



**SPARROW
SOUND & PICTURE
ARCHIVES FOR
RESEARCH
ON
WOMEN**

Publication Number 91

Published by

Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women

The Nest, B-101/201/301,

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Cartoon by Maya Kamath
from SPARROW Collections

Maya Kamath, who lived in Bangalore, was a trained painter who later took to drawing cartoons. Her cartoons were not only witty but also extremely thought provoking and gender-sensitive. Archiving the body of her works is an archival activity that is very important for it is important to document the work of a woman cartoonist. The entire works of Maya Kamath have been given to SPARROW for archiving by her family.

SPARROW

newsletter

SNL Number 37

August 2018

CONTENTS

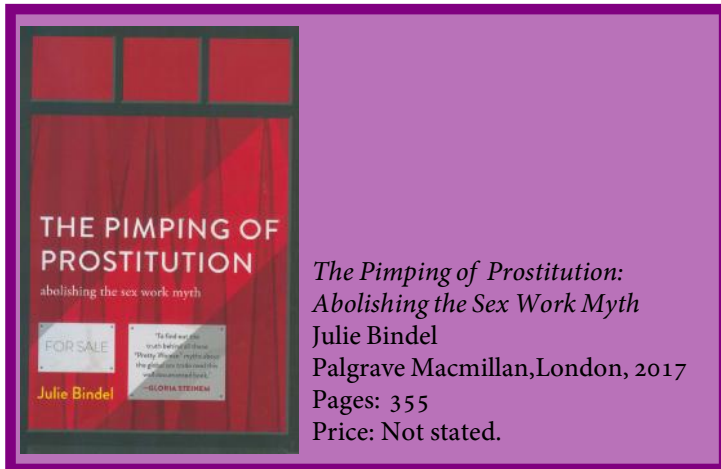
Editor's Note.....	01
Book Reviews.....	02-13
<i>*The Pimping of Prostitution: Abolishing the Sex Work Myth, *Sai - Majha Kalaprasas, *The Making of Exile: Sindhi Hindus and the Partition of India, *Nine, *Rasigai Paravai, *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory, *Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal, *Eka Gangichi Kahani: Prabha Shivanekaranche Jeevan Charitra, *Swara Bethangal, Shikari: The Hunt.</i>	
-C S Lakshmi, Charanjeet Kaur, Priya D'Souza, Sharmila Sontakke, Asmita Deshpande and Vidya Premkumar	
From SPARROW Archives.....	14-16
A Doctor Who Was Mashima to Her Patients: Dr Pushpitabala Das	
-Saumi Das	
A Personal Note.....	17-20
Hariye Jaoa Dingul (Those Lost Days) & Remembering Shirinbehn: Shirin Vajifdar	
-Naina Devi & Jeroo Mulla	
Article.....	21-25
The Woman Who Was Moni to Anil Biswas: My Memories of Meena Kapoor	
-Indraneel Mukherjee	
Homages.....	26-36
Bhakti Yadav, Ashalata Karalgikar, Radha Vishwanathan, Rajani Nagesh Limaye, Asma Jahagir, T Krishna Kumari, Supriya Choudhury, Sudha Karmarkar, Parvati Ghose, Elisabeth Barnoud-Sethupathy, Dr Manisha Dixit, Kamaltai Desai, Sridevi Boney Kapoor, Rajni Tilak, Dr Uma Pocha, Pratibha Umashankar-Nadiger, M S Rajeswari, Madeeha Gauhar, Rani Karnaa, Yamunabai Waikar	
-C S Lakshmi, Charanjeet Kaur & Vibhuti Patel	

[Editor's Note]

This issue of SNL grew bigger and bigger and as we went along. We wanted to do more books, more articles and there were many more homages to do. The book reviews cover a wide range of issues from Partition memories, sex work, poetry, the Tamasha world and the world of cinema. We remember with love Pratibha-Umashankar Nadiger whose translation of Yashwant Chittal's book *Shikari* is reviewed in this issue. The long articles in this issue take us to many different worlds. All three of them are personal notes actually. We requested Jeroo Mulla to write about her guru Shirin Vajifdar, the legendary dancer. Soumi Das sent us the private papers of her grandmother Dr Pushpitabala Das and has also written about her in this issue. There is also a personal note written by Naina Devi herself on how she became Naina. When Meena Kapoor, the wife of the famous music director Anil Biswas, and a singer whose voice melted many hearts passed away, we wondered who could write about her in a way that did justice to her musical talent. We found Indraneel Mukherjee who has written a very moving piece on her life and her music. In every issue we have a long homage section for often when we do the homages we realise how little we know about how women live and work. The homage section is always a learning experience.

This issue does not have a special supplement. There will be one with the next issue. And this time we have a Maya Kamath cartoon on the cover.

The Sex Work Myth



*The Pimping of Prostitution:
Abolishing the Sex Work Myth*
Julie Bindel
Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017
Pages: 355
Price: Not stated.

Investigative journalist and researcher Julie Bindel has been active in the fight to end violence against women and children and human trafficking. She is a board member of SPACE International ‘Survivors of Prostitution-Abuse Calling for Enlightenment’ committed to making people aware that prostitution is abuse and not just another type of work. She is also part of COALITION AGAINST TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN or CATW.

The premise of this book is very straightforward and Bindel gets right to the point in the preface. ‘For me, prostitution is a human rights violation against women and girls.’ The dominant viewpoint by feminists and liberals is that prostitution is a valid choice, even ‘empowering’. Bindel wants them to ask themselves how sex work can be sexually liberating.

The term used now most commonly for prostitution is ‘sex work’. A prostitute from a ‘legal’ brothel, Chelsea said that she has started inviting privileged academicians who think it is just ‘sex work’ to come and work with her in the brothels and get a dose of reality. The ‘choice’ of the prostitute to become one was made in the absence of anything better. An overwhelming 80-90 per cent of the prostitutes face violence. Sexually transmitted diseases are still a reality and even in the ‘legal’ brothels they have to work even when ill.

The Hollywood film ‘Pretty Woman’ shows ‘the happy hooker’ Julia Roberts falling in love and being rescued by the charming and wealthy Richard Gere. The reality of the escort service or the ‘girlfriend experience’ is vastly different, the man could be perfectly charming at dinner and totally disgusting later. Some academics and sex workers’ rights activists use the phrase ‘selling love’ indicating it is not really prostitution. But the sex trade survivors tell different stories and most of them reveal how they dissociate themselves and go to another place in their heads during the time they are with their clients. Bindel calls the mail-order bride phenomenon ‘24 hours-

a-day prostitution’ and has some women tell their stories. Also retraining former prostituted women as ‘sex surrogates’ is simply prostitution under another name.

Julie Bindel also discusses legislation and decriminalisation of prostitution. Demand and trafficking of women and girls have increased and there has been no decrease in violence against them. And it has made it more difficult for women to give up the trade. As Rachel Moran says, ‘Once you socially sanction prostitution as just another form of labour, immediately you cut off your exit strategies’. The rights and freedom only seem to be enjoyed by the brothel owners and sex buyers. Client satisfaction is still important. Many prostitutes are drug addicts and in desperation agree to anything.

Bindel discusses the normalisation of prostitution also with reference to Wadia, a village in Gujarat where a large percentage of the village is engaged in the business of prostitution, the men pimping their own wives, daughters and sisters. The women hardly have a choice in the matter, and being illiterate they are further bound; nor do they enjoy an equal share in the money given by the clients.

Bindel also examines the role of the sex buyers and the role of the human rights organisations supporting the sex trade. She cites the UN who gave an award to anti-trafficking activist Ruchira Gupta founder of Apne Aap which helps thousands of children who are sold into prostitution or are at risk, but told her not to mention the word prostitution in her speech. This was ignored by Ruchira Gupta. Bindel examines how many academicians and activists in the LGBTQ movement also support ‘sex work’ and ignore most of the complexities.

Whatever side of the debate one is on, this book is well documented and well worth a read especially for those in gender studies or activism.

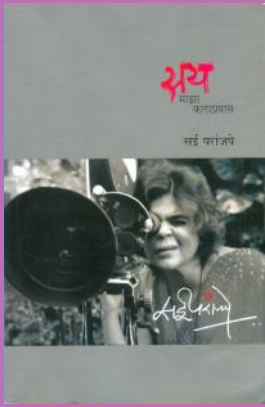
—Priya D’Souza



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A Journey in Art



Sai - Majha Kalaprasav
(Sai: My Journey in Art)
Sai Paranjpye
Rajhans Prakashan, Pune, 2017
Pages: 358
Price: Rs. 340 /-

S*ai-Majha Kalaprasav*, is written by Sai Paranjpye, the well-known screenplay writer, film and theatre director. This book is based on her *Loksatta-Lokrang* newspaper columns, published in 2016, and is about her personal life and professional journey.

Sai Paranjpye was born to a Russian father Youra Sleptzoff (water colour artist) and Maharashtrian mother Shakuntala Paranjpye. Shakuntala wrote many plays, sketches, and novels in Marathi. She also wrote in English. A Hindi children's movie, *Yeh Hai Chakkad Bakkad Bumbe Bo*, released in 2003 was actually based on a Marathi story by Shakuntala. Well known among her works are her novel, *Gharacha Malak* (Master of the House), and a children's book *Sawai Saha* (*Superior 6*). She was awarded the Padma Bhushan for her social work in the field of family planning. Shakuntala also acted in many Marathi and Hindi movies, including V Shantaram's classic *Duniya Na Mane* which was later made in Marathi as *Kunku*.

Sai devotes a chapter to her mother, and the chapter is filled with warm memories of growing up with a mother who was a stickler for truth and honesty and an intellectual. She narrates an incident when she was in Kindergarten school. She had a good friend Nandu and she liked to go to his house but her mother had told her not to go to anyone's house. The teacher tells her to tell her mother but Sai, the child, is hesitant to approach her mother. When the teacher asks her again she tells her that she has asked her mother and that the mother has said no. Later when Shakuntala comes to know this she reprimands her daughter for telling a lie. Sai also recalls another incident when she and her mother were travelling on some official government work. Her mother had her ticket issued for the official work but she wanted to buy a ticket for Sai who was two years and five days old. Shakuntala goes to the ticket window to buy a ticket for her daughter. The person at the window tells her that it really does not matter and that she can go without a ticket for her daughter because two-year-olds needed no tickets.

Shakuntala insists on buying the ticket since her daughter was two years and five days old! She also gives the person at the ticket counter a lecture on why the government should not be cheated. Shakuntala's idea of bringing up a daughter who would be intelligent and sensitive was also to point out to a wall lined with books and tell her that she should read all the books there!

Sai's parents got divorced soon after her birth and she was raised in the family of her maternal grandfather Sir Rangler Paranjpye. Even as a child, she started developing an interest in writing stories. Her first book of short stories written in Marathi, *Mulancho Mewa* (Children's Sweets) was published when she was just eight years old. Over the years, she has written many books for children, and six of them have won national or state level awards.

After her graduation from the National School of Drama, Delhi, Sai Paranjpye started her career in All India Radio, Pune, as an announcer. Here the real journey began. She started Balrangabhumi to promote children's theatre activities for the radio. She also enjoyed working in distinctive positions as a director/producer with Doordarshan Television in Delhi and as the Chairperson of Children's Film Society of India. She was also involved in books, plays, films, documentaries and similar matters. Sai was married to the well-known theatre artiste Arun Joglekar. They had a daughter Winnie and a son Gautam. Her children acted in very many plays and films. After two years the couple unofficially separated, but until his death they remained friends and worked together. Together they started Natyadyayi Theatre Company.

Sai writes about her travels to Paris, France, Devon and Geneva and about her learning French. She also shares her experience of meeting her Russian father after 26 years, in Geneva. Her father, uncle and his wife come to meet her at the airport. The uncle and his wife were known to her for they had visited India and met her family. With the father it was difficult to communicate for he could only speak French. So the conversation goes on with him speaking in French and with her replying in English. She speaks about meeting her paternal grandmother Babushka. Her father warns her that the grandmother may open all her albums and share them with her. Her grandmother does share her albums and to her surprise Sai finds that her grandmother had had an acting career and that she had acted in classic plays. She feels that long before her entering the National School of Drama, her grandmother had not only learnt all about theatre but had also played major roles in plays. She wonders if she has got the love for theatre from her grandmother's genes. Just before leaving her grandmother after a meeting full of warmth and love, the grandmother asks her son if he has told Sai whatever needs to be told. He replies in the negative and she tells him that he must tell her. That is when he tells

her that he has remarried and that he has a daughter. Sai meets her step mother and her step sister Marina and it is Marina who teaches her French.

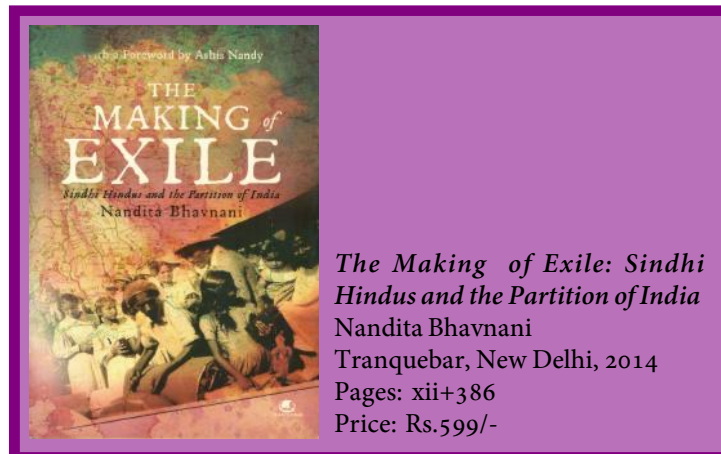
Sai writes about the making of her plays and films, the struggles to find the money for the films, the casting, the rehearsals and the shooting in a realistic manner. She recounts meeting G P Sippy and a few other producers to make her film *Katha*, and how they were hesitant when they heard her budgetary requirements. Sai writes that she got the impression that they thought she did not understand finance and money because she was a woman.

She speaks about her characters with a rare insight narrating several anecdotes about actors. She recalls how in *Chashme Buddoor*, Farooq Sheikh, a strict non-smoker had to use fake cigarettes or pretend to smoke with real ones. Sai has a long list of documentaries and tele-films to her credit and they speak of how she utilised her talent inherited from Babushka, her grandmother. Her films, although categorised as “parallel cinema” did attract even mainstream audiences. And this book talks about how a child who inherited her artistic sensibilities from her mother who was a multi-faceted person and a Russian father who was a painter with a mother who was a theatre artiste was able to carve out a niche for herself in Indian cinema.

—Asmita Deshpande



Being Sindhi in the Time of Partition



‘What will the dry wood remember of the rains?’

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai

In a recent book, *A Time of Madness: A Memoir of Partition*, the Pakistani journalist and travel writer, Salman Rashid, who comes to Jalandhar in India in 2008, in search of his ancestral home, says, “From as far back as I can remember, my father used to say, ‘Fools build houses; wise men live in them.’ All his life he resisted building a house for himself and his family, preferring, instead, to live in large rented premises.” Habib Manzil, the beautiful house built by his grandfather in 1930, had to be abandoned by the family in 1947 when several members of the family were killed. Home, therefore, in terms of a physical entity, and a roof over one’s head offering protection and security, turned into a myth overnight for them. One of the many psychological fall-outs of the traumatic events of the hastily drawn Radcliffe Line, which changed the destinies of a million people in India and Pakistan.

This quest for a home, following homelessness is central to Nandita Bhavnani’s well-researched work on how much Partition impacted the Hindu Sindhis. It is a kind of pioneering study because Partition Studies have focussed mainly on the violence in Punjab, Delhi, UP and Bengal, and it is only since the 1990s that events at Hyderabad [India], Sindh, the North Eastern states of India have been explored, even though the accounts are still a bit sketchy. So, even though this is a 2014 publication, it is worth visiting in 2018, since too much is not known about the Sindhi experience. In fact, the silence surrounding this experience in this community which did not dwell for too long on the tragedy, is also due to the fact that it got down to the task of rebuilding itself in India, as also the fact that ‘Sindh witnessed much less partition violence’. The focus in Nandita’s book is that Sindhis were subject to horrors like rape and murder to a far lesser extent than the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in other areas and that their major loss was in terms of the loss of a homeland, the high profile

professions and businesses that Sindhis had built for themselves in Sindh. Loss of property and loss of infrastructure were the material fallouts; loss of a place of their own, the Home, Sindh—the psychological fallout.

The anguish at the loss of a homeland is felt very acutely by Sindhis, even the present generation, because they do not have a state of their own in Independent India. Ulhasnagar, which is unofficially referred to as Sindhustan, is still a kind of shanty town which has not attracted either Government or community investment for its growth. The anguish is heightened by the demand that the word ‘Sindh’ be replaced in the National Anthem since Sindh is no longer a part of India. The Sindhi community feels this anguish very deeply since it reminds them of their vagabond existence. If they were treated badly by the Sindhi Muslims and the *muhajirs* (Muslim immigrants of multi-ethnic origin from different regions of India who migrated to Pakistan after Partition), who were keen to annex their vast properties, Nandita points out that “...while the Sindh government may have discriminated against Hindus in Pakistan, the Indian government also could display a high degree of callousness and highhandedness vis-à-vis the Sindhi refugees. That on occasion, the Hindus in India looked down upon Sindhi Hindus, making them feel unwelcome.”

Nandita Bhavnani takes a close look at the cultural moorings of the community, relating it to the Hindu, Sikh and Sufi traditions; her introduction to the political situation in Sindh from 3 June to 15 August 1947, the factors that forced them to migrate, the riots in Karachi on 6 January 1948, discriminatory role of the Sindh government, the Exodus to India, their resettlement in Bombay [particularly South Bombay, Chembur and Mulund], Kalyan, areas of Rajasthan [Alwar], Gujarat [Adipur], and the Central Provinces—the historical details presented in minute detail and with special insights into the situation are interspersed with first person narratives so that, in this book the individual tragedies and struggles are placed with the larger contexts of community hurt, political and social pressures.

