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*Death is like going off to sleep;
birth is like waking up from it.*

(Thirukkural, Chapter 34, 339)

(From the blog of Kannan's Translations of Thirukkural in English: A Modern Rendition of the Tamil Classic)

SPARROW
Supplement



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

Tara Sinha (1932-11 December 2019)



A high-profile advertising, external affairs, issue management, corporate communications and public relations professional, Tara Sinha, also known as Ma Sinha, is the first woman to set up a national advertising agency. From her earliest assignments with S H Benson in London in 1952, she moved on at the age of 27 to establish Clarion Advertising Services Ltd, which later

on became Clarion McCann Advertising Services Ltd. She also set up another subsidiary, Advertising Consultants India Ltd. She is also the first woman to start a national advertising agency Tara Sinha Associates, which later on came to be known as Tara Sinha McCann Erikson, after she was sent a termination notice by Clarion. Her toughness and professionalism were appreciated by those she worked with and praise for her work has been coming from senior advertising professionals: “Clients looked up to her and marketing managers were in awe,” said advertising veteran Sandeep Goyal, in his obituary to her “You have to remember her towering personality in the context of who her contemporaries were”.

Tara Sinha is perceived to be among the greats of the advertising world, in league with the likes of Mike Khanna, Alyque Padamsee, Arun Nanda, Subhash Ghosal, Subroto Sengupta and R K Swamy and she has handled prestigious accounts like Nestle. She was with Cocal Cola for a brief period and handled their operations in India, and her work was spread out across India, UK and America.

Apart from being the first lady of the Advertising industry, Tara was associated with the educational sector, too, in India. She brought her industry experience to bear upon academia as chairperson of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, member of the Advisory Council of IIT, Delhi and chairperson of the advertising sub-committee at The Associated Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

—Charanjeet Kaur

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Gita Siddharth (Demise: 14 December 2019)



The fact that much is not known about Gita Siddharth, in spite of a filmography which includes 21 films in two decades from 1972 to 1994, points to one of the flip sides of Bollywood, which carves a space for the glamorous and the glitzy, while ignoring the lesser ‘character role’

actors who form the supporting cast of films. Perhaps, it could also indicate the sense of privacy which people like her, in public professions, would like to retain. Whatever be the reasons for her near anonymity, all that we know of Gita Siddharth is that she debuted in Gulzar’s *Parichay*, was lauded in the role of Amina in the M S Sathyu iconic film *Garm Hava*, and made a significant impact in films like *Daman* (with Farooq Sheikh), the blockbuster *Sholay*, new wave films like *Mandi*, *Sadgati*, *Arth*, and *Nishaan*, and other mainstream films like *Doosra Aadmi*, *Trishul*, *Noorie*, *Shaukeen*, *Suraag*, *Desh Premee*, *Disco Dancer*, *Kasam Paida Karne Wale Ki*, *Alag Alag*, *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, *Ek Chadar Maili Si*, *Dance Dance* and *Insaf Apne Lahoo Ka*.

Married to the TV producer and documentary film maker Siddarth Kak, who is best known for the Doordarshan cultural magazine show *Surabhi*, she was the Art Director of the show. Her single award was a souvenir as the lead actor in *Garm Hava* at the National Film Awards in 1974.

—Charanjeet Kaur

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A Linguist and A Lover of Marathi Language: Suman Vasudev Belwalkar (1947-30 December 2019)



Suman Belwalkar was a linguist who studied Marathi language. In the late sixties with a gold medal from Willingdon College, Sangli, she joined the Deccan College of the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore. She worked for several years at the West Zone Language

