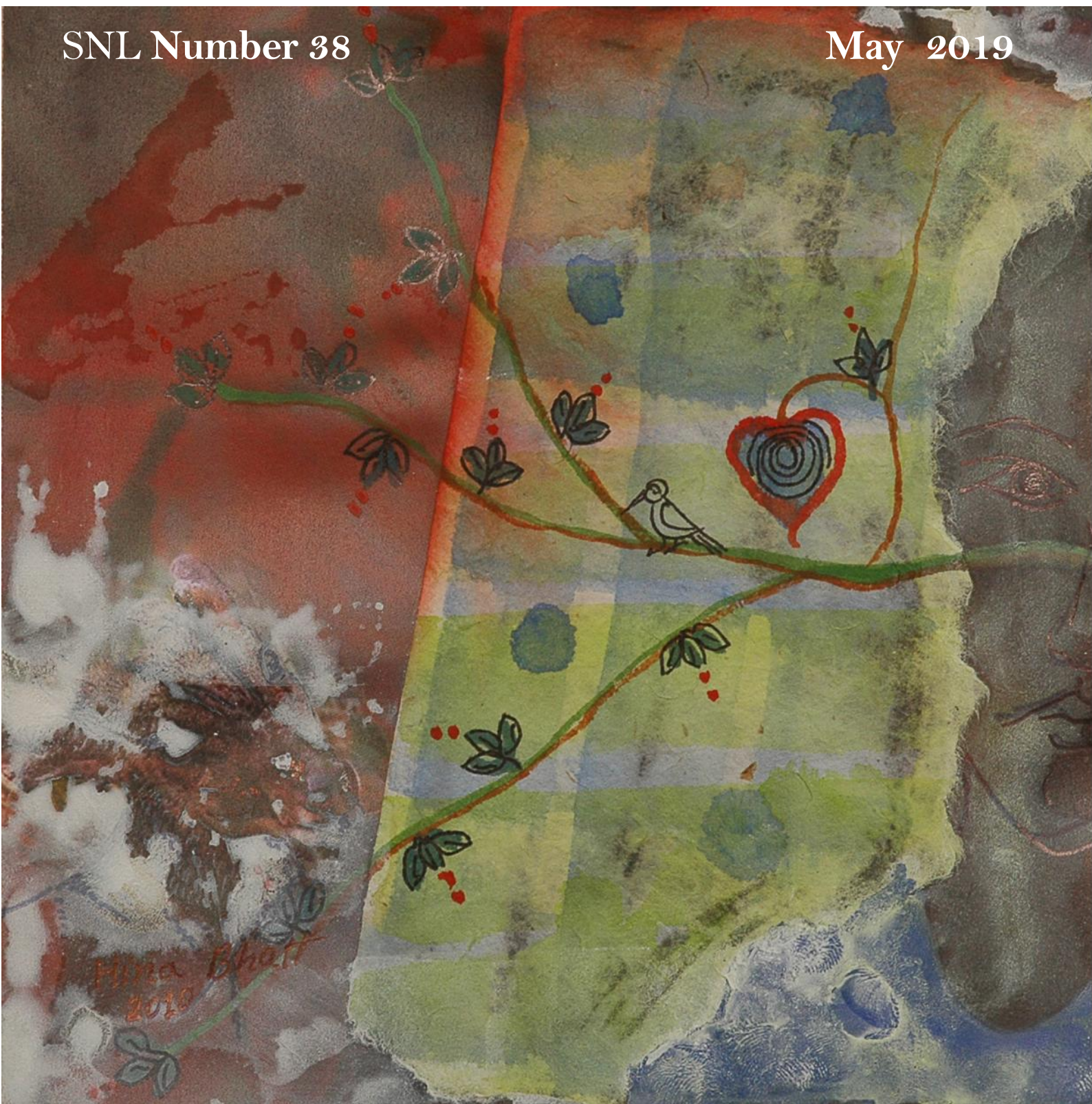


SNL Number 38

May 2019



# SPARROW newsletter



SOUND & PICTURE ARCHIVES FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN

## A Random Harvest



A random harvest is always intriguing and interesting. It has no continuity and sometimes its abruptness and incompleteness captures one's mind in ways one cannot explain. This book is an attempt to share that experience.



## A RANDOM HARVEST:

**A book of DIARY SKETCHES/  
DRAWINGS/COLLAGES/  
WATERCOLOURS OF WOMEN  
PAINTERS**

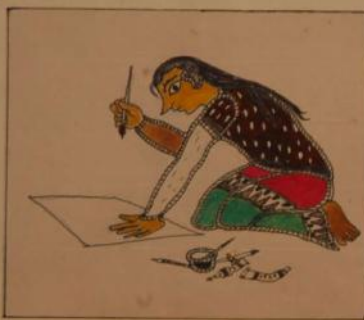
It is a random collection from the works women painters who supported the Art Raffle organised by SPARROW in 2010. The works were inspired by or were reflections of two poems SPARROW gave them which in our

## Contents



- Jinnat Shinde
- Sheila Carlotti
- Sanatna Mandes
- Bhavati Kapadia
- Sheetal Gattani
- Subanga Ghosh
- Rekha Rednithya
- Vasudha Thapa
- Sultisha Sitanderi
- Jyoti Kelle
- Santana Gehra
- Manal Damani
- Ansa Bhatt
- Rupa Chaudh
- Kirti Thakur
- Gargi Rames

- Kanchan Chander
- Ujjala Kapadia
- Brinda Miller
- Nikita Parikh
- Shivani Agarwal
- Shubho Sawant
- Anurag Tivedi
- Sana Jaisak
- Anandika Dhepe
- Rekha Shindekar
- Archana Fasad
- Rupa Chatterjee
- Madhuri Kotha
- Pooja Bose
- Sonali Pyngwar



*'Sage Overflow'*  
created for SPARROW with love, February 2010



"What about your wings?"  
she said. "How can you  
forget those when the  
stamps are still deep  
in your shoulder  
blades?"



- SPRING 'THE CHERRY' by Janet Wundersen

view, exemplified joy and sorrow and in a sense highlighted women's life and experiences that SPARROW, as a women's archives, has been documenting over the years.



Contribution Price: Rs. 350/-

This e-book is available in  
BookGanga.com.

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

Everything begins with a very simple idea in SPARROW. It seems so doable and easy. It is once we plunge into it that we realise that what we have got into is not a quietly flowing river but a river in spate! That is how this SNL 38 happened. We thought we must design each newsletter differently just for the fun of it and not really have a page limit so that we can include many more themes, issues, people and books. It was such an easy thing to imagine. We took it up as a challenge and it was all smooth flow till we did the cover. That is when everything went haywire. Earlier our newsletters were 8 pages and occasionally 16 pages and then 24 pages once in a way. This newsletter is 48 pages and with a supplement which nowadays we add to our newsletters, it is about 108 pages! It is not a newsletter but a book! And that is what our newsletters are going to be in future. Each one will be differently designed and hopefully we will get used to working on each one of them without frayed tempers and total loss of hope that it would ever see the light of day.

This SNL has its share of book reviews some of which, we hope, will inspire you to buy the books reviewed. These books have added to our archival collection immensely and by reviewing them we have included many of the women in the books in the history of women. G Shantha, the founder and director of DAWN (Development Action for Women in Need), a NGO in Virudhunagar, succumbed to cancer in December. She has a long association with SPARROW and we were hoping to do some work together. In this SNL we celebrate her life by publishing excerpts from a dialogue we had with her a few years ago. There is also an article by Dipankar Sengupta on Bimal Prativa Devi, a freedom fighter and an author from Bengal. And in this SNL we have some poems too. Kalyanee Rajan, a poet who writes in English, agreed to give us four of her poems. Kalyanee's poems are not words exquisitely strung together but her poems are her way of embracing life for what it is with pain, humour and love.

Then there are those homages which are a totally different experience altogether. Women who have been artistes, writers, activists and actors, some of whom we have known personally and some others we have read about and others we came to know only after their demise, are all here inspiring us with their lives, their words, their art and their music. The homages always get written with a sense of elation for having lived in the times these women and some men included here have lived.

SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary awards programme began in 2014. In this SNL we have given as supplement the acceptance speeches of the writers who got the awards for the acceptance speeches were not just formal speeches but stories the authors told us about themselves, their life and their writing which we felt, must be documented.

We would love to get feedback from you and do visit our website [www.sparrowonline.org](http://www.sparrowonline.org) to get to know more about SPARROW's work and also to generously donate towards our archival and other activities.

*Happy Reading!*



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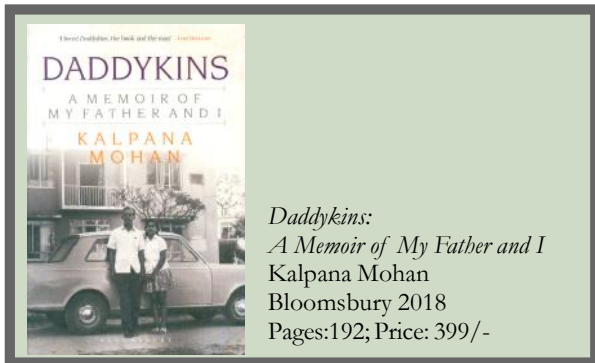
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–*C S Lakshmi, Charanjeet Kaur, Gowri Kirubanandan, Venkata Raman G & S Vijayalakshmi*

COVER PAGE: Drawing by painter Hina Bhatt  
ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: SPARROW ARCHIVES  
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*Daddykins:*  
*A Memoir of My Father and I*  
Kalpana Mohan  
Bloomsbury 2018  
Pages:192; Price: 399/-

A family memoir would be of interest essentially to that particular family. The immediate and extended family, relatives, friends, colleagues, the faithful retainer, all find themselves reflected at every turn of the page. They are in turn, amused, touched, saddened, gladdened. Loved ones appear, both wraithlike and real, as the author/ narrator recreates them into loving images. When it is a close relationship, the very act of writing creates for her a sense of catharsis. We discern all these characteristics in Kalpana Mohan's *Daddykins*. As she watches her father's life ebbing away, she begins to trace it from childhood to old age, etching out, as it were, the seven stages of man. Threading through the variegated strands of his life, are woven other lives, of Kalpana's mother, her sister and family, her own family in California, the three aunts, nicknamed the Three Roses, the loyal chauffeur cum Man Friday.

To the general reader they're all unknown, remote people. However, it is the mark of this memoir, that the outsider is drawn in; we discover the familiar in the unfamiliar, the known in the unknown. The author sensitises us to the dying man's last days on earth; we share the daughter's pain; we remember and recognise this as a universal phenomenon. Touches of humour mitigate the morbidity and gloom of the sickbed. For instance, while the father hugs his illness and hounds both daughters, Kalpana remarks, in real and mock exasperation, "Daddykins talked about his oesophageal dilation as if it were a condition requiring regular service," like "a tyre replacement, an oil change, or a battery check." There are those readers who would solemnly declare that the scene of a deathbed is no place for humour. I disagree and so would the writer, for, when everything else fails, when life itself fails, humour becomes our saving grace, both for the living and for the dying.

Moreover, the narrator leads us all away, her father and herself too, from the sickroom, from the sad present, to other climes, other times. The family's experiences in places as different as Lahore and Singapore, Dar-e-Salem and California expand their cultural and geographical horizons, and the memoir's literary horizons as well.

## FAMILY MATTER

-Roshan G Shahani

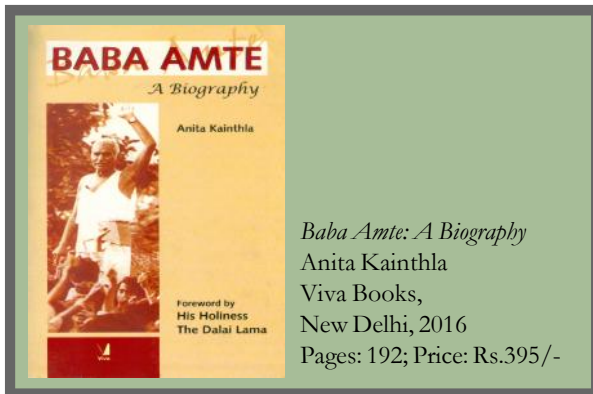
The narrative follows an anecdotal mode, so that the seamless, chronological sequence is constantly disrupted. Past and present collapse into each other, whereby the past is a constant presence. These anecdotes, at times amusing, at other times moving, are accompanied by the narrator's reflections which takes us beyond the immediate into a deeper understanding. One such vignette: on his return from his visit to his daughter in California, her father warns the servant never to visit the USA because the daughter keeps the house so clean you "cannot breathe ... Every object has an allotted place, and every place has an allotted object. If something that is supposed to be here, is moved elsewhere, you've had it." Many a reader, whether parent or daughter would nod in instant recognition! ... A bizarrely hilarious incident which becomes family lore is when during a Californian earthquake, a very pregnant Kalpana drives her parents in search of an open store to satisfy the very obvious obsession of most of us Indian visitors—to go on a shopping spree. As familiar is the father's positive response to the sense of privacy, efficiency and freedom that the American experience offers. And yet, when asked where he'd spend his last years, he echoes the reply of many an Indian septagenarian... "In India, [here] I am the king of my castle."

In the midst of these reminiscences, seated by her father's sickbed, only half listening to the servant's prattle and her father's responses, the daughter falls into a reverie. Reflecting on the old man's journey, she envisions her own distant one. "I saw my father as a young man of twenty standing on a hillock, scouting the many mountains he must still climb. And then almost too soon it seemed I saw him now standing at the grand summit, the place I too might reach one day and peer down not knowing how I ever made that climb." This reverie and many more, give the memoir its strength and sensitivity, despite its rather coy and cumbersome title.

Occasional detailed descriptions of traditional rituals might have its appeal being familiar to the Indian reader, and conversely, being exotic to the foreign one. At other times scatological references, both factual and funny, might catch some readers' fancy. Readers might even find a resemblance

to Rohinton Mistry's fiction in this connection. However, and this needs to be emphasised; Mistry's remarkable ability to explore familial relationships and the tender affection he

evokes for his characters is found, albeit in a more modest measure, in this memoir as well. Discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary, makes this memoir memorable.



Few literary attempts to recall Baba Amte can escape the significance of his life. It seeps into any mention of him, and the text can only be reviewed on the basis of how thoroughly the author has portrayed it. Anita Kainthla, through her *Baba Amte: A Biography*, takes us with her as she attempts the task.

Born to an affluent Brahmin household, Devidas Muralidas Amte grew up to become a practising lawyer in Nagpur. He left his caste taboos and devoted himself to organising labour unions, influenced by thinkers ranging from Gandhi, Tagore and Bhave to Marx, Kropotkin, Ruskin. The Gandhi-led nationalist movement swept him in its tide and instilled within him a loyalty to the nation and its people that persisted. One day he came across the ailing leper Tulsiram. His first reaction was to run, aghast at Tulsiram's state. Ashamed of his fear, Amte returned and attended to Tulsiram's wounds. He pledged to give his life to curing society's leprosy of the mind—the stigma surrounding leprosy patients.

With the unadulterated support of his wife Sadhana and sons, Vikas and Prakash, Amte went on to establish communes like Anandwan—a leprosarium meant not just for treatment of the disease, but also to rebuild the dignity of the afflicted. He maintained that none of the thinkers he subscribed to, answered the question of “how to build a person”. Rejecting class conflict as a means of emancipation, he focussed on ‘labour’ as the foundation of his institutions. It was what shaped individuals and the world, and it was the way to a dignified life in society. Some of his projects came

## THE GOOD PERSON OF ANANDWAN

-Oorna Raut

to life—such as Anandwan and Hemalkasa, and some failed. But Amte followed the strict policy of not disrespecting what he had. And so, he laboured on.

Anita Kainthla mentions larger struggles that Amte was part of. We learn of his endeavour to energise the nation's youth against divisive forces and counter-nationalisms. She calls his tryst with the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)—leading to a decisive Supreme Court verdict stalling the further construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam in the 1990s—his final act.

There is an astounding lack of theorisation and writings on Baba Amte given his contributions to society. In this respect, the book proves itself valuable. Anita Kainthla tries not to make the biography an uncritical one and attempts to shed some light on certain criticisms of Amte's authoritarianism, which perhaps would have painted a more realistic picture had it been interspersed throughout the book.

Reading the book, one can gauge the respect the author has for her subject. The instances of Amte's life are described with an almost religious awe. Even though ‘Baba’ was a childhood nickname, Amte represents a saintly idiom that has a definite place in Indian history and imagination. The book, above all, must be seen as part of this tradition.

A more detailed historical landscape within which Amte's life panned out would have been insightful. How he negotiated with the political environment, his peers, other social movements—all of this would have added texture to the biography. Medha Patkar, for example, is simply mentioned


in the one chapter on NBA. Ambedkar at the time was a force to reckon with when it came to advocacy for the down-trodden, yet he is barely even spoken of. We only get glimpses of his relationship with the existing system—that too, mostly towards the end of the book and Amte's life.

It remains a question to the reader how to place Baba Amte in today's historical and political imagination. The institutions he set up in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh are up and running, despite the fight against leprosy-stigma being far from won. Yet his more politically contentious bets—such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan—must continue their struggles against mounting opposition. In the current times when complex emotions constitute the national


consciousness it is economic and political gains that decide most policies and people's sentiments and attitudes towards issues that concern them play a lesser role. When one has to deal with a system that is deaf to the needs of all but a few, what of Amte's philosophy should one employ? And what must one reject? These are questions yet to be grappled with.

In his play *The Good Person of Setzuan*, Brecht's contention is that economic systems necessarily determine a society's morality. One cannot be truly good in a system that thrives on oppression. Baba Amte was unabashed in his beliefs, despite the idiosyncrasies of his time. This, as Anita Kainthla's book serves to remind us, is what makes him exceptional.

**In India Women Spoke, Women Worked,  
Women Wrote, Women Acted**



**Women Chose, Women Demanded,  
Women Created, Women Rebelled**



**We Put Them  
All Under One Roof  
And Called it  
SPARROW**

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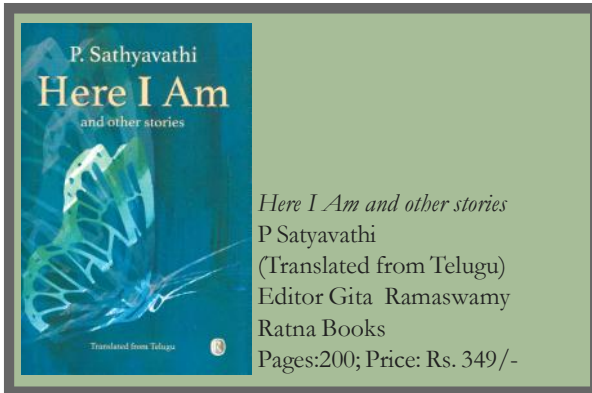
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We also thank our funders, donors, supporters, well wishers, friends and many more who have supported us in many ways.

# HERE IS SATHYAVATHI

-Priya D'Souza



A supermom dies suddenly and her body seems like limestone, curious mourners even pinch bits of it to investigate. Examination reveals it to be comprised of tablets. This is just one of many odd happenings in this book of sixteen stories by Sathyavathi, the well-known Telugu writer. Many of the stories have elements of magic realism, while others are more straight-forward. Sathyavathi introduces strange sub-plots into her stories— a man drives a long screw through the neck of his wife whose head was bent and kept bobbing up and down. Now she can look only straight ahead. This is woven into “City of Spells and City of Charms” about well-to-do Indian women settled abroad leading comfortable, self-centred lives obsessed with their own beauty and adornment and entertainment, stifling any feelings of unrest with religiosity, celebrating Indian festivals lavishly. Sathyavathi looks wryly at those living the American dream but giving up their own. The title story, “Here I Am”, is allegorical about a woman’s life as a journey by boat becoming all about accommodating her lover and accumulating possessions.

A feminist worldview informs all these stories. Women are expected to run their houses and sometimes also work outside the house with little thanks or power over their money. There are no easy answers; middle-class and upper-class educated women with supposedly progressive husbands and families still face challenges. Some women are abandoned by their husbands and learn to manage on their own. “Vasundhara’s Story” deals with the issues of the elderly dependent on their children and women’s work in the house being taken for granted. An elderly lady suddenly goes missing and reveals her reasons in a letter to her sympathetic daughter-in-law.

