express* (23 April 2013), says that had she been spotted young and allowed to specialise, she may have worked on any aspect of higher mathematics. “It couldn’t have been worse than someone born with a scientific temperament ending up as an astrologer,” he says. Maybe there are certain things we cannot figure out in life for Shakuntala Devi seemed very happy to don the role of an astrologer. It is possible her calculations, in this matter, were right. Maybe after death, there are numbers.

Tumhari Yaad Satati Hai: Shamshad Begum (14 April 1919 – 23 April 2013)



Shamshad Begum came into the lives of girls like me with her voice that sounded like a temple bell, as the famous music director Naushad put it, just when we were being told to speak softly and be “womanly”, whatever that meant. Shamshad’s voice rose aloud and with strength and filled our lives in the forties, fifties and even sixties, considered the golden era for film music. Shamshad was brought to Mumbai by the music director Ghulam Haider and she was on the Hindi film scene even before Lata Mangeshkar. She was a versatile artist who could sing any kind of song and give life to any kind of lyrics. Shamshad lived a long life and music lovers continued to listen to both her old songs and the remixed versions produced by enthusiastic modern-day DJs. Artists like her can pass away but they leave behind songs which can never die.

A Living Faith: Asghar Ali Engineer (10 March 1939 – 14 May 2013)



One had heard of Asghar Ali Engineer and his pioneering work in the reform movement of Dawoodi Bohras. But in 1993, many of us joined the march with him for communal harmony from Dadar to Sion Koliwada. He was an inspiring figure no doubt but at the end of the march when we reached Sion Koliwada and stood amidst burnt cars, destroyed homes and scattered belongings and heard him speak about why communal harmony should be our mission in life, most of us were in tears. He spoke with such passion and conviction on religion and humanity. It was after this that the Centre

for Study of Society and Secularism of which he was the founder, was set up. He had prefaced one of his articles saying that he could hardly ever unpack his suitcase for the moment he would come back from one trip he would be invited for a lecture somewhere else where his presence was needed. Asghar Ali Engineer wrote extensively on liberation theology in Islam and boldly faced through his works and talks the fundamentalist right wingers. His resistance to Syedna, the head of the Dawoodi Bohra community, earned him a social boycott but he never gave up his fight at any point despite threats and even physical attacks. His autobiography *A Living Faith: My Quest for Peace* which came out in 2011 that details his life and work shows us not only the road he has taken but the long road that lies ahead of us to deal with communal matters. His fight on the three fronts of interpreting Islam from a contemporary perspective, communal harmony and gender justice within Islam was a commitment he kept throughout his life. When people like him die, along with his son Irfan Engineer and daughter Seema Indorewala, those of us who have learnt so much about tolerance, justice and unbiased scholarship from him, also feel orphaned.

The Higher Octaves of Life: Ananthalakshmi Sadagopan (24 April 1928 – 15 May 2013)



We know death claims all but when artists die we wish there was a way immortality could be bestowed on artists for their art brings so much of solace to us and makes our life worth living. Ananthalakshmi Sadagopan is one such artist who took her music as a casual part of her life for she could not think of her life without music. Ananthalakshmi passed away at the age of 85. SPARROW had the honour to record an interview with her a couple of years ago with the help of her daughter, Sujatha Vijayaraghavan who is a musician like her mother, and a dance scholar and writer. Ananthalakshmi spoke with great enthusiasm and humility about her music and her life.

As a young girl she learnt music from Sattur A G Subramaniam and later under Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Nedunuri Krishnamurti, V V Sadagopan (her husband's cousin) and T Muktha. Her first concert was at the age of 10, in the presence of none other than the legend Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. Her father was a great patron of music and the doors of his house were always open to musicians. The family she married into was equally mad about music and Ananthalakshmi continued her music journey without any obstacles. She also learnt Hindustani music later under Vamanrao Sadolikar, father of the well-known musician, Shruti Sadolikar. She performed, learnt music and taught music almost all her life. Ananthalakshmi narrated an incident when she was to give a concert at Mysore and had

got into the train from Salem, with her aunt Lakshmi, who was her escort. They had to get off at Bangalore and change trains. But their train stopped midway elsewhere and they had to catch some other train and they reached the venue just half an hour before the concert after a long journey where they had not eaten anything out of anxiety. Her aunt told her that maybe she should just give up music and performing. That day her concert was excellent and there was no sign of fatigue in her voice or in her presentation. Her aunt came and held her hands later and told her that she would like to take back everything that she had said. Ananthalakshmi looks diminutive and calm but there is nothing diminutive about her voice. It can reach high octaves effortlessly. HMV which brought out her records told her that they rank her with M S Subbulakshmi and N C Vasanthakokilam. Many young people grew up in the fifties and sixties listening to her Tamil songs particularly her compositions of Ambujam Krishna's songs especially *Gana mazai pozikindran Kannan* and her four-raga based ragam-thanam-pallavi *Shankarabarananai azaiththodi vaaadi Kalyani darbarukku*. She has composed music for dance dramas also.

