



**SPARROW  
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# SPARROW

## newsletter

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### CONTENTS

Editor's Note.....	01
Reviews: <i>A Warped Space &amp; The White Chiffon Sari</i> / Mithra Venkatraj .....	02
-C S Lakshmi	
<i>Marathi Santakavayitrincha Itihaas</i> / Vidyasagar Patangankar .....	03
-Shobha Naik	
Article : Marathi Women Saint Poets from the Bhakti Movement in Western India .....	04
-Vilas Khole	
Tribute : To My Teacher Shyamala, With Love .....	05
-Ashwini Kaarthikeyan	
Homage: Prabhavathi Gopal Shastry , Vrinda Khole, Veena Alase, .....	06-12
N Kesi, Nirmala Joshi, Dr Manorama Kotnis, Sheila Ramani, Jayalakshmi Alva, Suniti Solomon, Vasundhara Komkali, Suvra Mukherjee, Dr Kalindi Randeri, Binny Yanga & Sathyabhama -C S Lakshmi	

## [Editor's Note]

The current SNL is being brought out four months after the previous one. These four months have been busy months we have spent in planning projects for this year some of which, if they come through, will keep us busy and excited in the coming months.

We took some decisions regarding SNL. We thought it would be interesting if each issue of SNL has a Consulting Editor who will bring in her inputs for the issue. For this SNL Dr Prachi Gurjarpadhye is the Consulting Editor. It was her idea to take up the subject of women in the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra for this issue. She commissioned an article by Vilas Khole and a book review by Shobha Naik on the subject. Mithra Venkatraj is an important Kannada writer and we are happy to review her two translated works here.

For this SNL when we began doing the homage section, we realised once again that whenever a woman artist, activist or scientist dies the death brings up the question of how important documenting the lives of women is. The women who have passed away have in many ways not only created history in the various fields they have been involved in, but also have rewritten the rules of how women must live and experience life. We have a special tribute article in this SNL. Ashwini Kaarthikeyan kindly allowed us to reprint her article from [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com). The homage pages always make the SPARROW team emotional and often become the subject of discussion during lunch and tea breaks. These women have enriched our lives and made it possible for us to think and function freely without being bound in anyway. Every homage we write confirms this truth.

Do write to us and do visit our website and also join us on our Facebook page.

## Of Warped Space



*A Warped Space*  
Mithra Venkatraj  
Frog Books, 2013  
No. of pages: 479  
Price: Rs.345



*The White Chiffon Sari*  
Mithra Venkatraj  
Partridge India, 2014  
No. of pages: 164

Mithra Venkatraj is an extremely subtle writer who is a keen observer of people and the complexities life places them in. A lot of her stories come from Kundapura, her native place, and the people she knew there as a young girl and as someone who keeps in touch with her roots. Although *The White Chiffon Sari* is a later publication most of the stories seem to have been written before the novel. These stories are like notes for a novel; like small boats pushed into the sea to test the waters. They are simple and direct stories that tell you about feudal households where relationships, people and emotions are constantly manipulated. There are also other stories that talk about how people you knew and loved in your childhood can become pathetic characters, how there is enduring love that remains unexpressed and how certain kind of love has to physically get extinguished because the society does not accept it.

“There Was a Message” and “The Scent of Jasmine” are the best stories in the collection. They explore forbidden love in two different situations. One is between a widow and her brother-in-law who is also a widower living in a large house bringing up two sets of children. His old mother living with him does not disapprove of this relationship; she is a widow herself. Mithra does not go into the logic of why this woman likes the widow and the affection she bestows on everyone including her son but she makes us understand the complexity of the emotions in this household. The widow’s work is exploited by many although she herself is shunned during family occasions and called names. Children listen to family gossip and stop going to see her. The narrator herself realises the injustice of this and remembers to pay her a visit now that she is alone and the brother-in-law has been taken away by his son to Bangalore to be taken care of during his old age. Both the old man and the widow long to be with each other and want to convey a message through the narrator to the other person but the message they want to convey to each other cannot be bound in words. It does not even need to be conveyed for it is understood by both even

when the other’s name is mentioned. It is a story that has many resonances written with great subtlety and warmth.

“The Scent of Jasmine” is about lesbian love. It is a sad story where two girls commit suicide because the family does not understand their need for each other. What exactly they meant to each other is speculated by an older person in a conversation with the narrator. It is an inconclusive conversation that is an effort to understand these two girls who decided to end their lives. Only the fragrance of their lives and the house they lived in remain to tell their story.

*A Warped Space* takes up the large canvas of feudal life in Kundapura beginning with the outbreak of the Second World War and coming up to the eighties. But the actual story covers almost a hundred years of life in a feudal household in Kemmadi and the areas surrounding it. The ruthless ways of one man, Madhava, determine the lives of not only the poor agricultural labourers and others in that area but also that of his kind and gentle father, his uncle who is willing to be his slave, his gentle and sensitive younger brother and all the women of the household including his mother who cannot shed a tear for him when he dies. Woven into this warped space of a household is the changing political situation with Naxalites demanding land for the tiller and the violence that becomes the reality of life. Violence of a feudal lord who wants to wipe out the communists and the violence of those who are determined to exterminate the oppressors and the violent deaths of innocent people caught in the fray. The story gently reveals a household and other extended households and a way of life where women try to support one another cooking together and working together, bringing up one another’s children, singing and telling them stories but also conniving and plotting against a person if she is generally not liked. Some women fight back but some succumb and commit suicide. Laxmi, the mother of the feudal lord can only be a mute witness to his excesses never once opposing him. One wishes she could have been as assertive as her mother-in-law Seethamma who was a widow who took charge of her husband’s estates and brought up a son without any feudal values of power and undue assertion.