In some stories people slowly come to relate to the people around them, unexpected friendships form across boundaries of class and age. In “The Awakening” a grumpy elderly man learns to connect with the people around him after a shock. Swarna, in “Seven Colours of a Rainbow”, is an

attendant to an elderly woman who rambles on about the colourful saris that she wore in her youth. Swarna slowly begins to sympathise with the old woman, who she initially viewed with indifference and even disgust when she soiled herself.

There is a sympathy for the poor and their struggles—the milkman, the maid—without being patronising. In “Palanquin Bearer” a poor maid Manga doesn’t have much of a reprieve when her alcoholic violent husband decides to undertake deeksha, wear the Bhavani mala for a few days. Now in addition to her duties as a maid, several times a day she has to bathe so that she can be clean enough to cook him fresh and varied meals, also her savings are needed for all the extra puja expenses. It is the women who have all the extra work to ensure their husbands do this ritual properly.

Sathyavathi writes sympathetically of the problems faced by the very poor parents who have sacrificed much so that their ‘topper’ daughter can do an engineering degree. But her education and studies and even the cellphone they get her creates a big distance/gap between them. Some stories are very poignant; “Nameless” deals with what a family, especially the mother, has to go through when their daughter goes missing.

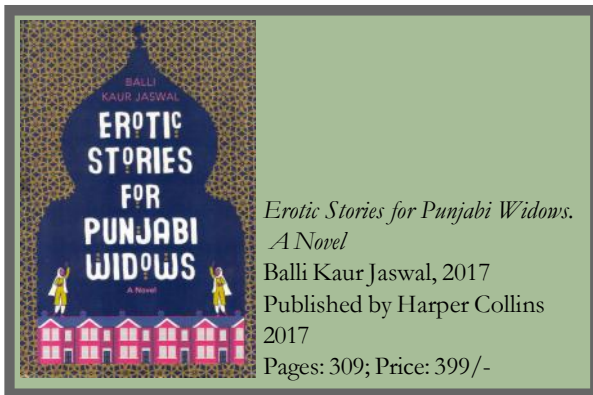
The translations of these stories are by different people and sometimes a bit uneven but easy to read. There is a lot of attention to detail but the stories do not get buried under them. The stories are populated with nuanced characters that are engaging, and the narrative and dialogue is natural, with crispness and humour. We get to know their thought processes, their desires, their anxieties, their hopes and challenges and recognise in them our own.



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

# TALES THE WIDOWS TELL

-Roshan G Shahani



*Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows.*

*A Novel*

Balli Kaur Jaswal, 2017

Published by Harper Collins

2017

Pages: 309; Price: 399/-

Directing a London cabbie towards Southall, I had the unpleasant experience of listening to his response: “No need, you can smell it a mile away.” Bali Kaur Jaswal’s novel, most of which is set in Southall, fortunately offers a very different response. Hers is the insider-outsider perspective. Having apparently lived in Southall, while also having travelled and lived over half the world, she occupies what one might call borderland country. Without ever sentimentalising it, she evokes the Mini Punjab world in a lively, holistic manner. She explores the lives and experiences of the Punjabi women, their relationships with one another, the patriarchal world that governs them, as well as the difficulties they face in grappling with life in a still alien world. The locale, with its Indian grocery stores, sari and jewellery shops, the beauty parlour and looming above them all the gurdwara is cinematically evoked as is the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty in the streets after dark. It’s not surprising then, that film rights have already been bought. The novel has elements of the crime thriller, there are mysterious happenings, there’s violent action, hilarious episodes, and is also a romcom of sorts. However, the author never loses sight of the narrative’s main concern—the repressed desires of the widows which find expression through the creative act of storytelling.

Nikki is the protagonist of the novel, if such a cumbersome term can be used for her. She is more a propeller whose interaction with the widows propels the narrative forward. Nikki could be considered the British counterpart of the ABCD i.e. the American Born Confused Desi. She lives independently, is a college dropout, takes sex casually, unknown to her conservative mother she works in a pub, is a placard bearing fem-fighter. She recalls her confusion as a child, when she’d accompany her parents to Southall, with its vegetable vendors, its tea shops and the strange smells and sights that greeted her. She sneers at her sister’s attempt at an arranged marriage. She tells her airily, “This is what young women do in Britain! We move out. We become independent. This is our culture.”

Nikki does “move out.” But with supreme irony, her author directs her back into the world of the Punjabi widows. She needs to move in, in order to move out. In the process of asserting her culture she discovers another culture hitherto unknown to her. The syncretic nature of any culture is no doubt a difficult ideal to achieve but Nikki is being propelled to an awareness in that direction. At the start Nikki feels she has a noble mission to accomplish, to teach creative writing to a homogenous group of ignorant Punjabi widows. Descending from the heights of cosmopolitan West London, to the desi district of Southall, this young teacher begins by being presumptuous and patronising. She ends up being the teacher who has lessons to learn. If the Punjabi women have a lot to learn, so has Nikki. While this young woman has been confused in her understanding, the author understands her confusion.

Coming to the widows’ stories. They are raunchy, bawdy, erotic; behind the demure dupatta lie unimagined passions, a palpable sexuality. Nikki is shown to be only a catalyst; if the women find agency, it is through their own struggle and changing mind-set. In fact, the let-us-tear-the-veils-off-our-distressed-sisters kind of firebrand feminism is laughingly debunked in Jaswal’s narrative. Besides, the Punjabi widows, though initially lumped together in Nikki’s mind, are keenly individualised. There is Sheena, a young widow choosing to live with an ailing mother-in-law; there’s Manjeet who’d rather be recognised as a widow than bear the humiliation of being a jilted wife. There’s a mother-daughter duo who share a conflicting relationship with each other. And there’s Tarampal Kaur, a child widow whose dark secret adds to the element of mystery in the novel.

The stories vary from premarital, marital to extra marital sex; there’s one that explores same sex love as well. The stories, all italicised, however raunchy and lascivious, could tend to get monotonous and some readers might even skip reading them. Perhaps to pre-empt just that, we read some of them not in the classroom, but with Nikki’s friend Olive chuckling over them or with Jason the boyfriend laughing

uproariously over them. One is seen to arouse Nikki's boss, Kulwinder, to the extent that she and her estranged husband begin a renewed sexual relationship.

Black humour and wit characterise this novel, whether it's a comment on gender or race. It permeates the Classroom as well, as the women relate their fantasies. It helps mitigate their troubles and moreover prevents the novel from getting solemn. For instance, Manjeet who has had a terrible marital experience tells the younger women, "At least you get to know the person before marrying him. You can separate the idiots from the bloody idiots." Spoken in Punjabi, one can imagine how much more colourful, her colourful words must sound. Nikki's own caustic humour is a weapon for survival. Just one instance—when Nikki can't help an American couple find their way, she overhears the wife tell her husband that they should ask someone British.

Racism by default is such a common experience, the idea that if you're not white you can't be British. The irritated Nikki who is trying hard to give up smoking, gives herself a legitimate excuse to light a much longed for cigarette after this encounter!

In keeping with the light tenor of the story, it's an all's-well-that-ends-well kind of end. The widows' stories are to be published, the mystery is solved, the villain has been caught, and though nothing can bring back their dead daughter, the grieving parents find solace in each other. Misunderstandings between Nikki and boyfriend are cleared up, her sister has arranged a match for herself.... But behind the action-packed plot, the boy-meets-girl romance, and even elements of chick lit, is a serious tale the widows tell, even though, seen from a vantage point, they may look insignificant, "like ghosts, like scrunched up pieces of paper."

## SPARROW CONGRATULATES THE PADMA AWARDEES



**Teejan Bai (Art-Vocals-Folk)**



**Bachendri Pal (Sports)**



**Muktaben Pankajkumar Dagli (Social work)**



**Draupadi Ghimiray (Social work)**



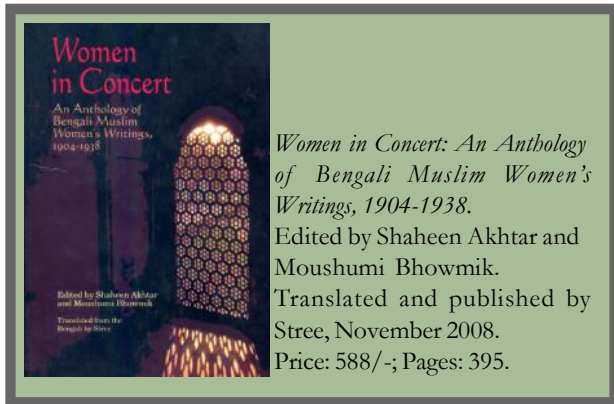
**Rajkumari Devi (Agriculture)**



**Bhagirathi Devi (Public Affairs)**



**Harika Dronavalli (Sports-Chess)**



*Women in Concert: An Anthology of Bengali Muslim Women's Writings, 1904-1938.*

Edited by Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik.

Translated and published by Stree, November 2008.

Price: 588/-; Pages: 395.

## WOMEN IN CONCERT

-Akshata S Pai

First published in Bengali in 1998, *Zenana Mehfil* was one of many feminist projects which sought to reclaim and record histories of women's writings in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It addresses a critical gap in the archives of Bengali literature on both sides of the partition, especially in West Bengal—the absence of Bengali Muslim women in its literary histories. The Bengali Muslim women writers featured in this anthology are passionate in their desire not to be left out of the great historical changes sweeping across their world. They address the socio-political discourses of their time: nationalism, Islamic identity, the reform movement, language, and attempt to make a space for themselves within these structures. Their choice of writing in Bengali was itself a crucial political choice to enter and participate in the nationalist public sphere. The collection allows us a glimpse into the early elaborations of a feminist discourse of rights and freedom as well as the contradictions and dilemmas which marked that discourse.

The book is striking in its painstaking and detailed contextualisation. Every text in the anthology exists in dialogue with its counterparts in a vast and intricate textual universe. The discursive networks within which such writing emerged and flourished are noted. Journals like *Saugat*, *Naya Bangla*, *Nauroz*, *Mohammadi* and *Begum* as well as women's organisations like the Bangiya Musalman Mahila Sangh and the Nikhil Bharat Mahila Sammelan, provided a space for women to engage with the question of their rights and roles within society. The editor of *Saugat*, Mohammad Nasiruddin, for instance, is acknowledged as playing an important role in encouraging women to tell their side of the story.

The anthology then not only highlights the texts but also details the production of those texts within difficult and painful material conditions. It is attentive even to the hesitation that women felt in first putting pen to paper. Take for instance this seemingly insignificant private exchange: "I wish I too could write books! But it seems impossible—I don't dare attempt it," Nurunnessa Khatun Vidyavinodini said to her

sister. Her sister replied, "Why should it be impossible? You can make it possible if you make an effort."

The recording of this anecdote is a part of the politics of this project as it situates the texts not only within textual networks but also within the affective networks of care and support upheld by both women and men who worked in solidarity for the education and betterment of Bengali Muslim women. Inclusion of contemporary reviews, commentary and censorship gives us a sense of the reception of these texts as well. In this way, the anthology is able to bring alive that very elusive thing that Raymond Williams theorised as "a structure of feeling." We are given a sense of what it might have meant to be a Bengali Muslim woman of a certain strata living in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The editors are careful to acknowledge and emphasise the memory-work of the people they interview for biographical information, making the work truly collaborative and reflexive. The book thus narrates its own archival practices and its own contexts of production. It is also aware of its limitations. Most of the writers featured in the anthology are from the upper classes of society and their imagination is inhibited by class and sometimes by caste.

Three major questions arise from the writings of these women: the practice of purdah or seclusion, the need for women's education, and the Bengali Muslim woman's role in the nationalist struggle. The book's structure in a sense traverses the purdah by positioning private and public texts against each other, showing us the mutual constitution of private and public selves of the women it features.

As far as the three raging debates go, the featured writers do not speak in a uniform or a homogenous voice. Their beliefs about women's roles in the nationalist struggle and the practice of purdah are different, as are the worlds they imagine in their fiction. Fatema Khanam's stories in their sudden and drastic transformation of radically nonconforming women into demure and self-effacing wives hints at the conflicting discourses that made a battleground of these

women's consciousness. These contradictions reveal the difficult task of reconciling radical possibilities with social conventions and norms. Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun's novella, *Niyantrita*, is striking for its expression of women's desires and sexuality and the tender delineation of the female gaze but also for the way in which it codes the domestic spaces that it portrays. While the entire novella unfolds within the inner quarters, the space of the terrace, the window, the threshold, the sites that allow a conversation between the inside and outside feature at the turning points of the story. While Akhtar Mahal's story finally mechanises a poetic justice that slowly destroys a woman who had sought to resist fate, Masooda Rahman's fiery prose appeals to women to be "bloodthirsty tigresses" and "repressed serpents" in asking for their rights.

All of the writers engage in debating the question of the purdah, a defining part of their lives and identities. While some criticise it and others value it, Rokeya Sakhawat's response is a marker of her strategic and attentive politics. As her biographer, Shamsunnahar Mahmud notes, "Rokeya's main rebellion was not against seclusion of women. She was

not impatient. She knew that this system was going to disintegrate as more people were educated. That is why all her strength was devoted to spreading education." Rokeya Sakhawat's writings articulate many of modern feminism's theoretical stances: the structural nature of oppression, the social construction of femininity and masculinity as well as the unequal opportunities and wages given to women. Her biting critical satire enlivens her prose and indeed justifies the decision to take her debut as marking the beginning of this era of restlessness and transformation.

The anthology is sensitive to the fact that these writings did not exist in a vacuum but registered and catalysed social change. The introductory sections carefully document the backbreaking and often thankless work of mobilising change among a reluctant and sometimes hostile populace and the everyday labour of keeping schools and organisations running.

In a time of rising Islamophobia and misogynistic backlash against feminist movements, these women's voices from a century ago provide both consolation and strength to carry on the fight for a just and equitable world.

## SPARROW CONGRATULATES THE PADMA AWARDEES



**Prashanti Singh**  
(Sports-Basketball)



**Jamuna Tudu (Social  
Work-Environment)**

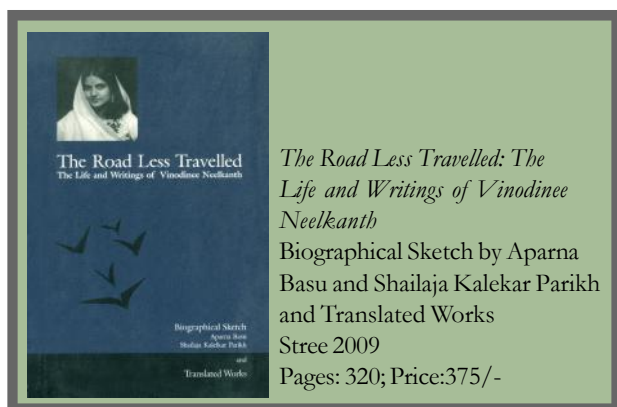


**Saalumarada Thimmakka**  
(Social Work-Environment)

## *Congratulations!*



**SPARROW** Congratulates Tamil writer Krishangini for getting the Thanjai Prakash Achiever Award on 15th December 2018 from *Pesum Puthiya Sakthi* magazine.



*The Road Less Travelled: The Life and Writings of Vinodinee Neelkanth*  
Biographical Sketch by Aparna Basu and Shailaja Kalekar Parikh and Translated Works  
Stree 2009  
Pages: 320; Price: 375/-

## ...AND THAT HAS MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

-Roshan G Shahani

The title of this book, taken from Frost's memorable line, finds multiple echoes throughout the ambitious venture. The Foreword, the biographical sketch, as well as Vinodinee Neelkanth's own journalistic writings, essays and short stories point in the direction of a road less travelled by this unconventional woman. And that has made all the difference to her own life, the lives of her family and the world in which she lived. This very volume, in which her family has been significantly involved bears testimony to the impact this difference has made. And if I may add a personal comment here; since SPARROW has travelled the road less travelled by, seeking out fellow travellers in lanes and by lanes, this archival work will make all the difference to its own archives.

Vinodinee dwells in the archive that her large and loving family has created for her, starting with the Foreword by her eldest son, through the biographical sketch, the reminiscences, the family clan's photographs and of course ending with her own writings. The word 'Archive' could connote a House, a Museum whereas this is more a home that her family has built for her, like the actual family home, "Baradari Bungalow" in Gujarat which was like "a living entity" filled with fond memories, sorrows too and boundless love.

The book places Vinodinee's life and experiences firmly in the context of the times, necessary in any impactful biography but even more necessary in the case of a woman who did not just live history but created it as well. She lived an unconventional life in a conventional society, "to become" in Gandhi's words, "the change you want to see." Unlike many of her contemporaries, Vinodinee didn't have to struggle against financial or patriarchal obstacles. She is described as growing up in a highly cultured and educated family. She was the first among Gujarati women to have attained a PhD from the USA.

Personal freedom and access to education was considered a birth right by her which has been attributed to the fact

that she belonged to the Nagar community of Gujarat who "had a history of living in urban areas, of being highly educated and of being in professions rather than in trade or agriculture." The long absences from home of the menfolk had apparently made these women more independent in the home and in the field of education. It was famously said of them that they "handled both the Kalam (pen) and the Kadchhi (ladle) equally well." Her biographers have humorously added that probably she held a spare pen in her ladle hand as well. How else could she have created the historical landmark of being the first Gujarati woman to have composed a novel (Kadaleevan) She occupied positions in public space and was a very popular headmistress of a school, lovingly remembered by her students. She had also translated *Pride and Prejudice* into Gujarati.

Like many of her generation, Vinodinee had come under the influence of Gandhi. Her political activism was palpably felt in her writings. As was remarked, "Gujarat was indeed fortunate in having two great daughters in Mridula Sarabhai and Vinodinee Neelkanth. Mridula was action oriented and established concrete institutions for the support and upliftment of women.... On the other hand, Vinodinee very skilfully attempted to bring about fundamental change in the attitudes and treatment of women by society, through not only addressing women in her writings, but also men, who had for centuries wielded complete power over the destiny of women."

To refer to just one among her forceful journalistic writings, will convey her strong feminist ideals. "Who is Akhanda Saubhagyavati?" The rhetorical title is followed by other rhetorical questions. Why should a married woman be considered "forever" "a woman of good fortune" only as long as her husband is alive? Why can't a single woman or a widow also be considered so? Suppose a man finds a really extraordinary wife, is he not also an akhand saubhagyaven? With irrefutable logic "Sushila" (most of her journalistic writings are anecdotal) continues; "there's never a letter

before a man's name that indicates whether he is a bachelor, a married man or a widower. Then why is it necessary for the whole world to know the marital status of a woman? She writes this in the form of a letter which the husband finds is in bad taste. He "feels like a person who chanced upon a stone while eating a sweet dish." Other pieces, too many to discuss here, speak eloquently through their titles alone of the verbal thrust they must have made upon her readers. Here are some: "The Daughter, a Millstone?" "The Daughter-in-law is always the Culprit", "The Curse of the Dowry System", "The Gandhian Couple" (an ironically worded title because this charkha-spinning couple disown the son when he chooses to marry a woman from a different caste.)

Vinodinee's essays are written in a very ornate style, appealing in an age and a time when restraint and terseness were not considered positive attributes. The first glimpse of Kashmir, the quiet beauty of Dalhousie, the Sabarmati in Spate evoke an ecstatic response. The last mentioned essay describes the stormy river "like a herd of elephants hurrying

past me" and then changing the metaphor, the river is seen to sweep by "with the pomp of a great empress."

"Like a magician she would come up with new stories" recalls one of her sons. One can imagine her doing so judging by the stories she composed and which form the final section of this volume. Like her journalistic works, the canvas is crowded with mothers and daughters, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, mean men and noble men, children, orphans, adopted sons, independent women, lonely women. They are like simply told folk tales but rich in understanding. I couldn't resist referring to the opening of one of them, a tender scene, of a mother-in-law combing her daughter-in-law's hair, telling her the reason why the family never slaughtered a goat on Bakri Id.

Like the sepia tinted family photographs, a precious inclusion in this memoir, the sepia tinted memories of Vinodinee's family have wrought a labour of love. Their magnificent effort has brought her alive for the contemporary reader.