The personal narratives are important because these are stories that are in danger of being lost with the demise of the generation that faced Partition directly. The second and third generations have not yet taken an active interest in these stories, and Nandita’s work is sure to ignite the interest of the more scholarly among the Sindhi community, who after their success stories are bound to come back to the search for their cultural roots. It is for this younger generation that Nandita’s work will acquire greater significance with the passage of time. So, stories like that of K M Kundnani, a Physics Professor in Sindh re-establishing the D G National College of Hyderabad (Sind) as the R D National College at Bandra in 1949 and

bringing books and equipment to Bombay in those traumatic days, like that of a certain Navalrai Hingorani smearing mud on a new carpet in order to circumvent the customs officials, or like that of Bhai Pratap Daldas’s unsuccessful attempts to get Gandhidham to be declared as the new Sindh in India, the success of the Indian Institute of Sindhology at Adipur with the intellectuals of the community nurturing it with great personal sacrifices. These are some of the many voices that speak to those who would like to understand empathetically the saga of unsettlement and resettlement of a community, which has always placed a high premium on education, creation of wealth and professional success.

Successful as the community has been, the condition of being an exile is ‘terrible to experience’ as the quote from Edward Said, which Nandita has used at the very beginning of the book says, ‘[It] is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place.’ She ends this compelling account by highlighting the long lasting and perhaps permanent damage that has been done: ‘But pushing Sindhis into the narrowed and divided categories of Indians and Pakistanis, into “ghettos of their own minds” has come at a steep price, and we are all the poorer for it’. The line that has been drawn at the borders has etched itself on the mind of so many communities.

—Charanjeet Kaur



Eating Poems and Making Memories



Nine
Anupama Raju
Speaking Tiger, Delhi, 2015
Pages: 85
Price: Rs.199/-

Anupama Raju’s poems are about love and longing and traversing distances, breaking borders. It is difficult to write about love without resorting to the usual similes and usual modes of longing but Anupama makes love something else entirely. It is what the waves carry from the sea, it is what the sand leaves behind as footprints. It is a wait, it is a revolt and it is dying and being born again as a papery rose in a lifetime. It is also one of the navarasas and an emotion that

permeates all the rasas. Her poems have no borders; they can sit on walls and watch over neighbours and countries. Her poems can also be eaten. And this is how it feels:

I once ate a poem,
it tasted of burnt letters
I wrote you in another life.
I once ate a poem,
it smelt of decayed words
I said when I was someone else.
I once ate a poem
it cut like the knife
that sliced your heart out.
I once ate a poem,
it danced on my tongue
till I choked and spat it out.
Finally, the poem ate me.
Now I crouch inside it,
trapped in its meanings.

And the body becomes many things before it turns to dust and from the dust arise all the memories of what the body once was. In a short poem in crisp short lines she is able to say it all in *The Memory Maker*:

When she died
her body grew into walls.
Walls into feet.
Feet into rooms.
Rooms into eyes.
Eyes into roof.
Roof into hands.
Hands into pillars.
Pillars into head.
Head into cobwebs.
Cobwebs into hair.
Hair into air.
Air into dust.
And he turns
dust into memory.

Poems like Anupama Raju's one has to put away like a sweet to be savoured at leisure, slowly and with relish like we did as children, putting some eatable away and taking it out and eating it slowly and deliberately in triumph, after everyone has hurriedly eaten it.

—C S Lakshmi

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

A Journey Through Star Dust



Rasigai Paravai
(Through the Eyes of a Fan)
Ba. Jeevasundari
Kayal/Kavin, Chennai, 2016
Pages: 280
Price: Rs.250/-

This book gives life stories and the career graphs of Tamil cinema's some 27 yesteryear actresses. Jeevasundari wrote a series of articles for a film journal on old actresses and these articles have been brought out as a book. The book is based on secondary sources she has painstakingly gone through in order to avoid presenting as facts gossip and rumours regarding the actresses which is something quite normal in Tamil magazines. What is normally written about actresses are voyeuristic and titillating and if the actress happens to have a broken marriage then the gossip columns would go overboard. Against this background of writing with a male gaze about women in the film field, Jeevasundari's book comes as a refreshing relief.

She states facts about broken marriages, extramarital relationships, remarriage, love, disappointments, widowhood and sorrow without making them into juicy gossip. She highlights their turning their opportunities into empowering modes and describes how many of them asserted themselves in the film field. Some of them come as very young girls into theatre and cinema and one does not have primary sources which can tell us if there was child sexual abuse in their lives. Jeevasundari does talk about K B Sundarambal as an eight-year-old being ill-treated and beaten up by the owner of the theatre company, but one does not really get to know about the extent of what was done to little girls in drama companies and film field and one may never get to know for these stars have not spoken about it or if they have we don't have enough documentation about it. But Jeevasundari is able to indicate the kind of life child actresses may have had, mistreated both by parents and the men in the field. Many are able to assert themselves in many ways as directors, actresses paid more than the heroes and as those who do not allow widowhood to cloud their personalities like Anjali Devi, who celebrates her 80th birthday, in a traditional way called *Sadhabishekam*, something

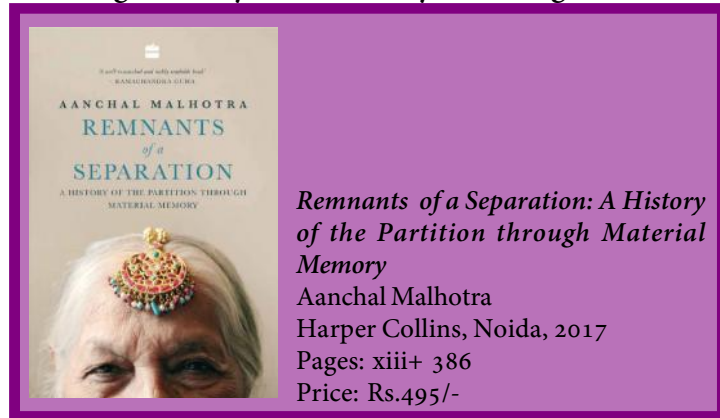
normally done only for men, despite her being a widow, with a photograph of her husband beside her.

The book is a good attempt and an important documentation for in the popular imagination the woman who is an actor is only someone with loose morals. To present them as people with ideas, vision and assertive tendencies is something that needs to be done.

—C S Lakshmi



Weaving 'History and Memory into Magic'



Anchal Malhotra is a 20-something scholar, artist, oral historian and a co-founder of the Digital Repository of Material Culture from the Indian Subcontinent—the ‘Museum of Material Memory’. In her first book, *Remnants of Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory*, she brings together 19 lives through 19 objects related to family history; objects, which breathe and live on their own and which resonate with the stories and memories they embrace in their solid materiality. Poignant, witty, sombre, frankly emotional, and narrated with the skill of a seasoned storyteller, these 19 stories bring Partition home to the reader, once again; moving to the point of bringing a lump to the throat, the tragedy of the Divide, as she consistently refers to it, unfolds, as she takes us through the gamut of the wide-ranging priced possessions—pearls, utensils, certificates, notebooks, *maang tikkas*, a stone plaque, *khaas daan*, photographs, Pashmina Shawl, and many more—objects, that the people who were driven to migrate in 1947, carried with them across the line drawn by Cyril Radcliffe.

Two aspects of this work are very significant: first, all the stories are narrated by the ‘children of Freedom and Partition’, as we may call them—those who were between the vulnerable pre-teen and teenage years when they were uprooted; those children, who did not have a say in the decision to migrate, since they were too young; at the time of being interviewed, they are all well into their 80s and 90s, making it crucial that their experiences be recorded. Secondly, the writer herself belongs to the third generation

of Partition survivors, for whom, the events of 70 years ago can be, at best, a distant, secondhand memory—muted memory, too, because of the reluctance of the ones who actually suffered to speak about it, until prodded to raise the curtain of amnesia to consciously confront the traumatic happenings of the past.

Objects pulsate with life in these narratives. Material memory ‘the ability of an object or a possession to retain memory and act as a stimulus for recollection’ is always potent: the nostalgia, fondness and longing with which objects from the past transport us to an earlier, idyllic life, to the travails with which it may be associated, act not only as a trigger of memory, but also divide time into the ‘before’ and the ‘after’, just as the Partition itself does so pointedly. In this context, objects take on a special significance, because land, which was divided and people who moved, are as material as the objects Anshu talks about. Loss of life, people, property, homes, land, homeland... is juxtaposed with what people could take with them—sometimes a tokens of a charmed, aristocratic upbringing, like the pearls of Azra Haq, sometimes survival kits, as the utensils of Balraj Bahri, sometimes as physical and mental scars captured in photographs or sometimes as just the memory of a beloved hockey field, as in the case of Nazeer Adhami. The questions that Aanchal raises in her Introduction become increasingly more valid and relevant as we move from one story to the next: Do people choose what to carry with them in such circumstances? Do they choose the utilitarian over the sentimental? How does a routine, ordinary object get infused with so much emotion and significance when it belongs to a past that has a life-changing experience behind it? How reliable is memory itself?

The telling is personal, subjective and sometimes, even dramatic, as it recreates an ideal past, ruptured by the Partition and the subsequent successful rebuilding of lives; because almost all the narratives are about people who, whether in Delhi or Lahore, have moved ahead and re-established all that they lost and even much more. So, Azra Haq, tells the enterprising story of how the jewellery came to her, her education and her joining the Army in pre-independence India and then in Pakistan, and how she managed to carry along the aristocratic set of pearls in the folds of her clothes when they had to move, the set of jewellery that ‘survived migration’. About the actual trauma, however, she refuses to talk: ‘If you don’t mind, I’d rather not talk about what I saw. I’m sorry, I cannot repeat those things. I cannot bring them to life again. I don’t want to remember them.’

Prabhjot Kaur, the well-known Punjabi writer, is more vocal though: ‘Suddenly, without warning, from the inky black night, a convoy arrived to take us from Badami Bagh to the train station. We scrambled in, leaving the house as

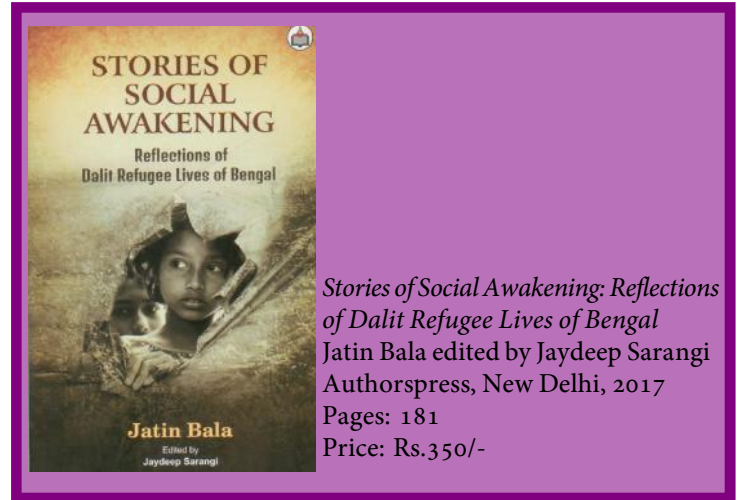
it was. We all had been eating dinner, I had been making *chapattis* on an open *chulha*, and with the confusion of the convoy arriving, I even left the *chulha* on. I remember thinking, only much later, about the fate of the *chapatti* left over the fire.' She also talks about the train, filled with corpses, they boarded at the station: '*phir kya*, we had to push the corpses aside and make room to sit. We sat next to them, we sat on top of them... It was sickening; first we were slinking away like thieves or robbers, in the middle of the night, dressed in black clothes for fear of being seen, There was no dignity in such flight. And then, to sit among the dead, it was sick.' It is no wonder then, that 'very quickly, like a deep internal wound that is left unexamined, the Partition became an unmentionable and invisible memory in the public sphere, reserved only for rare private discussions.' This is also borne out by the fact that almost all the narrators tell Aanchal that this is the first time they are actually speaking about the traumatic past.

Two refrains persist throughout the narratives: *kucch nahi laaye wahan se, sab kuch chhod aaye*, and the bonding of communities before the madness overwhelmed them. The bonding which was strongly revived after the storm that passed, too, in some cases. So, when Mian Faiz Rabbani visits his house, Shams Manzil, at Jullunder, which is now the property of the Tandons, the Sikh who takes him to the house announces, '*Thakurain, ghar ke maalik aa gaye*' and, when he meets the bed-ridden old Thakurain, the first question she asks him is, '*Putar, mainu dass, tussi khair naal pahunch gaye si?*' (Tell me, son, did you all reach Pakistan safely?) And the whole *mohalla* comes out to greet him. 25 years later they also help to transport the stone plaque, with the name 'Shams Manzil' inscribed on it to Lahore. In the Introduction, Aanchal narrates the incident in which the maternal side of the family of Zain Naqvi have boarded a private Delhi-Karachi plane, and they are taking their parrots with them. The pilot of the plane is a Sikh. 'You are taking your birds safely, I couldn't take my sisters,' he comments. Aanchal says that "after the incident, her (Zain Naqvi) family no longer kept parrots as they came to represent all those people who were not as lucky to have made the journey across."

Frankly emotional, as I have said earlier, the narratives tug at the heartstrings and focus on the humane and the humanistic. They open up a world that has remained in the shadows since the 1940s, and through these narratives we become repositories of, as Aanchal says, "stuff that doesn't belong to me: things, names, words, languages, books, emotions, cities, stories, voices, memories." And some part of the past is reinvented, or rather reclaimed, restored.

—Charanjeet Kaur

Caste and Borders



We have read many stories of Partition but not many stories of the Dalit experience of Partition have made their way to the reading list of books on Partition. It is disturbing to read Jatin Bala who was born in Jessore in 1949 (now in Bangladesh) two years after Independence, and who came to India in 1954, seven years after Independence, but the violence of Partition had not ceased, according to him. His family had been forced to migrate to India and take shelter in refugee camps. His stories one after the other speak of this migration to India and its aftermath of living and dying in abject poverty, dirt and filth, ill health, caste oppression, yet holding on to some kind of hope that this land they had come to would care for them some day. Abused as Namah because they were all Namasudras and ridiculed as bangal because they were from East Bengal, working as construction and agricultural labourers, fighting for their rights to live in wastelands and jungles, they manage to make livable lands and driven out of them to be part of a Dandakaranya project to till rocky lands impossible to till and yet trying hold their heads high, raising their skeletal chests to a landlord or a building contractor, it is a life no one would choose to live.

Often parents wait for a young daughter to come home in the night, and when a father tells her not to go out to work anymore even when they are starving and the mother shouts at her asking her why she comes back so late, the daughter cannot tell them she is selling her body for she has nothing else to offer to raise money. And then finally the human spirit survives with just two katas of land. Atul Mistri, the protagonist, at last finds a foothold. He thinks: What I want, hundreds of thousands of other people also want. This is social justice. Every soul is equal —no caste, no colour, no gender discrimination. The only thing that matters is being human. And when they find a groom for their daughter, Atul and Aloka, his wife, cannot control their tears. It is as if they have been resurrected.

Then there is Jahar Sarkar who is part of the “New Village”, a colony created after clearing jungles and marshlands, by the Namasudras. He finds a girl drowning one day in the deep portion of a pond. He is from the marshy lands of East Bengal. How can he allow a girl to drown? He pulls her back to safety. He administers first aid to remove the water she had swallowed. Then her family arrives. They are Brahmins. The girl’s mother is furious. She asks the girl to take a dip in the water again because a Namo had touched her. She grumbles that she has to sprinkle the water of Ganges to purify the girl. There is a crowd around watching this. Narrating this Jahar Sardar says: Mashai, there was a crowd but no one protested. They silently agreed and submitted to these evil practices of the caste system. Jahar Sarkar is a fighter. He tells the narrator of the story at one point that he fights against injustice and inequality and that the greatest enemy of the country is religion and caste. And he talks about how they came to make the New Village. “There was no village, nothing here but jungle and wasteland. There were tigers hiding behind bushes and large blood sucking leeches in the water. Even to this day [when there are BAs, MAs and engineers in the New Village] we refugees are more dangerous than tigers. Maybe so. We are Namasudras hailing from the Orakandi region of Faridpur. Overnight we ran two hundred miles to save our lives during the riots that broke out in the wake of Partition....” And yet, he becomes a wandering mad man who hurls stones at everyone muttering to himself for he witnesses the throats of twenty Dalits slit by some members of the orthodox Brahmin community around. He can be seen “staggering, his hair disheveled, his eyes morose—he was still limping across the roads of India.”

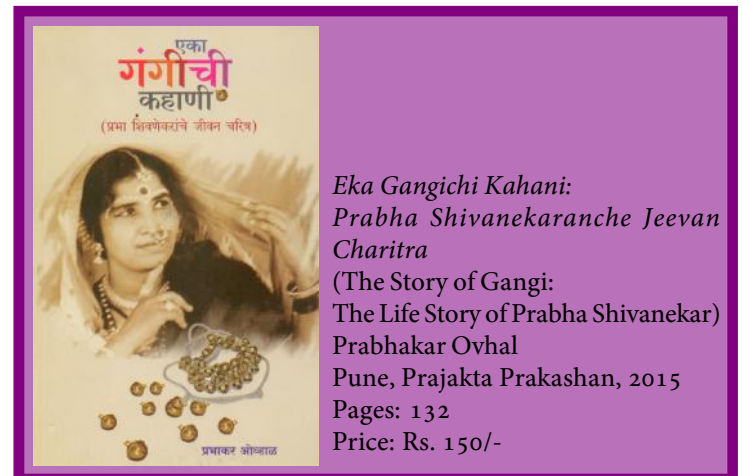
There are many such stories it is difficult to read without one’s heart getting heavy. A particularly poignant one is of a man meeting a Muslim family which has crossed the borders to take an old woman to hospital. He realises that the old woman was Fatima Amma, the Muslim lady who was their neighbour and whose family had helped them to cross the border in safety during Partition. Not only that. When he was born, his mother had been sickly and her milk had dried up. And Fatima Amma came every day to give him her breast for she had plenty of milk even after feeding her son. He was her Khokon, her dear child. The half conscious lady comes to life when he tells her who he is. There is the usual Hindi filmy kind of twist where only his blood matches hers when she needs blood but despite that there is the deep feeling a son feels for this mother who thinks that his motherland and Fatima Amma, who he watches crossing the border to go to her home, had fused and merged into one. But he can gaze at them forever, only from a distance.