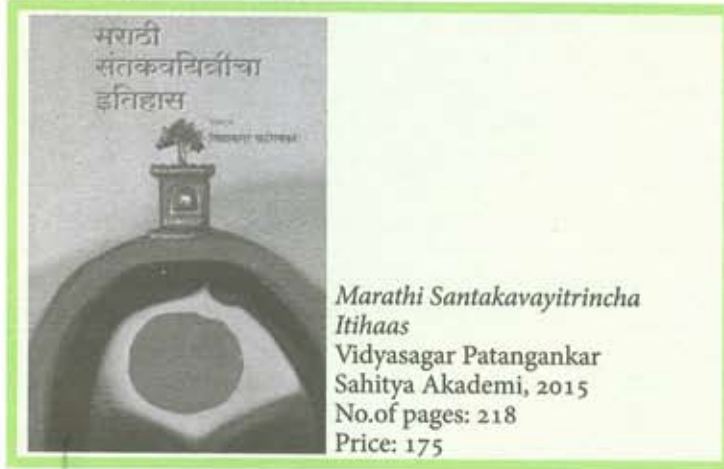
*A Warped Space* is a story well told and Para who was left homeless in the beginning, has a house of her own built by her sons towards the end. The novel ends with Laxmi coming to wish her well for Para could have been her daughter-in-law had the wedding not been called off by her authoritative son. Para was also her companion for many years later in her life and had lost her son in a violent death, in the feudal game being played out in Kemmadi. Laxmi feels she owes Para this gesture of affection. The life and death of an extremely cruel person has crushed the lives of many women but life must go on.

The translation of both the short stories and the novel is done by Venkatraja U Rao, Mithra’s husband. The translation reads well and is smooth and is able to bring out the language nuances of the original but it could certainly have done with some good editing.

—C S Lakshmi

## A Literary History of Marathi Women Saint Poets

Vidyasagar Patangankar



**M**arathi Santakavayitrincha Itihaas, ed. Vidyasagar Patangankar, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2015 showcases the literary achievements of Marathi women saint poets of medieval India. The book presents the history of twenty-four women saint poets who wrote between the thirteenth and the nineteenth century, ranging from the first Marathi poet Mahadamba down to the nineteenth century poet of the Mudalagi sect Minakshi Amma. Literary histories of Medieval Marathi have so far focussed exclusively on male saint poets, *pandit* poets and *shahirs*. A history that corrects this male bias to look more closely at the female consciousness of that cultural era was much-needed and the present book fulfils that need.

Medieval times were dark times for Hinduism in India when true religion was eclipsed by ritualistic practices and the institution of the *varnashram* system had bred inequality of gender and caste and social oppression. Further beleaguered by foreign invasions and natural disasters such as droughts, this era was marked by unspoken human misery. It was then that reformist religious sects such as the Mahanubhav panth, Naath panth, Varkari panth and Samartha Sampraday rose and sought to show the path of spiritual upliftment to individuals by rescuing them from the folds of an oppressive and rigid form of religion. Women saint poets who began writing in such times have made history in Marathi literature. Mahadamba, Muktabai, Janabai, Soyraibai, Nagi, Bahinabai are the earliest voices in the history of women's liberation in India and hailing from the lower castes and ostracised communities, they are also part of a broader history of social reform.

At a time when woman was seen as a defiled and polluting being, the revolutionary saints such as Chakradhar, Govind Prabhu, Jnaneshwar, Namdev and Tukaram accepted women disciples and inspired them to overcome social limitations so much so that many of them such as Mahadamba, Muktabai, Venabai and Naikbai eventually

rose to the level of spiritual leaders in their own right and were highly regarded by the fraternity of Bhakti saints. The image of god working as a servant in the house of his devotees which is part of the mythology of saint poetry is actually a metaphor of a non-hierarchical social order in which all will be entitled to enjoy spiritual growth. Such was the vision of the Bhakti movement.

This book gives a detailed account of the difficult spiritual journeys of several lesser known women saints such as Hiraisa, Nagaisa, Umaisa, Nagari, Nirmala, Bhagubai, Kanhopatra, Vithabai, Premabai, Bayabai, Venabai, Ambabai, Rukminibai Kenkare, Godamai and other saints such as Radhabai, Parvatibai, Gangaabai and Minakshi Amma who hailed from the neighbouring non-Marathi region. The most striking achievement of the book, perhaps, is to highlight the indigenous tradition of radical thought, our pre-colonial legacy of social egalitarianism that is evident in this collective history of women saint poets. Woman emerges as an empowered category through this poetry. Devotion to god invariably translates into practical lived virtues of equality, acceptance, service to humanity and humility in their writing. It is a spirituality that improves the quality of human life here on earth. True worship and realisation of god implies rising above social hierarchy. Not surprisingly, in one of his compositions Eknath describes how the gods rushed to Soyra, the wife of Chokha, a Dalit saint, and sought her help when they found that the nectar in heaven was turning sour.

Women saint poets enacted their resistance as well as a sense of belonging through the myriad social roles of daughter, sister, sister-in-law, wife, servant, mother, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, friend, concubine, young *kumarika*, widow and so on and their creativity is expressed through traditional folk literary forms such as the *ovee*, *abhanga*, *palane* and *dhavale*. The history of women saint poets, thus, is a saga of their difficult journey, of the challenges they faced in rising above their designated social position, and also of how finally they emerge victorious and sovereign, as if by a miracle.

*Mungi udaali aakashi / tine gilile suryasi*

*thor navlaav jala/....dekhoni Muktai haasali*

The ant took a flight into the sky and swallowed the sun

What a great miracle has taken place... Muktai laughs to witness it.

—Shobha Naik

(Translated and adapted from Marathi by Prachi Gurjarpadhye)



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

## Marathi Women Saint Poets from the Bhakti Movement in Western India

Women saint poets of Maharashtra during the period between the thirteenth and the seventeenth century laid down the foundation of women's poetry in Marathi. All these poets came from the downtrodden strata of society. Except Muktabai and Bahinabai all of them belonged to the lowest castes and were not permitted even to enter the temple of Lord Vitthala. However, they neither complained about the restriction nor did their devotion receive any setback.

Janabai, a maid-servant in saint Namdeva's house, assured women of the blessings of god if they devoted themselves to god wholeheartedly. She urged them not to give up hope because they were born women. Her exact words are: *strijanma mhanuni na vhavae udaas* (Do not despair because you are born women). Janabai herself was a staunch devotee of Lord Vitthala. It was her strong belief that he helped her in her household duties such as cleaning, sweeping, washing clothes etc. It was a convention of saint poetry to visualise Vitthala in the form of the mother (*mauli*). Janabai too imagines Vitthala as the mother of all saints and he carries one on his shoulder and others follow him on their way. All her lucid and expressive verse is seeped with her tender feelings full of love towards Lord Vitthala. Her poems are also important as a record of some of the incidents from the life of Namadeva. Thus, she is the first biographer of Namadeva and may also be considered the first woman biographer in Marathi.