## SPARROW CONGRATULATES THE PADMA AWARDEES



**Godawari Dutta**  
(Art-Painting)



**Friederike Irina**  
(Foreigner)(Social Work-Animal Welfare)



**Bombayla Devi Laishram**  
(Sports-Archery)



**Dr Sharada Srinivasan**  
(Archaeology)



**Gita Mehta**  
(Foreigner)  
(Literature & Education)



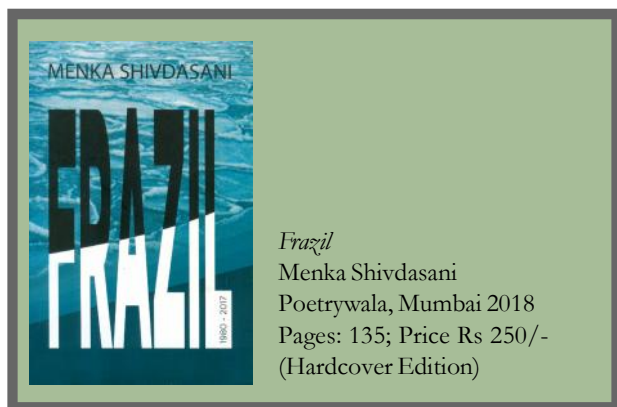
**Tao Porchon-Lynch**  
(Foreigner)  
(Others-Yoga)



**Milena Salvini**  
(Foreigner)  
(Art-Dance-Kathakali)



**Kamala Pujhari**  
(Others-Agriculture)



## No Small Talk This...

-Charanjeet Kaur

As I am doing this review the news has just come in that Menka Shivdasani's *Frazil* has been shortlisted for the Rabindranath Tagore Prize 2019, along with Jayanta Mahapatra and Kala Ramesh in the Poetry category. This is, indeed, good news, because Menka, with her three poetry collections—*Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990), *Stet* (2001), incidentally a SPARROW publication) and *Safe House* (2016)—is a major voice in Indian English poetry and a rallying point for poets and writers in, particularly, Mumbai. Her association with SPARROW is deep—she has edited *If the Roof Leaks*, *Let it Leak*, the fourth of the five volumes planned on Indian women writers in which she has presented the work of writers in Hindi, Punjabi, Sindhi, Maithili, Santhali and Dogri. Along with Anju Makhija and Arjan Shad, her Sahitya Akademi Anthology on Sindhi partition poetry—*Freedom and Fissures*—remains a pioneering work to this day.

*Frazil* (a fascinating title and word, which refers to 'soft ice formed by the accumulation of ice crystals in water that is too turbulent to freeze solid') presents a 'spatial' view of Menka's poetry, right from her earliest poems in the 1980s to her recent ones written by 2018. This volume is actually her 'Collected Works', and it is a pleasure to meet the poems, one has read in the past four decades, like old friends. For a person like me, instead of taking an academic look at the 'Growth of Menka Shivdasani as a poet or the 'Evolution of the poetic essence in Menka Shivdasani' (probable academic dissertations and research papers by scholars), it is picking up some of my favourite poems from her work and ideas that is more refreshing.

Thus, I have always been fascinated by the subliminal seriousness that marks her poetry, which makes her focus on issues like domesticity and chores, and then, makes you realise that she is taking about the analogous lives men and women live. So, you have this early poem "How to Kill a Rat" which bears this calm lightness of touch—searching for the rat, bemoaning the damage that it has done to her sofa, trying out ways of putting it to sleep—on the surface—and

then it explodes into metaphysical angst in its closing lines "but what does it take/ to live instead/ with the enemy/ beneath your skin." This juxtaposition of the serious with the trivial, rather the exploration of the grey areas that lie between the trivial and the serious, and the sharp, stark, concrete images she crafts are the major strength of her poetry. Consider this from the only long poem in the collection "Off Track": "I gorged on Belgian chocolate./ The lady at the counter grinned./ tied the ribbon round me./ The Grand Place stretched out/ into the sky, medieval castle/ made of lace and lust./ and we the worms/ crawling from the woodwork." It is the quiet crescendo of the horrors implicit in lines like these that grips the reader.

Moving on, the presence of all God's creatures—rats, cockroaches, snakes, worms, fish, bees, earthworms, cats, panthers, rabbits—as intruders, perhaps, but more often as victims of the human world, links it with intensity to Death, which is an overriding theme in almost all the poems. The rat is killed, the fish "We grab them, stab them, sink our lines./ We are still good, for we chant god's name/ as we serve death on our dining tables/ and the taste on our tongues is great" ("What We Do to our Gods"), or, after a session of pest control, "I stood there unmoving,/ like a can of pesticide,/ all of it inside me." It is almost as if the onus for the destruction of the fine balance in nature lies with the atavistic murderous nature of the human world. The intensity, the violence, the tragedy that is unleashed by the human race is unredeemed, perhaps unredeemable.

There are poems about insanity. 'Madness is when a person is herself, not what the world wants her to be,' she quotes in "The Price of Potatoes". Once again, the dividing line between the sane and the insane is blurred in a prose poem like "Diary of a Mad Housewife". The mask in "Paper Smiles", "which does not fall," the woman who "paid the bill and left" after her man pontificates about how he cannot marry her because of his 'responsibilities',—"she would scream if she had a voice,/ but hypocrisy taught her/ to make endless cups

of coffee instead.” (Today’s Fairy Tale),—all mark characters who are on the edge, and whose descent into the depths of insanity is hinted at. And then there is this stark poem, “Schizoid” in which she talks about the breaking point: “my limb grew as taut as a flute/ but no music came...”, “It no longer mattered that the branches/ talked to me, standing like lost pedestrians/ near busy intersections. It did not matter/ for advertisements went deep beneath my skin./ I ripped the canvas, tore it off my face.../ *The corpses make small talk in my veins*” (italics mine). The surreal leap in the last line, as also in “A bomb explodes inside my womb,/ but I survive till Sunday comes again,/ time for Sita to creep/ back through the wall.” (“Ramayan Revisited” in which she takes on the ‘flat’ depiction of Sita in the Ramanand Sagar TV series of the 1980s), also point to the in-betweenness, the fluidity, that is another important focus in her poetry—whether she is talking about relationships, journeys, destinations, life, death or the mind that absorbs all these.

“A Crow Finds its Feet” and “An Introduction” frame the poems in a kind of retrospection and unity. Between ‘I can hear the wolves howling, sometimes in packs; the coyote baying at the moon. I cannot invite them in, because like poems, they belong to the wild, and will tear me apart if they come home’ and “You’re at peace with the world and with your head, and even with the crow that has made its home on your face. You touch its wings occasionally and remind yourself the nest isn’t empty yet” lies a whole ocean of disturbed, distraught emotions. The power of this kind of poetry, which is frazil—turbulent, resistant, stubborn, creative, solid and yet fluid—leaves one gasping and has an other-worldly feel, keeping you grounded on *terra firma*, at the same time, because of its tangible, raw almost domestic, mundane realities.

## SPARROW CONGRATULATES THE PADMA AWARDEES

WE ARE SO HAPPY THAT MADURAI CHINNA PILLAI, DR ROHINI GODBOLE AND NARTHAKI NATARAJ ARE PART OF THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF SPARROW. DR ROHINI GODBOLE IS ALSO PART OF THE SPARROW PUBLICATION *THE BALANCING ACT* & NARTHAKI NATARAJ IS ALSO PART OF THE FILM *DEGHAM* PRODUCED BY SPARROW.



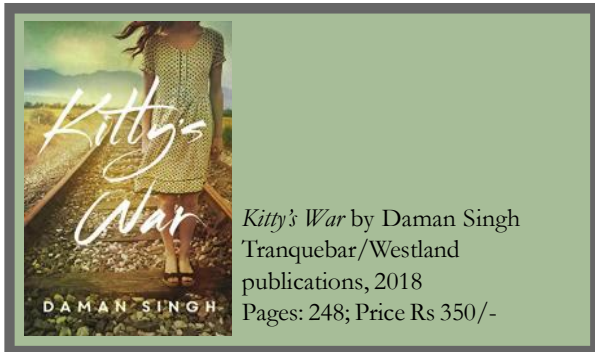
**Dr Rohini Godbole**  
(Science & Engineering-Nuclear)



**Narthaki Nataraj (Dancer)**



**Madurai Chinna Pillai**  
(Social Work-Microfinance)



*Kitty's War* by Daman Singh  
Tranquebar/Westland  
publications, 2018  
Pages: 248; Price Rs 350/-

## Pipli COMES ALIVE IN THIS QUAINT, HISTORICAL NOVEL

-Anvita Budharaja

The Guardian wrote of Christopher Isherwood's World War II novel, *Goodbye to Berlin* that "Reading this novel is much like overhearing anecdotes in a crowded bar while history knocks impatiently at the windows." A similar sense of history's presence pervades Daman Singh's recent novel *Kitty's War*, though perhaps it is not quite so impatient. Isherwood's crowded bar becomes a railway colony in Pipli in Daman's novel; a railway colony, home mostly to Anglo Indians who struggle to reconcile their divided identities, when faced with a potential Japanese invasion during the Second World War.

Daman Singh's novel tells a story through the perspectives of a host of characters in the colony. First, there is Kitty or Katherine Riddle, unsure of both her career and her heart,—who returns home to Pipli from her teaching assignment at the end of the term, to clear her head about both. Her father, Terrence Riddle, is her only family. He works for the railways, leads a quiet life, communes with nature, and lets his daughter figure things out for herself. A third perspective is that of their Ayah, who presents the other end of the economic spectrum, since Kitty's world is the rarefied world of the upper classes. Anxious for her son's well being, who he has run away and joined the war effort, she represents the tribal populations of the area. Finally, there is the new assistant station manager, nicknamed Chuckerbutty (Chakravarty)—the first native officer in the railway office,—diligent, and eager to prove himself.

As a historical novel, *Kitty's War* is remarkable. Daman demonstrates a painstaking, yet seemingly, effortless attention to detail about life in a railway colony on the Eastern line. We get a look at the power dynamics between Europeans and natives in the railway offices and the uneventful life of the families in the colony—which comprises of mainly movie nights, tennis games, and the occasional wedding. Moreover, she provides insights into the war that, for modern readers, will be both informative and surprising. Her research comes through in her representation of the realities of the refugee

migration from Rangoon as Japan closed in on India's eastern border, (Ayah's son is expected to return from Rangoon, where the war has taken him and Kitty seeks the help of Chuckerbutty to get some information about him), and the dismantling of the carefully constructed Indian railway line in order to aid Britain's war effort.

As a work of fiction, however, *Kitty's War* doesn't seem to finish what it sets out to do. Each of the major characters gets individual chapters told from their point of view, the effect of which is to make the small railway colony appear much larger than it is. Despite privileging these different points of view (that admittedly cut across class and race lines), one doesn't really come out of the book completely knowing or understanding any one of the characters. Their motivations and drives are told—rather than shown—mainly through their own reflections on their pasts, a move that ultimately comes across as a little unconvincing.

There is more than one conflict in this novel—the Japanese threat during the Second World War, the growing national movement to gain independence from the British and the internal fissures that accompanied it. But Daman also wants to emphasise the inner conflicts of these characters. It is unfortunate then that the stakes for these private battles never reach a crescendo. The title misleads a little—both in the idea that Kitty's (or any other character's) internal world is a war, or that, in fact, Kitty is the central force of the novel. The very idea of the individually named chapters belies that latter fact.

Nevertheless, that it does not create or resolve critical personal struggles is perhaps both the novel's accomplishment and undoing. The novelist offers a glimpse into life in a small, sequestered colony and her novel has a quaint charm, even though war and conflict are ever-present. Like Isherwood's novel and like most notable war novels, *Kitty's War* shows us a moment that was central to the country's history without the pomp and show that accompanies a romanticised view of History.

## POEMS

*-Kalyanee Rajan***A Gentle Divorce**

Some divorces  
Are more than  
Mere detachments  
Lawsuits and documents  
Or breaking of bonds  
Of roles, clothes and codes,  
Or dividing the assets,  
Financial, physical, emotional,  
Or drawing circuitous lines  
Around petty, everyday things,  
Or naming and renaming,  
Oneself, the house, the .Org,  
Or claiming the greater shares,  
On the bed, the dining table, the market,  
Or dissecting affections,  
Into myriad shapes and directions.

Some divorces  
Are deeper than  
The surface, the skin,  
Go beyond the specifics,  
Into redefinitions  
Without all the paperwork,  
With freedom of thoughts and Will  
Sans the spacing out bit,  
Revelations of selfhood  
Minus the breakage or the brokerage,  
Spurting creativity stale or fresh  
Through newly found old chinks,  
Stolen moments of delights  
Withholding the summons and the decrees,  
Of trances and fusions  
Outside the shots and the guns,  
Of poetry, plain and ornate, coupling and revelling, long  
and short,  
Nesting in the still blank margins of life's diary,

Concealed in broad sunlight  
As in caves of a ravenous night.

Some divorces  
Are simply gentle,  
Settled smoothly,  
Ex parte,  
Without the wigs and the collars and the big black coats,  
With far less fees and lesser clutter,  
With flesh and blood,  
Singing the eternal song  
Together,  
Within the Self.

**The Viral**

How is it you ask.  
How should I explain.  
Shall I say it is bad, which would mean that I am good.  
Or shall I say it is good, and that it infests me still.  
Let me say this.  
It heaves and dips by degrees.  
Infects me and gets infected, by turns.  
Educates me and learns a thing or two.  
It is a viral viral, an in thing,  
some detest it, and many crave for it,  
It mingles with the antibiotic to create formulations anew,  
It flows and sets interim stations as it goes.  
It makes me pour objectivity subjectively,  
Its ambitions stumble loftily,  
When it pumps great power via low grade capacitor.  
Its methods are primitive and its temperatures fluctuating.  
Massive tasks to be accomplished through one so variable,  
It lies and is true, it rises and lies,  
Its effects grey and blue, though it's only a viral,  
I'd rather it stays nice and high, eventually to subside.

Kalyanee Rajan works as an Assistant Professor in English, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Evening College, University of Delhi. She co-edits Lapis Lazuli - An International Literary Journal (LLIJ) ISSN 2249-4529, a refereed, peer-reviewed, and open access E-Journal.

## Healing

Women need to be cured...  
Urgently.  
Of an unfortunate dementia that's programmed into every  
woman  
as she comes of age-  
Man.  
Men.  
Manliness.  
Masculinity.

What nonsense!

Some few seconds, fewer minutes of erections.  
Sweats of short ecstasies.  
Odours of energies ill-spent.

And,  
Teaspoonfuls of emotions.  
Tablespoonfuls of desires.  
Frames of wide bones and weird angles.  
Bulks of muscles.  
Handfuls of beards and a few headfuls of hair.  
Here and there.

Yes.  
Mountains of 'proven' logic.  
Skyfuls of 'great' ambitions.  
Profusions of professed passions.  
Volumes of man-lined, man-timed, man-rhymed, verses.

Oh yes.  
Tomes of self-certified intellect.  
Varieties of fruitless doggedness.  
Eons of perpetual forgetfulness.  
Myriads of unilateral, half-understood commitments.  
Endless justifications and validations  
and those theorizations and propositions  
and what cosmic progressions and national integrations  
and such nuclear fissions and fusions.

And not to forget,  
a life-long selective amnesia  
that plagues Men-  
Of being born of The life-force.  
Unmanageable.  
Indefatigable.  
Inexplicably unfettered.

The one beyond.  
The black hole.  
Woman.

## The Agenda

Your nimble, thick fingers slip down my rounding, unlettered  
skin like feathers, gentle touch and go's,  
Your wide, callused palms measure my raw substance, all at  
one go, everywhere,  
Smearing my untried limbs with an ointment of red love,  
Embalming all interstices, baby bruises,  
Your pliant, famished lips brush past gently, all over, tracing  
passions primordial,  
Your luminous, piercing eyes embrace mine pouring forth  
springs of energy and warmth,  
Your rich baritone whispers to my soul mantras of healing,  
Eros and Philia interweaving,  
Your pepper hair flip gently, shifting as the body turns expertly  
at love-angles,  
Your oft-furrowed brow spreads long and straight,  
in anticipation of gratifying sensations,  
Your forever yelled-at ears, ease up to my honeyed renditions  
of your favourite love verses,  
Your lined, smooth skin glistens through the  
few rays of the audacious Sun,  
who despite every defence  
manages to peek in, finding us  
exploring brave, new worlds,  
invigorating evermore  
our age-old connection.

In small rented rooms, ardent lovers  
thus bring orders anew,  
untangle sinuous lives,  
take up arms for brief liberations,  
shift interim residences,  
unlock writer's blocks,  
rewrite charters and MOUs,  
work out cosmic puzzles,  
and belong to each other  
and not belong anymore  
to the warped sanities or  
subjective realities  
of the objective world.



# A DOYEN OF THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT IN UNDIVIDED BENGAL

-Dipankar Sengupta

I first came to know about Bimal Protiva Devi (1901-1978) in 1984, from one of my teachers for whom I have great respect—Bharati Chowdhury of St. Xavier's School, Burdwan. After completing my ICSE from St. Xavier's School, in the year 1983, I had enrolled myself as a student of Raj College, Burdwan, in the Science stream. But I have always kept in touch with my old teachers.

One Sunday morning in early 1984, Bharati Chowdhury told me that Bimal Protiva Devi, a veteran freedom fighter, who followed the anarchist path during the freedom movement, was the maternal grandmother of one of my favourite school teachers, Aparajita Saxena (nee Chatterjee), one of the founders of St. Xavier's School in Burdwan in the year 1964. Aparajita Saxena, a very kind hearted, sober, affectionate and dedicated teacher is an institution by herself. She is also one of the founders of The Holy Rock School in Burdwan. What Bharati Chowdhury told me was of great interest to me for I have always been interested in the national movement and the different personalities who were part of it. Around the same time, one of my old friends, Abhijit Chatterjee, told me that he had seen Bimal Protiva Devi conversing in fluent English with someone.

Bimal Protiva Devi was born in the year 1901 in Cuttack, the then capital of Orissa, in a Bengali Brahmin family. Her father Surendranath Mukherjee was an engineer based in Orissa. Later he went to Persia (present day Iran) as an engineer, to construct a bridge there. Her mother, Indumati Mukherjee was a homemaker. The family originally hailed from the Nadia district in undivided Bengal.

Aparajita Saxena gave me some background details about Bimal Protiva Devi, her grandmother, in 2014 or 2015. According to the description she gave me, Bimal Protiva Devi had no sisters; she had only two brothers. She was educated at home. Like many well-to-do families of those days, an English lady came as a tutor to teach her English language at home.

It is possible that the young Bimal Protiva Devi was inspired by her elder brother who was part of the freedom

movement. He was a freedom fighter who was lodged in the Andaman jail. He even did the daring act of trying to escape from Andaman jail by crossing the sea. He was again caught by the British Police. Bimal Protiva Devi's second brother Girindranath Mukherjee was a renowned Professor in Kolkata. Girindranath Mukherjee was married to Rama Tagore, the sister of Soumendranath Tagore, who were the niece and nephew of Kaviguru Rabindranath Tagore. Girindranath Mukherjee and Rama Mukherjee (nee Tagore) had a son; Aparajita Saxena used to call him 'Babui Mama'. He lived in Kolkata.

Bimal Protiva Devi got married to Dr Charu Chandra Banerjee of Kolkata, an eminent surgeon of that time. She was only 14 or 15 at that time. Dr Charu Chandra Banerjee belonged to a zamindar family of Pandooah in Hooghly district. Their residence was in Beadon Street behind the Scottish Church College in Kolkata. Archana Saxena also gave me some interesting additional details about the family. Dr Charu Chandra Banerjee's elder brother was Jyotindranath Banerjee, a famous engineer and contractor during the British period. He had built the Royal Exchange Place in Kolkata whose name has been changed to India Exchange Place and Clive Street where it stands has been renamed Netaji Subhas Road. But its façade still bears the name Royal Exchange. Jyotindranath Banerjee had won the title of 'Prince of Contractor' from the British Raj after building the Royal Exchange. Jyotindranath Banerjee also constructed the Science college, Scientist Acharya J C Bose's house and the Burdwan Power House.