In his interview given to Jaydeep Sarangi, Jatin Bala says that he has lived in three refugee camps since the age of four and a half, silently witnessed great atrocities of caste, worked as a farm hand in fields to feed himself, and studied on railway platforms. He reiterates whatever he has described in the stories but also says that literature based on these experiences have not come up in great numbers and that Dalit literature in general does not get enough media attention. This book is a good attempt to deal with this lacuna. But the translation is jarring at many places and could have been improved. Translation is not an easy task when one is translating a language that is colloquial and carries shades of language practices from across the border but at least the grammatical mistakes could have been avoided. However, this book can be seen as the first step towards bringing attention to Dalit experiences of Partition and the following years and as such it is a wonderful effort to be appreciated.

—C S Lakshmi



The Story of Gangi



This book tells the story of Prabha Shivanekar, a Tamasha artiste who was popularly known as Gangi. It is the story from her birth to her career as a Tamasha artiste. Like most Tamasha artistes Prabha also goes through a life full of insecurity, hardships and pain because all the decisions about her life are taken by others and yet she makes her life meaningful in a certain way.

Prabha’s parents had taken a vow when they lost many children in miscarriages that the first child they get would be dedicated as a Jogta or Jogtin. Prabha was their first born and they dedicated her as soon as she was born. It was the norm that a girl dedicated had to lead a religious life where marriage was not allowed. After her parents’ demise, she was raised by a distant uncle, who got her

sister married. But because she was dedicated to god, Prabha could not choose to marry. The uncle had to deal with two problems: one was protecting her from being exploited by others especially men and the second was bearing the expenses of bringing her up. So he brought her to Mumbai and handed her over to Dadu Indurikar, a famous folk artiste who had his own troupe or *phad*. His real name was Dadu Raghu Sarode. He was from Induri, Pune District. He belonged to a family of traditional Tamasha artistes. He was famous for his comedy acts and spontaneous humour which Dada Kondke was supposed to have imbibed. She joined his troupe and initially started doing only the menial jobs of washing vessels and clothes. But Dadu looked upon her as a daughter and he mentored her. Prabha became part of the troupe over a period of time and learnt the art of Tamasha from other senior women in the troupe and from Dadu himself.

In the 1960s, there were no other means of entertainment for the working class in both rural and urban areas. Tamasha was an art form in Maharashtra where the audience used to watch the dance and listen to the music and songs through *sawal-jawab* (*Lavani*). The *Vag* or the dramatic performance also gave them exposure to mythological stories and the spiritual questions in the mythologies. It entertained them as well as informed them about past history and present social issues. Prabha was trained expertly in dancing, singing and *sawal-jawab* and like all Tamasha artistes she was also taught the techniques of attracting the audience and keeping her audience absorbed in her performance. Then came the day when Dadu introduced her to the audience and after that she began to perform regularly as a lead actor of the troupe. The Tamasha artistes normally cannot have a regular marriage. They choose to live with a man without a ritualistic marriage and usually treat him as their husband. In the case of Prabha also this happened. Shankarrao Shivanekar was a partner in Dadu's troupe and he was also a performer. He was a married man and Prabha started living with him as his partner in life, too. Their troupe became very famous and used to perform in various corners of Maharashtra.

Sawalya Kumbhar (Sawalya, the Potter) was a folk drama performed by other Tamasha troupes but because they didn't have expert comic artistes, it was not doing well. Dadu changed the name to *Gadhavache Lagna* (Donkey's wedding) and produced and directed it with himself in the main lead and Prabha as his wife Gangi. The play became very famous and they were even invited to perform it for the members of Parliament and the play was also invited to countries like UAE, Japan, and other countries. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi watched it and congratulated them personally. The character of

Gangi made Prabha so famous that she came to be known as as Gangi.

This drama brought good days to the troupe. But other troupes also started feeling jealous of them and one day some goondas attacked the camp where the troupe was staying during the performance period. They burnt down their tents and they had to run away leaving everything behind. Tamasha troupes always have to deal with ups and down in their fortunes and this time the troupe faced a big loss for everything they had had been burnt down. But they rose up again with the help of well-wishers who were political personalities and writers. They also had a staunch supporter in Madhukar Nerale, who was proprietor of Hanuman Theatre in Lalbaug and a member of the Tamasha Kalavant Vikas Mandir Trust. (The Hanuman Theatre was later turned into New Hanuman Theatre Mangal Karyalay, a much sought after wedding hall and banquet hall).

Their troupe started performing again and in 1973 they got the Sangeet Natak Akademi award for the best folk play, which was performed almost daily. In the midst of this busy schedule, Prabha became pregnant but Shankarrao was not ecstatic to hear the news. He told her to abort the child because it would interfere with the performances. Prabha complied but later the doctors told her that she would never be able to conceive again because her uterus had to be removed because of some complications. This information shocked her and at that moment the woman in her woke up and she threw Shankarrao out of the troupe and ended her relationship with him. Their play was performed but with her and Dadu in the lead.

As other mediums of entertainment became popular, less and less people started frequenting Tamasha performances. Dadu and Prabha had to manage the upkeep of the troupe with great difficulty. When they could do it no more they had to break up the troupe and members of the troupe got scattered. Prabha herself joined another troupe as a performer and Dadu became an alcoholic and eventually died.

Prabhakar Ovhal, the author, is a supporter of Tamasha as a traditional art and cultural heritage. He has written biographies of Dadu Indurikar and the well-known artiste Yamunabai Waikar. He would like the current generation to know about the lives of these artistes, their art and their struggles. Prabha has spoken about many others involved with Tamasha whom she knew. It recreates the world of Tamasha for the readers with actual dialogues and lyrics of songs from her performances.

In 2014, Prabha was conferred with a lifetime achievement award named after noted Tamasha artiste Vithabai Narayangaonkar. But like many Tamasha artistes

before her, at present, Prabha lives in poverty in a hutment area in Narayangaon forgotten by the public. The audience who loved her performances and thronged to see her dance and act also does not exist anymore. Prabhakar Ovhal is doing a great service by writing these biographies talking about forgotten lives and forgotten artistes we need not only to remember but also help them to live dignified lives in their old age.

—*Sharmila Sontakke*



Discordant Notes of Life



Swara Bethangal
(Discordant Notes)
Bhagyalakshmi
Translated by K V Shylaja
Vamsi books,
Tiruvannamalai, 2017
Pages: 280
Price: Rs.250/-

S*wara Bethangal* is the autobiography of a Malayalam dubbing artist. Normally one never knows about dubbing artists and their importance. With many heroines acting in films in languages they are not used to talking in, the role of dubbing artists became an important one. But Bhagyalakshmi's dubbing career while it has established her as one of the best known dubbing artists who gives life to the acting of famous heroines with her voice and dialogue delivery, is not something that happened because of her eagerness to be in films or even her deliberate choice. A series of unfortunate life incidents push her into films and a dubbing career. Her story is about a little girl, abandoned in an orphanage along with her brother, by her mother because she was too poor to take care of them and too proud to ask her relatives, ending up as a successful dubbing artist in the Malayalam cinema. Her aunt who ill treats her in many ways also introduces her to films. Her brother Unni cannot bear this aunt and leaves at some point and she never sees him again. Marriage happens with a person who becomes a kind of supporter and this person becomes an avaricious husband and he and the children become part of her life along with a dubbing career. She builds a house and with encouragement from a father-in-law whom she grows fond of she learns to drive and driving alone

for long distances becomes her solace in life. Like all people greedy for money her husband wants to produce a film with her help and it turns out to be a disaster and their final separation happens. Her grown up sons stand by her and also many friends who become her family. She falls in love with someone and like a young girl in love, like her son says, she runs to pick up the phone when he calls. But he decides to fade out of her life without giving any reasons.

The autobiography begins with her driving to the orphanage she grew up in for sometime. It has changed but everything comes back to her: her mother leaving her and her brother telling them she would come back but never doing so; her aunt coming and claiming them and the difficult life with the aunt; her marriage; her sons; her building the huge house she always wanted to live in; her bitterness about her husband; her love that makes her bloom and then the way it just goes out of her life; her friends who stand by her and all the dubbing experiences she has had and the awards she has won.

And then she talks of the dreams that haunt her. One dream is of her walking endless distances in utter darkness. And then falling into a ditch and weeping bitterly for she is unable to come out and waking up crying. And then the other dream of her mother dying lying on her lap. As she is dying her eyes begin to come out and her face turns terribly ugly and her death happens with this unexpected twist of an image of a dying mother. This dream, she says, haunted her for a long time.

She built a big house but now lives in a flat. She often wonders what her life is all about. When she feels utterly hopeless she takes out her car and starts driving alone. She says driving to her is like meditation. Whatever happens on the road she would concentrate on driving and then she would calm down. She says, driving in a way, is life. There are many obstacles, the roads are bad at times and there are others who make it impossible but driving must happen despite that.

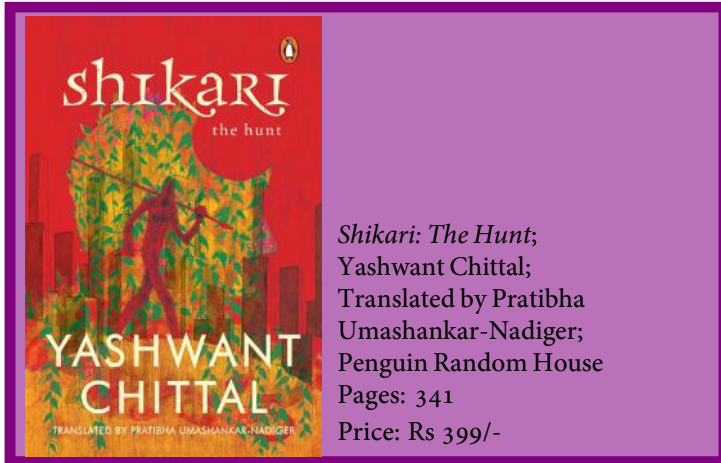
Bhagyalakshmi has given the title *Swara Bethangal*, discordant notes, to her autobiography. But despite all the discordant notes in her life, she is able to pick up the clear notes that are part of her life. Shylaja's translation is efficient and the text flows smoothly. There are one or two discordant notes in the translation but then discordant notes are as much part of music as clear notes.

—*C S Lakshmi*



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

Modern Existential Saga



Shikari: The Hunt;
Yashwant Chittal;
Translated by Pratibha
Umashankar-Nadiger;
Penguin Random House
Pages: 341
Price: Rs 399/-

Yashwant Chittal's *Shikari: The Hunt* begins with an inter-textual reference to Kafka's famous work *The Trial*, setting the atmosphere and tone of the work. As the reader enters into the Kafkaesque space that Chittal builds through the interior monologues of Nagappa, the reader experiences an already developing claustrophobia which tightens rapidly as the underlying deceitfully complex modern corporate warfare unfolds, through the switching narrations by Nagappa and a third person narrator.

Yashwant Chittal is one of the foremost writers in Kannada and has influenced a number of other writers in Karnataka including Girish Karnad. His works were incisive commentaries on the flaws within the developing Indian democracy. He began his literary career in the 1950s with short stories, wrote six novels, the most well-known among them being *Mooru Daarigalu (Three Ways)* in 1964, *Shikari* (1979) and *Purushottama* (1990). *Shikari: the Hunt* is based on his own experience of living and working in a metro as an American educated Chemical scientist who worked in an MNC in Mumbai. His sharp insights into corporate espionage and politicking come from his own observations of his surroundings.

When the novel was published in 1979, Chittal's readers in Kannada, perhaps, would not have identified with the immediate set of experiences. *Shikari* was a visionary work preempting the alienation that modern corporate and professional work spaces would create for their members in urban landscapes. Corporate power play and deceptions are intricately woven with other pressing issues of Indian society; that of caste, class and corruption. Compounding all these issues are the protagonist Nagappa's own psychological fears and demons that he is fighting with.

The complexity of modern life in an Indian metro is explored through the 39-year-old Nagappa, who is a brilliant researcher with a multinational chemical company with a base in Bombay and Hyderabad in the 1970s. He has dedicated 18 years to the company and

understands his identity only in terms of the progress he has made in his profession. Though inherently an introvert, he is popular with people and shares a good rapport with most of his colleagues except Kambata and Phiroz. His MD is very impressed with him and Nagappa is expecting to travel to America for further research, when abruptly he is transferred to Bombay and then after a few months, receives an order suspending him from work and an inquiry being set up to investigate some allegations that have been made against him. As he grapples with the sudden change of tide, he turns inward to find answers. He confers with Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, Konrad Lorenz, Eric Berne, M N Roy and Karl Marx to analyse his position. Through his, at times erudite, at times self-deprecating and sometimes intellectual and sometimes sarcastic inner dialogues with himself, he grapples with his personal struggles as the outward forces tighten their stronghold on him.

As the story unfolds in two weeks, mostly in Bombay, the city becomes the mute spectator to Nagappa's turmoil and ruin in the cramped space of the Khetwadi chawl which he has turned to for succour, and his friend's place in Shivaji Park. The restaurant run by a person from his own caste, which was the site of fraternity with his caste members before, becomes the site of his estrangement from his caste affiliates, exposing the deep rooted rot and hypocrisy which govern caste-based communities. As the caste politics and corporate politics collude, the protagonist's ability to counter it diminishes as the intricate details start tumbling out like the evils out of Pandora's Box. Nagappa deals with most of this onslaught in his mind through his constant dialogue with himself. Nagappa's own philosophical musings and existential crisis, along with his search for identity, furthermore, complicate the interpretation of the events that unfold, as mostly it is the protagonist's point-of-view that is accorded to the readers, creating ambivalence in the interpretation of the occurrences. The reader is left with a feeling that there may be more to the events than what is being told. The third person narrator's presence, whenever the novel switches its narration from Nagappa's interior monologue to the third person narrative, is almost invisible in terms of his description of the events. The narrator does not interpret the actions of the other characters in the novel or comment on them either. We have little insights into the minds of the other characters who are influencing the chain of events in the life of Nagappa. All the interpretations of the characters and events are routed through Nagappa and his subjective understanding almost at times making the reader question if all the complexities are only in the mind of Nagappa because of his paranoia.

Pratibha Umashankar-Nadiger has skilfully translated the novel from Kannada, retaining the texture and tone of

the narrative. The clever switching tenor of the language from formal to obscenely informal is retained in English also by the translator, making the confusion of the character available to the readers in English without losing the flavour of the original. The translation of the novel into English has come at the most opportune moment, for now more than ever before, the urban and professional readers would find their lives echoed in Nagappa's life with the corporate affairs and identity politics embedded in the corrupt nature of all institutions in society.

—Vidya Premkumar



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Women Chose, Women Demanded, Women Created, Women Rebelled

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SPARROW CONGRATULATES PADMA AWARD WINNERS

LAKSHMIKUTTY, a tribal woman from Kerala, who prepares 500 herbal medicines from memory and helps thousands of people especially in snake and insect bite cases, is among the awardees. She teaches at the Kerala Folklore Academy and lives in a small hut made of palm leaves roof in tribal settlement in a forest. She is the only tribal woman from her area to attend school in the 1950s.

SUBHASINI MISTRY, a poor lady from rural West Bengal, who toiled 20 years as housemaid and daily labourer and vegetable vendor to build a hospital for poor in the state.

Nonagenarian farm labourer SULAGATTI NARASAMMA, who provides midwifery services in backward region of Karnataka without medical facility, too was awarded the Padma Shri.

VIJAYALAKSHMI NAVANEETHAKRISHNAN, an acclaimed Tamil folk exponent, who has dedicated her life towards collection, documentation and preservation of Tamil folk and tribal music.

LENTINA AO THAKKAR, a Gandhian who has served for decades at a Gandhi Ashram in Nagaland.

RANI AND ABHAY BANG, both doctors, who over 30 years transformed health care in Naxal-hit Gadchiroli in Maharashtra.

SITAVVA JODDATI, who champions women development and empowerment, especially 'Devadasis' and Dalits.

98-year-old V NANAMMAL, India's oldest yoga teacher, who still practises and teaches 100 students daily in Tamil Nadu.

SAIKHOM MIRABAI CHANU, weightlifter, won the World Championships and multiple medals at the Commonwealth Games.



VIJAYALAKSHMI NAVANEETHAKRISHNAN



RANI AND ABHAY BANG



SUBHASINI MISTRY



LENTINA A THAKKAR



SAIKHOM MIRABAI CHANU



V NANAMMAL



SULAGATTI NARASAMMA



LAKSHMIKUTTY



SITAVVA JODDATI

Congratulations!

A Doctor Who Was Mashima to Her Patients: Dr Pushpitabala Das



Pushpitabala Das with her first born

Manto who has documented much of the horrors of the Partition, wrote in his story “Toba Tek Singh”, about the madman trying to ascertain where his home lay, and what if the boundaries of his village were to be redrawn again. Which place could he call home? Partition also affected the life of a group of people in Ranchi. This is the story about how when the country’s history was taking shape at the stroke of the midnight hour, the fate of a group of people who were in no power to decide their destiny was also being decided. The Indian Mental Hospital in Kanke, Ranchi, was witness to this little blip in the catastrophic saga of Partition. A team of doctors and hospital staff travelled to the Wagah border, or what was to later become the border, near Amritsar, where an exchange of patients took place. The Muslim patients were handed over to the authorities in Pakistan, while the Indian patients were brought back to the Indian Mental Hospital in Ranchi. And woven into this story is the story of my grandmother Dr Pushpitabala Das, one of the early women doctors of India.

This is the story of a little girl, an ordinary girl whose story though forgotten is an inspiration—the story of my grandmother Dr Pushpitabala Das of Ranchi, who passed away in 1973. In my childhood I had heard she was a doctor at the Indian Mental Hospital in Ranchi, and was drawn to her story... only to let it swirl in my mind, till finally I sat down to interviewing her two sons—my father and uncle to share all they knew about her.

“I want to be a doctor,” is what Pushpitabala had told her father when she was growing up in the early years of the 20th century Calcutta. She was born in circa 1900, and her father Brojendranath Das was an employee of the Calcutta Port Commission. His office was near the Kidderpore docks and his wife Kamala Devi was a homemaker and a mother of three daughters—the other two being Pratibhabala and Konika.