Muktabai, a mere young girl and the sister of the great saint Jnanadeva, was known to be very outspoken. She had the courage and the spiritual authority to tell her elder brother, the accomplished yogi, Jnanadeva, not to get angry because of the harsh and rude treatment he received in public. When once he locked himself up in his hut, utterly disgusted with the world, she stood outside the door (*taati*) and addressed her verses to him advising and entreating him to keep his spiritual role in society in perspective. These verses became famous as *taatiche abhang* and urged Jnanadeva to be kind to those who gave ill-treatment to him. Apart from these verses she mainly composed mystic poetry to express her experiences of transcendence. She was a highly respected figure among the fraternity of Bhakti saints and had attained the spiritual authority to be the Guru of a formidable and well-known yogi called Changdeva.

Soyarabai, the most humble of saints, was the wife of the Dalit saint Chokhamela. She wrote devotional poetry expressing her deep satisfaction of being one with her deity Lord Vitthala. In one of her much-celebrated abhangas, '*avgha rang ek jhala*' (All colours have merged into one and the Lord himself is bathed in the colours of bhakti) voices her ecstatic sense of spiritual fulfilment and the moment of realisation of Truth.

Bahinabai, disciple of saint Tukaram, is known for her greatness in many ways. She came from a village near

Ellora and was married at a very early age to a person who was thirty years old. He belonged to a Shakta family. He tortured Bahina because of her devotion to her guru Tukaram who was not a Brahmin by caste. But she did not hesitate to follow in the footsteps of Tukaram and she continued to worship Lord Vitthala. She was the first woman to write an autobiography including an account of her past thirteen births in one of her poems. She was well aware of the religious movement led by a galaxy of saints coming from different parts of Maharashtra. She composed a poem narrating the history of Bhagvatdharma, the well-known cult of the Varkaris or the devotees of Vitthal. She has authored the famous abhanga summing up the contribution made by four of the most important saints of the Bhakti movement in which she says, Jnanadeva laid the foundation and raised the temple of the Bhagvatdharma; Namadeva, the servant of the sect, enlarged it to a greater size; Eknatha gave it a pillar of support in the form of his volume Bhaagavata and Tukaram became the very peak of the temple, over which flies the banner of Bahina. Nowhere does one find such a concise account of the milestones within the Varkari movement.

Nirmala, Bhagu and many others who are comparatively unknown to the readers, also wrote wonderful lyrics in praise of god. Nirmala, the sister of Chokhamela, is a complainant to god and requests his help. She asks why god does not come to her rescue when there is a fire burning all around her, when there is no relative to help her and when under the circumstances, god alone was the saviour. Kanhopatra, a renowned beauty, and the daughter of a concubine called Shama, embraced death at the feet of Vitthala instead of submitting to an oppressive Sultan.

All these women who were otherwise from a very ordinary background became extraordinary saints by attaining the status of highly evolved and much-respected Bhaktas. It must be remembered that though they were the disciples of male saints, what they wrote was not an echo of the thoughts of those male saints. It was their own independent creation and the quality of their poetry is simply outstanding. All these women were suffering from worldly problems and difficulties, so much so that some of them felt they were passing through fire. The heat of the material world around them and the pangs of daily routine life were unbearable and they therefore, often quarrelled with god expressing their dissatisfaction of his negligence towards them, complaining that the divine lord paid more attention to sinners than to his devotees. All the poetry of these women saints begins with their devotion to Vitthala and ends in an overwhelming sense of his greatness and gentleness. But it is far from being monotonous writing in any way. It exhibits a rich palette of emotions and images of great literary merit and continues to move Marathi readers over eight centuries.

To My Teacher Shyamala, With Love  
Shyamala Mohanraj  
(October 3, 1941- July 14, 2015)

The passing of my dear teacher of classical dance, Shyamala Mohanraj (1941-2015) on July 14, leaves a large vacuum in my being. I met her for the first time two years ago, and it was love at first sight! Her curious, soft eyes and her gentle, kind smile melted all hard edges within. Before I found her, I had been learning with gifted teachers, yet a restlessness burned inside me.



Shyamala Mohanraj

Shyamala Mohanraj and Ashwini at Kamakshi Amman temple, Kanchipuram



Then, on the 1st of January 2013, I entered Shyamala Akka's quaint little house with a brass plate laden with fruits, flowers, betel nut leaf, and was initiated as her student. The Pandanallur form of dance that I had devoted many years to, was considerably different in Akka's manner of teaching. There was a palpable softness, grace, and fluidity that lured me in. Though her nature refrained from any impositions upon me, I soon realised that to truly bathe in the essence of her teachings, I had to muster the courage to begin from the beginning. And so my journey resumed from the first lesson of Tatta Adavus.

Apart from being an exponent of dance in T Balasaraswati tradition, Akka had been a teacher of Botany for many years, an adept yoga practitioner under her father's tutelage, as well as an ardent student of Vastu Shastra under Ganapathy Sthapathi. These varied backgrounds greatly influenced and coloured her manner of teaching Bharatanatyam.

She was the only daughter, born into a learned family of teachers, who had settled in Sri Lanka for many years. Akka's father saw the gift of dance in his dear daughter, who was also equally brilliant academically and in sports! Akka was a volleyball champion in her school, a passionate athlete at heart. However, her father's keen eye for refined art brought Shyamala Akka along with her mother to Chennai, at the tender age of thirteen, to continue her classical dance and music studies with T Balasaraswati. It was a cultural shock for her to adjust to living in the

demanding, disciplined routine from the young age of thirteen, in a new city, quite different culturally, while being away from her larger family and estates in Sri Lanka. But her love and trust in her father, allowed her to surrender to the many years of gruelling practice in this classical dance form, which was a non-negotiable loyalty expected of any student of the doyen of Bharatanatyam, Balasaraswati, lovingly addressed as Balamma.