Dr Charu Chandra Banerjee and Bimal Protiva Devi had three children. The eldest one was Dilip Kumar Banerjee, a barrister. He was a bachelor. The second one was Sunil Kumar Banerjee, a pilot. Sunil Kumar Banerjee had married a Finnish lady, Marjetta. They had a son and a daughter. Sunil Kumar Banerjee died years ago, when a plane was being hijacked. After the plane hijack episode, Marjetta Banerjee migrated to Finland with her children and their family has since settled down there.

The youngest child of Dr Charu Chandra Banerjee and Bimal Protiva Devi was Mamata Chatterjee who got married to Sudhangshu Sekhar Chatterjee when she was only eighteen years old. Sudhangshu Sekhar Chatterjee was studying law and practising at the same time. Their only child was my teacher Aparajita Saxena (nee Chatterjee), who was born on 10<sup>th</sup> January, 1938. Her father died around 1940 or '41 and she was brought up by her mother Mamata Chatterjee and her grandmother Bimal Protiva Devi in a place referred to as 'Damodar' on the banks of river Damodar. And it is this proximity to her grandmother in an intimate atmosphere, that inspired her to know and understand her grandmother's life and her work.

The adjacent village to Damodar river was Dihika, which was not inhabited by people. From the 1930s till the early 1960s, Bimal Protiva Devi stayed here.

Aparajita Saxena, recalled many details about her grandmother in her conversation with me. Bimal Protiva Devi at first joined the Indian National Congress in 1919 when she was still in her late teens. For some time, she was the Vice President and the Secretary of Nari Satyagraha Samithi (NSS) in Kolkata. She was an anarchist; a veteran freedom fighter who followed the path of Revolutionary Terrorism. She along with her fellow anarchists wanted to liberate India from the chains of the British Raj. She took an active part in the Swadeshi Movement in spite of facing strong objections from the family of her in-laws. Bimal Protiva Devi was arrested by the British Police and their Indian counterparts, a number of times during that period. She was imprisoned many times in various prisons of the country.

According to freedom fighter Kamala Dasgupta, in 1927 she was elected president of the Bengal wing of 'Bharat Naujawan Sabha'. This information was given to me early in 2017 by Prof. Dr Ishani Mukherjee, the great-grand daughter of Sir Asutosh Mukherjee of Calcutta University. Bhagat Singh was the All India President of the Bharat Naujawan Sabha. As a result Bimal Protiva Devi established close links with revolutionaries outside Bengal Province. Before 1928, she secretly worked whole heartedly for the freedom of the country. In 1928 in the Calcutta Session of the Indian National Congress, she openly joined Indian National Congress and started working with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. In 1930 during the National Movement, when salt laws were broken, she along with prominent Congress Women like Shanti Kabir (nee Das) and others joined hands to form and organise Nari Satyagraha Samithi; she also played an important part in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Bimal Protiva Devi and Shanti Kabir (nee Das) became joint secretaries of Nari Satyagraha Samithi at that time. For

some time she was the Vice-President and the Secretary of Nari Satyagraha Samithi in Kolkata

On 22nd June, 1930 the Nari Satyagraha Samithi of Kolkata broke Section 144 and staged a procession of freedom fighters in various parts of Kolkata. Bimal Protiva Devi was imprisoned on 26th June for participating in the procession and also in the meeting which was banned. She was lodged in jail for six months.

Around the same time, she became involved in revolutionary activities. She helped the Revolutionary Terrorists of the Chittagong Armoury Raid by selling pictures of the Revolutionaries, who were killed in this incident; she collected huge amount of money due to this and donated the money for continuing the case of the revolutionaries Chittagong Armoury Raid. On 2nd October 1931, she was arrested in connection with the Manicktala Dacoity case along with Sri Narahari Sen, Sri Kalipada Roy, Shri Dhiren Chowdhury and others. Later she was released from this case and on the very day she was again imprisoned without trial. In the same year (1931) she went to Tripura District to join the Youth Conference. There she came to know many revolutionary activists .

In various phases of the National Struggle, Bimal Protiva Devi was lodged in prisons—in Suri, in Hijli and also in Presidency Jail, for six years. In 1938 she got released from jail. In the same year (1938), she was appointed as the Secretary of "All India Committee for the Movement of the Release of Prisoners".

Around 1939, she became dissatisfied with the Indian National Congress leadership and had differences of opinion with them. As a result she left the Indian National Congress in 1939 and joined the Forward Bloc founded by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose in 1939. During that time, the British Police and their Indian counterparts seized an anti-British manifesto from her. Due to her anti British activities, she was arrested and lodged in Presidency Jail and many other jails without trial for a number of years. Eighteen years of her life were spent in prison. While she was a political prisoner (or Rajbandi) in one jail, she was put in an underground prison and the matron of the women's jail would come up every morning to take her up so that she could have some fresh air. In another jail, Bimal Protiva Devi and other women prisoners were given training in gardening and coaching classes were conducted for them inside the prison premises. She did not waste her time in the jail. While she was in jail she wrote a book on the Working Class Movement entitled *Natun Diner Alo* (A Bright New Dawn) and another book *Aguner Phulki* (The Spark of the Fire). After her release she wrote *Gotir Bihbolata* (Moving in the Wrong Direction)

In a conversation, Aparajita Saxena mentioned that Bimal Protiva Devi was in charge of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, Kolkata Unit, under Captain Lakshmi Sahgal and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and that she was trained in rifle shooting, horse riding etc. Bimal Protiva Devi was one among the many women in the British period who took leadership roles in the Working Class Movement in Bengal and was also a dedicated worker of the Progressive Women's Movement in India.

In the year 1945 after getting released from prison, Bimal Protiva Devi became active in the Leftist Trade Union Movement. She joined the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India and organised and strengthened the party under the leadership of Soumendranath Tagore. She took the responsibility of the Asansol branch of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India. An interesting story Aparajita Saxena told me was that while her grandmother was organising the Women Workers' Movement under the leadership of Soumendranath Tagore in the coalfields from Raniganj to Asansol Zone, she would dress herself in men's attire, and would ride on horseback. She was successful in organising the women workers in that area.

Many among the Left politics were her close friends. The veteran CPI(M) leader of the bygone era Comrade Robin Sen was her ardent follower. In the year 1964, she introduced Comrade Robin Sen to Raniganj's veteran anarchist, Durgadas Haldar. She was also on familiar terms with Aruna Asaf Ali for they had been lodged in the same prison and she was close to Vijayalakshmi Pandit, whom she called Viju.

During Partition when riots took place in various corners of undivided India, she saved hundreds of families in various parts of Punjab (including Lahore and Multan) and also in undivided Bengal, from being killed by the rioters. Some British Sergeants, were moved by her dedicated work and helped her in her work.

Aparajita Saxena moved to Burdwan with her husband Shanti Kumar Saxena, and both of them founded the St. Xavier School there. She became a teacher there and settled down in Burdwan. When she shifted, her mother Mamata Banerjee and her grandmother Bimal Protiva Devi came to live with her. Bimal Protiva Devi passed away in March 1978 at the age of 77.

#### References:

Apart from conversations with Aparajita Saxena and Bharati Chowdhury the following books were useful in tracing the life and work of Bimla Protiva Devi. Freedom Fighter Kamala Dasgupta's book *Swadhinata Sangrame Banglar Nari* (Bengal's Women in the Freedom Struggle) published

in 1963 and republished in 1970 by Basudhara Prakashani, Shibshankar Ghosh's "Gopbhumir Nari" (The Underground Women) and Ratanlal Dutta's "Swadhinata Andolane Bardhamaner Nariganer Bhumika" (The Role of Bardhaman Women in the Freedom Movement) in the book *Bardhaman Jelar Nari Itihaser Sandhane* (In Search of Women's History in Bardhaman District, 2011) by Sarbajit Josh published by Bardhaman History and Archeological Centre have highlighted the life and activities of Bimal Protiva Devi.

Dipankar Sengupta works as a Teacher of Social Science and Moral Education in DAV Public School, Rupnarayanpur, West Bengal. His writings have been published in various magazines and newspapers .

**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=PLTxTDSOEWjKbERIPDZZjpc6UzqVPzvZV>

#### Conversation with Vimmi Sadarangani & Puthiyamaadhavai

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSOEWjKbERIPDZZjpc6UzqVPzvZV>

#### Conversation with Jhelum Paranjape

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSOEWjKbERIPDZZjpc6UzqVPzvZV>

#### Conversation with Purvadhanashree & Ranjana Dave

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySGI55ZhsBEdaH0dnnf8q0zc>

#### Conversation with Sumathi Murthy

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySGI55ZhsBEdaH0dnnf8q0zc>

#### 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>

# SPARROW LITERARY AWARD 2018

The SPARROW panel of judges (N Sukumaran, Kannan Sundaram and Ambai) decided to take up contribution to literature in general this year for consideration for the SPARROW-R THYAGARAJAN Literary Award 2018. Two awards are normally given for Tamil writers and one for a non-Tamil writer. This year for the first time we decided unanimously to award three Tamil writers and two non-Tamil writers. In Tamil, two awards for acknowledging and honouring writers who have been in the field for many years and one award for a younger writer for literary work done in the recent past. The SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary Award 2018 for Tamil was given to S Thenmozhi for her excellent contribution to fiction and poetry and non-fictional work, Ba Venkatesan for the wonderful literary work he has done for the past many years both in terms of fiction and poetry and S Senthilkumar for the promising work he has done in fiction and poetry. This year the non-Tamil writer award was shared by two writers: Varsha Adalja, a feminist novelist and playwright, who won the 1995 Sahitya Akademi Award for Gujarati language for her novel *Anasar* (An Indication), who is also a dramatist who has acted and written several stage plays, screenplays and radio plays and Aruna Dhere, a Marathi writer, who has written over forty books in different genres including personal essays, short stories, novels, poems, travelogues, children's stories, bhakti literature, folk literature and social history.

Former Trustee of SPARROW, Dr Roshan Shahani, gave away the award and spoke eloquently about her association with SPARROW and SPARROW's work and also about how Indian language literature needs to be taught and studied as diligently as English literature is, for India is a land of diverse languages and diverse cultures all of which contribute to what makes India.

The award function is normally an informal event which we organise in collaboration with RCWS (Research Centre for Women's Studies). Our association with RCWS is a long one and it is always a pleasure to work with Dr Putul Sathe who is generous with her time for this event. This is an annual event when everyone who is a friend of SPARROW comes to support and cheer us up. This year too our regular friends Dr Divya Pandey (former trustee and friend in whose love

and support we thrive), Dr Chhaya Datar, Dr Kunjalata Shah and writers Pudhiya Madhavi, Urmila Pawar and of course, our own Vishnu Mathur were there. It was a pleasure to have Ila Arab Mehta, the legendary Gujarati writer, with us and she came quietly as her sister Varsha Adalja's guest.

Apart from the usual Mumbai features like traffic jams this time there was a little bit more of problems in coordination for the Tamil writers had decided to stay in different places. Ba Venkatesan was staying with his daughter-in-law's family, S Senthilkumar was staying in the SNDT University Women's Hostel guest room and S Thenmozhi came with her extended family and was put up at the SRP Guest house at Goregaon East, arranged by the enterprising and ever helpful Anuradha Krishnaswamy in her official capacity.

S Senthilkumar came the previous evening and looked a bit disconcerted for he was the only one in the entire third floor of the hostel. He said that 24 days in a month he stays away from his family in Thiruvapur in a room amidst books as editor of a journal and is with his family only six days in a month. He was hoping his Mumbai trip would mean being with other writers and here he was all alone once again! But he said staying in a girls' hostel and eating at the mess hall with them will be a new experience and he welcomed it. We cheered him up with some tea and chakli and left him in his room with some more snacks to munch and sonpadi to keep him happy.

Ba Venkatesan kept his promise of wearing the maroon shirt he had worn in the photograph which we all liked but he did not know about the Mumbai traffic and came half an hour late with his wife, daughter-in-law and grandson. Although he had told us that he did not want his age mentioned we did mention it in the PPT we did on each writer but he took it sportingly and did not complain for we had forgiven him for coming late.

S Thenmozhi's problem was different. She arrived at 6 a.m on the morning of the event and had told us there was no need to receive her at Dadar station. We assumed someone else would receive her. But when she rang us up at 6 a.m and said that no one had come to receive her I panicked for she did not know Hindi and she was with a family of eight people. But the ever efficient Pooja Pandey handled it with her

characteristic calmness (after all, she is the cool one who stood outside the Operation Room before going in for a Caesarean section to tell me the Annual Report was complete and that she had mailed it to me) and told them to take cabs and she instructed the drivers over the phone on what route to take. We wondered how they would make it in the evening for the SRP Guest House is in the interior area and it is difficult to book cabs to come inside the campus. Aarti Pandey and Sayali Balekar who can practically deal with all such hurdles brought the family of eight in autos and a taxi just a little before 5 p.m.

Fortunately Varsha Adalja and Aruna Dhere are both familiar with Mumbai and Mumbai traffic and came on time.

The evening's programme was compeered by Maitreyi Yajnik who was doing it for us for the first time but she did a thorough job of it and managed to pronounce all the Tamil names as if she knew Tamil! The acceptance speeches were inspiring and dealt with many different aspects of literature. S Thenmozhi spoke about how and why she writes and about women writers, especially Dalit women writers, evolving a language of their own and why it was important to make this a universal language. Ba Venkaetasan was of the opinion that awards alone would not do and that organisations like SPARROW must also translate the writers they award. It is a tall order considering he writes novels of thousand pages but well taken. S Senthilkumar's acceptance speech was a

story by itself. He spoke about Bodinayakkanur passenger train that brought cardamom bags to Mumbai at one time and gave a picturesque description of his town and its gods and how humans become gods and become part of his stories. Aruna Dhere spoke about her writing and what it means to her and why it is important to write if one wants to change the society and also keep what is precious in our culture. Varsha Adalja spoke just two lines accepting the award as she was keen to give more time for the evening's music performance.

The evening's programme ended with Mandar Katti enthraling us with Puriya Kalyan played on his sitar. He was ably accompanied on the tabla by young Shreeraj Tamhankar. Sharmila Sontakke had organised the evening's music programme. Manik Sonkar saw to the projection arrangements and also took the responsibility of receiving and dropping S Senthilkumar at the airport. Asmita Deshpande took charge of exhibiting the books of the authors and SPARROW and other similar arrangements. Priya D'souza was, as always, the official photographer of the event. Pradeep Surve saw to it that we got enough cups of tea and all of us ate enough and more of the snacks.

As we gathered later to have tea and snacks we shared stories and joked and laughed and took photographs. Thus ended another wonderful Literary Award event.



L to R: Aruna Dhere, S Thenmozhi, Dr Divya Pandey, Dr Roshan Shahani, Ba Venkatesan, S Senthilkumar, Dr C S Lakshmi and Varsha Adalja



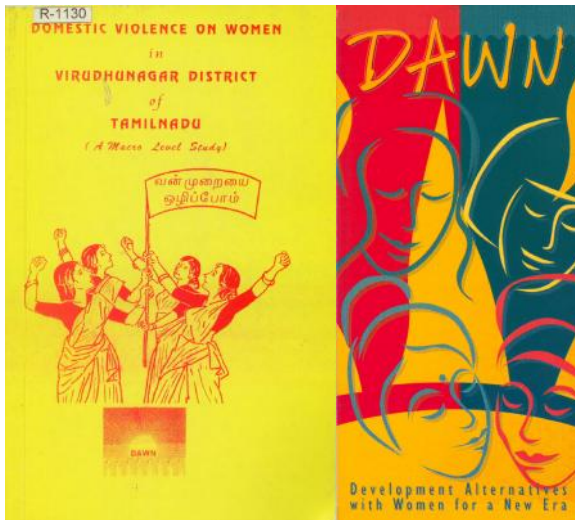
Awardees with audience



Mandar Katti and Shreeraj Tamhankar performing



SPARROW Team



## INTERVIEW with G SHANTA ORGANISATION : DAWN

### GROWING UP IN A VILLAGE

**G Shanta (GS):** I am the last child in my family. I can't recollect my mother ever scolding me or beating me. In the same way, even in those days—only now words like 'feminist' have become popular. But now, when I think of the life I led in those days, my mother was a feminist par excellence. Her philosophy and principles were feminist based. Now when I think of all that, I feel proud and get goose-pimples. She never regretted being born a woman. She had a majestic personality. I grew up in a village, and my mother was very famous among those who lived there. She used to be an advisor to many. In a family ridden with disputes, both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law would come to her with their grievances and seek her advice. I would feel confused. But my mother would say [that] if they give vent to their anger and emotion, their problem would get solved without much ado. And she would not divulge what the mother-in-law or daughter-in-law said to her, to the other party.

**Dr CS Lakshmi (CSL):** What is the name of the village?

**GS:** It is a village called Kallupatti in Madurai district. Kallupatti Gandhi Niketan, most people would know about Kallupatti but not Gandhi Niketan. My village Vandadi is about 14 Kms away from Kallupatti. It is a small village. Even now, the school there has classes only up to 8th Standard. Though I was brought up in such a rural environment, I was familiar with both rural and urban settings because of our family environment; because I have three elder brothers and one elder sister. Since all my brothers were settled in Chennai, I was familiar with the busy life of Chennai and the basic unhurried lifestyle of a village. I would say it was a big

opportunity. It proved beneficial for me to figure out which were the things acceptable in a village and which were considered normal in a city. Because in a village, caste still had its stranglehold. It was so even in our village. As we enter our village, there would be the street where the leather workers live—Chakkiliar Theru, then Pallar Theru—another low caste street, then Nadar Theru—meant for upper castes. From the layout of the roads, you can make out the caste hierarchy. The people there won't mingle with another caste or sub-caste. But even then, in our village there were castes like Pallu, Paduvu... and Pallu was some 18 castes. It was altogether a multi-caste village. Even when I was young, I remember certain details that most who belonged to the upper caste will not partake of any food in the houses of the lower castes. But my mother once told me, in her ancestors' time, a little child accidentally entered the house of a lower caste and they gave it something to eat. When the others came to know of it, they had the child killed. Caste had raised its ugly ferocious head, one could say. Even now conditions have not changed....

### A BAD MARRIAGE AND THEREAFTER

And then in my personal life, an accident that occurred in the name of marriage paved the way for my setting up women's organisations like this... Because on June 8th, 1982, a ritual took place in my life in the name of marriage. But after the mangalsutra was tied around my neck, I realised that dowry was a very cruel [system] that could have a big impact on a girl's life, even though I was very clear and emphatic about dowry at that time. I had decided that I would never marry a person who demanded a dowry. I was also very choosy. I rejected many who came to see me as a

prospective bride. I would say 'I will not marry this person, nor that one.' My mother began to panic, [afraid] that she would never be able to get me married to anyone. And then a man came. He had studied Tamil literature. I was passionate about Tamil. Even when I was young, they used to have a section to be learnt by heart. I would have learnt everything in it by heart.... I would learn all the poems by heart. Even my teachers would wonder 'Why is it that you have this strong love for Tamil?' And, when I found out that he was doing his PhD in Tamil literature, talks between our families about our marriage were being finalised. And I had already spoken to him before marriage. At that time, I was a senior instructor teaching transcendental meditation. And soon after our marriage ceremony was over, after the auspicious hour was over, I heard about this. And when I saw my strong-willed mother, who was not easily swayed by any crises, shedding tears, it left an indelible mark on my mind. The groom's mother had told my mother that the house which my parents were gifting to me, until its registration was over, our first night could not be performed. This is what I was told. And my mother had wept then. It flashed in my mind that the price I would have to pay to surrender my body to my husband was this house. So I found that it was not a girl but her body that was being sold. I was furious, filled with rage and repugnance. And after that, even though there was no marital relationship that materialised out of this ceremony, it took me almost four years to get a divorce legally. And the talk among all my relatives was 'That girl's life has been ruined.' And when I heard that this is what they were talking about me, I mused about the fate of all those middle-class girls like me whose dreams had been shattered. And I decided I should establish an organisation, an institution for girls who were in the same boat. So you can say that this incident was like a catalyst, which turned out to be the foundation for my present way of living....