The family was Bengali Christian by faith, and Brojendranath’s father, Joseph Chandra Das, had somehow managed to educate him with great difficulty. Joseph Chandra was a man of very limited means. He sold copies

of the Bible in the streets of Kolkata for a few paise. Probably the early years of hardship had made Brojendranath realise the importance of education. After completing his matriculation, he took up a job with the Port Commission and worked at the Store. He got all his three daughters admitted to St Margaret’s School in Calcutta. While Pushpitabala and Pratibhabala were keen to go in for higher studies, Konika settled down to domesticity after marrying Manoranjan Das who was a highly respected and well-known Science teacher at Ranchi Zilla School.

Pushpita’s words, “*Ami daktar hote chai*” (I want to be a doctor) was not a childish refrain to her parents. Since they were residents of Calcutta the natural choice was Calcutta Medical College and Hospital. But she was not selected for the course there. So she applied for the licentiate degree at Dhaka (Dacca) and to her joy was selected. She stayed in the girls’ hostel of the Dacca Medical School which later became the Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, and with her friends often took walks at the Ramna Park, the green oasis in the middle of present day Dhaka’s urban chaos.

During her student days, an interesting case captured the popular imagination—that of the prince who rose from the dead—the intriguing Bhawal Sanyasi case. She had narrated to her family that the ‘sanyasi’ had taken up lodgings near the girls’ hostel and when she and her classmates would go to their college he would drop dry fruits like cashew and raisin from his balcony perch!

After completing her course in 1925, Dr Pushpitabala joined government service and was posted in several towns of Bihar. Some of her early postings were Begusarai, Muzaffarpur, and Purnea. She was probably posted at the Sadar Hospitals there.

She came to Ranchi to join the Women’s Section of the Indian Mental Hospital, Kanke, around 1927. Around that time, she met Dr Baroda Charan Das, a physician colleague and they decided to get married. Since Dr B C Das hailed from a very orthodox traditional Hindu family from Balasore, this was bound to lead to problems. Dr B C Das

was known for his rambunctious personality, a man of westernised tastes and habits, he had scant regard for his family's rigid customs. He drove his 'lady' friend to a brother's house in Puri, which served as the family fortress—the house of Rai Bahadur Uma Charan Das that overlooked the great Jagannath Temple. The house was called 'Kshetra Renu' as Puri is called 'Srikshetra' of the land of the Lord of the Universe—Lord Jagannath. As relatives milled around to catch a glimpse of the 'lady doctor' Dr Pushpitabala found herself completely at sea, and in a strange world where a large joint family was trying to size her up. Finally, one of the brothers understood her discomfiture and requested her to go into the kitchen and make some tea—a subtle sign of acceptance of a Christian woman in a patriarchal Hindu home, where though all the brothers were highly educated, the customs followed were rooted in tradition.

Dr B C Das and Pushpitabala Das got married in Ranchi and settled down to working towards building a life and career together.

They were both in government service and stayed at the accommodation offered at the Indian Mental Hospital at Kanke, on the outskirts of Ranchi. Dr B C Das owned a car and used to drive down to Ranchi to his workplace.

After Shri Brojendranath Das retired from service, age and concern for his daughter motivated him to shift to Ranchi. He then bought a large plot of land in Kanke, and shifted base with his unmarried daughter Pratibhabala, who was a teacher.

In due course, the family shifted to the house in Kanke, called Shanti Kutir. It was a full household—Shri Brojendranath, his two daughters, Dr B C Das, two grandsons Susanta Das and Manu Das all lived under the same roof in a large house spread over an acre that included a stable for two horses, a cowshed, dogs, 50 pigeons, parrots and twin swans! My grandmother, they say, often rose at the crack of dawn to make sure the household ran efficiently.

Dr Pushpitabala Das served the Indian Mental Hospital with utmost dedication and diligence. She headed the Women's Section of the hospital. She was known for her inclusive approach towards mental health. She believed in integrating mental patients into the mainstream and had them over at her home on a regular basis. Very few women patients were kept confined to their rooms, and they would often visit her home for a chat, to eat home-cooked meals, chop vegetables, share anecdotes. Most were shunned by their families, and spent years at the hospital. My father and uncle have vivid memories of many patients visiting them, chopping vegetables, having meals in her home. To most she was simply Mashima, and not 'doctor'. Many called her 'Ma'.

She was charitable and kind to a fault. One of my aunts has recounted an anecdote about how she reached out to the most marginalised of people—leprosy patients. In those days, leprosy patients were treated as outcasts, and they travelled in bands of a dozen or twenty members and earned a living through begging. Once when a band of beggars (who were all afflicted with leprosy) were begging from door to door, they met her on her way to work, and said they were hungry. Dr Pushpitabala Das told them to give her some time to organise a proper meal for them in the courtyard of her home. She asked them to return after an hour or so and assured them that she would keep a hot meal ready. She immediately sent word to her domestic help to arrange a simple meal of rice, lentils and some vegetables for 15-20 people. The help did as she was told. She then fed the group in the courtyard of her home. This was not a one off. Somehow the group would come each month on their begging rounds, and upon arriving at Kanke, one of them would inform Dr Pushpitabala that they would be having lunch that day. This was a practice that continued for years till the beggars eventually found it easier to beg in Ranchi, as the city was also growing, rather than walk all the way to Kanke.

Dr Puspitabala was the only doctor in the women's section of the Indian Mental Hospital. She was expected to be at the hospital from 8 a.m. till noon, when she took rounds of the wards, saw and treated patients who were ill. Then again visit the hospital in the evening. As part of her duty she had to perform certain procedures that were broadly described by my father and uncle. She had to perform 'lumbar puncture' and administer electric shocks to the patients (Electroconvulsive therapy or ECT, as it was known) if the case so demanded. These were accepted practices back then, and had to be performed with utmost precision. In another procedure a patient was made to stand immersed till her neck in a tub of water, with only her head outside. Insulin was also given to some patients in her care (though not for diabetes). ECT, hydrotherapy, metrazol convulsion, and insulin shock therapy were accepted practices back then, and had to be performed with utmost precision.

As part of her hospital duties, Dr Pushpitabala had to take rounds of the wards of the Women's Section of the hospital once a week, all through the year. The winter temperatures at Kanke could dip to 1 degree Celsius and the hospital was spread over approximately 50 acres. An ayah and a warden with a lantern and a stick would accompany her on her rounds. Those were pre-electricity days. The next morning she had to file a detailed report. An interesting detail is that the hospital was also host to the great mystic-poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam in 1948. Nazrul, who enjoyed iconic status in his own lifetime, inspired

generations of freedom fighters as he highlighted British oppression through his poetry. The poet widely respected in both the Bengalis, the National Poet of Bangladesh, spent a few months in a small cottage in the European Mental Hospital undergoing treatment under Major R B Davis, a pioneer in psychiatry, in the region. He never spoke, and those around him, could hardly imagine him to be the Nazrul of his soulful Nazrulgeeti.

And now for my grandmother's role in the drama of Partition. My grandparents Dr B C Das and Dr Pushpitabala Das spent their entire working careers in Ranchi, and were witness to the great churning and the tragic consequences that scarred the country in those years. My grandmother, Dr Pushpitabala, as head of the women's section of the hospital, travelled to Amritsar with her team to hand over the Muslim women patients, many of whom were from Bihar or Orissa or what was then undivided Bengal. They did not understand a word of Urdu, and had never stepped out of their homes till they were hospitalised in Ranchi. And she had been their mother figure in the hospital and their only support system all these years. It is an incident that perhaps few know of, and the records if any, might still be gathering dust in the archives of the hospital in Ranchi.

How exactly the women patients felt when they were sent across the border and how they reacted to leaving their Mashima, their only emotional link in the world, has not been recorded. And what were the emotions crowding the mind of Dr Pushpitabala herself? No diaries, letters or other documents of Dr Puhpitabala have been found recording this important event in her career as a doctor. Even if official records are found in some dusty archives, they would only record it as a bureaucratic order carried out and the patients would be only numbers. It is in those brittle browned pages recording just the official details of Partition where these women were merely numbers with a religious tag to be exchanged for some other numbers also with a religious tag that one must learn to see the emotions and the bond that those women patients shared with a sensitive doctor whom they called Mashima.

Dr Pushpitabala Das officially retired in 1957, but was granted an extension for two years. She hung up her boots finally in 1959. She lived with my parents and uncle in Ranchi till her death on November 18, 1973.

—Soumi Das

(Written after conversations with Susanta Das (father), Manu Das (uncle) Nilima Das (paternal aunt) late Kalpana Ghosh (aunt) and late Aruna Maharana (aunt).)

SPARROW ENTERED ITS SILVER JUBILEE YEAR IN DECEMBER 2013. IN ORDER TO CELEBRATE THIS WE HAVE TAKEN A FEW INITIATIVES, ONE OF WHICH IS TO ORGANISE CONVERSATIONS WITH WOMEN FROM VARIOUS WALKS OF LIFE.

The conversations can be viewed on the following links

Conversation with Kalyanee Mulay

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSOEWjKbERIPDZZpjC6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Vimmi Sadarangani & Puthiyamaadhavai

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSOEWjKbERIPDZZpjC6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Jhelum Paranjape

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSOEWjKbERIPDZZpjC6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Purvadhanashree & Ranjana Dave

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySGI55ZhsBEdaHodnnf8qozc>

Conversation with Sumathi Murthy

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySEiqqDvyKdruGkVUNqoqXIW>

Conversation Sudha Arora

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4dB7gdoMgc>

YOU CAN ALSO VISIT SPARROW WEBSITE FOR MORE DETAILS ABOUT THE CONVERSATIONS

<http://www.sparrowonline.org/silver-jubilee.html>



Hariye Jaoa Dingul Those Lost Days



My variegated life seems to course back to the past. Many scenes flit before my eyes. I was then, a girl of four. There was an organ in the drawing room. My hand did not reach the keyboard, though I would try hard. My nurse Nurunnisa placed me on the stool and bellowed the pedal with her hand. And I started playing the organ. When I played the English song ‘Whispering...’ my parents, elder brothers and sisters would watch in surprise. There was a piano in the room too. I would sit on the stool and play the piano. I would use both my hands to play chords producing music which sounded like western classical. Neighbours would think that some professional musician was playing! I would play in this manner till I was about nine or ten. Then somehow I forgot. Perhaps it was some memory of a previous birth!

The atmosphere in our house Kamal Kutir (presently Victoria Institute for Girls) was very unique. For *Maghotsav* (the celebration in the month of *Magh* approximately 23 December) we would have Upaasna, Brahmosangeet, Kirtan, Theatre, Jokes, Anand bazaar (fetes) for girls. Those days come back vividly now. The day Mahatma Gandhi came to our house. I sat on his knee and sang to him “*Amra rehat garib, amra rehat choto, tobu tirish koti bhai jege otho* (We may be poor and small (inferior)—but brothers rise...)” I remember the famous Congress session at Park Circus—Netaji Subhas Bose was received as the GOC [General Officer Commanding] [of the Congress volunteers]. Many eminent leaders were present. Saraladevi Chaudhurani taught me “*Bande Mataram*” and many other patriotic songs. I sang *Bande Mataram*. Her son Deepak Choudhury conducted the orchestra.

I told Mejdi, (middle sister) ‘You know, Angurbala has given me her number. She has asked us to call her.’ Whenever we were alone at home, Didi and I would call Angurbala and listen to her singing. We would also sing for her. It was a precious secret we hugged to ourselves. Kanakda heard from some sources around the theatre world that Panchu had taken Nilina to Angurbala’s place. And he divulged this to father. Baba drove away Panchu uncle after hearing this.

I have talked of Angurbala, but I remember something else about Panchukaka. The day he brought Kaji Nazrul Islam to our house. Panchu Kaka and Kaji Saheb were good friends. Both had served in Mesopotamia during

World War I. Kaji Saheb would sit with the harmonium. He taught me two of his songs “*Ke bideshi – mon udashi*” and “*Bagichay bulbuli tor phulshakhate dishney aji dol*”. I told him these were tunes from ghazals. There was a Muslim colony behind our house, I would often hear the Muslim boys going down the lane singing similar tunes. The original for “*Ke bideshi*” was “*Bhole bhale kaley wale hote hain jallad bhi*”. Kaji Saheb remarked that I was correct, and asked whether I knew the original of “*Bagichay bulbuli*”. I knew that too because I was learning Urdu then. A local youth used to teach me and my cousin Kalyani—both of us were keen on learning the language. The other ghazal was “*Khoday chasni ay sarbate deedar thodisi/Azal tu thahar ja dum bar jara dekh lene de/Abhi baki hai dil mein maratey deedar thodisi*”. When I sang this song there were tears in Kaazi Saab’s eyes. He said, ‘You are right, I am feeling good today. No one before has been able to tell me about the original numbers which I adapted for my compositions.’ He hugged me—and I was quite overwhelmed.

I remember another amusing incident—listening to the songs of the courtesans—baijis. Maharaja Pradyot Kumar Thakur had in his house guests the Nawab of Rampur, Raza Ali Khan and his Begum Sahiba. His garden house Emerald Bowen was in Dumdum. The Maharaja had asked my mother to meet the Begum Sahiba. She was in strict purdah and knew English. Mother would often take me along with her. One day I overheard their conversation—there was to be a party at Markat Kunj. A banquet would be held in honour of the Nawab Begum (which would be attended by the Viceroy and Governor) followed by a nautch party I didn’t know then what ‘nautch’ meant—I thought it meant a dance party. (In Bengali dance is naach!) I was sure there would be music and dance at the party. When the invitation card arrived it read banquet to be followed by nautch Party. I insisted on going with my parents. Ma told me that children were not allowed to such parties. I cried and threw tantrums. I told her that I wouldn’t go for the banquet—I would sit with the Begum behind the purdah and watch the dance (nautch)! My parents relented, a little before the banquet, I was taken to the Begum and my mother explained that I had stubbornly insisted on coming and that I would sleep off sitting by her. Saying this, Ma went down to the party, where the ‘memsaabs’ wore long dresses and the men were dressed suavely in dinner jackets and sherwanis. I dropped off to sleep in the banquet hall and woke [up] to the strains of the sarengi, singing voices and the sounds of bells. I sat up immediately and looked down to see many pretty baijis (nautch girl) dressed in peshors (sic) and sarees. Some

singing, some entering and saluting. I was surprised to watch the women bow down and performing ‘salaam’ then addressing the Britishers and singing. Many of them sang, some danced. The English ladies were talking to the begums. They were discussing the courtesans, mentioning their names. I remember a few names of the women who sang that day. There was Noorjehan Baiji and her daughter, Shahjahan. And Chulbulewali Malkajaan. Nargis’ mother Jaddan Bai, Ratan Bai and many others whom I don’t remember. I remember something funny. They sang classical [music]—khayal, thumri, then bhar, dadra, ghazal and when the sahibs were applauding loudly—three girls came forward and sang an English song “Ka, Ka, Ka, Katie, beautiful Katie” and another song ‘Oh Johnny, Oh Johnny’ I was very surprised. They knew English songs! I felt giggly and amused!

One day Madhu Mama (Madhu Bose) arrived at our house. He requested my mother to allow Sadhana and myself to participate [in the play] *Alibaba*.^{*} Ma granted permission and we both sisters were very thrilled. I sang the song of Niyoti (Destiny) “*Joto lekha chilo, shobi to phuralo*” and in the chorus, I danced too. After *Alibaba* Madhu Mama would come to our house often. He made Aparesh Babu dramatise Tagore’s short story “Dalia”. And in Rabindranath’s presence the play was staged! Mejdī (Sadhana) was Tinni and I the Araakan dancer. That was a memorable experience. Amala Nandy (Amala Shankar) also danced in *Dalia*. When Dada (Uday Shankar) first came to Calcutta with his troupe, he would visit us often. He taught us a number of *mudras* and gestures. We would be inspired by him and Mejdī was completely entranced.

In my youth, we would often go to visit my grandmother in Benaras. There was lot of opportunity to hear music in Benaras. Ashubaba (Umacharan Kabiraj) loved music and if he heard of any soirees, he would take us. In front of the Sitala Devi, the baijis and the Kabir Chaural—the musicians—would perform. Every year there would be an annual concert (jalsa) in front of the Sitala Devi Mandir. It was spectacular. Once a year they would have Burwah Mangal. They would sing Chaiti on the bajra (boat). Well known singers—Rasoolon Bai, Kashibai, Siddheswariji, Motibai, Kamleshwari Bai would be there. Many would pass by singing on the boats. Raja Moti Chand would take me to Burwah Mangal often.

Another amusing anecdote. There was an old Bengali singer—her name was Khedi. Saffron robes, with short hair, she would come to every house to sing and beg for food. She would come to our house often. When she found that all of us were involved with music, she would stay on for a long time and sing for us *baithaki* and Kirtan song. One day she whispered to me ‘You’ll listen to so many of my songs. Get me an omelette and a cigarette!’ I went and

told mother—she was very amused. I made the omelette for her. She relished and ate it and sang many songs. After that whenever she came, it was omelette and cigarettes for her and a lot of songs for us. It amused us greatly. Her name suited her appearance. Blunt nosed, short and stout, she had a very short neck.

She would take a dip in the Ganges and tell me, ‘You didn’t take a dip; go put on the tilak (sandalwood paste). You’ll have to go home and take a bath.’ After being scolded by my mother, I would go and take a holy dip, and then return home.

My mother was always very apprehensive about my addiction to music fearing I would make it my profession. It is because of this fear that she did not allow me to go the Allahabad music Conference with Girija Babu. She didn’t let me sing over the radio in Calcutta. At the age of 15, she married me off in faraway Punjab. After 14 years of marriage, lightning struck.

My husband died. I felt like a boat tossed in midstream. Suddenly I remembered that old woman’s song on the ghats of Benaras—“*Hey govinda rakho sharan ab to jeevan hare*”. It seemed she was calling me with that song. The look in her large dark eyes seemed to overpower me—I, ‘Nilina’, immersed myself in those dark eyes and Naina was born.