During this time, she stayed at the home of a Kathakali maestro from Kerala, and hence got exposed to the classical art forms of Mohiniyattam as well as Kathakali. A bright student, she was gifted with the ability to shape herself to any form of dance. Though her primary teacher, Balamma, was a strict disciplinarian, she had a keen eye for a genius in a child, and allowed the flowering of each student's uniqueness, if another art form complemented the student. So Shyamala Akka enjoyed a privileged relationship with her teacher, Balamma. For Akka, Balamma and her family became everything. She remained eternally grateful for every wakeful moment with Balamma and cherished each composition learnt under her, more than any material comforts or wealth.

During my dance lessons with Shyamala Akka, there was not a single day which missed out on some anecdote or nostalgic story from her life with Balamma. Through Shyamala Akka, I, too experienced the grace of this refined classical tradition transform every cell and breath in my body. For the first time in my life, my hunger and thirst to look and search for something outside of me vanished. I felt nourished and quenched. I could sense an inward and outward metamorphosis, transforming my life. I felt my being grow expansive. Many life situations miraculously healed, and grew new, tender, shoots!

I knew I had found my teacher. I danced with her morning and evenings, as much as the universe allowed. What I internalised with Shyamala Akka cannot be counted by the number of compositions I learnt under her guidance, or the number of public performances I gave since, or whether I may pass on her teaching to other students in the garb of a teacher of this classical art form. Shyamala Akka breathed life into my brokenness. Shyamala Akka role-modelled devotion, playfulness, and the joy of dance into me. I know not of my future as she reunites today with our Mother Goddess. I find my tears flowing and ebbing like the tides. I feel her presence, I hear her voice, her laughter, her touch, and sense her blessings pouring out towards me, as I sit stunned inside an unfathomable, dark void.

I pray for you, my dearest Shyamala Akka, as you soar towards God's light. I pray for your guidance, as I continue on my path as a classical dancer. I love you. My heart brims with gratitude for the gift of knowing you, and learning from you, in this lifetime.

—Ashwini Kaarthikeyan

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### Tripura Sundari: Prabhavathi Gopal Shastry (1949-January 7, 2015)



Hailing from a family of musicians, Prabhavathi Gopal Shastry instinctively chose art as her way of expression. Vishnu Hebbar, her grandfather, was a sitar teacher at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, and her father J V Acharya was a well-known sitarist who was part of the film industry. He was

awarded the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 2003 for his fifty years of service in Indian cinema.

Prabhavathi Shastry's initial training in dance was under the tutelage of Jayalakshmi Alva and Ramakrishna Alva at the Chitrabalam Dance Center in Mumbai. She also learnt Kathak from Pandit Hazarelal for some time. Encouraged by her husband G M Gopal, she started her own dance school Gayathri Nrithyalaya in 1975 in Bangalore and trained many dancers in Bharatanatyam. She was the founder member of Vidya Vardhaka School's Lalitha Kala Academy at Rajajinagar (Bangalore) where she was the dance director. Her friends and colleagues affectionately called her Tripura Sundari.

She choreographed many dance dramas like 'Samudra Manthana', 'Ramayana', 'Mohini Bhasmasura', 'Nava Shakthi' and folk dances of India feature called Bharath Darshan.

The dance academy Natyakshetra, in Chennai and Bangalore, which conducts the dance festival Nrithya Utsava dedicated to the memory of her husband G M Gopal, in both the cities, was founded in 2005 by her along with her son Prashanth Shastry. Her two daughters Shilpa and Gayathri are also dancers. For her dedicated work in dance she was given the Nrithya Kala Tarangini award during her 60th year celebrations by the committee of Nrithya Utsava festival. Her son Prashanth and daughter-in-law Sunitha have released an audio CD entitled 'Nrithya Prabha' dedicated to her services in dance for dancers.

Her passing away at the age of 66 just a few months before her own guru Jayalakshmi Alva, is a double loss to the field of dance.



### A Woman Science Lost: Vrinda Khole (April 15, 1952- April 8, 2015)



Dr Vrinda Khole's death is not only a great loss for The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) but for the entire field of reproductive biology for she was an outstanding scientist and a teacher. Vrinda got her doctoral degree in zoology from Pune University after which she did post-doctoral research at Tashkent

University.

On her return she joined the Institute for Research in Reproduction (now National Institute for Research in Reproductive Health) in 1985. Thus began her scientific quest in reproductive immunology. She was an active member of Indian Immunological Society and has published many research articles in national and international peer-reviewed journals. She was given "the Best Woman Scientist of the Year" award by a leading women's organisation, Vanita Samaj, in 2013.

Vrinda's students and colleagues remember her for her passion as a teacher and as a collaborator who could successfully and effectively steer multi-investigator projects. She was very sensitive to women's plight in problems such as infertility and she had great empathy for those suffering from painful endometriosis and this motivated her to take up research in these relatively neglected fields. In the midst of her chemotherapy sessions she could get into spirited discussions on research in her field. She was committed to her students who were from diverse streams such as Medical, Veterinarian, Life sciences, Biotechnology. She guided them both on academic and personal fronts. She did not let her students down till the end. She willed herself to do her best for her students and she managed to complete the degrees of her last four students while she was battling with terminal cancer.

In our last SNL we paid homage to Vrinda's mother, the well-known musician, Padmavati Shaligram and it is sad that the homage for Vrinda closely follows that of her mother. But the work and the students Vrinda has left behind will remain to tell the story of a scientist who worked till the end.



### Congratulations!



Congratulations Dr N Valarmathi, for being the first scientist to receive the Dr A P J Abdul Kalam Award, instituted by Government of Tamil Nadu in honour of the former president Abdul Kalam in 2015! You are the second woman scientist of Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to head a prestigious project after Dr T K Anuradha, Project Director of the GSAT-12 mission in 2011. In 2012 you were named the Project Director of India's first indigenously-developed Radar Imaging Satellite RISAT-1 that was successfully launched. This award given to you in recognition of your work is richly deserved. Scientists like you and Dr T K Anuradha make us all proud!