Once the interview for SPARROW was over, she hastened inside and brought me a few mangoes plucked from the mango tree in her backyard and gave them to me as her gift. I remembered those mangoes and their sweetness and the sweetness of her own personality when the news of her demise reached me.

Architect of an Era: Dr Vina Mazumdar (28 March 1927– 30 May 2013)



When news came of Vina Mazumdar quietly passing away early morning at Delhi's Gangaram Hospital, there was the feeling that one had to now learn to live without one more pioneer of the women's movement many adored and respected. Vina Mazumdar was the Member Secretary of the first

Committee on the Status of Women in India which brought out the report *Towards Equality* which became the foundation stone for the women's movement and later for research on women. It was her untiring efforts along with Dr Madhuri Shah, the then Vice-chancellor of SNDT, and her belief that activism must combine with academics where women's issues and rights are concerned that led to the creation of many Women's Studies Centres in India. In her own life she ably combined activism and academics by working with the unorganized sector and also writing about her work. The Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) became a pioneering institution under her able guidance. In the oral history documentation film SPARROW has made on her life and work, at the end when she was asked about the women's movement in times to come, she had said that she and others of her generation would now like to hand it

over to the younger generation to take it further. It is a great responsibility that her generation has given all of us but what will see us through most probably will be the qualities of humility, generosity and courage that she has taught us.

A Scholar Activist: Dr Sudhatai Kaldate (1935–2 July 2013)



Dr Sudhatai Kaldate, a noted sociologist and former Head of the Department of Dr B R Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad, died on 2nd September 2013. She was 78. She was wife of freedom fighter, sociologist and former MP of Aurangabad late Dr Bapusaheb Kaldate. Her body has

been donated to Sane Guruji Hospital as per her wish. Sudhatai was a person who was both an activist and a scholar. She actively participated in many social movements and also remained a scholar with deep knowledge of the nation and its history. Her book *Bhartiya Samajik Samasya* was one of the reference books prescribed for a graduate course in social work of Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, Nanded. She remained deeply committed to social work till the end.

A Rare Scholar: Dr Sharmila Rege (7 October 1964 –13 July 2013)



Sharmila Rege was a scholar whose work on the interplay of patriarchy and caste oppression opened up a whole new ground for research and discussion in both sociology and women's studies. Her books, *Writing Caste*, *Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonies* and *Against the Madness of Manu:*

B R Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy clearly pointed out that in India there is no way that the feminist debate not engage with the question of caste. As Director of Krantijoyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre, she encouraged young people to walk the path that she had and feel confident as scholars. She was always there for anyone who needed help to research or document anything related to Dalit women's history. When SPARROW made the film on Vithabai, Sharmila took personal interest and helped us to organise the oral history documentation. When news came on 13th July of Sharmila's death due to colon cancer, it was a shock to many who knew her personally and as a scholar. It is not often that we come across scholars like Sharmila who can combine erudition with warmth and care for fellow scholars and their work. The work she has done will definitely be continued by the young minds in

her department. Nothing can be a better homage for while a person like Sharmila cannot be replaced, her work can be taken forward by others who respect and admire her work. There can be no better way to celebrate a life like hers.

Swayamsiddha: Madhavi Desai (21 July 1934–15 July 2013)



In the wee hours of Monday morning, 15th July, in Belgaum, a writer who inspired many women to write passed away after a massive stroke. Madhavi Desai, the daughter of Dadasaheb Phalke award winner and noted Marathi film producer and director of yesteryears Bhalji Pendharkar, was born in Kolhapur

and had spent a major part of her life in Goa. Madhavi worked as a teacher in Maharashtra for over 16 years before shifting to Goa. She took part in the Goan Freedom Movement and went to jail.