—A handwritten personal note by Naina Devi given to C S Lakshmi

End Notes

1. “Whispering” was a song that was first published in 1920. Paul Whiteman first recorded it in 1920. The lyricists were John Schonberger (1892–1983) and Richard Coburn (1886–1952) who is also known by his pseudonym Frank Reginald DeLong. The composer was Vincent Rose. The lyrics of the song went:

Don’t worry I’m not looking at you
Gorgeous and dressed in blue
Don’t worry I’m not looking at you
Gorgeous and dressed in blue
I know it drives you crazy
When I pretend you don’t exist
When I’d like to lean in close
And run my hands against your lips
Though we haven’t even spoken
Still I sense there’s a rapport
So whisper me your number
I’ll call you up at home
Whisper me your number
I’ll call you up at home...

2. Angurbala who Naina Devi is referring to, was a famous singer and a theatre artiste born around 1896. In a short biography written by Jyoti Prakash Guha on the web link www.imdb.com/name/nm1271150/bio he says, “Angurbala was popularly known as Sangeet Samragyee or empress of the Music World along with contemporary artiste Miss Indubala, who was also her close personal friend.” A documentary film, titled *Teen Kanya* featuring her along with two other artistes namely Indubala and Kamala Jharia was made in 1972. Angurbala passed away in January 1984.

3. *Alibaba* was a play directed by Kshirode Prasad Vidya Vinod in 1897. It was later made into a film in 1937 directed by Madhu Bose and Sadhana, Naina Devi’s sister, was the heroine and she was married to Madhu Bose by then and was known as Sadhana Bose. This play could not have been the one Naina Devi took part in for she was born in 1917. And although there was a play *Niyoti* directed by Kshirode Prasad in 1913 produced by Minerva Theatres Naina Devi is probably referring to the play *Karnarjun* directed by Apresh Chandra Mukherjee in 1923 produced by Art Theatre Limited in which Niharbala played the role of Niyoti (Destiny) and her songs became the highlight of the play and the play ran non-stop for 250 nights.



Remembering Shirinbehn: Shirin Vajifdar



I must have been around four or five years old when I began to learn Indian classical dance. I would itch to walk bare-feet on the ground. I was prohibited from doing so by my parents since I was pampered and might catch a cold! I loved the feel of the tiles, the marble, the ground. Dancing allowed me to be barefoot.

Luckily I had parents who encouraged me to learn Indian classical dance and not ballet as would normally have been the case with a Parsi. My father, Farrok Mulla, was an unusual man. He worked with Tata’s and also had an artistic side. He painted, loved gardening, and even learned Kathakali so that he could understand Indian art and culture. He would give talks on Modern art and supported artists. Our home would often have performances of people like M S Subbulakshmi and Ram Gopal. My mother, Piloos Mulla, although educated in Switzerland and Paris and having studied ballet there, also learned Kathak under Lachhoo Maharaj once she returned to India. So the environment was an encouraging one for me to learn dance.

Among my father’s friends was the famous novelist Mulk Raj Anand who was married to Shirin Vajifdar. Perhaps for this reason or perhaps because they knew the three Vajifdar sisters Shirin, Roshan and Khurshid personally and even Shiavax Chavda the painter who was married to Khurshid, my parents decided to send me to Shirin Vajifdar’s classes.

How I loved them! They were held in a small room on the ground floor of a building called Oceana on Marine Drive. The class was called Nriya Manjari.

Shirinbehn had painted the room a bright yellow. There were yellow curtains with red borders. Everything was yellow and red. Just the right brightness for young children like myself to enjoy. In the front was a low seating place covered with bright ethnic prints. Shirinbehn would sit in the centre wearing a beautiful hand-woven sari, phundas (a decorative accessory) hanging from her plait, back absolutely erect and play the tambourine. In the front right corner of the class sat Ramesh, the person who played the mridangam. On the left would be Sunita Cooper who taught us dance. Shirinbehn would teach us only on rare occasions but she organised other teachers for us. And so, we were taught by Sunita Cooper (now Golwala) and then her sister Palloo Cooper and then Sheroo Patel (now Mehta). In retrospect I think it was so marvellous that Shirinbehn opened this space up for children like us where we really learned the joy of dance! It was fun and exciting.

When she was there in the class there was a lot of discipline. She had a sharp eye and nothing would go unnoticed. She would often tell me to keep my back straight. I can still hear her say it! But we appreciated that because it made us better dancers.

Each year there would be an annual show—a much looked forward to event. It was usually held at the Bhulabhai Desai Auditorium at Marine Drive close to where her classes were. There was much excitement as the event approached.

Costumes would be stitched and there was the excitement of make-up being put on backstage. For us children having lipstick put on our faces, was a great feeling. We could be adults for a few hours! And then there was the first moment of entry.

All of us who were the youngest, would walk onto stage in a semi-circle ...one and two, and one and two, and..... That was what I now know to be the *nadai adavu*—the defining walking step in Bharatanatyam. I can never forget the excitement of that first step onto the stage!

I remember learning in her class the shloka for all the hand gestures or mudras in Bharatanatyam and, of course, the Alarippu. I remember that while practising it at home my brother managed to learn quite a bit of it as well!

What Shirinbehn did was rather wonderful. She taught us a medley of all dance styles. While Bharatanatyam was the base, we also learned Kathak, Mohini Attam, Manipuri and folk dances from all over India. One of them I can never forget was Limdi. A bit later, in the late sixties or early seventies I think, she also invited a teacher to teach us Odissi. This gave us an exposure to all the styles and later when I wished to learn further I knew exactly which one appealed to me, so that I could train further in it.

It was at one of these annual shows in my early years of college that some of my friends encouraged me to take up dance seriously. So I went up to Shirinbehn and asked her advice. She told me that if I was really serious about dance then I should go to Acharya Parvatikumar the great Bharatanatyam guru. So it was thanks to her advice that I found my guru.

He usually never taught those who had been taught by someone else, but he made an exception in my case because he was very fond of Shirinbehn. Her admiration for him was also very clear. I gathered later, that the shlokas for the hand gestures which I had earlier learned from her, had been taught to her by Acharya Parvatikumar. They were from the *Abhinayadarpanam* and he had been studying the text at that time. When I began to train under him he made me re-learn dance from scratch. So I began relearning all the *adavus* and dances at the age of 19.

When I did my *arangetram* (in my thirties!) I invited Shirinbehn to be the guest of honour and paid a tribute to her. It was a joyous occasion. I think she was overjoyed that one of her students had taken up dance seriously. She wrote a glowing review of the *arangetram* in the *Indian Express*, as she was still a critic then. I was, of course, most happy. It felt wonderful to be praised by my first dance teacher.

I would subsequently invite her to all my performances and she never failed to turn up until she grew old. Often, when I would be practising with my Guruji Acharya Parvatikumar, he would ask “*Maari Shirinmai kemche?*” (How is my Shirin?) He would insist I go and meet her and get news of her.

Once when Shirinbehn was much older but still alert, I went to meet her with Sunita Shivdasani a childhood friend who had also learned dance with me at Shirinbehn’s and was as fond of her as I was. I remember we both danced for her informally and spontaneously at her residence and her eyes had lit up with joy! Sunita, now settled in Germany, danced the flamenco and I danced the Alarippu. As Shirinbehn grew older she was looked after by her niece Jeroo Chavda, the daughter of Shiavax Chavda, the artist. So I would often call Jeroo to get news of her.

Sadly towards the end Shirinbehn could not comprehend too much and the last visit was a difficult one for me. She outlived my Guruji and I think she was older than him. I

suspected that her life must have been a huge struggle for her—three Parsi women struggling to dance when it was considered an activity that was unbecoming of a respectable lady. Reading Sunil Kothari’s obituary gave me an insight into how very difficult it must have been for her and her sisters. I know my own mother stopped



Invitation

learning after she got married. I guess the pressures were too much. So how incredible that Shirinbehn and her two sisters persisted. I came across a photograph of them dancing, at an exhibition on Ebrahim Alkazi where his daughter and son-in-law had through old newspaper cuttings managed to create a flavor of that period. I saw it with great joy and pride. I also read about the historic 1947 Independence Day programme at the Sea Lounge Taj where they had danced. This was forwarded to me on the net. How strong she had to be to do what she did! Now that I am so aware of feminist issues my admiration is even greater!

Shirinbehn was my first dance teacher and a part of my childhood and so will always be very special.

I have now lost both my dance teachers and there is a feeling of emptiness—but both of them gifted me the most precious gift of all—the joy of dance.

—Jeroo Mulla



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The Woman Who Was Moni to Anil Biswas: My Memories of Meena Kapoor



(1930-23 November 2017)

I had taken part in a National Patriotic Song competition at Delhi's Mavalankar auditorium around the mid-seventies and had sung an IPTA song with a group of girls and boys and we won the first prize. The judge was none other than the legend Anil Biswas. In the late seventies I visited Dada regularly and became close to Anil Biswas and Meena Kapoor, a rare musical couple of the Hindi film world. Although he was old enough to be my father I always called him Dada. When he passed away in 2003 I was invited by the NDTV News Channel to pay homage to him and I held back my tears and sang *Humsafar ek din toh bichadna hi tha ... Alvida Alvida Alvida!*, a song which Mukesh sang in the film *Choti Choti Baatein* (1965) under Dada's musical banner.

Fourteen years have gone by now and once again I feel orphaned at the terrible news of Meena Kapoor's passing away, whom I used to call Boudi, elder brother's wife, so endearingly. Tagore wrote a song in his book of many songs *Geetobitan* which keep ringing in my ears: *Deen guli more shonar khaachaaye roi-lo-naa - shei je amaar nana rongeyr deen guli* (Those golden days caged in time is no longer mine, they cease to exist, which was once all wrapped in a multitude of emotional colours and meant so much)

When She Came Out of the Closed Room

I used to visit them on an almost regular basis every weekend. I used to have long chat sessions with Dada but I never had the luck to meet Boudi. Dada told me that she was suffering from depression and was not well and that

due to water retention, her face had puffed up and that she had become so self-conscious that she did not come out to meet anyone. This went on for some time. When I used to discuss various composers with Dada I used to sing aloud at times. One day we couldn't recollect a particular composer of a song and he called out to Boudi calling her Moni, and asked her and she promptly replied. The song was *Tere khayalon mein hum* from the V Shantaram film *Geet Gaya Patharon Ne* and of course, she shot back saying it was Ramlal and that was the first time I spoke from the drawing room and asked her directly why she didn't join in. Her bedroom door used to be always shut, but of late it was kept open, but she never came out, till one day on the spur of the moment I said, 'Boudi, it is only me who comes to the house and it makes no difference if you come out or stay bored in your room.' It was then that she mustered courage to come into the drawing room to be part of those chat sessions! It was then also that she started opening up. She often fell sick and Dada used to be very worried that she kept indifferent health.

It was only after a few more visits that Boudi explained to me why she never came out. One day she brought out her personal collection of photos and showed her own photos of her hey days. There were photos with Madhubala and Geeta Dutt two of her closest friends from the industry. She also reminisced about how she once told Madhubala, '*Ri, tu kitni sunder hai*' (Aye, you're so pretty) and Madhubala replied: '*Tu bhi toh kitni sunder hai, ri!*' (You too are so pretty) ! In yet another quip she told me how on certain recording days, the debonair singer Mukesh

used to tease her saying, '*Aaj toh chakku lag rahi hai!*' (Today you have those killer looks!).

The photos truly depicted Meenaji's beauty and it was from there on I understood why she shied away from everyone so much. After her visit to Russia and UK for the *Pardesi* film release, she fell severely ill with pneumonia never to recover from the water retention problem which completely changed her looks. Losing her beauty shattered her in many ways. She showed me bundles of Radio and TV contract invites wanting to record her at AIR and Doordarshan Studios which she systematically refused, only because of her looks.

Singing for Anil Biswas

Boudi used to be angry with Dada because he gave some extraordinary compositions to Lata in the mid-fifties even when Meenaji was around. She did bear a sense of animosity against Anil Biswas for that. In her moments of close camaraderie with me she used to fight with him right in front of me and used to say, 'I would like to re-record few of those Lata songs which were so beautifully composed' and she did record them in my studio. On the day of the recording I was anxious and literally standing on one foot, having kept everything ready wondering if she would turn up at all. But she came in right on dot of time, standing tall and looking composed and confident. She was like a tigress at the mike. Not even one blip; every expression, punctuation, pitch, no breath sound—everything so perfect! I was delightfully impressed, floored and highly amazed at Meena Kapoor's singing prowess at the condenser microphone. Even though she was not used to the system of modern day track recording techniques through head phones, she quickly mastered the new trick and rendered flawlessly all of the eight songs of Lata composed by Anilda and she set a record of sorts by finishing all of them within straight six to seven hours with an hour's time in between for tea and chocolate eating breaks!

It was during these days that she spoke of Anilda's composition of *Saare jahaan se achha Hindustan hamara* which I always had assumed to be a Pandit Ravi Shanker composition, but wonder of wonders, she did record for me this patriotic song which became the title of my CD collection *Muzhab Nahin Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna*. It was a beautiful fresh tune; I felt the song was reinvented and reborn with Anilda's music. This recording helped for Dada had told me: I never thought she will ever be coming out of her self-imposed confinement and singing so beautifully once again after 25 years of sheer negligence. It was also around this time that I convinced her to sing for the Indian TV where we got the CPC Producer G D Ghoshal to invite Anilda and Meenaji for a

choral music assignment as it was done the previous year with the maestro Salil Chowdhury. Although Meenaji agreed to sing in the studio she refused to come on the screen. But it was a very good reactivation of the Biswas music with an 80-voice choral group.

It was around this time that they left for Bombay which they usually did, during severe winter months of Delhi cold. She thanked me saying you nagged me out of my negativity and got me out to sing and record again. The winter of that year Anilda recorded the devotional music album *Tulsi Chandan* for Sa Re Ga Ma and this time the recordist was Daman Sood at Western Outdoor. And what a great album it was, each bhajan a divine gem! Dada gifted me the ¼ inch spool given to him by the company, the copy of which was meant for the composer and the singer was obviously Meena Kapoor.

Meenaji once told me about an incident that happened on the recording floor of *Sautela Bhai* in 1962. It was a public display of her anger. She told me about it very candidly in front of Dada. On the day of the recording of *Laagi nahin chhute Rama chahe jia jaaye...* (Oh Ram, attachment does not go away even when life is threatened) Lata Mangeshkar was heard saying, '*Aaj toh meri imtihan hai!*' (Today is my examination). And she said that she wanted to sit cross legged in a sitting posture to record the song and not in the usual standing posture and a chowki was arranged. The song was a duet between Lata and Meena Kapoor and the sore point was the scene as per the film, was to show two dancers dance and one of them was to lose in the end, and Meenaji was the one to lose. She was boiling within till all rehearsals were through and at that point unable to accept it any more she burst out: 'Mr. Anil Biswas, music director, I will not lose. I will sing all the notes you have given me but I will keep on singing all the *taans* and *sargams* keeping the *raag* framework and end it according to my capacity to sing and I won't lose and that too to Lata!' There was a stunned silence but it was accepted in principle that no one among the dancers would lose in the scene and the storyline would be changed and the rest is history!

Her Memories and My Memories of Her

Meenaji shared many memories with me. She told me how she had sung for so many composers before Dada used her voice by late forties which is when she started singing for the great Biswas who was ruling the roost at that time. Their last film together was *Anokha Pyaar* starring Dilip Kumar and Nargis with Meena Kapoor singing for the city girl role played by Nargis and there was the role of the village belle to be sung in Lata's voice which perfectly matched her intonation.

I keep raving about *Mere liye wo ghamein intezaar chhode gaye* (He has left for me only sad waiting) and *Aye dil meri wafa me koi asar nahin hai* (Oh my heart, my faithfulness has no influence). Of course the prized song *Yaad rakhna chand taaro is suhani raat ko* (Moon and stars, remember this beautiful night), went on to become the romantic song of their lives for after ten years of courting, they got married in 1959.

Meenaji belonged to an artistic family. She was the daughter of actor Bikram Kapoor who worked with the New Theatres Studio. Her family was also related to the legendary filmmaker PC Barua. She was actually a child prodigy. As a child, she had sat on K L Saigal's lap and had sung for him. Her father used to keep records in her room and she would play them and would imbibe those songs easily whether it was a three-minute song of Juthika Ray or a Gauhar Jan song of 7 minutes and she could render them perfectly. But she had her own childish stubbornness too. If her father asked her to learn a specific song she would never pick it up! Her father thus usually kept the records quietly in her room which she would discover and curiosity would have the better of her and she would hear them and in no time master the songs. And it is this quality in her that made her father to personally take her to S D Burman who was a family friend. She did receive some formal training from Krishna Chandra Dey, Ninu Mazumdar and S D Burman but again she was a perfect playback singer material. She was most certainly a very gifted singer.

Manna Dey had told me that none of the Mangeshkar sisters had formal classical music training as such from notation reading angle, but they too were freak geniuses who were in Bengali called "*shruti dhars*". *Shruti dhars* are gifted people who retain in the ear whatever they hear and as a matter of fact, Anil Biswas too was one! Anilda had no formal music training. He was a truly gifted person; he learnt from the lessons which were privately being taught to his mother and he used to hear her tutor and later he would take her book and try and reproduce it himself. Thus he too was self taught and a *shruti dhar*. Similarly all our old singers including Rafi Sahab, Mukesh, Hemant Kumar and Kishore Kumar were all listening and learning freaks with great voices. Talat Sahab did have formal training but Manna Dey was the only sight reader of notation-based music like a professional who would write his music notes on top of his lyrics and would never make a mistake ever while recording. He was perhaps the only sight reader amongst our legendary singers of yesteryears.

Coming back to Meenaji's marriage to Anil Biswas, the marriage unfortunately cut short her musical career. Biswas got a call from the then I&B Minister, Govt. of

India, for heading AIR, Delhi. Also there was a storm brewing in Anilda's personal life and the rift with his first wife Mehrunissa (Ashalata to some. A name given by Anilda's mother) was a difficult one. Meenaji's life took a big turn, bringing them to Delhi in 1965. Her body of work was unique and her voice had all the qualities of a great playback artist. Connoisseurs of good music did not find any limitations in her voice. Her vocal expressions, timbre, pitch, musical expertise were all excellent, to say the least. Even before S D Burman recognised her musical talent and composed for her, she was spotted in 1946 by the musical legend K C Dey (Manna Dey's uncle) and he brought her into the musical world with the film *Dooor Chalein* in the same year, after which S D Burman got her to sing under his banner for the film *Aath Din*. The song was *Kisi se meri preet lagi main kyaa karun*, which brought her to Bombay and opened a new world to her.