### SETTING UP DAWN

**CSL: And this NGO you joined in Chennai, what was its name?**

**GS:** CDRA. Then they change CDRA into ICRA and shifted it to Bangalore. I worked for a few months in Chennai. It was there that I learnt about registering a society or a Trust.

**CSL: What is the expansion of CDRA?**

**GS:** Centre of Development, Research and Action.

**CSL: And ICRA?**

**GS:** Institute for Cultural Research and Action. ICRA.

**CSL: ICRA, okay.**

**GS:** At that time, I had a lot of opportunities to give training to many NGOs and to interact with many companies and other NGOs to provide an opening for employment to NGOs I was training. But I observed one thing. I have seen that in many NGOs, programmes for women have only secondary importance. They are not given priority. Those who were at the head of these NGOs were all men. Therefore, in some concerns, the wives of these men will be put in charge of overseeing women's programmes or they will be coordinators. Nobody as a director. And when I asked questions about such an anomaly to my friends [the answer seemed to be that] in this patriarchal society where male domination is the norm rather than the exception, women cannot function or manage on their own. This is what they felt. But I took it up as a challenge. Therefore an organisation wholly managed by women—you see, there are only a few things that a woman can do [according to them]. For example, can a woman be employed as a driver? And as an office boy? Because such a person will be sent on errands everywhere. Will women be able to do it? That is why, they said, women are not employable in such posts. Then itself I decided—the organisation I would establish would have only women manning all posts and it would be an organisation that would prove that women could discharge duties that have been men's prerogative. That is why I established DAWN, an All-Women's Organisation in Chennai. For that matter, we registered it in 1987 under the Societies Registration Act. It was situated in Saidapettai in Chennai. Because I had spent a major part of my life in Chennai studying in SIET, I felt more or less at home in Chennai.

Even so, then I could say it was an accident that brought me to Virudhunagar. I don't remember the year nor the month. But in a village called Meenapatti near Sivakasi, we read that there was a big accident in a factory manufacturing crackers. At that time we had a woman working in DAWN, who belonged to Sivakasi. She said, "Whatever appears in these newspapers is not true. Many young girls would have died. Their names would never be in the list, in the register. Some came here to investigate. We went and met the collector. It was then that we knew that the matchbox industry and the cracker industry were being conducted on a large scale. The land was drought prone. The sun bore down all the year. We thought they were exploiting these climatic factors. And when we went to the schools, the names of many girls would be in their registers. But they were not to be found in the

schools. They would be sitting at home, filling matchboxes with matchsticks. Or they would be stuffing tubes of crackers. It would be filled with sulphurous material. But as many as 70% of the girls never went to school, though they had the opportunity. I felt this was a gender issue. That's when we realised that a woman's status does not change for the better even if she earns handsomely. The financial status of a woman does not play an important role in determining her value or her status. Mainly because of that we decided to start our work in Virudhunagar district, and began our work in the villages. Even then, many people tried to discourage us. They said, "Don't be so idealistic. You come from big cities and try to impose the way of living and thinking in the villages. You cannot change things overnight. They will not accept your way of dressing." I retorted, "I grew up in a village and I know what living in a village is. I know the basic qualities, feelings and emotions of a village. Yes, I did leave for Chennai, because I got an opportunity to study there. But I feel I will be able to cope because I am familiar with the urban and rural lifestyles and I am determined to help women who are being denied any opportunity to improve their living standards." And we began our job.

**CSL: How did the name DAWN come about?**

**GS:** Even that was influenced by Maharishi (Mahesh Yogi). In all his cassettes, video cassettes, Maharishi would begin [his] speech with DAWN, Age of enlightenment.... DAWN could be looked upon as sunrise or to dispel the darkness as there are many patches of darkness in a woman's life. It is brightness. It could come from any corner. But women in need, we felt, was very important. Because we felt that though the facilities and the employment opportunities had increased for women, one could not say that she was truly liberated. There were some invisible chains around her. So wherever there were needs for women to be fulfilled, we felt we should have Development Action for them. And when we tried to match these two, the name came out almost as a natural corollary. Development Action for Women in Need, therefore DAWN. And when I looked at the name, I was filled with joy. Many would tell me, what is in a name after all? But I would say, there is a lot in this name. Each name has a background. Therefore ...

**CSL: When did you start this?**

**GS:** It was established in Chennai in 1987 and we had it registered.

**CSL: Was your mother alive then?**

**GS:** She was. My mother was alive, yes. But my mother was not cast in the same mould as other mothers. She was different and I have seen that. She had an excessive trust in my ability.... I had studied it thoroughly, the plus and minus points. But she would lament, "You keep changing jobs. You were getting a good salary there. If you persist in behaving like this, you might remain unemployed for a long period of time." But as if regretting all that she said, "But, of course, you know about all this, you would have thought of the repercussions. You are highly educated and well-read. You have travelled a lot. You have gone to a distant place for your training. I am not in the same class, I have not read much. I was brought up in the hinterland, in a small village. But as a mother, I should caution you, shouldn't I?" And again she would also say, "If we keep working for financial security, we cannot bring about any change," and she would support me. At times I could sit with her and talk about so many personal, private matters; DAWN's Activities

And we used to ride on cycles to go to the villages and since only women worked in our organisation, when we would approach women, the men would come forward and say, "My wife knows nothing. You tell us what you are going to do. I would explain it to her." And if we ask, "Are you educated?" the men would say "No." And we would retort, "Your wife is also uneducated." They would still insist, "She knows only cooking and nothing else." So we decided to use a subterfuge to counter this, which would bring us closer to the women. So we thought of an entry programme. We thought of starting a Balwadi, Play School in the villages. We began that in 10 villages. So the women would come there to leave their children. And when we began talking to them about the problems of their children, the men began to leave automatically. These are all women's concern. "You ask them about all that." Then we began telling the women: "This child is restless. That child keeps beating other children. There may be some psychological reasons for this." And if we start talking like this, men would beat a hasty retreat because they did not seem to have any interest in all this. Realising that not much money would come their way, they would say, "Talk to our wives." And so after that we closed these schools gradually. Because we did not consider running them to be our business.

**CSL: Because you looked upon it only as an entry.**

**GS:** We used it only as an entry. Therefore we did not return to it. But because of our interaction with women, there were some benefits arising out of it. It was this way. As time went on, the women shared with us not only their personal

problems but also family problems. Since a family is a separate institution, anything connected with it should not be discussed with others. All such thoughts and ideas were only a myth as we came to know later. They would share even intimate details about sexual intercourse, how violent their husbands would be. Even then they would say, "You are not married. So you do not know about all this." So, hesitantly they would start, "I want to talk about it." That way, the ice was broken. Later, two women committed suicide in the village in which we worked. Their complaint: "My husband picks up a fight with me all day for no rhyme or reason." And if they go to their parents' home, they are not allowed to stay there for long. They are advised, "You have to listen to what he says and try to adjust." Then there was a girl. We had a tailoring centre in that village. It was actually just a ruse to get the women to meet there. Because if they say they are going to learn tailoring, they will send them. Not if we talk about gender. And one girl who was coming there, her mother complained that she was not willing to live with her husband. She said, "Please advise her." Only after we spoke to her did we know that she suffered unbearable pain during intercourse. But if she told him, he would say, "You are only acting. Don't pretend." She said he was not willing to listen to her. I had a friend who was a gynaecologist. I took this girl there. And after examination, she said the girl's vagina was full of sores. And the girl said, "My mother is not allowing me to talk about all this. She says nobody talks about these things." And to rub it in, the girl was married to her own maternal uncle. And after I got the girl treated and cured, the girl began to enjoy her marital life. Then her mother came and told me, "See, you have done what I couldn't do. I never knew that this would be the problem."...

**CSL: When I hear you talking, I feel you formulate your programmes according to the needs of the women; whatever they need. That is, you do not make a programme and take it to them.**

**GS:** No, we don't.

**CSL: After that you also travelled to many places and spoke to many women.**

**GS:** Yes. Because when we established our Women's Association in the villages, in all reports, this is how I would begin the first paragraph. 'Since you have to look at women's problems with a separate, a woman's perspective,' I would start my preamble with this statement that only if one looks at women's problems in this way, only then will our actions strengthen women. Then I would talk about other things. I

would look upon Women's Association as the instant cure for making women strong. I would look at them from both angles. Why our social, cultural and political environments emasculate women. Even some of the plans formulated by the Government are like that. They make the role of women more burdensome. But women, if they are alone, are timid. But when there are four of them, they start talking boldly. If one woman is teased in the bus, she is scared. But if there are four of them, they turn on the mischief-makers. That is why I felt the model of an association was the best.

**CSL: Now how many associations are there, formed by you?**

**GS:** There are more or less 200 of them.

**CSL: When you were talking, you said your associations are working in 60 villages. In 60 villages there are 200 associations, isn't it?**

**GS:** Yes, when we began working on certain projects, we looked upon them as a pilot project. Because many people cautioned us, saying since it was an all-women organisation, it will arouse the suspicion of men. Moreover, some men are of the opinion that women would start quarrelling and such associations weaken a man's position. Therefore we selected five villages and worked for 6 months. It was only after that did we gain confidence. We understood that men were only giving voice to their inner fears. Even now our aim is not to work in many villages and run many associations. If that was our target, if we had kept a target of 50 associations per year, we would have achieved so much. But it is not so. Because a women's association is a woman's space, a grassroots level organisation where women can give vent to their grievances, find solutions for them and try to lend a shoulder to another woman, that's all. Our concept is that by being a member of these associations, women would be able to solve their problems. That is why we are determined not to have a profusion of women's organisations, because our time and energy will be spent on running and managing them....

**GS:** ...ASW (Action for Solidarity of the World) were the ones who provided our first funding. Even though it was a very small amount, I still considered them to be the best funding agency. Because even when we discussed women's issues through the perspective of a woman, they were willing to approve of them....

But we did a few things. Like taking loan from the bank and

buying land. What we earned from the land went towards repaying the loan. Now DAWN has nearly 20 acres of land. Women are doing farm work there. But what they earn from this is taken away by their husbands. Women have no control over that. So even these, we enforced a model. When we talk of women as farmers, what everyone visualises is a man ploughing the land or driving the tractor. Nobody thinks that a woman can also be a part of that. When they talk of a farmer, they underline a female farmer. Even recently, a woman was able to raise a sizeable harvest in Tirunelveli. But when they talk about her achievement, they say 'a woman farmer.' Why? A farmer can be a woman or a man.

**CSL: It is a common term, isn't it?**

**GS:** It is a common term. But it is never put into practice, into common usage. So they qualify someone as a female writer. In the same way, when these women say, "We do farming too," they say, "Oh, you know all that job? You know about farming also, is it?" Now our income out of that has become our corpus fund. So the paddy we reaped and other grains we sold and managed to fund our activities here. We managed to do that...

**A SPACE FOR WOMEN**

**GS:** In many families, when there is a fallout between husband and wife, women go to their parental home. But if that percentage increases beyond a limit, the parents start resending it. "Try to manage and live there. You have been married only for two years. So don't come here." Then we began telling them through our associations that "You can come and live unconditionally if you are not able to get along with your husbands."

**CSL: You have got something like a Home.**

**GS:** Yes. And when [we] welcome women here there was opposition from the men working in these villages. They said, "You are supporting them, encouraging them to separate from us." We said, "No, it is never like that." And then the husbands found out that they could not manage without their wives. They would come and ask them to return. Then we would lay down conditions, "You should not beat them. You should hand over all your salary." Then we would tell them, "You give your consent to our conditions in writing and then you can take away your wives." When we set up a meeting at the house and talk to them, they would say—they still can't give up their ego!—they would say, "My house is empty without her." Then if we ask, "Then why don't you come

and take her back?" They will retort, "She went on her own. Head-strong woman, let her come if she wants." Then we should have to soft cushion our stand. We will cajole them, "You should not think like that. She is not an outsider. She is after all your wife." We will try to placate him and send her back. But those conditions that we laid down gave many women security. Because where they believed that there was no one to question them, the situation changed and the women got the upper hand. They threatened to go back to DAWN, if the men did not mend their ways. The situation changed. Women from almost 200 to 300 families would come to us with their problems. They would be with us for 10 to 15 days. But these small warnings, "Please give it in writing" and so on—worked. But if they go back to their old ways, we will pretend to browbeat them, "Remember you have given it [in] writing. We can take action against you." But all these have borne profit. Now there is a change in the behaviour of both men and women. So we have our gender training for women—young women who are not married—I will [show] you those articles on gender-training. Sreeji Publications have published them, calling them Gender Training in the Guise of Tailoring Programme!...

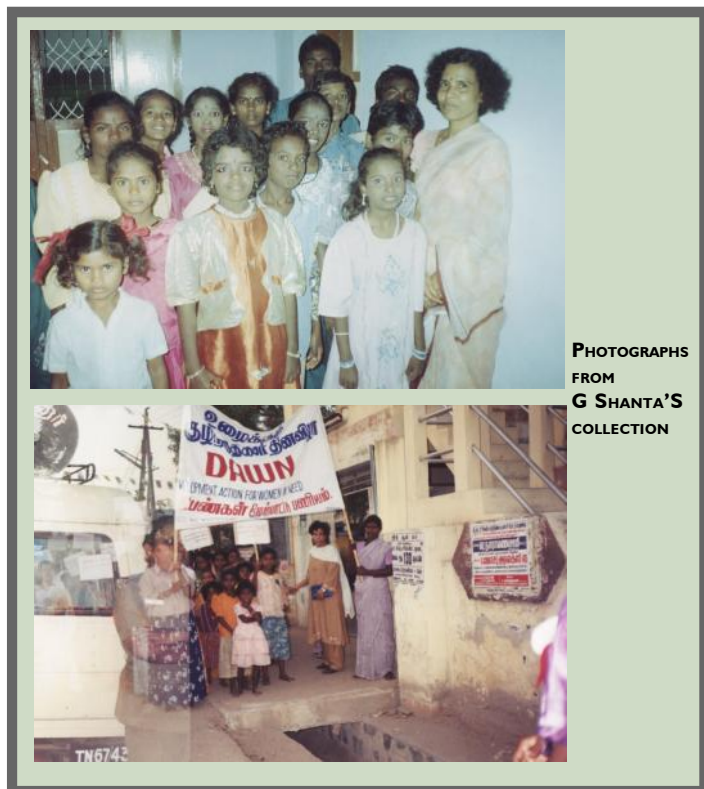
**CSL: Which film did you say, you showed them often?**

**GS:** *Chinna Thambi*. They said the film was very popular among women. We got a cassette of the film and showed it to the girls. There is a widow, portrayed by Manorama. To humiliate her, they will cover her with coloured sari, put bindi on her forehead. That means, [she is a wayward woman]. "If a woman wears a bindi, a widow wears a bindi, is it something shameful?" [we would ask them]. Only after asking questions like this did they say, "See Madam, all these days we thought on those lines!" And in that film, the girl loves a man, who is a servant in her house. He would have his food on a plantain leaf and throw it in the garbage bin. Then she would come, pick up the leaf from the garbage bin and eat from that, secretly. "Does it mean only if one eats from the soiled plate of one's lover, it is love? Eating out of a soiled leaf?" Once we began asking question like this [they began to think]. "But do they show in any film a man eating out of the soiled leaf from which his wife has eaten? They say women do it because they love their husbands. But it is not love but repression" [we explained to them]. And young girls immediately catch on to talks like this. Like camphor burning as soon as it is lit. But we also know that the environment in DAWN is vastly different from the environment prevalent at home. To help them cope with these two opposite environments we send them home every two weeks even if they are not willing. And then they will tell

us the problems they faced in these four days. They would tell us, "We were not aware of all this before. When we were called *Pottai Kazhudai* (Jenny-ass, a derogatory term, a prejudice reserved for women), we would feel ashamed [but would not react]. This time we asked them the equivalent for *Pottai Kazhudai* in English. There was a fight. We used to discuss about all this. We would tell them they should be very clear in their minds but at the same time their approach should be soft. We would advise them. So some girls even decided to remain unmarried. Then we told them it is better to marry someone whom they like than to shun marriage. If I had not given them that three months' training, the marital lives of these girls would have been very different. Even now we feel we should persist with such conversation. Because even before a girl gets married, she is brainwashed into believing that she should surrender completely to her husband. She should be submissive. And the final piece of advice is, 'Do as he says. Do not question.' But nobody advises the new groom that he should respect the feelings of his wife and not hurt her....

**CSL: Do you conduct any special campaigns here apart from the training centre?**

**GS:** Yes.



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**CSL: For example, you spoke about violence.**

**GS:** Violence against women. Even now, [there] is no law with Indian Penal Code on Domestic Violence. Even now when women go to the police station to register a complaint against their husbands who beat them, the standard reply is, "Who else will beat you if not from your husband?" There is a film song which preaches 'The hand that beats also fondles.' Since this is the situation, since there is a connection [There is need for constant dialogue].... Some of them give us new insights, because we keep in touch with them. So we formed a collective called 'Thamizhagha Penngalin Kattamaippu' (Tamil Nadu Women's Configuration) in Chennai for women who lived in the districts of Tamil Nadu. It was at the same time that DAWN was established. It was set up at the same time....

...And again, in another conference, we raised the issue of female infanticide being practised in our neighbouring village Usilampathi. We are very active members in the campaign against female infanticide. We are also very intense in our campaign against sex-selective abortions. Moreover in the campaign against child labour until last term, I was the District organiser. Now I am a member of the Working Committee....

### MOTHER WHO DRIVES THE JEEP

**CSL: You also told me [about your son]. When Sudarshan (her adopted son) was asked in school, what his parents did for a living, what did he say about you?**

**GS:** They would teach in UKG what their mothers did. Most of the children would say housewife. He knows his mother is not a housewife. But what does she do? He comes and asks me, "Amma can I say Daddy is a policeman?" "No, not a policeman, but a businessman." "Okay, what can I say what you do?" He did not understand the term Executive Director. "What does that mean, Amma? I told my teacher my mother drives a jeep. But she said women don't drive jeeps," he said. Then he said that he wanted to say she does a lot of social work. He knows that I go to villages to work. He has come with me. He would shout with us. "Educate young girls, send little girls to school!" (Laughs). So I would tell him, "You tell your teacher my mother works like this." But he would say, "How can I say that in one word? I cannot understand. Some say their mother is a teacher, some say my mother works at home. So what do I say?"

I told him, "Your mother works to bring a change in society." He said, "Ah! Now I know!"

**THE JANE AUSTIN OF SOUTH INDIA: YADDANAPUDI SULOCHANA RANI ( 2 April 1940-21 May 2018)**

She was born in a small village Kaza in the Krishna District in the old undivided Andhra. She began to write from 1965. She wrote about 70 novels 17 of which were made into films. Her name is known

throughout Andhra and she was one of the most popular Telugu writers with a large fan following. She was the queen who ruled the Telugu literary world and her journey as a writer began in Hyderabad. She got married to Narasimharao in 1957 and came to Hyderabad. It took her a while to get used to urban life. She began to read a lot.

For many when Yaddanapudi Sulochana's name is mentioned the image of the hero of her novel *Secretary*, the six-footer Rajasekar or the short-tempered heroine Roja of her *Sangamam* (Confluence) novel may come to mind but what comes to my mind is the smiling and bright face of a simple, dignified woman. She did not write just love stories. She created women characters that women aspired to be. The woman protagonist in novels till then were beautiful with all the so called womanly qualities. But her women characters more than beautiful, were unique and self-respecting and this appealed to many readers, especially women. The underlying note in all her novels was that women and men were equal and that the concept of Ardhanari is the best one. She was generally referred to as the Jane Austin of South India.

Normally when a novel gets published it can become popular and be discussed avidly depending on its style and theme, for maybe ten years or at the most twenty years. But fifty-two years after the publication of her novel *Secretary* it is still being talked about. Hundred editions of this novel have so far been published. It was made into a film which became a big hit. Sulochana Rani became so popular that it created a situation where male writers who came later felt that they should write in a woman's name for their stories to be accepted. Fifty years after the publication of *Secretary* Telugu readers organised a function to celebrate their favourite writer Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani. This is a rare honour not bestowed on all writers.

Sulochana Rani passed away in California. But the characters she created will survive in the Telugu-speaking world through several editions of her works and through films and T V serials.