**A Bridge Between Two Languages:  
Veena Alase  
(December 3, 1940-May 30, 2015)**



**V**eena Alase did service to not just one language but two languages in a way that her contribution has been appreciated and recognised by the litterateurs of both, Marathi and Bengali. Veena Alase hailed from Chandrapur. She lost her parents very early in life and was brought up by Kamalabai Hospet, a

social worker from Nagpur. It was after her marriage that she settled down in Kolkata. The urge to study never left her and she got her MA degree from Jadavpur University at the age of 40. She joined the Marathi Department of Vishwabharati Vidyapeeth at Shantiniketan and retired as its head. Her work on Marathi poet and prose writer Manik Godghate popularly known by his pen name Grace, got a lot of appreciation in the literary world. She was a regular contributor to the magazine *Satyakatha*. She made excellent use of her living in Kolkata by translating from Bengali to Marathi and from Marathi to Bengali. In 1994, she was given the Sahitya Akademi award for her translation of Jotiba Phule's *Gulamgiri*. She translated Sukumar Sen's history of Bengali literature into Marathi as *Bangali Sahityacha Itihas* in 1981. She also translated Mahashweta Devi's stories into Marathi and Vijay Tendulkar's play *Kanyadan* into Bengali. She introduced the thoughts of the Vice-Chancellor of Viswabharati University and great thinker Amlan Dutt, to Marathi readers. Just two years ago her book *Ravindradiksha: Saptaparni* was published. She introduced many progressive women of Bengal to the Marathi readers. Her articles on Nati Binodini, Veena Das and Srimati Sarkar contributed to the historical documentations of the women's movement. She regularly wrote articles in *Navabharat* published from Wai. She was seen in Marathi literary conferences though she was not living in Maharashtra. The Bengali Association of Nagpur felicitated her for creating a cultural bond between two languages last year. And it was January last year that she inaugurated the Round Table Conference on Contemporary issues of Nomadic and Denotified Tribes of India at Sewagram, Wardha. She spoke eloquently on the literature and realities of the society. The stories of Mahashweta Devi formed her anthropological sources. She envisioned the issues of marginal population through such writings and reading experiences. She put forth the problems of the NT and DNT communities in the context of globalisation. She analysed the livelihood issues of these communities seeing them from the point of view of their traditions and today's science. Veena passed away in her daughter's house in Kolkata after not only enriching two languages with her sensitivity and knowledge but enriching two cultures with her deep understanding of literature and human predicament.



**The Demoness Who Played the Flute: N Kesi  
(March 10, 1918-June 14, 2015)**



**W**hen I was working on my book on musicians, one musician I really wanted to meet was Kesi. As a child I had been fascinated by her photograph with her flute at her lips, which used to appear in the All India Radio's *Vanoli* magazine of programmes. Both the image and the name intrigued me. I had heard

of the Tamil epic *Kundalakesi* (One with curly hair). But there was also Kesi, the demon who came as a horse and was destroyed by Krishna. There is also the Kesi-tirtha on the banks of Yamuna, where Krishna is supposed to have played his flute for the gopis surrounding him. I did meet Kesi in her Mylapore house and had an extremely interesting conversation with her, her husband and her elder sister. She was very casual about her musical prowess. She was the only woman student of the maverick flautist T R Mahalingam, known as Mali to everyone. She performed with him on the stage not caring about the comments of the orthodox people. Her husband P N Narayanasamy, who was a Deputy Superintendent of Police, and a great lover of music, supported her in everything she did. In a way, Kesi combined all the meanings of her name. She was a demoness when it came to playing flute and ardently pursuing her art and profession; when she put her flute on her lips she could remind a music lover of the Kesi-tirtha where Krishna is supposed to have played flute and she did have wavy hair.

Kesi began to learn vocal music at the age of five at Nagappattinam. Her father T S Vaidyanatha Iyer was a lawyer. Later she developed an interest in playing the flute and learnt from Pandit Subramanya Shastri. She moved to Chennai after her marriage and began her lessons with Musiri Subramania Iyer. Her professional career as a flautist began under the guidance of T R Mahalingam. She performed with him in many concerts. She also received music lessons from T Brinda.

She had students and taught them generously. I remember once a friend of mine who used to play a bit on his own on the flute approached her to take lessons from her. She asked him to play. After he finished she remarked, "You play like one of these beggars on the road. But I will teach you." He did learn from her for a while.

Kesi was honoured by the Tamil Nadu State government with a Kalaimamani award in 1972. In 1997, she received the Sangeet Natak Akademi award for flute in the Carnatic music instrumental category. Fifteen years ago she went to live with her nephew based in Noida. But the strains of flute can still be heard coming from her house in Mylapore, for her house has been bought by Mala Chandrasekhar, the well-known flautist, daughter of the Sikkil Sisters. Kesi lived a long and fruitful life filled with music. Whenever I think of her I can hear the sound of music emanating from a flute placed on her lips.



### A Missionary of Charity: Sister Nirmala Joshi (July 23, 1934 – June 23, 2015)



Sister Nirmala, an Indian Catholic nun, succeeded Mother Teresa as the head of Missionaries of Charity six months before Mother Teresa's demise in 1997. Nirmala Joshi, was born in a Brahmin family as the eldest of the ten children, at Regmi Village, Syangja, Nepal, and named Kusum.

Until the independence of the nation her father served in the British army as an officer. Kusum's family shifted to India when she was about one year old. She was educated at missionary educational institutions like Mount Carmel, Hazaribag. She came to know about Mother Teresa's work and decided to dedicate her life also to service. She converted to Catholicism and joined the Missionaries of Charity that Mother Teresa had founded. Nirmala Joshi has a Master's degree in Political Science and a doctorate degree in law from the University of Calcutta. When a foreign mission was sent to Panama, she was one of the first Sisters of the institute to head the mission. She started the contemplative branch of the Missionaries of Charity in 1976 and remained as its head until 1997, when she was elected to succeed Mother Teresa as Superior General of the institute. Her term as Superior General ended in March 2009. The same year on the Republic Day in January, she was honoured with the Padma Vibhushan by the Indian government for her tireless services to the poor and underprivileged of the nation. Sister Nirmala Joshi chose to dedicate her life to the service of the people and died just a month short of her 81<sup>st</sup> birthday having fulfilled her chosen mission.