From what I understood of her voice, she did have a huge range—three and a half–four octave voice, very versatile. She sounded like Suraiya, Noorjahan and host of those artistes whose voice was prevailing at the time in earlier songs. However, it was very individualistic and different and she has sung the songs which came to her later on, in films like *Anokha Pyar*, *Raees*, *Raahi*, *Akash* with an extremely thin and amazingly expressive voice. The song in *Raahi*, *Chand so gaya taare so gayee* (The moon and stars have slept), a lullaby, is so beautiful and breezy, yet how many remember such a musical creation of Anil Biswas with Prem Dhawan as the lyricist! In the song *Main matwali nagin* (I am a sensuous snake-woman) from the film *Malika Salomi* the composer Iqbal Gill has made her sing such crazy high notes! In the film *Angulimal*, Meenaji had a few splendid lines in the song sung by Manna Dey and chorus *Buddham Sharanam Gachchami*, her rendition in the *taar saptak* (higher scale) notes only shows what a singer she is! In *Laagi nahin chute Rama* as I have pointed out already, Lata stood outclassed by the tigress Meena. She did not have a limited range at all or a limited number of songs; in all she had sung songs in 60 films for 30 music directors.

The Many Songs She Sang

I would like to dwell on a few more songs as it won't be possible to talk about all of them. In 1948 she sang for the film *Gopinath* with Ninu Mazumdar's music: *Main birhan baithi* (I am a woman in longing), a Meera song, which has so much of controlled pathos riding in the devotional song with a kirtan style. In the same year she sang for S K Pal in *Nayi Reet: Doh baat na ki chaley gaye* (Without speaking a word he went away). Here I would like to say those were the days when melancholy was the

'ras' and 'feel' liked so much by the audience. Meenaji seemed to be in total sync with the emotions of the song rendered so evocatively. Not that she did not sing the happy comedy songs. In 1949 Burmanda gave her a song in the film *Kamal* with Motilal as the duet voice: *Pyaara pyaara hai sama my dear come to me* (Beautiful is the night my dear come to me) and much later in the sixties Anilda tuned for her a song alongside Mahendra Kapoor for the film *Return of the Superman: Stella O Stella, I have a feeling*. Since Meenaji could speak English very well, such songs came her way. However, the most beautiful composition in this genre of light hearted fun songs, which came to her was in 1953 in the film *Mashooka*, which was *Ye sama hum tum jawaan* (This night you and I are young). With the great Kishore Kumar and composed by Roshan with lyrics by Shailendra the song was a sheer delight! Then two songs of *Akash* by the great Biswas: *Bhigi bhigi raat aayee* (Rainy nights are here) and *Mere dil ke geet chupke* (Silent song of my heart) by Satyender Athaiya and Prem Dhawan were again delightful songs. It was not a Suraiya or a Noorjahan singing, but Meena Kapoor who had by this time carved her niche!

In 1950 came the great song: *Todh gaye hai* (I am shattered), an excellent song by the composer extraordinaire Sajjad Husain and lyrics by Shams Azimabadi—truly memorable. Compositions by Sajjad were no easy songs to sing and she mastered them so fast. For example, Talat's rendition of *Yeh hawa ye raat ye chandni* (This breeze, this night, this moon) was by Sajjad and he practised it over a month till he was allowed to record. *Sautela Bhai* had many outstanding songs. Meenaji sang one song with Lata Mangeshkar (*Laagi nahi chhute Rama*) and the other one was "*Maiya maiya bole baal Kanhaiya*". It was a lovely Hindi Kirtan; a style which was put to music by Anilda so very aptly, beautifully and penned so masterfully by Shailendra. Meenaji sang it with Pankaj Mitra. Of course, there are so many songs and I wouldn't like to miss *Kachchi hai umariya mohey bhi rang deta ja* or *Rimi jhimi barse paani aaj morey angna* are such lilting tunes given by this sweet evergreen couple. Madan Mohan's "*Mori atariya pe kaga bole mora jiya dole*" from the film *Aankhein* was a hit song sung by Meena Kapoor.

There were two brilliant Bengali songs by Anilda sung by Meena Kapoor in the year 1951: "*Tomar chawrono pawrosho tawlay*" by lyricist Subodh Purokaystha and "*Tumi cholay jabay jaani*" with lyrics by Sailen Roy which are absolutely mellifluous. The Bengali *talaffuz* is perfect as she spoke Bengali at home. The piano pieces in the first song is a delight and so is the full song—Meenaji doesn't fail to impress me in any of her songs. One must listen to the *Angulimal* song "*Mere chanchal naina*" based

on a Gurudev Tagore song, so very perfectly rendered by Meenaji—a special pleasure to the Bengali ears tuned to Tagore music! Not that she sang only for Anil Biswas. Even before meeting Anilda she had already sung for Ninu Mazumdar, S. K. Pal, Gyan Dutt, Avinash Vyas, Ghulam Haider, Ghulaam Muhammed, C Ramchandra, Iqbal Gill, Girdhar Sharma, Manohar Arora, Aziz Khan, Khaiyaam, Inayat Ali, Allah Rakha Qureshi, Dada Chandeker, Pndt. Gobind Ram, Ram Rasad, Hanuman Prasad, Bulu C Rani, S D Burman, Husanlal Bhagatram, Hans Raj Behl, Roshan, Madan Mohan, Sajjad Hussain, Moti Ram and Robin Banerjee. She sang nearly 25 songs of Dada Anil Biswas. In all she has sung well over a hundred songs in spite of her lack of interest in singing for movies. Most of the time she flew back to Assam for she originally belonged to Assam. Nothing really mattered to her. Anilda told me once that the great movie maker Satyajit Ray wanted her for a role in his film. But Anilda said that he knew about the kind of grilling Ray was known for when he was directing and how meticulous he used to be for each shot—she wouldn't have been able to take so much of strain as she was too delicate a person, so she turned down the offer!

A Woman of Many Moods Who Loved Anil Biswas

Despite being a great singer Meena Kapoor was indifferent about either money or fame. In those days songs were directly recorded on the film's original track; HMV used to record the songs again a second time for the discs. Meenaji sang the songs on the film tracks for *Anokha Pyaar* and went away to Assam to celebrate Durga Puja and couldn't care less about recording it for HMV a second time. Such an attitude hurt her career tremendously. Her lackadaisical nature coming from being a woman who looked stunning with a great talent, who was the daughter of a snobbish rich man did not help much. At this time Lata Mangeshkar was building her career carefully making use of every opportunity both for its artistic and monetary benefits. But Meenaji was an extraordinary but careless playback singer who did not bother about her career as for her, her family, friends and Assam meant much more. Those who had not seen *Anokha Pyaar* thought that the songs of the film had been sung by Lata Mangeshkar until years later HMV released the original sound track recording of the film with Meenaji's voice. Watching the film and hearing the songs in her voice is a sheer delight.

She lived in Delhi from 1965 to 2007. Anilda passed away in 2003. Somehow she held on to Delhi for four more years. She first shifted to a much smaller but new accommodation after a year at South Extension saying she

could not bear the environment and absence of Anilda. She successfully sold off the property albeit at a loss, as she did all that by herself and stayed on till 2007 at Lajpat Nagar behind the busy shopping complexes, saying it would help her to divert her mind. After that she bought herself a property in Behala and spent 10 years in Calcutta where I went and met her a few times.

Although Anil Biswas had children from his first wife, he and Meenaji had no children. An early miscarriage after her marriage to Anilda led to complications and doctors advised her not to conceive again. And she was prone to depression. She spoke fluent English, fluent Hindi and very fluent Bengali. In fact, she even wrote a book in Bengali of her childhood memories, *Lookkhipurer Chotto Kaahini* and she composed Bengali songs. In fact, she wrote eight children's songs which she tuned and recorded in my studio. She was a great composer and wrote her own lyrics. But unfortunately she suffered from indifferent health for twenty five to thirty years of her life. When she left Bombay in 1965 and came to stay in Delhi which had extreme climates, this shift to Delhi became her undoing.

Anilda and Meenaji used to visit Bombay for two to three months during Delhi winters and friends used to pour in and the entire atmosphere was musical. Some news of her death say that Anilda's first wife's family did not keep in touch with her after she left Delhi and that she led a reclusive life and that not much is known of reasons for her death apart from old age and some say she had a paralytic stroke. I am reminded of Begum Akhtar often when I think of Meenaji. Akhtari Bai was stopped from singing in public by her husband and she stopped singing in public but she fell severely ill; it was only after friends and her wellwishers got all medical reports together that they persuaded her and got her back to the singing stage where she sang full throated for so many great years of music and she became alive once again.

In the case of Boudi also although she projected herself as a very strong person but she needed that constant love of the audience. When singing was her joy and talking about music her only way of enjoying life, she was taken away to Delhi, not forcibly, of course, but this was like cutting off her lifeline and sensitive as she was, she slipped into depression often. She was a great singer but she also moulded herself as a great wife who took care of a great composer. She was sixteen or seventeen years younger than him and she looked after him as if he was a lamp in her hands which she had to guard closely and not let any wind blow it off. Sometimes I feel that they were star crossed lovers. She did many shows with a very talented Urdu speaking Master of Ceremonies, Krishna Chandra Khurana, who was selected by Anilda himself to do shows

with her. She earned a lot but remained listless and depressed. So ended the life of Meena Kapoor Biswas, the name she used as signature, in Kolkata, shrouded in mystery with no one being able to say what took away her life; whether it was old age, illness or a paralytic stroke she suffered in the last years.

Maybe like one of her songs set to music by Gyan Dutt with lyrics by Manohar Lal Khurana she had a wounded heart slowly going to pieces: *Ghayal dil toota hua pal pal*.

—Indraneel Mukherjee



Congratulations!



Mamta Kalia (Hindi Writer) for Vyas Award



Krishna Sobti, Hindi fiction writer and essayist, Jnanpith Award for her contribution to Indian literature (2017)



Yamuna Krishanan – for The Infosys Prize 2017 in Physical Sciences for her groundbreaking work in the emerging field of architecture of the building blocks of life—the DNA.



Sanghamitra Bandyopadhyay - For Third World Academy of Science Prize, 2018.

SPARROW CONGRATULATES ALL OF THEM!



SUSHMA DESHPANDE won a special jury mention for her performance in the film *Ajji* at the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles (IFFLA). She also won The Flame Award at the UK Asian Film Festival along with the Fresh Blood competition at the Beaune International Thriller Film Festival 2018.

*We are proud of you
Sushmaji!*

Indore's Doctor Didi: Bhakti Yadav

(3 April 1926-14 August 2017)



When a very weak nonagenarian gynaecologist Bhakti Yadav was handed over her Padma Shri by the District Collector at her residence in April 2017, because she was too weak to travel to

Delhi, one does not know what her feelings were. She is smiling in the photographs but one wonders what was behind that smile. Is a Padma Shri in the month when one has turned 91, after 68 years of free treatment offered to patients as a gynaecologist, lovingly called Doctor Didi, worth being happy about? One does not know for three months later in August, Dr Bhakti Yadav, breathed her last.

Bhakti Yadav was born in Mahidpur, Ujjain. A Maharashtrian, she belonged to a family that encouraged girls' education and so in 1937, after completing her primary education till 7th Standard in Garoth town, when she expressed her desire to study further, her father took her to Indore and admitted her into Ahilya Ashram School, the only school for girls in Indore. At such a young age, she did not mind staying with her uncle to continue her education. After completing school in 1948, she took up science stream and did her BSc studies in Holkar Science College, Indore, and thereafter she did her MBBS from Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Medical College (MGM), Indore. When the first batch of 40 medical graduates passed out of MGM Medical College in 1948, Bhakti was the only woman in that batch. She was offered a job in the government hospital but she chose to join Nandlal Bhandari Maternity Home where wives and other women from the family of poor cloth mill workers came for treatment. She headed the maternity home for several decades, before starting her own nursing home, Vatsalya, in Pardeshipura area. Bhakti Yadav delivered thousands of babies of patients coming from other cities of Madhya Pradesh and even other states like Gujarat and Rajasthan for she charged no fees and was known as someone who was very warm and kind towards her patients. Over the years Doctor Didi became the name by which she was known. Women like her belong to a generation of women who became doctors and teachers to serve the people and true to the spirit of that generation, Doctor Didi said that her desire is to serve the poor till her last breath. That she could do it is the most fulfilling award that a dedicated life like hers could get.

—C S Lakshmi



Andhralata: Dr. Ashalata Karalgikar

(November 1942-30 December 2017)



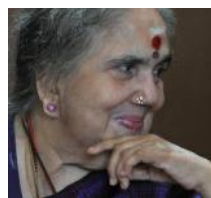
On 18th November 2017, sometime on the eve of her birthday, just little more than a month before her demise, the blog <http://musicpotion.in/2017/11/18/andhralata/run> by music lovers carried a long piece on Ashalata and her music and wished her a long and healthy life asking her to sing forever. Had Ashalata read the blog she would have been very happy for her life indeed seems to have been an effort to keep her music alive. From her school days when she sang "Yeh Zindagi Usiki Hai" Ashalata relentlessly pursued music. She could sing exactly like the music in records her father bought for her and literally gobbled up music as if it were food. Later she met stalwarts in music and learnt from observing them and talking to them. She had to take up a job in LIC but did not allow it to stop her performances. Fortunately she had a supporter in her husband Vasant Rao Karalgikar who encouraged her to pursue postgraduate studies and also do a doctorate in music. She has sung before many national leaders and once when she sang Kabir bhajans Lal Bahadur Shastri was moved to tears. Since she was from Hyderabad Dr Rajendra Prasad gave her the title Andhralata. She did playback singing in both Hindi and Telugu films but her real passion was for giving musical programmes which she did along with her efforts to get a doctorate. Her life story and musical journey has been told in her autobiography *Swaranubandh*.

It is not often that one sees a singer who pursues her music despite all odds but Ashalata was one such singer. In her seventy-five years of life she enjoyed singing and also gave joy to many others through her singing. A well-lived life or should one say well-sung life?

—C S Lakshmi



The Only Disciple of M S Subbulakshmi: Radha Viswanathan (11 December 1934 – 2 January 2018)



Radha Viswanathan's name is synonymous with MS Subbulakshmi. She accompanied her step-mother, the legendary "M S" in all the concerts till the end. She was an Indian Classical vocalist and Dancer. She was the eldest daughter of T Sadasivam and his first wife Apithakuchambal. She has acted in child roles in a couple of films and she was also trained in dance by Vazhavor Ramiah Pillai. As a child she gave an impromptu performance for Mahatma Gandhi in Birla

Mandir for the song *Ghanshyam Aayari* with M S singing the song for her. But she did not pursue a career in dance. She also learnt music from TR Balasubramaniam, Ramnad Krishnan and Mayavaram Krishna Iyer. Even as a child she accompanied M S in her concerts. Radha was honoured with the title Sangeetha Ratna by Lalithakala Academy in March 2008. In April 2010 she was awarded the citation Kala Chandrika by the Cleveland Aradhana Committee for her outstanding services to the cause of Carnatic music. She was the only disciple of M S and her life was closely linked with that of M S both in terms of music and otherwise. Theirs was a unique mother-daughter combine.

—C S Lakshmi



The Smile That Never Fades: Rajani Nagesh Limaye (1 May 1937-6 January 2018)



Rajani Nagesh Limaye was a teacher in a normal school where she joined as an Assistant Teacher and she took voluntary retirement as Vice-Principal in 1989. Nothing unusual about this. But what makes her life and her work unusual is that Rajani had a mentally disabled child, Gautam. She strongly believed that dealing with mental retardation was not a family responsibility but a social responsibility. To put this into action she set up the Prabodhini Trust in 1977 with parents who had similar children and were frustrated. The tagline of the trust emphasised that mental retardation was a social responsibility. She also took educational training to train and educate the mentally afflicted. It was not easy and it was a struggle to set up this unique institution in North Maharashtra. It was started with just four students. It needed funds, space, trained teachers, committed workers and also para-medical professionals. The most difficult task was to convince the parents of the mentally challenged that their children could be trained to be useful and independent. But everyone connected with the trust, most of all Rajani Limaye, worked hard and slowly things began to move. It was recognised by the Maharashtra State in 1982. The Nashik Municipality gave it an acre of land and a new school building came up in 1986. A Nursery School came up in 1988. A sheltered workshop building was built in Satpur in MIDC in 1993. A Teachers Training Centre was opened in 1996. A Prabodhini hostel for M R students and Agriculture project came up in 2001. Now it has over 350 students, two mini-buses, two buses together with a six-seater rickshaw to take the students from home to school and back. And it has over 100 teachers and committed workers.

Rajani Limaye wrote two books: *Goduli Gani* (Poems for Kids) and *Jagar* (Awakening) *Experience of last 25 Years in the Field of Mental Retardation*. In 2016 a documentary *The Smile That Never Fades* was made on the institution and it captured in twenty minutes what Rajani Limaye along with her team had achieved in 39 years of hard and dedicated work. Limaye received many awards and many special appointments. But one feels that what would have given her most satisfaction is that smile on the faces of mentally afflicted children, which she never wanted to fade at anytime.

—C S Lakshmi



Feisty Conscience of Her Nation: Asma Jahangir (27 January 1952-11 January 2019)



There is a marked irony in the fact that the lawyer-activist, Asma Jahangir, who has been awarded the highest Civilian honours in Pakistan – the *Hilal-i-Imtiaz* and *Sitara-i-Imtiaz* – was also frequently dubbed as an Indian agent and a traitor by the military rulers, for particularly advocating peace with India, and also for taking up causes like women’s rights, rights of bonded labourers, especially kiln workers, human rights issues, minority rights, oppression in the name of religion and commitment to democracy. “However flawed democracy is”, she would say, “it is still the only answer... [and] public opinion is the key to democracy”. It is due to her fearless opposition to the military rulers of Pakistan and her strong commitment to the various causes she supported that she has been regarded by the international community as the conscience of her nation.