She spent 25 years in Goa and started her literary works there. She was the founder of the All Goa Literary Conference, which is being held annually since the last ten years. She was married to Narendra Katkar a few years after whose death she married noted Marathi writer Ranjit Desai and went to a small village called Kovad near Belgaum. She continued to be active in social and cultural fields. She started the Sahitya Sammelan (Writer's Meet) in border areas. She is remembered for the Sahitya Sammelan she organised in Kadoli, near Belgaum, twenty-seven years ago. She was seen as an iconic figure who created a strong bond between the three different literary spheres of Maharashtra, Goa and Karnataka.

Madhavi wrote nearly 38 books which include 11 novels, one translation work, some creative essay collections, a collection of one-act plays and a script for Marathi film *Ghe Bharari*. She also compiled a collection of articles on noted women of Goa and a biography of Anjalibai Malpekar. But she will be remembered for her book *Nach Ga Ghuma* (Dancing in Circles), an autobiography which saw ten editions being published and was also awarded the Yasho Damini Sahitya award. *Naach Ga Ghuma* created a sensation in the Marathi literary world. Its publication coincided with many other autobiographies of wives of Marathi writers but hers with its forthright manner of narration was entirely different. In the autobiography she mentions Ranjit Desai's first wife Sunanda and how she had no identity of her own. She talks about meeting her and about her own feelings for her. *Prarthana* (Prayer) and *Seema Resha* (Borderline) are among her other books, which have been awarded the Kala Academy Sahitya award. Some of her other popular works include novels *Devaraie* (Sacred Grove), *Jagaveglle* (Unlike the World), *Swayamsiddha Amhi* (I Am Self-Created), *Shalmali* and *Havthan* (The Kiln), which was a translated work.

Poet and academician Sangeeta Abhyankar paid her rich tributes saying that Madhavi inspired a lot of women to take to writing besides reaching out to housewives and helping them develop their organisational skills. Abhyankar said Madhavi also worked with various social organisations apart from working with rural children on value education. Madhavi was often invited by companies to speak on work ethics, said Abhyankar.

After her separation from Ranjit Desai Madhavi came back and worked in Goa. She had shifted to Belgaum to be with her daughter a few months ago. She died just a week before turning 80. The Marathi literary world and the women she inspired and the rural children she worked with will remember Madhavi Desai for a long time to come for women like her remain in the hearts of people.

New Wings and New Songs: Dr Shaila Dwarkadas Lohiya (1939–24 July 2013)



Writer and activist **Shaila Lohiya** passed away in Beed on 24th July. She was 74. Shaila Lohiya, apart from being a teacher of Marathi language and a writer, was a social worker keenly aware of problems of women in a backward district like Beed. Her name was synonymous with Marathwada Navnirman Lokayat (MANAVLOK) in Beed District and its Manaswini Mahila Prakalp (Manaswini Women's Project) which was started in 1988. When the September 30, 1993 earthquake killed many in Latur village in Maharashtra, MANAVLOK had suggested to Maharashtra Sewa Samiti Organization that since funds from all over the world were pouring in, the funds raised by it must be used for long term rehabilitation of female victims. MANAVLOK had proposed an Oil Extraction Plant which would employ women left widowed or destitute by the earthquake. The earthquake relief efforts were headed by Shaila Lohiya and her husband Dr Dwarkadas Lohiya.

In an informative and in depth study of domestic violence in rural areas, which is part of the book *Violence Against Women: Women Against Violence* by Shirin Kudchedkar and Al-Issa (Pencraft International, Delhi, 1998) Shaila Lohiya has detailed the work of MANAVLOK and its women's project. MANAVLOK is a voluntary organisation working for the socio-economic upliftment of the rural-poor. Apart from its objectives to work for integrated rural development in 150 villages, MANAVLOK also aimed at giving special support to the economic development of women and the landless via skill training, capital support, etc. Apart from this it also organises awareness programmes for improving the status of the women, rural poor and youth. Manaswini project provided home for homeless women in its Dilasa home and apart from being a hostel Dilasa also gave vocational and skills training for young women.

In 1995, FICCI Ladies Organization (FLO) gave Shaila Lohiya the award for being the most outstanding woman social worker. In 2010, the Akhil Bhartiya Marwadi Yuva Manch gave her the Sahitya Puraskar. In a poem, *A Tale of My Salvation*, Shaila Lohiya begins the poem saying that birds whose wings are cut off cannot soar high and sing songs. But the poem ends with hope: Ecstasy lies in soaring up freely in the sky/with new wings and new morning songs. Women like Shaila Lohiya have given wings to many women. Those new wings can be kept only if their work is continued by others.