### The One Who Admired Dr Dwaraknath Kotnis: Dr Manorama Kotnis (1921 - July 2, 2015)



Dr Manorama Kotnis, a professional nutritionist who advocated peace through discussion with China and friendship with China all her life, is known as the sister of her more famous brother Dr Dwaraknath Shantaram Kotnis, an Indian surgeon who was sent as part of a medical team to China in

1938 and who died in China while treating Chinese troops fighting with Japanese army. She herself was only 16 when her brother had gone to China but she was inspired by his work and dedication to humankind and had ever since taken it upon herself to follow his philosophy. China has honoured Kotnis with a Martyr's Memorial. Chinese leaders who visited India made it a point to pay their respects to Manorama Kotnis. In 2013, visiting Premier Li Keqiang had

called on Manorama Kotnis. Li at that time informed the Kotnis family that China still remembers Kotnis and his help to his countrymen during the crisis following the Japanese aggression during 1937-45. Top Chinese legislator and chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), Zhang Dejiang, visited India in June 2015 and paid tributes to Kotnis. His first stop was Mumbai where he attended a photo exhibition commemorating the work of Dr Kotnis. At the exhibition he met Manorama Kotnis, the only living sibling of the seven siblings of Dr Kotnis. That was probably the last time Manorama Kotnis was seen in public. She lived a long life not only admiring her brother but also believing in his work and propagating his ideals.



### Dil Jale Toh Jale: Sheila Ramani (March 2, 1932 – July 15, 2015)



Sheila Ramani Cowasji, the actress from Sindh, who people will remember as Sylvie, the sensuous dancer who danced to *Dil Jale Toh Jale* in a black sari and a white satin blouse in the film *Taxi Driver* (1954), passed away in the home she grew up in, situated in Mhow, Madhya Pradesh. Sheila Ramanai was crowned

Miss Shimla in the early fifties. V Shantaram's *Surang* (1953) was her first film. She played the role of a miner, a strange casting for her because she was a colliery owner's daughter. Then came Navketan's *Taxi Driver*. In 1956, accepting the invitation of her uncle in Pakistan, she went there to play the lead role in the film *Anokhi* (1956). She also played the lead role opposite Dev Anand in *Funtoosh* (1956) but it is as Sylvie of *Taxi Driver* that people mostly remember her. She later played roles in *Teen Batti Char Rasta*, *Naukri*, *Mangu*, *Meenar*, *Railway Platform*, *Jungle King* and *The Return of Mr. Superman*. After her marriage to Jall Cowasji, an industrialist, she moved to the United States but returned to live her last years in Mhow, in her childhood house. People forget actors who are not on the scene and not part of tit-bits in film magazines. Maybe that is why she decided to seclude herself with her own memories to keep her company. Her husband passed away two or three decades ago and she lived her quiet life. It is reported that she was afflicted with Alzheimer's towards the end which may have cost her, her memories of life in Hindi films. But one is sure, on hearing news of her death even those who had forgotten her, remembered instantly the sensuous woman singing *Dil Jale Toh Jale*.



Do write to us if you get 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.

## Saraswathi Incarnate: Jayalakshmi Alva (October 15, 1933-July 22, 2015)



Jayalakshmi Alva was called Saraswathi Incarnate by dancer Dr PadmaSubramanyam. She was born in 1933 and hailed from Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu. Younger sister of singer K V Janaki, Jayalakshmi opted for dance. She learnt Bharatanatyam from KN Dandayudhapani Pillai, and Abhinaya from Swarna Saraswathi

and Gowri Ammal and Kathakali from Karunakara Panikar. As a member of Mrinalini Sarabai's Darpan troupe, she had performed in Rome, Italy, Egypt, Switzerland, Japan, Germany and Russia. She propagated the abhinaya of the Swarna Saraswathi school and Gowri Ammal. Artistes like Waheeda Rehman, Sonal Mansingh, Shreelekha Mehta, and Aditi Mehta learnt from her.

After her marriage to Mangalorean artist Ramakrishna Alva, she moved to Mumbai from Ahmedabad where she taught at Darpana, and taught several young dancers at Bhulabhai Institute. She started the Chitrambala Dance Centre in Mumbai in 1959. Sunil Kothari, in his *Footloose and Fancy Free: Globetrotting with Dr Sunil Kothari* column, writes in his *Mangalore Diary: In Praise of Senior Bharatanatyam Exponent Jayalakshmi Alva*, in August 2011, recalling Jayalakshmi teaching at the Bhulabhai institute. He says, "Jayaben used to conduct *nattuvangam* for Sonal (Mansingh) and Maya (Kulkarni) and ah, what *riyaz* they used to do. Bhulabhai Institute at that time was the meeting place of Pandit Ravi Shankar, painters M F Hussain, Dashrath Patel, Gaitonde and others. Soli Batliwala, trustee of Bhulabhai Institute, assisted dancers, musicians and painters... Dancers practised downstairs. The terrace theatre had performances of dance and music. Those were the halcyon days in Mumbai for performing arts."

Jayalakshmi and her husband decided to shift to Mangalore where they planned to start an academy on the lines of Kalakshetra on their family property. Unfortunately Ramakrishna Alva passed away before this dream could materialise. But Jayalakshmi raised her daughter as a single mother conducting dance classes, and in 1974, she established Sridevi Nritya Kendra in Mangalore where she has trained a number of dancers. She is well-known for the brilliant dance ballets she produced and choreographed like 'Chitrambala Kuruvanji', 'Krishna Tulabharam', 'Nritya Govindam' and 'Panchakanya'.

Jayalakshmi was held in great esteem not only by her disciples but also by her contemporaries like N S Jayalakshmi and C V Chandrashekhar from Kalakshetra, Mrinalini Sarabhai and dancers from Darpana Dance Academy, Guru Mahalingam Pillai, Kalyanasundaram Pillai, Parvati Kumar, the Jhaveri Sisters, Sitara Devi and Damayanti Joshi from Mumbai.

Many awards came her way for her immense contribution to dance. She was awarded Rajyotsava Award, the Natyarani Shanthala Award, Nrithyakala Shiromani by Karnataka

Nrithya Kala Parishad, Karnataka Kala Tilaka by the Karnataka Sangitha Academy, the Sandesha Award and many more awards.

Her daughters Arathi Shetty and granddaughter Satvika are not the only ones who would miss Jayalakshmi Alva. When veterans like her pass away after having lived a full artistic life of generous giving and warmth, many other like us can feel our emotional strength draining.