She imbibed her values from her feisty civil servant and activist father, Malik Ghulam Jilani, who was jailed frequently for opposing the dictatorship in Pakistan, and her mother, Sabiha Jilani, who nonchalantly took on the travails which his frequent imprisonment brought along. “Whenever my father got arrested, she would sell her car and would move around on a tonga, believing that everything will work out or she would rent out our house and go to her father’s house and put us in his dressing room,” is how she describes the quiet strength of her mother.

Courts became a kind of second home for her from the time she filed a petition in the Lahore High Court for her father’s release, when she was just 18, and she went on to earn her law degree from Panjab University in Lahore in 1978. She had already made her political affiliations clear in 1969, when she joined a protest march for women’s rights. Her imprisonment/ house arrest by Zia-ul-Haq and

Pervez Musharraf both, established her pro-democracy credentials beyond doubt. Often criticised by the status quo for not talking about human rights issues in India, she had the courage to say, “I think it sounds very hollow if I keep talking about the rights of Kashmiris, but do not talk about the rights of a woman in Lahore who is butchered to death.”

Ultimately, it is human dignity that lies at the core of her relentless struggle against authoritarianism. She liked to quote a bonded labourer whom she represented “I’m not asking for food. That I can get in jail. I’m fighting for my dignity, which is priceless.”

As the founding Chairwoman of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an independent group, and trustee of the International Crisis Group, as the United Nations rapporteur on human rights and extrajudicial killings. She was responsible for highlighting human rights issues and violations in Pakistan. “There was a time when Human Rights was not even an issue in this country... women’s rights were thought of as a western concept. Now people do talk about rights—political parties talk about it, even religious parties talk about it,” was how she described the success of these two enterprises.

Asma has been popularly described as the ‘Iron Lady’ of Pakistan. While not downsizing her work in any way, one question that needs to be asked is, ‘why do we have to use the language of power and sloganeering implicit in the concept of ‘Iron lady’ to validate the work of a committed man or woman, reducing it to a single dimension? Slogans, after all, are easy conscience-soothing utterances and too facile to contain the complexities of a phenomenal life and lifelong work like that of Asma Jahangir.

—Charanjeet Kaur



A Star in Her Own Right: T Krishna Kumari

(6 March 1933-24 January 2018)



An article on Krishna Kumari written by M L Narasimham that appeared in *The Hindu* in 2013, had some interesting details about Krishna Kumari and her entry into films. Her first film was *Navvite Navaratnalu* (1951). Krishna Kumari wanted to be a dancer in movies as she was trained in Kuchipudi and was a disciple of Kuchipudi exponent Vedantam Jagannadha Sarma. Her sister Sowkar Janaki was already acting in films. Krishna Kumari had, in fact, joined the Gemini Studios which was

planning the film *Veerakumar* but since nothing came of it, she left Gemini Studios. And she had already faced the camera in a minor role for the film *Mantradandam* (1951), a folklore fantasy film, starring Akkineni Nageswara Rao and Sriranjani. She had also done the role of an angel in *Pathala Bhairavi* (1951) with N T Ramarao and K Malati in the lead roles. But Krishna Kumari got an offer to be a heroine in the strangest possible way. She was watching the film *Swapnasundari* at the Rajkumari Theatre in Pondy Bazaar, Chennai. A young lady sitting behind her chatted with her during the interval. The next day Krishna Kumari got an offer from Tamil Nadu Talkies to do the heroine’s role in a film to be produced and directed by S Soundararajan Iyengar. The young lady she had befriended was N Ye Bhuma, his daughter who had obviously recommended her. Krishna Kumari’s father Venkaji, encouraged her and she became the heroine of *Navvite Navaratnalu*. The film was a terrible flop as a film because the enthusiastic Bhuma ghost-directed it and she knew nothing about directing a film. But it was still running to full houses in the first week. Narasimham writes that in the July 1951 issue of the magazine *Telugu Cinema*, veteran writer Commuri Sambasivarao had expressed surprise about how such a badly-made film could run to full houses in the first week in important centres like Vijayawada. Commuri Sambasivarao asked about it to a gentleman from Vijayawada. It seems the gentleman replied: “Who cares for the movie? People thronged the theatres to see the charming new heroine.” That is how Krishna Kumari’s debut into films became a successful one. After that Krishna Kumari acted in a series of films, in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada but did more of Telugu films than Tamil or Kannada films. She carved a special niche for herself and was never seen as a shadow of her sister Sowkar Janaki. She is remembered for her initial Tamil films in which she did the leading role notably *Thirumbi Paar* (1953), *Manithan* (1953), *Azhagi* (1953), *Pudhuyugam* (1954), *Viduthalai* (1954) and *Thuli Visham* (1954). She acted with veteran actors in all the languages. With Sivaji Ganesan in Tamil films, Dr Rajakumar in Kannada films and with Akkineni Nageswara Rao and N T Ramarao in Telugu films. She got married to Ajay Mohan who was editor of Indian Express then and settled down in Bengaluru. Unlike many other heroines of her times she chose not to do mother’s roles or other similar character roles. She was one of those lucky stars who lived a happy and contented life and quietly and graciously grew old. She was 85 when cancer claimed her. But it is the young Krishna Kumari that people remember and that is the way probably she would like to be remembered.

—C S Lakshmi

An Actor Who Refused to Diet: Supriya Choudhury (8 January 1933-26 January 2018)



It is difficult to say if Supriya Chowdhury was *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, a cloud-capped star or a *Komal Gandhar*, a soft note on a sharp scale, two films of the same title one associates her with always, for her long life has taken her on such a varied

journey from Burma to Bengali films that at times she seems like a cloud-capped star and at times like a musical note that could pull the heart strings. Supriya was born in Burma, and named Krishna, the youngest of eight daughters, and walked with her parents as a refugee all the way to Kolkata. Her father was a lawyer and when she was seven she had already taken part in two plays directed by her father and she had also begun to give dance recitals and won an award from the then Prime Minister of Burma. From this to a long arduous walk to Kolkata and the family picking up the broken threads of life reads like a story with too many dramatic twists. But that was her life. In 1952, at the age of 19 she acted in *Basu Paribar* her first film with Uttam Kumar. In 1954, she got married but came back to acting in 1958 and also to a relationship with Mahanayak Uttam Kumar. If the middle-class Bengalis were scandalised, she did not care. She continued to work in films and sixties brought *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and many more films making her a star to reckon with. She made a foray into Hindi films but was not enamoured by the kind of roles offered to women actors and did not stay on to do many films.

Supriya was called the Sophia Loren of Bengali films for some reason. And she took the comparison in her stride for she did resemble her a little but Sophia played aggressive roles but always rooted for the family in her interviews but Supriya in her lifestyle and attitudes was very different. She made no secret of her live-in relationship with Uttam Kumar, but her own life was under her control, not anyone else's. She decided what roles she would do and how she would do them. The story goes that some Hindi film producers came home to offer her a film on the condition that she should go on a diet and reduce for the film. She offered them lunch and declined the offer for soon it was going to be the Durga Pooja festival season and also season for hilsa fish. How could anybody diet in this season!

Supriya won many awards for her acting and was honoured with the Banga-Vibhushan award in 2011 when she was 78 and the Padma Shri in 2014 at the age of 81. But knowing that nothing really mattered to her apart from living her life on her own terms receiving these honours so late in life or not receiving these honours would have

hardly mattered to her. The way she lived her life itself was the way she honoured herself like nobody else could have.

—C S Lakshmi



A Theatre Space for Children : Sudha Karmarkar (10 May 1934-5 February 2018)



On 8th March, 2018, a special programme was organised in the memory of Sudha Karmarkar at Amar Hind Mandal. The programme is organised by Amar Hind Mandal along with Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh, Goa Hindu Association, Natya Sampada and some other groups. Two documentaries on Sudha Karmarkar were screened and many spoke on her and her work. It was a fitting tribute to the 84-year old veteran theatre artiste who had passed away in February.

Children's theatre was certainly a post-Independence phenomenon. What our parents' generation had as entertainment as children and young people was puppet theatre and similar entertainment. It was Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who thought of creating a space for children and Bal Bhavans were created with libraries and spaces for theatrical presentations in ten major cities. The earliest effort to create a theatre company for entertaining children and young people was, however, created by Sudha Karmarkar. Sudha Karmarkar's company Bal Ranghbhoomi (Little Theatre) employed an entirely adult cast to entertain children instead of making children act in fairy tales and folk stories with music and costumes and grand sets. Set up with the help of Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha, the company produced many successful plays. Her theatre productions became instant hits with children and young people who must have been tired of the earlier moralising efforts at entertaining them. Sudhatai could feel their pulse and give them what they wanted which was adults acting with children as audience. She not only directed the plays but also acted in these plays. Her initial hit plays were: *Madhumanajri*, *Aladdin and His Magical Lamp* and *Kal-Lavya Kandachi Kahani* (Tale of the Troublemaking Onion). Sudhatai also acted in commercial theatre and was much appreciated as an actress. For her pioneering work and for conducting the Maharashtra State Cultural Operations Directorate she was honoured with the Prabhakar Panshikar Rangbhumi Jeev Gaurav award in 2012. Artistes like Sudhatai live long inspired lives leaving behind their works as major cultural contributions for the coming generations.

—C S Lakshmi

Amari Gaan Jhua: Parbati Ghose
(28 March 1933-12 February 2018)



Parbati Ghose is a well-known and a much respected name in Odia film industry along with her husband Gour Prasad Ghose. She was a veteran actress, producer and director who began to act at the age of sixteen and began her debut as a producer and later directed many notable films. Her life story and that of her husband detailed in the *gourparbati.com* website reads like a story. She was born in Manasinghpatana in Cuttack, as one of eight siblings. Hers was a middle-class family with her father Basudev Naik working as a manager in the famous Manmohan Press. This is the press that published the works of famous writers like Kanhu Charan Mohanty and Gopinath Mohanty. Her father had also done a Odia translation of Bhagwat Gita. Her mother Sebati Naik, hailed from Damodarpur, Cuttack, was not highly educated but she encouraged her daughters to take part in cultural activities and also get educated. Parbati's maiden name was Chapala. She was put in Sanat Nalini Girls' High School and took part in all the cultural activities of the school. She learnt Odissi from the legendary Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and also from Guru Dayal Sharma and Guru Suresh Routray. She was fondly called Chapala Rani in the neighbourhood. She was also called Chandana. Chapala became a child artiste in All India Radio and also began to take part in the cultural programmes of the Praja Socialist Party. Her entry into films happened at the age of 16 when she did the role of Nila Madhav in the film *Shri Jagannath* (1949/1950) directed by Chitta Ranjan Mitra. Her future husband Gour Prasad Ghose aka Raj Gour, also did a role in the film as Shaktidhar. In 1953 she was offered the lead role at the age of 19 in *Amari Gaan Jhua* (Our Village Girl) produced by Naren Mitra, and directed by Binaya Banarjee, opposite Raj Gour. The movie dealt with the issue of child marriage and they became famous as a lead pair as the movie was a great success. In 1956 Gour Ghose turned to production and produced the film *Bhai Bhai* (1956) where Chapala was cast as the heroine. Her next film with Gour Ghose as producer was *Maa* (1959) on women's struggles in life and they got married the same year and her marital family gave her the name of Parbati.

Chapala's next lead role was in *Maa* on women's struggles in life, which she co-produced with Rai Gour in 1959. This year became significant as she married Gour Ghose and became Parbati Ghose (name given by her in-laws). Then came a series of successful films produced with her husband: *Lakshmi* (1962) *Kaa* (Impersonation) (1966) based on the famous novel of Kanhu Charan

Mohanty. Along with her husband she directed *Sansar* (Life) (1971). Almost immediately they announced the next film but finally after a hiatus of thirteen years the film she had chosen for a directorial comeback, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (Eight Acres and a Third) (1986) based on Fakir Mohan Senapati's classic nineteenth century novel got released. She produced the film and also wrote the dialogues for the film and did playback singing in the film. It was panned by the film critics but Parbati Ghose did not lose heart for she also received some appreciation.

Gour Ghose, her soul mate died in 1994 but she completed the documentary film he was offered by Films Division on Bhakta Salabega (a devout Muslim devotee of Lord Jagannath) in 1996. Parbati Ghose has acted in T V serials and made several short films including a biopic on the freedom fighter Malti Choudhury and several music videos.

Her films *Laxmi*, *Kaa* and *Stree* won National Awards as Best Regional category. Many years before the well-known women directors we know like Sai Paranjpye, Aparna Sen and Kalpana Lajmi came on the scene Parbati Ghose had already won three national awards in the Best Odia film category and she had a film company of her own and had also acted and produced her own films and had established herself as a pioneer director. She has also received the Jayadev Puraskar and Bioscope award. Parbati Ghose was an empowered woman much before the word came to be used. She lived a long life and filled it with everything that inspired her to live.

—C S Lakshmi



A Friend of the Tamils in Paris: Elisabeth Barnoud-Sethupathy (12 March 1952-11 February 2018)



Elisabeth Sethupathy's name is familiar to anyone who is a Tamil writer or is researcher in Tamil literature. Elisabeth Sethupathy was a student of Francois Gros and her doctoral thesis was on *thevaram* songs being sung in temples. She learnt Carnatic music herself and all Tamil writers who visited Paris either enjoyed her hospitality or were invited home for a South Indian meal. She was the director of INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales) and was a French national married to a Sri Lankan Tamilian. She wanted to translate all my stories into French but kept postponing it and now they may be translated but not by her. She fought bravely her lung cancer but succumbed in the end. She kept an open house for all Tamil scholars from India. During my trip to Paris a few years

ago I had stayed with her and we discussed so much about contemporary Tamil literature. Her daughter Vidya Sethupathy is very proud of her mother and also proud of the Tamil legacy Elisabeth has given her. All those who knew Elisabeth and her hospitality will feel the void she has left behind.

—C S Lakshmi



Ovi te Haiku: Dr Manisha Dixit
(1947-17 February 2018)



In January 2013 Hrishikesh Deshpande and actor Vibhawari Deshpande decided to revive an old show conceptualised and produced some fifteen years ago by Dr Manisha Dixit. Vibhawari was familiar with

the show and its contents because Dr Manisha Dixit happened to be her mother. The show produced by Manisha Dixit called Ovi te Haiku (Ovi to Haiku) chronicled the changes that had taken place in poetic forms and themes and explored the themes and nature of the art of poetry and the context in which they were written. It goes to the credit of Manisha Dixit that a show she had done some fifteen years ago still had relevance in 2013.

Throughout her life Manisha Dixit had made her interest in drama, poetry, films and classical music the focus of her life. She was a well-known drama critic and researcher of Marathi literature. Her interest in literature and allied areas came from her father G K Bhatt who was a Sanskrit scholar. Manisha Dixit belongs to Amravati. She did her graduation in Elphinstone College, Mumbai, and later taught at Fergusson College, Pune, and worked in Lalit Kala Kendra and was also in the faculty of Educational Multimedia Research Centre (EMRC) which is one of the centres established by the UGC in Savitribai Phule Pune University to promote educational television programmes for the Countrywide Classroom project. Any programme that had poetry as subject needed the guidance of Manisha Dixit. Thus in 2014 when Kala Chhaya Cultural Centre, Pune, as a part of its Golden Jubilee celebrations put together a programme that combined poetry and dance called Kavya Nritya Unmesh whose purpose was to delve into nineteenth and twentieth century poetry from Krishnai Keshav Damle (Keshavsut) to Aruna Dhere including Mangesh Padgaonkar, Vijaya Jahagirdar and others and give creative freedom to young choreographers, one of the persons they approached for guidance for interpretation of poetry was Manisha Dixit.

She guided the young choreographers along with Dr Shyamala Vanarase. The programme had some powerful themes on women like Draupadi and Ahalya with imaginative interpretations. Manisha Dixit did her doctorate on a very unusual subject: Poetry Criticism During the Second World War Period. She wrote only four novels (*Rujavan* (Origin), *Nigarani* (Care), *Pool* (Bridge) and *Diary*) but the novels were received very well by the discerning Marathi readers. Young people today who are keen to delve into poetry and drama need people like Manisha Dixit to unravel the complex forms and content of Marathi poetry. Her death will be a great loss to the younger generation.

—C S Lakshmi



An Activist Fondly Known As Chabbutai: Kamaltai Desai (16 December 1921- 20 February 2018)



It seems strange sitting in the local train from Govandi to Andheri and writing a homage to Kamaltai Desai. Many memories crowd my mind. With her passing away one could say an entire generation of pioneers of the women's movement who were committed to the cause of working women have left us orphaned. A big void has been created in terms of leadership.

I first met Kamaltai in 1974, when she visited Vadodara along with Mrinaltai Gore, Ahalyatai Rangnekar, Manjutai Gandhi and Taratai Reddy to form the Vadodara branch of Anti-Price Rise Women's Committee. As a college girl, I was highly impressed by her egalitarian ethos, courage of conviction, work ethics, spartan lifestyle and her commitment to labour standards. Kamaltai was always at the forefront of struggle against price rise, hoarding, black marketing and corruption.

All of us knew the history of activism of Kamaltai and her resilience and courage. She lost her husband just a few years after marriage but bore it courageously and came out of her suffering by plunging into work for others working with Baburao Samant. She began to be known as a staunch Lohiaite. In 1972, Kamaltai actively supported the formation of Maharashtra State level Stree Mukti Andolan Sangharsh Samiti (Women's Liberation Struggle Committee).

During Emergency, Kamaltai was arrested along with Mrinaltai and was released after Emergency Rule was lifted in 1977. In the post emergency period, when Mrinaltai contested for the Assembly election, Kamaltai plunged into election campaign. Mrinaltai won the

election. Kamaltai worked shoulder to shoulder with Mrinaltai and she was also called Paniwalibai and Handawalibai. Some referred to her as the Lieutenant General of Mrinaltai. She was fondly called Chabbutai by everyone.

During late 1970s, Kamaltai took the lead as one of the founders of Samajwadi Mahila Sabha that took up issues of defending statutory rights of women employees in service sector, conducted survey on crèche to press the demand for state supported day care centres for working mothers' children. She was the first woman activist in India to organise against sexual harassment of nurses in the hospital and formed the Nurses' Union.