—Gowri Kirubanandan

**LIBERATED THROUGH MUSIC: GEETHA BENNET (21 NOVEMBER 1950-6 AUGUST 2018)**

I knew Geetha Bennet more as a writer than as a veenai player. I knew she was the disciple and daughter of Sangita Kalanidhi Dr S Ramanathan whom we all knew as Veenai Ramanathan. She had

written a touching tribute to her father when he passed away. When her father had become the principal of Sri Satguru Sangita Vidyalaya in Madurai, Geetha went to Madurai to be with him after completing her studies in Chennai. When her father came back to Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, Geetha joined him and started playing veenai duet concerts with him in the United States. Dr Frank Bennet was a student of her father and he was a veenai player and also a percussionist. Their marriage was an unconventional one but her father gave his blessings and although not many mention her mother, in an article on her life Geetha had written that it was her mother Gowri, who people would have thought would have disapproved of Geetha's choice of her husband, who really stood by her and supported her. Everyone thought Geetha had the most perfect life, giving veenai concerts all over the world with Frank Bennet accompanying her on mridangam, strictly adhering to the tradition of her father. To bring out the emotive aspect of a song, she would sing the song while playing the veenai.

In June 2016, she wrote an article in *Anandavikatan* which came as a shock to many of us. In the article she wrote about her battle with cancer for twenty-two years in which cancer had travelled from breast to bone to oesophagus to lungs. Geetha was very good looking and very fond of makeup and was very conscious of her good looks. The chemo treatment had taken away all her hair and in the article she had written that she asked god why he had made someone so beautiful, so ugly. Throughout her battle with cancer she continued to give concerts. When she wondered why she had survived at all a casual remark by one of her students made her feel that she had survived to pass on all that she had learnt from her father to posterity. She began to upload on YouTube with clear details and explanations what her father had taught her.

Musician, Vedic scholar and writer Thiruvaiyaru Krishnan in his moving tribute to her in *India Currents* (August 12, 2018) writes about her performance in La Verne, San Diego, a year before her demise. In April 2017 IFAA (Indian Fine Arts Academy) of San Diego organised an event to honour

her father during his centenary celebrations. She was undergoing experimental medical treatments and she found it difficult to bend and move but insisted on sitting on the floor and playing the veenai the way it should be. Among many songs, she also played her father's favourite *Mokshamu Galada*, a Thyagaraja composition in Saramati Ragam where Thyagaraja asks, "In this world, is emancipation attainable for those who have not become liberated in life (with limitless knowledge, free from suffering, and enjoying eternal bliss)? O Ever Evident One! In this world, is emancipation attainable for those who are bereft of knowledge of music combined with true devotion towards you?" The song could have come from her own heart for in her article while she asks god why he has made her suffer so she also says she is alive to give others her knowledge of music.

Geetha was honoured with several awards for her music and writing in her life. But her best achievement was that she never allowed music to go away from her life. No pain, no suffering, no physical agony could take away her music, her solace in life.

—C S Lakshmi

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## INDIA'S FIRST WOMAN IAS OFFICER: ANNA RAJAM MALHOTRA (17 JULY 1927-17 SEPTEMBER 2018)



**W**hen Anna Rajam Malhotra received her Padma Bhusahn in 1989 many of us only knew her as an exemplary Indian Administrative Service officer and the first woman

in India to hold that position, who had been honoured for her services to the nation. There were also the usual details that she was born in Niranam, Aleppey, to Ottavelil O A George and Anna Paul and that she was the granddaughter of the Malayalam writer Pailo Paul. Also that she got her Bachelor's degree from Malabar Christian college in Calicut and that she got her Master's in literature from Madras University and that she passed the civil services exams in 1950 and that she joined the IAS in 1951. There was also the information that she had married her batch mate R N Malhotra. What we did not know was what had gone into all these efforts and how they had shaped her life.

Digital News Platforms The Better India and The News Minute have provided us with interesting details of Anna Rajam's life. It was not easy for Anna Rajam to opt for the Administrative Services. The Board that interviewed her when she appeared for the viva voce consisted of four ICS officers and was headed by the Chairman of UPSC, R N Banerjee himself. The Board was not too keen that she join the Administrative Services. Foreign Service and Central Services were offered to her for they were considered "more suitable for women." But Anna Rajam was determined to join the Administrative Services and chose the Madras cadre and picked up her rank. However, her appointment order had the clause, "In the event of marriage your service will be terminated." This rule soon changed but Anna Rajam's appointment order is certainly a historical document in women's history! It was not as if choosing Madras cadre ended all her problems. She had to work under Chief Minister C Rajagopalachari who, in principle, was against women entering public service. He was convinced that a woman would not be able to handle law and order situations and did not want to post her as a district sub-collector. He offered her a post in the Secretariat. But Anna knew her capabilities. She had undergone training along with others in horse riding, rifle and revolver shooting and in using magisterial powers. She considered herself as capable as her male counterparts if not more, and so she got her own way here too and got

posted as sub-collector in Hosur district. Story goes that when she visited one of the villages on horseback she was told the village women wanted to see her. Anna went to meet them and they just walked around her, looking at her and an old lady remarked, 'She looks just like one of us.' It is not just the village women but even her colleagues thought a woman who had joined the IAS would be "different" and she had to face many such gender prejudices.

Her sister Grace speaks about her sister with great warmth and love in the News Minute article. She says that there was no electricity in Hosur at that time and that Anna persuaded the Madras government to give the people electricity. Another incident Grace remembers is when Anna went out to catch a team of smugglers. She caught them but the boss was upset that she could have harmed herself in the process. So after that she was given a revolver to protect herself! Then there is the famous story of her dealing with a herd of six elephants which had entered a village in Hosur and how she solved it without shooting the animals. It was her role in the building of Nhava Sheva port in Mumbai which had impressed Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and she won the Padma Bhushan in 1989 in appreciation of the work she had done. She had also toured eight states with Indira Gandhi as an Agricultural Secretary.

Grace says that Anna fought many conventions in her life but in her own personal life she hesitated to do so. She fell in love with her batch mate R N Malhotra who was a Hindu but they thought their marriage may affect both the families as he was a Hindu. So they kept their love a secret for 25 years before getting married. But even in her death Anna broke some conventions. She did not want to be buried in a coffin but wanted to be cremated and wanted her ashes immersed "in a good place". Her wishes were fulfilled and her ashes were floated in Rameswaram.

—C S Lakshmi

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### A BRIDGE TO TWO DIFFERENT GENERATIONS: KONDAPALLI KOTESWARAMMA (5 AUGUST 1918-19 SEPTEMBER 2018)



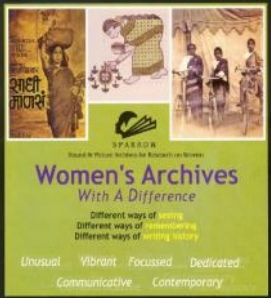
A freedom fighter, a communist activist, a feminist, a writer and a poet. Koteswaramma was born into a middle-class family in Pamarru village near Vijayawada. At the age of five she got married to her maternal uncle and

became a widow at the age of 7. Her family was a family involved in the Independence Movement. Although they had got her married at the age of 5 they sent her to school even after she became a child widow. She went to school and studied till Eighth Standard. Her family's active participation in the Freedom Movement drew her also into it. When she was just 10 she quietly removed her jewellery and placed it at the feet of Mahatma Gandhi when he visited Vijayawada. She also joined the Congress Party. At the age of 18, encouraged by Comrade Chandra Rajeswara Rao, she got married to Kondapalli Seetharamaiah, a leader of the Communist Party of India. She and Kondapalli Seetharamaiah separated from each other when she was 37. She continued her studies and completed her Matriculation. She became a hostel warden in a government polytechnic school in Kakinada and brought up her children. She began to write plays even while studying and writing became her way of expressing herself. She wrote poems, plays and short stories. She was one of the active organisers of Praja Natya Mandali. She wrote *Amma Cheppina Aidu Kadhalu* (Five Stories Mother Told, 1972) *Ashru Sameekshanam* (Review With Tears, 1991) and *Sanghamitra Kathalu* (Stories of Sanghamitra, 1991). Koteswaramma's son, was an active revolutionary. He was arrested by the police as a student and killed. Her daughter Karuna and her son-in-law both of whom were doctors died at a young age and in a tragic way. The son-in-law died young and unable to bear his death, the daughter committed suicide. Koteswaramma's responsibilities were not over. She had to bring up her grandchildren. At the age of 92 persuaded by people she wrote her autobiography *Nirjana Vaaradhi* (Unpeopled Bridge) and published it in 2012 and it won the Telugu Sahitya Akademi award.

As I was travelling to Visakappattinam to participate in her hundredth birthday celebrations all these details had filled my mind. How many storms she had faced in her life! How happy had she been and how much had she suffered? How much had she got from life and how much had she lost?

How did she manage the household? Her mother Anjamma somehow made both ends meet with some rent money and money earned from selling flowers and fruits. How did it feel to just get the clothes of her son who had gone underground and had been killed? How did she face her daughter's suicide after her son-in-law's death? How did she have the courage to go on with life? How firm she was in her views! When the Party people came and told her that her husband would like to see her she asked them, "He may want to see me. But should I not feel like seeing him?" But when her granddaughter brought him home when he was ailing she was willing to treat him as a fellow human being but not willing to renew the old relationship of being husband and wife. One day when others insisted she went up to see him which she had avoided all along. Seetharamaiah began to weep on seeing her. Koteswaramma told him there was no point crying; she had cried so much at one point that her tears had dried up. When we look at the details about her life superficially they are not difficulties and hurdles other women have not faced. But there is a great difference between watching the waves from ashore and to be in the middle of waves rising above you. And that was the difference between the Koteswaramma I had known while translating her autobiography into Tamil and the Koteswaramma I heard when she gave a speech at her hundredth birthday celebrations. When I met her at the age of 100, she was still an activist. On August 5, 2018, a huge crowd was there to celebrate her hundredth birthday. "There are no movements without women; there is no history without women," she thundered. Everyone who had gathered for the occasion called her Amamma (maternal grandmother). And on that day amidst so many young people she looked peaceful and at peace with herself. The only true tribute to her would be to create an equal society for women and to create an environment in which they would be safe and secure.

—Gowri Kirubanandan



*We often pause to recall the statement of Gloria Wekker: "Show me your archive and I will show you who is in power!" And we know that we have no other choice but to continue with resilience our task of archiving for we have to remain in power.*

## NAMED AFTER A GODDESS: RANGANAYAKI RAJAGOPALAN (3 MAY 1932 -20 SEPTEMBER 2018)



**R**anganayaki means the consort of Krishna and she is the presiding Goddess of Ranganatha Swamy temple at

Srirangam. When her parents named her Ranganayaki, they would not have realised that one day her name would be taken whenever the musical instrument veena is mentioned. Ranganayaki was a naughty child and too full of energy. Had it been the present times she would probably have been put in a play school to keep her occupied at least for a few hours. But in 1934, her parents took her to Sangeetha Kalanidhi Sambasiva Iyer who lived nearby to teach her music. He was at that time still mourning the loss of his brother Subbarama Iyer. He was not too keen on teaching anyone leave alone a mischievous two-year-old. His wife persuaded him to take in the child. And thus began her musical training in the traditional gurukula style.

I met Ranganayaki Rajagopalan in 1991 in the course of my research on musicians. She was very casual about her career in music but a little prodding brought out her extraordinary life. Here was a musician who had given her first performance at the age of six when little girls play with toys. A performance was organised in aid of the Congress building at Madras in Karaikudi. Ranganayaki initially got scared of the crowd and literally ran off but her guru bundled her up and brought her back and put her on stage and much to the surprise of everyone an exquisite performance followed. Ranganayaki got married at the age of 13 and got caught in the everyday life of a family but she did perform and was hailed as an extraordinary student of Sambasiva Iyer. She could have performed more and but music took a second place in her life after her marriage and if she minded it, she did not voice it. How much music and memories associated with it was alive in her mind I could make out reading her young student Guhan Venkatraman's tribute to her (*India Currents*, October 23, 2018) where he narrates almost everything she had told him about her musical career which were exactly the same as what she had told me. Ailing with Parkinson's she could still recall not only her musical journey but also teach him. Guhan calls her the unsung heroine. There have been many unsung heroines in the musical world but one is happy that there are still recordings of her music one can hear and that in her lifetime she got at least the recognition she deserved.

In 1970 Music Academy selected her as the best veenai player and presented her with a veenai and in 1979 she received the Kalimamani title given by the Tamilnadu government and in 1984, the Balasubaramaniam Sabha conferred the title Veena Visaradha on her. Ranganayaki passed away at the age of eighty-six but eighty-four years of it were filled with music sometimes like a river in spate and at other times like a quiet river.

—C S Lakshmi

### A Life Robbed: Kavita Mahajan (5 SEPTEMBER 1967- 27 SEP 2018)



SPARROW has interviewed many writers for its Oral History Recording Project but Kavita Mahajan was someone we took for granted and thought we could interview her anytime for she was someone close to us and

we could always talk to her later. And now Kavita is no more.

SPARROW has very good memories of Kavita. She had come to the Women Writers' Meet at Kashid in 2006 organised by SPARROW and had kept us entertained with her mimicry and also shared with us her life and experiences as a writer. Considering the ups and downs in her life, she was always full of laughter. When she spoke of the kind of readers in Marathi and how they viewed women writers, she said that when she wrote the novel *Brr* (A Cry) in 2005 which was about women sarpanches and their experiences in the Panchayati Raj, it was written in English as Bra in the print page and a man had the temerity to send her a bra by parcel. *Brr* was her first novel and but she wrote two more—*Bhinna* (Different, 2007) and *Kuhu* (Sweet Note of a Bird, 2011) which won a lot of critical acclaim. *Brr* won 12 awards and *Bhinna* won four awards. *Kuhu* was the first multi-media novel of its kind which had audio, visual clips, animation, lyrics, music over a classical base and original paintings woven into the text. Kavita also did non-fictional work (*Graffiti Wall*, 2009) and translations. She put together translations of selected stories of non-Marathi writers like Ambai and Vaidehi. Her book *Rajai* (Quilt) a translation into Marathi of 17 short stories of Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai was given the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2011. She also wrote poetry which came out as a collection, *Dhulicha Awaz* (Sound of Dust) in 2008. *Joyanache Ranga* (Joyana's Moods) is book of children's stories that

she wrote, published in 2011. For her work in children's literature she got the Shashikalatai Agashe Award for Children's Literature in 2013.

Kavita was born into an illustrious family. Her father, S D Mahajan, was the ex-secretary of Marathi Vishwakosh and the well-known painter Tryambak Vasekar was her grandfather. Details about her life do not mention her mother or grandmother but she did speak of women in her family contributing to her growth as a person. Looking at life with sensitive eyes and questioning injustice and discrimination against women came to her naturally maybe because of her background.

She could have contributed a lot to Marathi literature, had she lived. It is pity pneumonia snatched her away. Her daughter Disha would miss Kavita who was more than a mother, a friend to her.

—C S Lakshmi

### A WOMAN IN THE SHADOWS: KRISHNA RAJ KAPOOR, NEE MALHOTRA (30 DEC 1930-1 OCTOBER 2018)



It is sad that the identity of Krishna Raj Kapoor is limited to being the wife of the showman, Raj Kapoor, the mother of her sons, the sister of her three actor brothers and the overarching the matriarch of the Kapoor *khandaan*. Google her and that is all one gets. Or 'a life in pictures' in which she is posing with members of her extensive family. In a family whose name is synonymous with film, glamour and showmanship, the silence surrounding her is, to use a cliché, indeed, deafening. One wonders whether it was a conscious choice she made—to be known only in relation to the more famous people of her family; one also wonders how she must have coped with the various controversies stemming from chiefly the multiple relationships that Raj Kapoor is known to have got into. Her projection is that of an ideal wife, ideal mother, ideal matriarch who held the family together. In itself, this is no mean feat. The carefully cultivated persona 'stunning in georgette sarees, with a choker round her neck and shimmering red lipstick, she epitomised style' is all that we have to be satisfied with. If only the woman behind this epitome could have been glimpsed sometimes. Or is it that we must learn to accept the fact that there are some people who do not ever emerge from the shadows and that their 'privacy' is to be respected?

—Charanjeet Kaur

## AN UNHEARD MELODY: ANNAPURNA DEVI (1927–13 OCTOBER 2018)



So many stories have been woven around Annapurna Devi, the reputed surbahar player who was the daughter and disciple of Baba

Allauddin Khan and the first wife of Pandit Ravi Shankar who was also her father's disciple. She neither countered them nor approved of them and continued to be a private person all her life. She was born as Roshanara Khan. Her name 'Annapurna' was bestowed on her by Maharaja Brijnath Singh of the former Maihar Estate in M P Allauddin Khan was the founder of the Maihar-Senia gharana. Annapurna stopped performing but did not stop playing the surbahar or teaching music. She taught her own son Shubendra Shankar also. Subho as he was called, died young without much of a career. Annapurna bore his death and the death of her second husband and her student Rooshikumar Pandya in 2013 with great resilience.

Many well-known musicians learnt from her and they were not necessarily surbahar or sitar players. And they were also students of Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, her illustrious brother, who played the sarod, and Pandit Ravishankar. They included the sitarists Bahadur Khan, her own cousin, Debi Prasad Chatterji, Indranil Bhattacharya, Hiren Roy, Kartik Kumar, and Nikhil Banerji. Bansuri players Hariprasad Chaurasia and Nityanand Haldipur were her students. She also taught the dilruba artiste Dakshina Mohan Tagore and the violinist Satyadev Pawar. She taught her nephews, Dhyanesh Khan and Ashis Khan, sons of Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, who were sarod players and also other sarod players, Basant Kabra, and Suresh Vyas. She lived in Mumbai and was the moving spirit behind Acharya Allauddin Khan Music Circle which was a music association in the memory of her father to promote Indian classical music.

She received several awards including Padma Bhushan in 1977. In 1991, she received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. She was probably the only surbahar player who was so honoured. 1999, Visva-Bharati University gave her the Desikottama, an honorary doctorate degree. In 2004, she was made a fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. She lived a long life and from what we know of her it was music that kept her alive and active all her life despite the several tragedies in her life.

—C S Lakshmi

## BRINGING BENGALI LITERATURE TO MARATHI: MRUNALINI GADKARI (12 JAN 1949 – 27 OCT 2018)



Taking up translation as a lifetime's job is something only someone interested in the literature of two languages can do. Mrunalini Gadkari began by introducing Marathi literature to the Bengali readers translating it into English. But later in life she took up several other translating challenges. With a

Master's in Marathi and an MPhil and PhD research in which she studied Marathi poetry and compared Rabindranath Tagore's poetry with that of Borkar, she was all set to translate the best of Bengali writing into Marathi and also take up translations from English to Marathi. She began with two major books in Marathi which are still referred to, of two personalities who spent their lives in Bengal: one was Vivekananda on whom she wrote a book in Marathi and the other was Sister Nivedita. Another translation effort of hers which is often mentioned is her work in collaboration with the University of Pune's Marathi Department and World Bible Translation Centre, in which she participated in the translation of the English Bible into modern Marathi. Her translations of fictional and other works from Bengali to Marathi can be seen as her major lifetime work. Her translation of Saratchandra Chatterjee's classic *Devdas* into Marathi got her the Sahitya Akademi award in 2004. She translated Rabindranath Tagore's stories and brought out three books: *Teen Sangi* (Three Stories) in which there are three stories of Tagore: "Ravivar" (Sunday), "Akheracha Shabd" (Last Vow) and "Laboratory") *Postmaster Ani Ithar Katha* (Postmaster and Other Stories) *Kabuliwala Ani Ithar Katha* (Kabuliwala and Other Stories). She has also translated important books of Taslima Nasreen. *Amar Mayebela* as *Maja Kunwarpan* (My Childhood) *Phera* (A Wedding Rite), *Nirbachit Kalam*, *Nirbachit Kavita* (Unbroken Pen and Unbroken Poetry), *Nashta Meyer*, *Nashta Gadya* (Fallen Prose of a Fallen Girl) are some of her translations of Taslima Nasreen. She has also translated Baby Haldar's story of her life *Alo Aandhari* (From Darkness to Light). Mrunalini Gadkari died at the age of 69 but hers was a life dedicated to translation and she has left behind for us a treasure of translations to remember her by.