The Face of Marathi Musical Theatre: Jaymala Shiledar (21 August 1926 – 8 August 2013)



When Jaymala Shiledar received her Padma Shri this year she said that she did not see it as a recognition of her individual work alone but as a recognition for Marathi musical theatre. As a veteran singer actress who had devoted seven decades of her life to natyasangeet, it is not surprising that she saw it that way. While her death is a great loss for Marathi musical theatre, her lifetime contributions to its growth and survival will keep it alive.

Jayamala was born as Pramila Jadhav in Indore. Her first stage appearance was in 1942 at the age of 16. Three years later she worked with the legendary Balgandharva in the musical *Sangeet Sharada* and she got to play the lead role. She married co-artiste singer actor Jayram Shiledar and became Jaymala Shiledar. Several offers for the silver screen came their way but both Jayram and Jaymala Shiledar, decided to devote their entire life for the upliftment of the Marathi musical theatre and founded their own company, Marathi Rangabhoomi on October 10, 1949. While celebrating the birth centenary of the late Balgandharva in 1987, Jaymala, through her Marathi Rangabhoomi, presented more than 125 shows of plays by Balgandharva all over the state.

Jayamala had a long and illustrious career. She won many awards including the prestigious Annasaheb Kirloskar award, Lata Mangeshkar award, Balgandharva award by the state government, Vishnudas Bhave award, a citation from Kolhapur Municipal Corporation, Mahindra Natraj award instituted by Natyadarpan, Krishnarao Gokhale memorial award instituted by Pune Marathi Granthalaya, Zinda Dil award by Rangat Sangat Foundation and many others.

Apart from playing lead roles in many acclaimed musicals and being active on Marathi stage for over 25 years, she also composed music for 16 plays written by noted playwrights like Bal Kolhatkar, Go Ni Dandekar, Nanasaheb Gokhale and Madhav Gadgil. In 2003, Akhil Bhartiya Marathi Natya Sammelan gave her the distinction of being its president.

Jayamala was a great teacher who not only trained her own two daughters but also hundreds of children to be

part of Marathi musical theatre. Marathi theatre lovers will always remember her smiling countenance and her devotion to Marathi musical theatre.

Kasturba's Teacher: Dashariben Chaudhary (1918 -2 September 2013)



Dashariben, an Adivasi who was a Gandhian and freedom fighter, passed away at the age of 95 at her house in Vedchhi village near Vyara in Tapi district, Surat. The interview with her that SPARROW has recorded is a powerful narrative that draws you into her life and times. Dashariben's grandfather

Jivanbhai Dabarbai, was a teacher and a social reformer greatly influenced by Gandhian ideology. He was the one who brought khadi into the Adivasi talukas of Surat. Her father Revati Lal Chaudhary was a freedom fighter. Brought up in this progressive environment Dashariben started wearing khadi from the age of 6. She was admitted to school but when Gandhi gave the call to boycott government school education, her education was stopped. But she was later admitted into Ranipara Kanya Vidyalaya, a school that imparted basic education with a nationalistic perspective, started by Kasturba, Mithuben Petit and others.

When Dashariben was 8 years old Gandhiji had come to bless the Fourth Khadi Convention. He visited Dashariben's house where she stood with a khadi garland to garland him. As she was very small he picked her up in his hands. He noticed that she was wearing ornaments and told her to live a simple life. Those words were enough for her. She never wore jewels all her life. Dashriben jumped into the freedom movement at a young age and was sent to Yervada Jail for taking part in the Swadeshi Movement in 1933. Dashriben was arrested and sent to Yervada Jail again in 1942 during Quit India Movement. It was in Yervada jail in 1933 that Dashri and Kasturba were lodged together. Surprisingly, Kasturba, who had started basic education schools, did not know how to read and write. Dashri taught her to read and write in jail. Mahatma Gandhi was surprised to see a letter from his wife. He promptly wrote to Dashriben congratulating her on being able to teach his wife.

After being released in 1944, Dashariben married Kanji Chaudhary, a freedom fighter. It was an unusual marriage for those times. There was no officiating Brahmin, no procession, no ornaments and no lavish food.

Dashariben appeared to be a rather frail woman but she was a very strong and determined woman indeed. She never really gave up learning. She had learnt to play the Casio and with great enthusiasm played the national anthem for Divya Pandey who went to interview her on behalf of SPARROW. Dashariben felt that Gandhi's ideals have not been realised and she continued to voice this opinion throughout her life. People like Dashariben give us hope that we must not give

up the fight for justice and the fight to uphold freedom.