On 8th March, 1986, rural and tribal women from all over Maharashtra had walked for 5-7 days to reach Mumbai. Women activists of Women's Liberation Coordination Committee were the hosts. For us younger women, it was really an energising experience to work with Kamaltai and the team from Samajwadi Mahila Sabha and Nurses' Union to look after thousands of sisters who were dehydrated, hungry and famished but who were still spirited enough to raise their voices demanding meaningful and timely implementation of Employment Guarantee Scheme, and protesting against bride burning and sex selective abortion that had penetrated rural and tribal areas of Maharashtra.

Kamaltai got along well with the younger generation of women's rights activists and took part in all united front rallies, public meetings, demonstrations, sit-in protests, signature campaigns and being part of delegations to government representatives, politicians, administrators, police and management of industries. Kamaltai was non-sectarian and expressed her solidarity with all genuine causes of women taken up by autonomous women's groups.

We worked closely with all those organisations with which she was associated during joint commemoration of International Women's Day, year after year from 1977 onwards till March 8, 2018. Kamaltai and Sharada Sathe drafted and proof-read leaflets in Marathi and I did the same for English and Hindi leaflets in those days of letter-press. After 1984 communal riots in Bhiwandi, we worked together in Women's United Front against Religious Fanaticism (*Dharmandhata Virodhi Mahila Kriti Samiti*).

During the last decade of Mrinaltai's life when her health was deteriorating, Kamaltai always accompanied her. I used to meet her often in the training programme of women in Panchayati Raj institutions. I also had the duty to go to her home in Goregaon East and accompany her in her vehicle, on the way pick up Rohinitai (Rohini Gawankar) and reach the venue and while returning from the programme we would drop Rohinitai first and then

go to Kamaltai's home. During the ride back, we would share our nostalgia the good old days of solidarity and sisterhood.

Kamaltai was a multifaceted personality and had interest in classical music, an aesthetic way of living and culinary art. She was an excellent organiser who made everyone feel important and wanted. Like all socialist leaders, she was also a very good orator. She was warm and hospitable to her co-workers and support staff and ensured that they got food, proper accommodation and safe transport.

Kamaltai's autobiography *Jayho* is an important historical document not only about her life but also about her work for women. I learnt the lesson of wisdom in collective work from the team work of Mrinaltai, Kamaltai, Ahalyatai, Taratai and Manjutai whose unity and bonding added a glorious chapter in the history of the women's movement. And as I write this I realise that Kamaltai is in a way the Last of the Mohicans to leave all of us who were once young and learning from these stalwarts and who now think often of the sisterhood we had forged at one time and are not even confident of living such long meaningful lives.

—Vibhuti Patel



Third Crescent Moon: Sridevi Boney Kapoor (13 August 1963- 25 February 2018)



They say that the third crescent moon appears as a thin silver in the western sky just as the sun sets and is visible for half an hour before sunset and for a few minutes after the sunset. It does not stay long enough on the sky. Sridevi, the star, acted in a Tamil movie *Moondram Pirai* (1982) meaning the crescent moon remade in Hindi as *Sadma* (1983) and her life like the third crescent moon did not last long. Her lifestory and career in films beginning as a child artiste and rising to that of a star with both glamour and talent, her being paired with the best actors in Tamil and Hindi, her marrying an already married person and her being a mother of two daughters and her coming back to films as a matured character in *English Vinglish* (2012) are all well-known. She was honoured with a Padma Shri in 2013. It is sad that her life has been cut short in an accident. Her last film was *Mom* (2017) and a national award for best actress for her role in the film has been announced. It is a pity it is a posthumous award for it would have given her so much joy.

—C S Lakshmi

The One Who Spoke Her Mind: Rajni Tilak (27 May 1958 - 30 Mar 2018)



Amidst people who often compromise when it comes to acting out their commitment to causes Rajni Tilak was a rare individual who was not afraid to speak her mind. She came from a family with limited means and although she wanted to become a nurse she had to give up her dreams for higher education and join ITI in Delhi so that she could support her younger siblings. It was here that she organised a union for girls to protest against gender based discrimination that young marginalised women had to face in college. Later, she merged this group with the Progressive Students' Union (PSU). Later she also mobilised Anganwadi workers at the national level demanding regularisation of their pay scale. She split from PSU because she wanted more than just focus on economic problems and felt that the caste question cannot be set aside by the Left movement. Disillusioned by the Left she began to chart her own path to deal with the issues of caste.

As a Dalit feminist activist she was critical of the Left and also what is regarded as "mainstream" women's movement because she felt they neglected the issue of caste. She was also critical of the Dalit movement for not taking up the issue of patriarchy within the Dalit communities and the Dalit movement. She associated with Saheli, the feminist group in Delhi even while she advocated that the caste question must become part of the mainstream movement. Writing a touching tribute in *Scroll.in* Sandali Thakur says that her constant fight was for inclusivity and that she would "often echo Dr Ambedkar's sentiments that fighting for equality is always more difficult than fighting for liberty." Rajni was the Executive Director of the Centre for Alternative Dalit Media (CADAM) and the co-founder of the National Association of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR). She was also the president of the Dalit Lekhak Sangh (Dalit Writers' Group). Just last year, she translated Savitribai Phule's poems from Marathi to Hindi at Savitribai Phule University in Pune. Her autobiography *Apni Zameen Apna Aasman*, (Our Earth, Our Sky) and her collection of poems *Padchaap* (Footsteps) and *Hawa si Bechain Yuvatian* (Young Girls Braving the Wind) *Ankahee Kahaniyan* (Untold Stories) and the volumes she edited on Dalit women writers brought new understanding to the issues of gender, caste and feminism. Her death at such a young age is a great loss to all those who are committed to struggle for Dalit rights and gender justice.

—C S Lakshmi

The Show Must Go On: Dr Uma Pocha (1939-4 April 2018)



Dr Uma Pocha was a medical doctor who worked as a doctor for Municipal School children. She was born into a middle-class Tamil family. Her father Sami Iyer later became Police commissioner of Mumbai. Uma and her sister Indira were a famous singing duo in the fifties who performed in clubs and gymkhanas in Mumbai and other cities like Kolkata for the pleasure of singing. Their music took them to even Sri Lanka then. They also performed with such legends as Hal Green and his band Chick Chocolate, Goody Seervai, Ken Mack, Maurice Concessio and Mickey Corriea. Her song *Bombay Meri Hai* is considered a kind of Bombay anthem and is even now played in some clubs. The famous Usha Uthup is the younger sister of Uma Pocha. Uma died of throat cancer but her sister Usha Uthup says that she met her a week before her demise and they sang together despite her condition and it was a fun-filled meeting. Her son Adi Pocha in his blog has written about his mother in words that touch one's heart. He says that the motto of his mother and father Jimmy Pocha who was a comedian and a mega star of the Parsi stage was that *The Show Must Go On*. He narrates an incident when he was a boy sitting in the audience in one of his parents' shows. The accordionist Goody Seervai collapsed on the stage from a heart attack when the band was in full swing. The music paused. Adi Marzban, Pesi Khandalawala, Jimmy Pocha, his dad, and a few others rushed from the wings and took Goody Seervai away from the stage and took him to a hospital. And the band started up again. The show has not really stopped for Uma Pocha for as her son says, even after her retirement she found ways to be useful. She had continued to teach young people about caring for the environment, about not using plastic bags and so on. She conducted workshops on HIV/AIDS and even basic sanitation. He says through all this "she extended her life, her worth, her purpose" and that "somewhere in someone, her memory, and her value, does live on."

—C S Lakshmi



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.

Bubbly, Ebullient, Energetic: Pratibha Umashankar-Nadiger (15 November 1957-21 April 2018)



It is not easy for me to write about Pratibha Umashankar-Nadiger, because she is one of my closest friends. As an academic, she was in top form, with a first class at every stage of her studies, right up to the MA and MPhil in English Literature from the University of Mumbai. A couple of years ago she registered for her PhD in Gender Perspectives in Partition Studies and completed an enviable amount of work in a short time; but then, she enthusiastically and with the vigour characteristic of her, plunged into the translation of Yashwant Chittal's novel about the underbelly of office politics, caste and class, set in 1979, *Shikari*, and completed it in a record time of four months. She completed the translation in April 2017, was diagnosed with cancer in May 2017, the book was released by Penguin in October 2017 and Pratibha breathed her last on 21 April 2018. The book has been very well received, and it gave her much happiness in those months when she was struggling with the physical pain and the treatment to read the positive reviews it received. Her PhD, sadly could not be completed. She worked like one possessed, but even a person with her kind of energy and grit cannot fight Time.

Her students at Smt CHM College, Ulhasnagar, K V Pendharkar College, Dombivli, and the Indian High School, Dubai, remember her as one of the most enterprising and motivating persons who helped them to chart their paths and took them along the exciting journey of books and the arts. As a senior journalist with *Khaleej Times*, she has interviewed some of the stalwarts of the century—M F Hussain, Nelson Mandela, Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, Amitabh Bachchan, President Ferdinand de Clerk among others. Her interviews for *Muse India* and other journals in India were always in-depth and searching—be it with our own Ambai, or Jayant Kaikini or Paromita Vohra or Kamla Bhasin or Ananya Jahanara Kabir. Her literary sensibility, sensitivity and erudition shone through these Conversations. I would often say to her—'Pratibha, it is you who should be being interviewed'. And after *Shikari -The Hunt*, came to be published, this happened; and I am grateful for it. Too little, too late, but nevertheless something so significant.

Friends have been remembering her *joie de vivre* and her penchant for jokes with great fondness. She could keep a gathering entertained for hours on end. It was her phenomenal memory, her comic timing, her fascination with language which gave her the edge when it came to conducting Quiz Competitions, and preparing her students for them.

For me Pratibha remains that breezy chit of a girl, lithe, slim, quick, quick-witted, warm, caring. The one with the sparkling eyes, the one who would suddenly stand still and say, 'Charan, do you remember...?' and then would launch into a deep recitation of lines from *Hamlet* or Sahir's couplets, or Eliot's *Four Quartets*. 'Do not wait to strike when the iron is hot' she would quote, from her favourite, W B Yeats, 'but make it hot by striking'. She has dedicated her translation of *Shikari* to her parents, the warm-hearted and Annapurna like mother, Sulochana, and the erudite, humourous writer and freedom fighter, Govinda Rao Nadigar, who apart from being a teacher, retired as an officer of Press Information Bureau and was also the Head of the Commentary Section at Films Division.

—Charanjeet Kaur



Song for a Little Sparrow: M S Rajeswari (24 February 1932 - 25 April 2018)



Many remember M S Rajeswari for the songs she has sung for child artistes. People especially recall the song "Ammavum Neeeye Appavum Neeeye" (You are Our Mother and Father) she sang for the little child Kamal Hasan in the film *Kalathur Kannamma* (1959) But the song sung by her that those who belong to my generation remember often is "Chittu Kuruvi, Chittu Kuruvi Saethi Theriyuma?" (Little Sparrow, You Know What?) that she sang for Anjali Devi in the film *Town Bus* (1953). It was a song that was on everyone's lips for a long time for the warmth in M S Rajeswari's voice brought out both the love and the intimacy the character wanted to convey. Rajeswari's mother T V Rajasundari was herself a stage artiste and a singer who married Madurai Sadagopan. So it is not surprising that the daughter born to them also came into the same field. The famous actor, producer and director B R Panthulu introduced Rajeswari to film singing. Her regular career in singing began in A V M Studios where she became one of the resident playback singers with the famous T K Bhagavathi but her very first song was sung for Pragathi Pictures for the film *Vijayalakshmi*, a 1946 Tamil film directed by P Pullaiah with B R Panthulu and M V Rajamma in the lead roles. Rajeswari sang the song "Maiyal Migavum Meerudhe" (I am Overcome with Love).

In a career that lasted for nearly fifty years Rajeswari sang more than 500 songs in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada language films. Her later songs from the sixties were mostly for child artistes for her voice had that innocent quality.

Considering that she herself was little more than a child when she sang about being overcome with love, it is strange that Rajeswari's voice became the voice for child artistes. But Rajeswari does not seem to have minded this course her singing career took. But for age-related illness towards the end she remained cheerful and contented and when she was felicitated in 2013 at an event honouring legends of the Tamil film industry as a part of the centenary celebrations, she accepted the award gracefully.

—C S Lakshmi



Burqavaganza: Madeeha Gauhar (21 September 1956 – 25 April 2018)



Those who have known the satirical play *Burqavaganza*, a love story in the time of *jihad*, where all the actors were in burqas and talking about fanaticism, sexual discrimination and intolerance, will know Madeeha Gauhar

and what a loss the death of a person like her from Pakistan who was an actor, a playwright, director and women's rights activist, is to the women's movement in Asia. She and her husband Shahid Nadeem founded the Ajoka Theatre in 1983 and they have staged plays on streets, in public places and in theatres in Asia and Europe. Gauhar had a master's degree in English literature and she went to London for another master's degree in theatre sciences from the University of London. It was after her return in 1983 that she set up the Ajoka Theatre in Lahore. In 2003 she was honoured with a Prince Claus Award from the Netherlands. In 2007 she won the International Theatre Pasta Award. It is unfortunate that the life of a person who had so much more to offer has been cut short.

—C S Lakshmi



Ahana, the Immortal: Rani Karnaa (1939-7 May 2018)



Rani Karnaa established the dance division of Aurobindo Bhavan, Kolkata, by name, *Ahana* and headed the department from 1980 to 1987. The name, meaning immortal or as some interpret, inner light might as well have been the adjective meant for her dance and her life dedicated to dance. She inspired many and for many dancers and for

those who love dance, her death would be a personal loss. Samskritiki Shreyaskar, the dance academy in Kolkata that she set up in 1995, would carry on her legacy.

Rani Karnaa was born in Hyderabad, Sindh, and when she was three her family moved to Delhi. She learnt dance from the best of gurus from the age of four. Initially she learnt from Nrityacharya Narayan Prasad and Sundar Prasad. Later she learnt both the Jaipur gharana style and the Lucknow gharana style from Guru Hiralal and Pandit Birju Maharaj. She beautifully integrated both the traditions later in her performances. She also learnt Manipuri and Bharatanatyam from Amubi Singh, Narendra Kumar and Lalita Shastri, a disciple of Rukmini Arundale.

In 1963 she moved to Bhubaneswar after her marriage and learnt Odissi from Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Rani Karnaa was honoured with several awards a dancer of her calibre deserved, including the Padma Shri in 2014 just a year after she gave her last performance at the age of 74.

—C S Lakshmi



A Baithak Lavani Artiste from Wai: Yamunabai Waikar (31 December 1915-15 May 2017)



It was in the feminist cultural festival EXPRESSION organised by Madhushree Dutta in 1990, where feminist scholars, women artists and women's movement activists came together that in one session folk artists spoke about their art and their life. It was one of the most interesting sessions of the festival. Yamunabai Waikar was one of the artistes who spoke about her life and sang some Lavani erotic songs for us. She was not young then but her demonstration performance took the session by storm. Even feminists who had spoken and written a lot about eroticism learnt a lot about folk presentation of desire and about women folk performers that day. Many of us thought that a film must be made on Yamunabai Waikar. SPARROW was able to make a film on Vithabai Narayangaonkar but could not make a film on Yamunabai which is a pity for she lived a long life and passed away at her village Wai, at the age of 102 six months before her 103rd birthday.

Yamunabai was a baithak lavani artiste and a tamasha artiste who was an institution by herself. Born into a poor family of the Kolhati community, she had a father who was the stereotypical drunkard while her mother was a performer. It was her mother Gitabai who taught her lavani singing. While many know that she was trained

professionally by the Rangu-Gangu Sangeet party, not many know that she received training in classical music from Faqir Mahammad of Bombay and Akhtarbai of Kolhapur. At the age of 10 her family had moved to Mumbai and she began performing on the streets of Mumbai. Not long after, at the age of 15, she formed her own lavani group with her sisters, called the Yamuna-Hira-Tara Waikar Sangeet Party. Since she was trained in classical music Yamunabai could sing thumri, tarana and also ghazals with expertise. She had even shared the stage with the well-known kathak exponent Birju Maharaj when he had danced for a lavani that she had sung.

Yamunabai had also performed in musical dramas like *Sanshay Kallol*, *Dharamveer Sambaji* and *Mohityanchi Manjula*. They say that Sane Guruji himself came to see her perform in the play *Maharachi Por* (Children of Mahars). Yamunabai was honoured with many awards: Padma Shri in 2012, Maharashtra State Award in 1990, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1995 Sahakar Maharshi Shankarrao Mohite-Patil Lavani Kalavant Award in 1997, Ahilyabai Holkar Award from the Government of Maharashtra in 2000, Life Time Achievement Award of Tagore Ratna Samman in 2012, Aditya Vikram Birla Kalasikhara Award in 2012, Rasikmani Shrikrishna Pandit Uttung Gunagaurav Award in 2014.

Yamunabai was an unparalleled performer but as someone who had wandered looking for a livelihood, she deeply understood how performers like her need a permanent place to stay. That is why her community people to whom she was deeply attached are proud of not only her performances and the awards that came her way, but they also remember with love how she fought for permanent residences for this nomadic community.

—C S Lakshmi



Congratulations!



The Directorate for Tamil Development has given the 2017 award for translation to **Muthu Meenakshi** who writes in the name of Vasantha Shyamalam. She received a citation and a cash award of Rs.

One Lakh from the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu on 5th April 2018. She has translated from Punjabi through Hindi to Tamil and from Hindi to Tamil. She also translates from English to Tamil. She has also written short stories in English, Tamil, Hindi and Sanskrit. She has received Lilly Deivasikamani award and other awards in the past. Recently she got a post-graduate degree in Sanskrit at the age of 76. Way to go Vasantha Shyamalam!



Muthukannammal, the Sathir dancer from Viralimalai, was honoured on 17th March 2018, with the Dakshina Chitra Virudhu, an annual award instituted by The Madras Craft Foundation and The Friends of Dakshina Chitra to honour performing artistes. She was honoured with the award for having kept the art alive and for sharing it still with many students. Sarada Ramanathan who made the award winning film *Sringaram* on Devadasis, presented the award to 79-year-old Muthukannammal.



SPARROW Congratulates both of them!



We thank all our trustess and advisors who reposed immense faith in our efforts which has made it possible for us to spread our wings. They continue to stand by us. We also thank our funders, donors, supporters, well-wishers, friends and many more who have supported us in many ways.

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