—C S Lakshmi

**A WOMAN WE KNEW ONLY AS KAMALA AND CHAMPA: LALAN SARANG: 26 DECEMBER 1938-9 NOVEMBER 2018**

Lalan Sarang was a legendary theatre and television producer and actor known to theatre lovers in Maharashtra as a name to be reckoned with. But in the memory of those who had seen her in Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam*

*Binder* and *Kamala* she remained Champa and Kamala. Lalan Sarang was born in Goa and did not come from a family that had a theatre background and yet she was drawn to theatre and began her career with Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha and Atre Theatres plays like *Mee Mantri Zale Tar* (If I Become A Minister), *Buva Tithe Baya* (Where There Are Gurus, There will be Women), and *Moruchi Mavshi* (Moru's Aunt) among others. She was known for her portrayal of bold characters in *Geedhade* (Vultures) and *Rath Chakra* (Chariot Wheel) but it was her playing the roles of Champa and Kamala that catapulted her into the spotlight and she became a household name. She married Kamalakar Sarang, a producer and director. She acted in films like *Samna* (Confrontation), directed by Dr Jabbar Patel and *Ha Khel Savalyancha* (Shadow Play) directed by Vasant Joglekar. She did not entirely give up theatre and in 2012, she acted in Jaywant Dalvi's play *Kalchakra* (The Wheel of Time). She has written about her theatre experiences in the book *Nataka Magil Natak* (Play Within Play), *Mee Ani Majhi Bhumika* (My Roles and I), *Jagle Jashi* (The Way I lived) and *Bahardar Kisse Ani Chatakdar Pakakruti* (Interesting Stories and Tasty Recipes). Apart from presiding over 87th Marathi Natya Sammelan held in Kankawli in 2006, she was also honoured with many awards like the Grahini Sachiv Award of Ga. Di. Madgulkar Pratishthan (2011), Kalagaurav award of Pimpri Chinchwad Kalarang Sanskrutik Sanstha (2015) and Jivan Gaurav Award (Lifetime Achievement Award) from Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Natya Paraishad (2017). Lalan Sarang died of old age after living a fruitful life of acting, writing and running Masemari (Fishing), a seafood restaurant on Tilak Road in Pune where she often sat and shared her theatre stories with customers who enjoyed talking to her about her life.

—C S Lakshmi

*Once a SPARROW decides to fly high, the sky is the limit!  
The larger and bluer the sky, the better!*

**A TRADITIONAL STORYTELLER: T R KAMALA MURTHY (4 MARCH 1932-10 DECEMBER 2018)**

Kamala was called Kamalamba as a child. She was born at Pasupathykoil, Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu, to S Ramachandra Iyer and Seethalakshmi. Raja Bhagavathar first taught her the basic music exercises and varnams in ragams such as Bhairavi, Sankarabharanam and Thodi. The first Harikatha she

learnt from him was 'Vathsala Kalyanam' with all the necessary details of the story and Kamalamba had the talent of repeating it within a few classes without any stutter. Satisfied, Bhagavathar arranged for her arangetram, the first stage presentation. She was only eight years old then. Later she also learnt from D Annaswami Bhagavathar, Embar Shri Vijaya Raghavachariyar, Venkatasubramania Sastrigal, and Swaminatha Athreyan.

From Annaswami Bhagavathar, she learnt 'Valli Kalyanam', 'Garuda Garva Haranam', 'Rukmini Kalyanam' and 'Sita Kalyanam'. Classes with Annasamy Bhagavathar helped Kamala improve her repertoire in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Hindi, Urdu and Sanskrit. Bhagavathar always insisted on learning the language to understand the songs. Embar Shri Vijayaraghavachariar showed a lot of interest in her development and helped her hone her skills.

After her arangetram at the age of 8, she made her debut as a traditional Harikatha artiste at the age of nine. When she was hardly sixteen years old, Kamalamba performed at Tiruvaiyaru Saint Thyagaraja's samadhi, attended by none other than Bangalore Nagarathamma who lived there.

Over a career spanning more than six decades, she has enthralled audiences in all the major cities of India. She has also performed abroad. Her performances are enlivened by renderings of compositions from Marathi, Telugu, Kannada, Sanskrit and Tamil. A regular broadcaster of Harikatha in India, she has also rendered Harikatha over the radio in Singapore. She was married to Shri Krishnamurthy who was serving in the military. She then came to be known as Kamala Murthy. Thanjavur Gopala Bhavathar played mridangam for her regularly. Vocal support is indispensable for Harikatha and Kamala found an ideal partner in her younger sister.

Acclaimed as one of the finest women Harikatha artistes, she has been honoured with the title of Kalaimamani by the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram in 1978. Various other institutions have also honoured her for her work. Shrimati T R Kamala Murthy received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award

in 2000. She was conferred the Tagore Fellow of Sangeet Natak Akademi for her contribution to Indian music.

Although she gave up Harikatha discourses when she got very old she continued to sing even at the ripe old age of 88 at home. Her passing away has created a big void in the Harikatha tradition. Her legacy being carried forward by her disciple and granddaughter Suchitra Balasubramanian.

—Venkata Raman G & C S Lakshmi

## THE WOMAN WHO DROVE A JEEP IN VIRUDHUNAGAR: G SHANTHA (30 OCTOBER 1956- 13 DECEMBER 13 2018)



I met Shantha in the early nineties in a conference. In her work with rural women which also involved discussing literature with them, she told me she had used one of my stories. She had already set up DAWN

(Development Action for Women in Need) in Virudhunagar by that time. Later I visited Virudhunagar to see how DAWN functioned and over the years we became very close friends. She had had a tough life and was in a long distance marriage after a failed first marriage. Yet she had the courage to adopt two children knowing she would have to bring them up as a single mother. In Virudhunagar she was known as the woman who drove the jeep. Once she came all the way to Madurai driving the jeep to pick me up to bring me to Virudhunagar. She was severely diabetic but would laugh about it. A few years ago she admitted herself in the Ayurvedic hospital in Chennai when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. I went to see her unannounced and I still remember the surprise on her face when she saw me and how she came running into my arms. She came back to Virudhunagar after she got cured. We planned to do some collaborative projects and I visited her in Virudhunagar a couple of years ago. A week or two before her demise when she rang me up and told me there was a relapse of cancer I sincerely believed that she would come out of it as just the year before she was seriously ill with some diabetic complications and had come out of it. But it was not to be. She had probably rung up to say her final goodbye but could not bring herself to do it. She merely told me to take care of the children in case she becomes seriously ill. Then came the news of her death. Shantha had succumbed to cancer. Shantha had an indomitable spirit to face adversities in life but finally her body gave in. I would

like to remember her driving her jeep nonchalantly as if she had no care in the world.

—C S Lakshmi

## YOGA FOR A HARMONIOUS LIFE: GEETA S IYENGAR (7 DECEMBER 1944 – 16 DECEMBER 2018)



The renowned Yogacharya B K S Iyengar's yoga institute in Pune, Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI), was run by his eldest daughter Geeta Iyengar and his son Prashant Iyengar after his retirement in 1984. Very early in her life, in the year 1961, when she was not even out of her teens, Geeta began to substitute for her father when he went away on international teaching tours. Since then she has been a yoga teacher who has been particularly interested in teaching yoga for women's health. She learnt yoga from her father as a child and grew up to be a yoga teacher as capable as him. When RIMYI was established in 1975 she and her brother became co-directors of the institute along with Yogacharya B K S Iyengar. The institute itself was named after her late mother Ramamani who had also learnt yoga from her husband and had taught a few women students but she was known more as the person who urged him and helped him to be the best yoga practitioner. Talking about her mother Gita says that many women who practised yoga earlier wore the traditional nine-yard sari which was cumbersome. For a long time Gita and many women like her wore blouses buttoned in front and skirts and a sari. Some women would wear pants or trousers that belonged to their husbands or brothers. In the 1960s, Gita says, the stretch pants came in with more westerners coming in. And Indian women also began to wear salwar kameez for yoga. Her father bought her two full pants from Europe but her mother felt that they still would make movements difficult. Ramamani insisted that she should wear shorts like her father and since the shorts were loose near the thighs she would insert a string through the hem and knot the string at the inner end of the thighs. Later, the string was replaced by elastic. With a mother like Ramamani, whom her brother Prashant Iyengar calls "a yogi in the truest sense of the term", to mould her and also give her the freedom to be herself and a father who was a yogacharya, Gita's life was spent in teaching yoga in India and all over the world and to live a life where the body, mind and soul which were

represented by the three floors of the institute she ran with her brother, were in complete harmony.

—C S Lakshmi

### THE NIGHTINGALE OF ASSAM: DIPALI BARTHAKUR (30 JANUARY 1941 - 21 DECEMBER 2018)



**D**ipali Barthakur was a child prodigy. She was born at Nilomani Tea Estate in eastern Assam's Sivasagar district. She was the youngest daughter of Biswanath and Aimoni Borthakur. When she was still a child she lost her father and was brought up by her maternal uncle. Through *Moina Mel*, a forum for

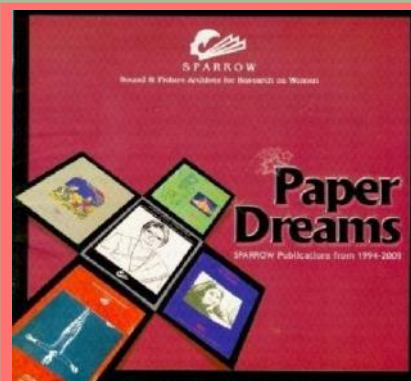
young minds, she was introduced to the world of music. Her brother Bhaben Borthakur became her guru and growing up in an ambience of music Dipali found expression in music very early in life. In 1955, when she was still in school, she sang for All India Radio. The song was *Bandhu samay pale aamaar phale ebar ahi jaba* (Friend, please come to our place when you find some time) written by the famous lyricist Rudra Baruah. At the age of 15 she earned the best singer award in a competition conducted by Sangeet Natak Akademi at Dibrugarh. When she was hardly seventeen she sang the song *Joubone Amoni Kore Chenaidhon* (Youth bothers me) for the film *Lachit Borphukan* (1959). While she was still in college she had cut her first gramophone record for HMV. In the sixties when Dipali's were a rage in Assam, she suffered a setback. She was affected by a nerve degenerating disease which took away her voice in 1968. And it happened rather dramatically in the middle of a recording she was doing. The disease not only took away her voice but it also eventually made her wheel chair-bound. She found her soul mate in 1975 in Neel Pawan Barua who was an eminent artist and painter who had graduated from Santiniketan. He had come to Assam to start the Assam Fine Arts and Crafts Society. It was not an easy life for there were financial difficulties and Dipali's musical career had come to a stop.

The two of them were often compared to Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, like Dipali, had suffered from an impairing illness. Writing about her songs (North East Now, December 21, 2018) Putali Kayastha says that her voice could take old Assamese classic songs like *Xonor kharu nelage mok biyar babe Ai...* (I don't want bangles of gold for my marriage, O mother) penned beautifully by lyricist Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi

and composed by Bhaben Borthakur to a different level altogether. She says her voice painted the picture in the minds of every listener the bride who says that more than gold jewels the blessings of her mother are more precious for her. Putali Kayastha says she infused her soul into all the songs she sang. When she sang *Agloti kola pat lore ki sore*, the song by renowned lyricist Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, the listener could imagine a weaver, as she is lost in thought of her beloved, and her superstitious belief of noshing a crow to seek blessing for her love. Even after she stopped singing, people never forgot her songs like *Khoj lahekoi dibi sakhi, khoj lahekoi dibi* (Put your steps carefully, dear friend), *Senai moi jaon dei, O bihute-no ahimgoi/tetiya gai jaam geet* (Dearest, I bid farewell for now/But I shall be back during bihu/When I will sure sing you songs).

Dipali was richly honoured for her songs. She received the Padma Shri in 1998 and the Silpi Bota award in 2010 from Government of Assam and the Aideu Handique Silpi Award in 2012 by the Sadou Asom Lekhika Somaroh Samiti. But an award she would have cherished would have been the one she got from Lata Mangeshkar known as the Nightingale of India, in 1984, in an event organised by Bhupen Hazarika. The Assamese who loved her songs bid her farewell knowing that with her departure the lines in the song where she sang 'But I shall be back during bihu when I will sure sing you a song' will never come true.

—C S Lakshmi



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## THE MID-WIFE OF PAVAGADA VILLAGE: SULAQITTI NARASAMMA (1920-25 DECEMBER 2018)



**W**e came to know about Narasamma when she received the Padma Shri in 2018. She looked like a grandmother anyone would love. But she was not just an old woman with a disarming toothless smile but an important midwife from Pavagada village, in the Tumkur district of Karnataka

state. Her mother tongue was Telugu although she lived in Karnataka. Like many women of her times she was not sent to school and at the age of 12 she was married off to Anjinappa. She had 12 children but only eight survived. In time she became an old woman with 36 grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But Narasamma's life story was not just that. From her grandmother Mariegemma who was a midwife and who delivered five of Narasamma's own babies, she learnt her midwifery skills. When she was hardly 20 she assisted her grandmother in delivering her aunt's baby. By the time she was a ripe old 90, Narasamma had helped with the delivery of more than 15,000 babies. She conducted the deliveries free of charge in this deprived region of Karnataka which had no medical facilities. The selfless service of Narasamma was honoured with many awards. She received the National Citizen's Award of India in 2012 and in 2013 she received the Kitturu Rani Chennamma Award. In 2014 she was honoured with the Karnataka Rajyotsava Award and National Citizen's Award of India and Tumkur University gave her an honorary doctorate the same year. In 2018, the Padma Shri was awarded to her and having tirelessly worked to deliver so many children of the region Narasamma decided to take a break maybe and passed away in December.

—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.**

## THE POLITICS OF LIFE: MRINAL SEN (14 MAY 1923- 30 DECEMBER 2018)



**I**t was as a doctoral student in Delhi that I first got exposed to Bengali films and Bengali filmmakers. Film Festivals were very much part of our student life and we

saw every film that was possible to see. Mrinalda's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) explored the subtle way in which a village girl makes a bureaucrat become sensitive about people around him. Almost all his films whether it was *Chorus* (1974) which was a social satire, *Mrigaya* (1976) on a tribal in the colonial times, *Oka Oori Katha* (Telugu, 1977) based on Premchand's "Kafan", *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979) where a working woman who is daughter of a household does not return from work one night, *Akaler Sandhane* (1982) on famine, *Khandhar* (1984) about a broken old fort in which a blind old woman and her daughter live, or *Padatik* (1985) about a young revolutionary and his relationship with a divorcee, *Ek Din Achanak* (1989) where a professor just leaves the house leaving no trace behind or his last film *Aamar Bhuvan* 2002 on relationships and their complexities, were efforts to understand the way women and men in families try to find meaning in their lives in a country that is coping with poverty, middle-class ambitions, development and politics and how women become the pivotal points in the politics of middle-class life. When filmmakers like Mrinal Sen pass away, one suddenly starts feeling the need to see his films and trying to find meaning in our own lives.

—C S Lakshmi

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**WORKING FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: MEERA SANYAL**  
(15 OCTOBER 1961-11 JANUARY 2019)

**M**eera, who succumbed to Cancer after a two-year tryst with it, belongs to the new generation of politicians—articulate, highly qualified, professionally successful policy framers with international exposure and

blessed with wealth, status and comfort since birth. Though today famous as the candidate of the Aam Aadmi Party who lost the Lok Sabha elections in 2014 from the South Mumbai constituency, and a vocal presence in TV debates, Meera nurtured a brilliant career in the banking sector.

As the daughter of Vice Admiral Gulab Mohanlal Hiranandani and Banu Hiranandani, she must have been keenly aware of the Partition since her family was among those who migrated from Sind to Mumbai. Her father was the naval officer who masterminded Operation Trident, the naval attack on Karachi during the 1971 Indo-Pak war.

Meera led an active professional life: CEO and Chairperson of the Royal Bank of Scotland in India, Head of Corporate Finance and later the COO for ABN AMRO in Asia, founder of the global BPO and ITES for ABN AMRO / RBS in India. As an influential banker, she mentored the MicroFinance programme, which financed over 650,000 women in rural India. Her association with PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action)—an NGO was instrumental in bringing her close to the reality of women's economic instability in India, and in her initiatives with PRADAN Meera worked for the empowerment of women through entrepreneurship. She has also been on the Board of Mumbai's Jaihind College and the Indian Liberal Group. And many more.

In her homage to Meera Sanyal (*Indian Express*, January 14, 2019), her co-worker and journalist Shloka Nath spoke warmly about their association and Meera's commitment to the cause of women: "She often said that when a woman is financially empowered, and generating income, life in her family dramatically improves. A woman invests in the right things; education for her children, more nutritious food, health and hygiene, and savings for a rainy day."

—Charanjeet Kaur

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**A GANDHIAN SCHOLAR: MARGARET CHATTERJEE**  
(13 SEPTEMBER 1925-15 JANUARY 2019)

**A** philosopher and Gandhian scholar, was an expatriate Britisher who chose to become an Indian citizen after her marriage to Prof Nipendranath Chatterjee in 1946, an English Professor. She inherited

her love for philosophy, music and religion from her parents, Edith and Norman Gantzer. She was an excellent pianist and deeply immersed in Western Music. For many years she was the music critic of *The Statesman*.

Margaret's career took off in 1953, after the death of her father, when her mother offered to take care of her three children. Having graduated in 1943 from Somerville College, Oxford, in philosophy, politics and economics, she took up doctoral research at Delhi University in 1961 and subsequently joined the Department of philosophy, initially as Reader and then as professor. She was attracted to Gandhian Studies and an exploration of Gandhian Thought and Practices since the 1960s and she wrote extensively on Gandhiji, six books in all, after her introduction to Gandhiji's ideas by his close associate Nirmal Kumar Bose in the 1940s. In fact, one of her major works is *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (1983). She lectured extensively on Gandhi and Philosophy in South Africa, US, UK, Canada and Israel. In 1997, she wrote the highly perceptive *Modern Jewish and Hindu Thought*. It was due to her erudition that she was appointed as Director at The Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.

As a Gandhian scholar, Margaret viewed him critically and in her 1999 book *Gandhi and His Jewish Friends*, she denounced him for being insensitive to the fear of the Jews of being annihilated by Hitler. She also rejected the restrictive mode in which Gandhiji's ideas were perceived: "For Gandhi, tradition was not a repository of inviolable norms but a place of considered criticism, change and development." Her *Philosophical Inquiries* (1968) stands as a classic in philosophy and religion to this day as are her other works.

Margaret was also fond of poetry and herself wrote some poetry. She also used poetry widely, especially that of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Pablo Neruda and Boris Pasternak, to introduce her students to the imagery in which ideas are expressed. Her simplicity was legendary and she lived for the most part of her life in a small DDA flat in Delhi's Shalimar Baug, cluttered with books, music CDs and stationery. She was often prodded by friends to write her

memoirs, but she declined, saying: “What is past is past; the future beckons, and the future for me always means the next book.” True to form, she continued to dictate her last book to Malay, her son, into whose home she had moved when she was too feeble to live alone.

—Charanjeet Kaur

**“HUM JHAMELE KARNEWALE LOG THE”: KRISHNA SOBTI  
(18 FEBRUARY 1925- 25 JANUARY 2019)**



*“I have one promise with me. The moment I use a wrong word, the next day I’m going to lie down” (In an interview with **Live Mint** on 13 May 2016).*

**M**y first introduction to Krishna Sobti was somewhere in the 1990s, when my PhD research guide at SNTD University, Dr Sunanda Pal (one of our current trustees), told me about a slim book of hers, *Ai Ladki*. I read it in both English and Hindi and apart from savouring the earthy and audibly nuanced language, it left me with a deep disquiet. The monologue of an aging mother addressed to her elderly unmarried daughter raised so many questions, and till today I have a love-hate relationship with this novelette. Not so with *Zindaginama*, though. The culturally reverberating English translation by Neel Kanwar Mani and Moyna Majumdar, it touched me in a deep subliminal, almost primordial inner space, because of the manner in which the interplay of Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu culture and languages weaves a magic in what is essentially a non-novel, but which is considered to be one of the most significant Indian novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Striding across the century, being a sensitive witness to the upheavals in the nation and the world, her intellectual participation in all that she deemed herself to be a part of was always very honest and deep. Right from women’s issues, to the partition of India, to the tapestry of the landscape of North India, to women’s sexuality—Krishna Sobti’s wide canvas is an exploration that goes on without end, without the need to come to any unidimensional ‘conclusion’. Yet her disillusionment with the current political situation in India, was the cause of a great agony in her life. Acclaimed as one of the most relevant writers of modern India, she has adorned awards right from the Bhartiya Jnanpith—India’s highest literary award—the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Crossword

Book Award, the first Katha Chudamani Award and so many more. One of the most translated writers of India, Krishna Sobti’s work is available in English, Hindi, Russian and Swedish and other languages, particularly Indian languages.