## Dealing with a Deadly Virus: Suniti Solomon Gaitonde (1935- July 28, 2015)



In 1986 Dr Suniti Solomon, the groundbreaking HIV researcher, brought to the attention of the world, the prevalence of HIV infection in India. This first documentation of HIV in India came about when Dr Suniti Solomon and her colleagues took blood samples of six commercial sex workers lodged at the government

home on Kutchery Road in Mylapore in Chennai. The samples were first sent to Christian Medical College in Vellore and later to a facility in the USA, where they tested HIV positive. It immediately was followed by a series of research and training for medical and paramedical professionals on HIV infection, apart from making possible a treatment regimen for those affected. She has led the research in the treatment of the deadly virus through her institute the YR Gaitonde Center for Aids Research and Education (YRG Care), the premier HIV/AIDS care and support centre of which she was founder-director. Speaking about her 1986 research work in a 2009 interview to *Mint* newspaper, she said that among the first six cases uncovered by her was a 13-year-old girl who had been forced into the sex trade after being kidnapped. "She was the first girl we tested that I spoke to, and she changed me," she said. Her husband Dr Solomon Victor was worried about her working with HIV positive patients for most of them were at that time, homosexuals who self-injected drugs or sex workers. But she told him, "Look, you have to listen to their stories and you wouldn't say the same thing," and continued with her work. It is this commitment to research into and treatment of HIV that has brought her the respect of her colleagues and the love and affection of so many afflicted with the disease for she was not just interested in the biomedical aspect of the disease but was also interested in dealing with the human aspect of care, support, counselling and the gender issues involved. Dr Suniti also taught at the Madras Medical College and Government General hospital as a professor of Microbiology. Losing pioneers like Dr Suniti leaves a big void in the field of medicine for dedication such as hers is not easy to come by. Hopefully her son Dr Sunil Solomon and her colleagues at YRG Care would carry on the work of Dr Suniti Solomon with the same ardour and dedication.



## Student First and Wife Later: Vasundhara Komkali (May 23, 1931-July 29, 2015)



It was many years ago in the seventies in Delhi where I was a research student that a friend of mine and a great lover of Hindustani music who was trying to teach me how to appreciate it, told me about a private concert, at someone's home in Delhi, of Pandit Kumar Gandharv.

We joined a small group of specially invited friends who filled the hall and Kumar Gandharv was ready for this intimate performance. Vasundhara Komkali sat behind him with the tanpura. Before he began, from among the audience came a request for Vasundhara to sing first. A smile appeared on her face and she obliged. I don't remember what raga she sang that day but I remember that the alap was so meditative that I felt myself being drawn into it without even knowing the nuances of Hindustani music. At points I choked when her voice glided like a bird into the notes. I have listened to her sing along with her guru, who became her husband later. But the memory of that evening refuses to leave me for it was as if her voice filled the entire room and made way for her guru to tread on it without effort when he sang later. That performance personified Vasundhara who has said many times that she was a student first and a wife later.

Many refer to her as the wife of eminent musician Pandit Kumar Gandharv which she was but she was also a good musician by her own right. She began to sing at a very young age. She was born in Jamshedpur but was brought up in Calcutta. She was an artist at the All India Radio at a time when Ustad Allah Rakhaji was a tabla accompanist there and he accompanied her for many of her recordings. She met Kumar Gandharv when she was just twelve years old when he came to All India Music Conference where she was taking part in a competition and he was performing. He told her to come to Bombay to learn from him. But her family shifted to Bombay only in 1944. Initially she learnt from Professor B R Deodhar and later became a disciple of Shivaputra Siddharamaiyah Komkali generally known as Kumar Gandharv and then his wife in 1962 and began to live in Dewas where she passed away. The years following her marriage were spent accompanying him on the stage and as his devotee. She performed along with him for his thematic concerts like Geet Varsha, Triveni, Mala Umajalele Bal-Gandharva, Geet Hemant and Thumri-Tappa-Tarana. She sang duets with him which enthralled the audience. After the demise of her guru, she did give solo performances. She also trained her daughter Kalapini Komkali and her grandson Bhuvanesh. She was awarded the Padmashri and the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in recognition of her immense contribution to music. Along with her husband she has also left the strains of her music in the ancient town of Dewas in Madhya Pradesh, where they spent most of their lives.



## The First Lady of India: Suvra Mukherjee (September 17, 1940 - August 18, 2015)



People know Suvra Mukherjee as the First Lady of Rashtrapathi Bhavan. But she was a painter, a singer and a writer also. As a graduate student she was a great fan of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. She sang Rabindra Sangeet and performed in Tagore's dance-dramas for many years in India and abroad. Suvra founded

the Geetanjali Troupe to spread the philosophy of Tagore through song and dance. She was also a well-recognised painter who had held many group and solo exhibitions. She wrote two books: *Chokher Aloey*, a personal account of her close interaction with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and *Chena Achenai Chin*, a travelogue recounting her visit to China. President Pranab Mukherjee, it is reported, was back to his Presidential duties a few hours after her funeral rites. That is what Suvra would have liked him to do for she had stood by him all these years and stoically bore the pains of lung cancer.



## The One Who Showed the Light to Many: Dr Kalindi Randeri (24 April 24, 1936 - August 24, 2015)



Dr Kalindi Randeri, was founder-principal of the Premlila Vithaldas Polytechnic of SNDT Women's University, which was the first such institution for girls in the city of Mumbai. She was the force behind an entire generation of fashion designers. During her tenure the Polytechnic received an

award for being the "Best Polytechnic of Maharashtra State." She boldly introduced subjects that opened the doors to many new careers for young girls. Subjects like Jewellery Design and Manufacture and Ophthalmic Technology were introduced by her and she also introduced innovative ways of teaching and examination. She developed a carefully planned collaboration between the various industries and the institution. She had a PhD degree in Administration and Organisation of Higher Education from the US after an MA in Social Service Administration from the US as well. She kept in touch with the latest academic trends by regularly visiting institutions abroad. For her dedicated work she has received many awards one of them being the Woman of the Year (1995), title as an outstanding educationist by the Ladies' Wing of the Indian Merchant's Chamber, Mumbai, and by the Bombay Chapter of the Zonta International Club for Women. Wendell Rodricks, a fashion designer, writer and Goan environmental activist, in his touching tribute