No Escape from Taliban: Sushmita Banerjee (1964 -4 September 2013)



Sushmita Banerjee alias Sayeda Kamala who was executed by the Taliban terrorists was a human rights activist and a Bengali writer who authored the best-selling book *Kabuliwalar Bengali Bou* (A Kabuliwala's Bengali Wife) which inspired the Bollywood movie *Escape from Taliban*. Sushmita

married Afghan businessman Janbaaz Khan in 1988 much against her parents' wishes and went to Pakistan with him only to discover later that he already had an Afghan wife Gulguti and also children by her. But she chose to live with him in his joint family household. She was a trained nurse and opened a clinic to help the women of the village. In 1995 the Taliban men discovered her clinic and asked her to close it but she refused. For her reluctance to close the clinic and refusal to wear the burqua she was tortured several times. Finally she was arrested and a fatwa was issued against her ordering her death on 22nd July 1995. But the headman of the village who appreciated her health work helped her to escape. She made a dramatic escape and came back to Kolkata. She wrote a book on her escape and many more on the Taliban but decided to return to Afghanistan in 2013. She once again began her work as a health worker in Paktika Province in southeastern Afghanistan, and also started filming the lives of local women. In the late hours of 4th September she was dragged out of her house and her dead body was found on 5th morning outside a Madrassa on the outskirts of the provincial capital Sharana. The corpse had 20 bullet holes. One wishes Sushmita had not gone back to Afghanistan knowing that there was a fatwa against her. She should not have taken the risk when even Afghan women who have stepped out of their homes have been targetted by orthodox Muslim groups. The Afghan women have lost someone who cared for their health and dared to come back for their welfare.

Laughter and Stories: Khorshed Gandhi (19 march 1926 - 6 September 2013)



Gallery Chemould celebrated its Golden jubilee this September. For art lovers of Mumbai, Gallery Chemould meant only Kekoo Gandhi and Khorshed Gandhi and the wonderful exhibitions they organised at Gallery Chemould through which the Mumbaikars learnt to appreciate art. Khorshed

Gandhi curated many shows but Portrait of a Community

organised at the NGMA, Mumbai, in 2002, was a very memorable one.

In an interview given to *Mid Day*, August 25 2013, her daughter Shireen Gandhi aptly put it when she said that when Cowasji Jehangir offered Kekoo Gandhi a space on the first floor of the Jehangir Art Gallery in 1963, "it became not just the iconic gallery with the curved wall; it was also a seedbed and a nursery and a confessional. Artists turned up for advice, for loans, for encouragement and inspiration. They drew from Kekoo's enthusiasm and from Khorshed's good sense. Tyeb Mehta, Ram Kumar, Bhupen Khakhar, Nasreen Mohammadi, Pilloo Pochkhanawala—all have had their first exhibitions in this space."

In her interview with SPARROW Khorshed spoke not only of her work in the field of art but also about her work for communal harmony. In her last requests, we hear, she said that she wanted no memorial service and no solemn faces. She wanted laughter and stories. Laughter and stories are what we would associate Khorshed with and also Gallery Chemould.

A Woman to Remember: Shahjehan Aapa: (1946 -27 September 2013)



Shahjehan Aapa who passed away sometime back, comes from a working class background. Until the death of her daughter Noorjehan, who died due to dowry harassment, Shahjehan Aapa had not thought about working for issues concerning women. Her daughter's death gave her the reason and the courage to

venture out of her house seeking justice for her daughter and for many others like her daughter. She was the President of Shakti Shalini, a women's organisation in Delhi that deals with counseling and redress of grievances and the Director of Nav Shrishti, an organisation committed to girls' education. She was a great fighter for justice for women and for education of girl children. Her fight against dowry inspired SPARROW to make a film on her life and work. So it was with great shock that we received the news of her demise on 27 September 2013. It seems she was crossing the railway lines and was run over by a train. At the end of SPARROW's film she says that finally when she is taken away forever, people will say, "Here is a woman who fought for women's rights." Yes, Shahjehan Aapa, that is how we would like to remember you.

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Women Created, Women Rebelled



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Despite many hurdles and literally swimming against the current SPARROW has completed 25 years with the support of well-wishers and friends like you. There is a Tamil proverb which says that one who has planted the tree will water it. People like you gave this fledgling SPARROW a tree to make a nest in. We are sure you will continue to water the tree and make it grow stronger to face bad weather and heavy storms so that this SPARROW can fly forever.

Do write to us if you come to know about a life, a book, a visual, a film or a song which you think must be documented in SPARROW. For reviews please send two copies of the book.

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