Krishna Sobti has been her own person throughout her long life: In 2010, when she was offered the Padma Bhushan, she declined it, stating “As a writer I have to keep a distance from the establishment.” She wrote a great deal of her work, particularly her columns and brief profiles of writers like Bhisham Sahni, Namvar Singh and Nirmal Verma under the male pseudonym, Hashmat. When she found that her first novel, *Channa*, was published by Leader Press, Allahabad, with major editorial interventions and linguistic ‘straightening’, she withdrew her consent for its publication. She even paid the cost of the printed copies and got them destroyed. Her most famous quarrel, though, was with another pioneer of Punjabi writing, Amrita Pritam. For 26 years, she waged litigation against the use of the word ‘Zindaginama’ by Amrita Pritam for the title of her novel *Hardatt ka Zindaginama*—a protracted legal fight in which influential writers of the time like Khushwant Singh stood up for Amrita Pritam and which she lost in 2011. Her marriage to the much younger Dogri writer, Shivnath, when she had crossed 70, belongs to the same class of the uncompromising independence she symbolised. When she passed away at the age of 93, and till the publication of her last novel *A Gujarat Here, A Gujarat There*, Krishna Sobti remained fiercely progressive and independent in thought and action.

The irony of fame is best seen in her case in the reported comment of the judge who gave his verdict in favour of Amrita Pritam in 2011: “Amrita Pritam is a great writer, but I have not heard of Krishna Sobti.” To which her wistful reply was “In Delhi, who recognises Hindi writers?” And in 2017 she was a Jnanpith Award winner!

Her account of leaving her Lahore hostel in 1947 captures the pain of Partition, which was to be a major thematic thread running through her entire corpus: “Prior to Partition, I was in my hostel in Lahore. I packed my suitcases, looked at the rooms, they were empty, and came down. I ventured towards the swimming pool, I don’t know why. I went to the gate, took my suitcases there. The chowkidar (guard) did not look at me and I didn’t look at him—when we left that place, there was something telling you that it’s over. From the gate, I went up to my room, and looked at the empty room. Only one pencil was there. I picked it up and wrote on the wall: *Behati hawao yaad rakhna / Hum yahan par reh gaye hain* (Blowing winds, please remember/we too have stayed here).” (*LiveMint* interview, 13 May, 2016)

The only regret that Krishna Sobti had was that, being caught up in litigation over the use of ‘Zindaginama’, her

proposed trilogy could not be written. And her *Zindaginama* stands as a colossal reminder of what the loss to the literary world has been.

—Charanjeet Kaur

### A STRONG FEMINIST VOICE: ARCHANA VERMA (6 April 1946-16 FEBRUARY 2019)



**A**rchana Verma, well-known Hindi writer, passed away on 16 February 2019. She was 72. Archana Verma taught at Miranda House, University of Delhi, in the Hindi Department. Along with the famous writer Rajendra Yadav she

was editing the magazine *Hans* since 1986. Some of her well-known books are her poetry collections *Kuch Dur Tak* (For Some Distance, 1981), *Lauta Hai Vijyeta* (Coming Back Victorious, 1993) and her short story collections, *Sthagit* (Deferred, 1981), *Rajpaat Tatha Anya Kahaniyan* (Rajpaat and Other Stories, 2010). Many remember Archana Verma for her essay in the magazine *Kathadesh* where she reflected on feminist discourse and tackled the comment of Vibhuti Narain Rai (former IPS officer, founder editor of *Vartaman Sahitya* and at the time he gave the interview, Vice Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University at Wardha) who in his interview given in the magazine *Naya Gyanoday* in its special issue on infidelity (August 2010), had remarked, “Feminist discourse has been reduced to a grand celebration of infidelity,” and “Hindi women writers are competing with each other to prove who among them is the greatest slut (*chhinal*).” He denounced a woman writer’s autobiography, saying it could have been more aptly titled “How many times in how many beds.” Her essay was translated by Ruth Vanita and Simona Sawhney.

Here is a poem of Archana Verma translated by Ruth Vanita from Hindi.

#### Security

Planting a small sapling  
he set up around it  
a fence  
of thorny branches.

The sapling was to blame.  
It grew.  
What could the thorns do  
but pierce it?

Archana Verma’s was a strong feminist voice and it will be missed.

—C S Lakshmi

### THE WOMAN WHO WORE A RED TEMPLE SARI AND A GREEN BLOUSE FOR A BEAUTY PAGEANT: L V SHARADA (1941- 21 MARCH 2019)



**G**rowing up in Bengaluru it is difficult not to have known S L Bhyrappa’s modern classic *Vamsha Vriksha* (The Genealogy Tree) written in 1965 which was later made into a film By B V Karanth and Girish

Karnad in 1971. I was about twenty-one when the novel became a rage. The novel put to question the entire idea of a “pure” family tree. And in 1977 M K Indira came out with *Phaniyamma* that described the story of a defiant widow. It was made into a film in 1983 by Prema Karanth. The characters who stood out in both films were played by L V Sharada. She was a young widow Kathyayini in *Vamsa Vrisksha* questioning tradition and the old widow Phaniyamma in the film *Phaniyamma* who broke caste rules to help a Dalit woman deliver her child. She had also acted in *Adi Shankaracharya* by G V Iyer but it is as Kathyayini and Phaniyamma that we remember her. One often forgets that people you remember in association with some films can die. So it came as a shock to get the news that LV Sharada succumbed to breast cancer on 21<sup>st</sup> March. Satyajit Ray once called her the only South Indian actress he had met who was intelligent too. Sharada took the remark lightly saying she had showed off her knowledge of cinema to him and hence his remark. She was the daughter of philanthropist L S Venkaji Rao and Saraswathi Bai. She did some ten films but did not hanker after roles in cinema. But she was involved with many projects on arts and crafts. She produced and directed documentaries for Doordarshan. Her favourite role, she said in an interview, was that of Yashodha in the T V serial *Krishnavatara* by G V Iyer. She studied in Mount Carmel College and was good at

tennis and athletics (even though she ran in a sari) and later even tried to take part in a beauty pageant. She did not make it because she wore a red temple sari with a green blouse she explained jocularly in an interview. She took her achievements rather casually. In the interview given in 2001 to Roja Kandath for his article in *Times of India* (January 5, 2001) where she spoke about herself, she casually described herself “as a bright kid who became dull later.” But we will remember her as the bright kid who remained bright and shining all her life unfazed by age or anything else.

—C S Lakshmi

## DEATH OF A DRUG FIGHTER : NEHA SHOREE (1983- 29 MARCH 2019)



**N**eha Shoree had a Pharmacist degree from Punjab University. She also had a Master’s degree from NIPER (National Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research). Those who have degree

in pharmacy normally go for well-paid jobs in pharmaceutical companies. But Neha chose to appear for the Punjab Public Service Examination for Drug Inspector and cracked it ranking 8<sup>th</sup>. She joined the Punjab Health Department as Drug Inspector. She took her job seriously and soon began to fight the drug mafia and gangsters revealing the nexus of some influential people in Punjab with the drug mafia. She came to be known as one of the best drug inspectors of Punjab during 2007-2010. In fact, she was transferred by the government to protect the drug peddlers. At the time of her murder, she was posted at FDA’s Zonal Licensing Authority.

Neha had cancelled the license in 2009 of Balwinder Singh who shot her. In September 2009, Neha was posted as a Drug Inspector in Ropar District and she had raided Balwinder’s shop. During the raid, 35 types of tablets used by drug addicts were recovered but Balwinder Singh could not produce any supporting documentation. That was when she cancelled his licence, according to SSP Bhullar. According to the police, Balwinder Singh went to the FDA office, shot Neha twice on the temple and chest and shouted “Happy Holi!” Then he shot himself when he was cornered at the gate.

On 29th March Balwinder Singh had his revenge. But it

was a revenge not just against Neha Shoree but against all women who dare to fight for justice. Neha has a two-year-old daughter and would have been Assistant Commissioner in a few months. She was a woman who dared to fight the dreaded drug mafia in Punjab. It is easy to get rid of women like her but not easy to obliterate the exemplary and important work she has done. There will be more Nehas in future.

—C S Lakshmi

## TAKING THEATRE TO THE NEXT GENERATION: S MALATHI (1953-MARCH 31, 2019)



**W**hen she inaugurated and spoke at the World Konkani Theatre Day celebrations organised under the aegis of the Karnataka Konkani Sahitya Akademi in 2013 in Mangalore, Malathi said that the existence of

theatre is a must for a better society. Malathi was a multifaceted person. A graduate from National School of Drama, New Delhi, she was Managing Trustee, Antharanga Trust, in Sagara, Karnataka, who was a writer, renowned theatre director, activist, playwright, actor, poet and translator. She was also associated with Samudaya the radical cultural activist theatre movement in Karnataka, which fought against Emergency by performing street plays and participating in jathas. In 2016, as part of Hasiru Dasara, B V Karanth College Rangothsava and Navaratri Rangothsava, when Malathi was felicitated, she again spoke about theatre as passion and why there was a need to pursue it despite the hardships associated with it.

Many remember her for her many plays among which is the adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* in Kannada as *Taayi*, which was the first play of Samudaya. But after coming out of NSD she had translated and directed many plays. She translated Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People* as *Janata Kshatru* and his *Doll’s House* as *Vasanthi* and directed them. She used many aspects of traditional theatre in her plays and her *Bheemakathanaka* with Bhima as the central character from *Mahabharata* successfully used Yakshagana theatre to narrate the story. Other plays scripted by her were *Dalithaloka* and *Sita Charita*. She scripted and directed more than ten plays for children of which *Mooru Makkala Natakagalu* (Three Children’s Plays) is often mentioned. Some of the

other plays directed by Malathi were *Kerege Haara* (A Sacrifice for the Tank, A folktale of Karnataka), Chandrashekhara Kambara's *Sirisampige* and Girish Karnad's *Yayathi*, and *Hayavadana*. Her anthology of poems *Kshakinavallada Kshanagalu* (Unforgivable Moments), won the Pejawara Sadashiva Rao award instituted by Mumbai Kannada Sangha in 1998. In 2004 Karnataka Natak Academy honoured her with an award as a Director of plays. Karnataka Lekakiyara Sangha honoured her for her two plays. In 2010 Karnataka Balavikas Sangha honoured her in recognition of her contribution to children's theatre. Malathi had presided over the fifth taluk-level Kannada Sahitya Sammelana in Sagar.

A life such as hers, dedicated entirely to theatre, is rare. Malathi's immense contribution to Kannada theatre was recognised and honoured in her lifetime but her death at such a young age is a great loss to the theatre world.

—C S Lakshmi

#### DEATH OF A DIRECTOR: J MAHENDRAN (25 July 1939-2 April 2019)



Many feel that if a history of Tamil cinema is written it would be divided into two parts called before and after Mahendran. His style of film making influenced the generation that followed to a large extent. He entered the Tamil film

industry as a screen play writer mentored by M G R who saw his talent as a creative filmmaker. His first directorial venture was *Mullum Malarum* (A Thorn Can Bloom, 1978). It was his next film *Uthiripookkal* (Spare Flowers, 1979), based on a short story written by Pudumaipithan, that most people remember for the way he turned the story into a sensitive cinematic expression. His *Nenjathai Killathe* (Don't Play with My Heart, 1981), a love story, won three National Film Awards including the award for the best regional film. Beginning with 1966 and till 2019, he had worked as screen play writer, director, dialogue writer and actor in more than 45 films. Of late he had started acting in some films apart from being the head of the direction department of BOFTA (Blue Ocean Film and Television Academy) Film Institute in Chennai. Tamil cinema audience will not forget J Mahendran for his sensitive portrayals of women.

—C S Lakshmi

#### WITHERING OF A FRAGRANT TULASI: TULASI VENUGOPAL (18 NOVEMBER 1954-8 APRIL 2019)



Tulasi who was so much a part of SPARROW is no more. She succumbed to liver cancer. Tulasi was SPARROW's Kannada language coordinator. She had also co-edited 2 Kannada volumes of SPARROW based on SPARROW

workshops. After her husband Venugopal's death a few years ago, she had shifted to Pune to be with her son and daughter-in-law and a granddaughter who was just born. We kept her table and her papers uncleared for she kept saying she would come back, for SPARROW work kept her happy. She participated in the 2015 women writers' meet in Karjat, and became her old laughing and playful self.

Tulasi's world of stories is considered outstanding. Her writing is forceful and also deeply moving. One can discern her concern for humanity in her stories. She is able to capture subtle emotions and present these in a sensitive, exploratory and flowing style. Her first short fiction collection *Munjavige Kaadavalu* (The Woman Who Waited for the Dawn) 1993, that has stories revolving around married life linked to the city of Mumbai, and her poetry collection *Putagala Madhyadalundu Navilugari* (A Peacock Feather in Between Pages) 1999, have won several prestigious awards. She received Sir M. Vishweshwarayya Sahitya Prashasti award and Vardhamana Udayonmukha Sahitya Prashasti award for *Munjavige Kaadavalu* and G S Shivarudrappa award for *Putagala Madhyadalundu Navilugari*.

Her poem "Touch of Light" ends with hope we associated Tulasi with.

...Even with a single ray of light  
the ice would thaw  
a tender sapling would unfurl,  
young streams would snake  
across a valley of flowers,  
petal-soft minds would bloom –  
a bouquet of luminosity.

Like inviolate hearts  
let earthen lamps burn,  
melting the darkness.

(Translated from *Belaku Sparsha* by Shefali Srinivas.)

—C S Lakshmi

## THE FRAGRANCE OF LUCKNOW: SWAROOP KUMARI BAKSHI (22 JUNE 1919-13 APRIL 2019)



**S**waroop Kumari Bakshi who was Bakshi Didi to everyone, died just two months short of her hundredth birthday. She was a veteran politician, a writer, an academician, a freedom fighter but more than anything else, she was a

Vedantin who sought to understand eternity. Her collection of short stories entitled *Kahan Gai Lucknow Ki Khushboo* (Where Has the Fragrance of Lucknow Gone?) is a title that comes to mind now for her life and her activities added fragrance to what Lucknow is in its culture and politics.

Bakshi Didi belonged to a Kashmiri Pandit family. Her father Pandit Hari Prasad Shinglu was scholar, a poet and a musician. It was her marriage to Raj Kumar Bakshi that brought her into the Nehru family for her husband was an advocate and second cousin of Indira Gandhi. Bakshi Didi's marital family was deeply involved with the Congress Party. Her father-in-law's elder brother Dr Madan Atal was a freedom fighter. Her own mother-in-law Dhanraj Pati Bakshi who was chairman of the Zilla Parishad, Maihaabad region, Lucknow, was lathi-charged during the protest against the Simon-Commission in Lucknow.

Although Swaroop Kumari Bakshi joined the Congress Party formally only in 1940, she was initiated into politics at the tender age of ten when she attended along with her grand-aunts, the open session of the All India Congress Committee held in Lahore on 29-31 December, 1929. She had seen Jawaharlal Nehru, the President of the Congress then. After schooling in Lahore and a Master's in Sanskrit and English literature in Lucknow University she became principal of Nari Shiksha Niketan Intermediate College in 1947. It became a degree college later and she was principal till 1979. But having joined Congress Party formally in 1940, she got drawn into the freedom struggle. She took part in the Quit India Movement and distributed pamphlets and organised protests and was arrested and jailed.

After Independence her active political life began one can say in 1974 when she was elected to the Vidhan Sabha from Lucknow (East) on a Congress ticket. She was elected three more times in 1977, 1980 and 1985. She functioned as Cabinet Minister in the U P Government in various departments like Education, Home, Harijan and Social Welfare and Culture from 1980-89. Education improved by leaps and

bounds during her tenure with a number of degree colleges and schools opened and a fillip was given to girls' education. Adult education and non-formal education were taken up with a zeal that was infectious. As Home Minister she dealt ably with the dreaded bandit groups of U. P. The anti-dacoity ordinance was brought about during her time. As Social Welfare Minister she helped the poor, disabled, depressed and scheduled castes a great deal through various plans.

Like her father, she also took to writing and amidst all this work also wrote some 31 books of poems, plays, stories, novelettes and novels in Hindi. She was honoured with the Sahitya Bhushan for her creative work by the U. P. Government in 2002. Hers was a long life well-lived with extraordinary aspirations and activities that touched the lives of those around her.

—C S Lakshmi

## A WOMAN CALLED MAGGIE DHAIRYAM: MARGARET AMRITRAJ (1927-20 APRIL 2019)



**D**hairyam in Tami means bold. Maggie's father's name was Dhairyam and that is why she was Maggie Dhairyam but it was as if the surname gave her the boldness no

woman of her times possessed for she was not only a tennis player herself but she thought of training her sons Anand, Vijay and Ashok in tennis to become international players. Not only that, she set up along with her son Vijay Amritraj the Britannia Amritraj Tennis Academy (BAT) and helmed its affairs till 2005. The academy produced many tennis stars like Leander Paes. She was also an entrepreneur who ran a business.

In 2017 when they celebrated her 90th birthday she said to a friend that she did not realise she was 90! Her husband Robert Amritraj died in 2012 after which she lived alone cared for by a loving staff and her three sons visited her in turns and never kept her really alone. Maggie lived a long life and she made it as fulfilling as she wanted it for herself, for her sons and for those who loved tennis.

—C S Lakshmi

**THE GREY BIRD THAT DISSOLVED IN TIME: KALAI ILAKKIYA  
(15 JANUARY 1980-6 MAY 2019)**

**K**alai Ilakkiya was a Tamil poet. And a self confident, activist writer. She has written eight books so far. Her real name was Chandra. She took her friend's name as her pen name. A pen name can protect you sometimes. Maybe she had a reason to choose a pen name. She was deeply interested in serious creative literature. She did not have a

permanent job and so worked as an accountant, a clerk and a typist, whichever job was available to her.

I got to know her through her poems. She has a Master's in Tamil literature. She could bring very subtle emotions into poetry. She also wrote non-fiction and stories. She was born in Jeyamangalam in Theni District in 1980 and lived in Veerapandi in the same district. Her husband is Kamuththurai and she has two sons.

She began writing poetry in the nineties in the magazine *Agnikunju* edited by Idhayageethan. Later many small magazines carried her poems. She used to write her poems on post cards and send them to magazines. It is not easy to be a writer in a society where writing itself is considered an activity against traditional culture. But Ilakkiya continued to write. She has published four collections of poems: *Imaikkul Nazuviyaval* (The Woman Who Slipped into the Eyelids), *Biramma Niravivu* (A Great Contentment), *En Andhappuraththirku Oru Katavulaik Kaettaen* (I Asked for a God for My Inner Quarters) and *Penmai Thinavu* (Feminine Desire). Apart from poems and short stories she has also brought out a collection of durgas. She also wrote musical poems. When I read her first collection of poems I found out her number and called her. I wrote an article introducing her. She invited me to speak on the occasion of the release of her last poetry collection. Unfortunately I could not make it that day.

She was one of the members of the Tami Nadu Progressive Writers' Association. She was also a passionate orator. She often expressed the view that women should not be confined to homes. Her speech at the Pondicherry conference was much appreciated. Her speeches were filled with wit and sarcasm. Where she was there would be humour and laughter. She would speak in the earthy language that belonged to Theni district, which had warmth and camaraderie that would draw anyone close to her.

I remember what Kalai Ilakkiya said once in the course of a conversation:

Not leaves that fall  
Birds that fly fluttering their wings  
Are we

Kalai Ilakkiyaa has flown like the bird and has merged with time. Her poems will remain with us like the little ones she brooded.

—S Vijayalakshmi

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