to her in Mumbai Mirror, says that she was the reason why he decided to come back to India from Paris when he was uncertain if he could stay in India for more than a year. He says meeting her changed the course of his life for before him was "a lady sparkling with energy and light." He says her letter inviting him to India saying India needed people like him brought him back here to teach three days a week at the Polytechnic. According to Rodericks, "there were fashion stars on campus. Jeanne Naoroji was head of department. The staff included Hemant Trivedi and Neeta Lulla. Anita Dongre had recently graduated and in my class was an adolescent Priyadarshini Rao. Payal Khandwala, Masaba and many others later glowed on the fashion scene." He appreciates Kalindiben's personal touch and how she kept track of every student, model and choreographer and how she enquired about them and mentioned their names to potential employers. He says, "She was the industry's chess master, moving talent about like pawns. Starting the nation's first fashion course in 1978 and later the first jewellery design course, she gave young women many trades... from food to medical technology. Her aim was to empower young women." Many like Wendell Rodericks remember her as the person who showed them the light.



### An Achiever from Arunachal: Binny Yanga (July 7, 1958 – 3 September 3, 2015)



**B**inny Yanga passed away at a Guwahati hospital. She was only 57 and still had a long life ahead of her but she was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 2007 and it took its toll eight years later. Binny Yanga was that rare brand of social worker who continued with her work despite the diagnosis of cancer. She was well-

known and respected for her work for the welfare of weaker sections of society.

Very early in life, as a student, Binny Yanga revealed what she was going to be in future. As a student at Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, she formed a girls' forum, All Subansiri District Girls Welfare Association. She began her career as a teacher. During this period, she set up an adult education and nursery centre in 1979. When the first batch of women officers were inducted into the Arunachal Pradesh Police Force in 1987, Binny Yanga joined Arunachal Police Force. But a year later, she had a different calling. She quit the Police Force. She reregistered the adult education and nursery centre she had started in 1979, as a society in 1988 with the name Oju Welfare Association (OWA), which helped rehabilitate victims of child marriage and polygamy and also campaigned against child marriage, forced marriage and dowry. OWA combined many activities. A free educational institution in Seppa, a children's home Shishu

Greh and a Short Stay Home, a working women's hostel, a family counselling centre and a women's helpline. OWA also ran a girls' school, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, at Jang in Tawang district, a secondary school following CBSE syllabus and a vocational training centre. OWA also hosted the central government agencies, *Jan Shiksha Sansthan* and State Resource Centre in its premises. Not stopping with these activities Binny Yanga also founded Himgiri Multipurpose Cooperative Society which catered to the needs of rural artisans and provided marketing facilities for their products. She was also a member of the National Planning Commission. Many awards came her way. She received the Dr Durga Bai Deshmukh Award in 2000 followed by the COSIA Entrepreneur Award in 2009-10 from the Chamber of Small Industry Associations. She got the NCDC Award of Cooperative Excellence and also the National Tribal Award and IFFCO Sahakarita Ratna Award in 2012. The Eastern panorama magazine honoured her with the Achiever's Award. The Government of India awarded her the Padma Shri in 2013 which she richly deserved. Her dedicated work will be remembered by all those who work for women.



### The Legacy of Mohiniyattam: Sathyabhama (1937-September 13, 2015)



**S**athyabhama stopped performing very early in life at the age of 24, because she had taken up the more difficult task of restructuring Mohiniyattam and expanding its scope. She took up the arduous task of being a teacher and choreographer. When she herself began to learn dance at Kalamandalam founded

by Poet Laureate Vallathol Narayana Menon in 1930, despite his efforts to revive Mohiniyattam, it had not come out of the stigma attached to it as a dance performed to please an entirely male audience. After learning dance at the Kalamandalam as a part-time student she took it up as a full-time student after completing her 8th Standard. Kalamandalam stalwart Thottaseri Chinnammu Ammal, whom Vallathol himself had requested to be a teacher in Kalamandalam, taught her Mohiniyattam although the main focus of study was Bharatanatyam. Vallathol encouraged her by offering her a scholarship. She also trained under Kalamandalam Kalyanikutty Amma. In 1955, during the Silver Jubilee celebrations of Kalamandalam, she gave her debut performance. The years following that took her to many places outside India. She joined Kalamandalam later as a junior teacher. Around this time she met Kalamandalam Padmanabhan Nair, the famous Kathakali guru, and later married him.

Kalamandalam Sathybhama was the first woman Vice Principal of Kerala Kalamandalam and later was its Principal

until her retirement in 1992. She sat in the selection committee to decide annual Kalamandalam fellowships and she also functioned as the Dean of Kerala Kalamandalam. Kalamandalam Sathyabhama had many students who became notable artistes in their own right like Kalamandalam Kshemavathy, Kanak Rele and Bharati Shivaji. Sathyabhama is respected for her contributions to the dance form rather than for her on stage performances. She is credited with enhancing the *lasya* aspects of Mohiniyattam with the intention of purifying the dance form. She reordered the Mohiniyattam curriculum at Kalamandalam which not only included altering its repertoire but also making changes in the costumes and the coiffure of the performer. Inspired by Ravi Verma paintings she designed a coiffure with the hair

knotted into a bunch on the left side. It was much appreciated by everyone except by her guru Kalayanikutty Amma, the veteran teacher at Kalamandalam. She also pioneered group choreographies and ballets in Mohiniyattam. Her greatest contribution was her book *Mohiniyattam: History, Techniques and Performance* in which she has included a rich legacy of 35 Mohiniyattam compositions. She was the first to receive the Nrithya Natya Puraskaram of the Government of Kerala in 2005. She was honoured with a Padmashri only last year. She will be remembered as someone who enriched Mohiniyattam making it a dance form on par with other dance forms.



## Congratulations!



SPARROW congratulates Kavita Mahajan for getting *Unch Mazha Zhoka Puruskar* 2015.

*We are proud of you Kavita!*

Congratulations to all the winners of *Unch Mazha Zhoka Puruskar!*

## Congratulations!



SPARROW congratulates Thenmozhi for winning the TamilNadu Progressive Writers' Association Award for her book *Koonal Pirari* (Hunched Moon)

*Way to go Thenmozhi!*



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