Centre of this organisation. At the Centre, she taught Marathi to those who were Marathi speakers. Many Marathi speaking students were groomed by her in the Marathi language. These students then went to their own native provinces and began to teach Marathi. This was a rich contribution that Suman Belwalkar made to the Marathi language which not only brought critical attention to the language but also created enthusiasm to learn it from a linguistic point of view. Suman Belwalkar retired from the Mysore Language Centre as principal. During her teaching career there, she concentrated on language education books and through the Mysore Language Centre, she co-authored with Vijaya Chitnis, *An Intensive Course Reader in Marathi* and in the same series brought out *Marathi Jeevan Chhata* (Life Shades of Marathi) and *Marathi Shardiyeच्या Chandrakala* (Autumnal Moonbeams), which is a textbook for those learning Marathi as a second language. She also did an important column on Marathi and Maharashtrian culture in *Lok Satta*. Her columns were later published as a book entitled *Belbhasha* (Dabbler). A very important book that Suman wrote was *Maharashtra Bhumi, Bhasha Ani Sahitya* (Maharashtra: Land, Language and Literature). Her dissertation *Leelacharitharal Samajdarshan* (Depiction of Society in *Leelacharitra*) was a seminal book that looked at literature from a social perspective. *Leelacharitra* is a biography of Chakradhar Swami, the guru of the Mahanunhava sect, and is a text that also reveals the socio-cultural life of the 13th century and is authored by Maimbhatt. Suman Belwalkar's attempt was to see in the text the medieval Marathi culture and life revealing it in all its complexity.

Suman Belwalkar passed away at her residence in Warje, Pune, after a brief illness. In a life spanning 72 years Suman Belwalkar made an immense contribution to the study of Marathi as a language and to the understanding of Maharashtrian culture through its rich literature.

Dancing Her Way to *Moksha*: Dr Minati Mishra (1937-6 January 2020)



In 2011 Minati Mishra was considered to be the oldest living Odissi performer. She was nearing 75 then. Not surprisingly the Government of India waited for this information to

honour her with a Padma Shri the next year. Minati Mishra graciously accepted the award.

The year of birth of Minati has been given as 1929, 1932, 1934 and 1937 in different reports on her. But in an earlier interview given by her she says that she was a girl of 7 when she got interested in dance and that in the forties not many girls took to dance which means that she was born in 1937 and not 1929. She was born the third child in a family that lived in Cuttack. Her father Basanta Kumar Das was a headmaster. Her mother's name is not given anywhere but she must surely have been someone who encouraged the artistic aspirations of Minati. After she saw a performance in 1945 by Laxmipriya Devi—later to wed Kelucharan Mohapatra—who used to dance what was then known as Oriya dance, a combination of Mahari and Gotipua, as a part of a theatre act, Minati was inspired to take up dancing. Talking about this incident in her childhood and her love for dance to Diana Sahu in 2014 (*New Indian Express*, 1 June 2014) Minati said, "As a kid, I used to visit the Annapurna theatre with my parents. Once I got to see a dance performance by Laxmipriya Mohapatra, wife of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. I fell in love with the dance at first sight and asked my parents to allow me to learn it. In the 1940s, being a dancer carried immense social stigma. My father agreed on a condition. He wanted me to complete my education."

Minati started her lessons in classical singing, playing of the stringed instrument Esraj and folk dance. Her initial training was under Ajit Ghosh and Banabihari Maity of Calcutta. What she learnt from them was a mixed style of dance on several themes. Her training in Odissi began with the great artiste Kabichandra Kalicharan Patnaik. Kabichandra was a pioneer who had done in depth research on Oriya dance styles and he also owned the Odisha Theatre. It is possible that Minati's later interest in research actually took root at this time. Later, in 1950 Minati started training under the legendary Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra.

With a scholarship from the Government of Odisha to learn Bharatanatyam she went in 1954 to Kalakshetra in Madras, and trained under Rukmini Devi Arundale, Sarada Hoffman and Peria Sarada. Later she continued her training under Guru Pandanallur Chokkalingam Pillai and Guru Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. Minati did her arangetram in Bharatanatyam in 1956, and after intensive training at the Indian Institute of Fine Arts in Madras she was conferred with the 'Natyakala Bhushanam' title. She continued to dance Bharatanatyam after that but gave it up later. In her interview with Diana Sahu in 2014, she explains why: "I learnt Bharatanatyam from Chokkalingam Pillai, but I decided to give up the dance form following an advice by dance critic Charles Fabri who had seen me performing Odissi in New Delhi." Charles Fabri was an eminent dance critic and he told her to pursue Odissi seriously and take up the task of promoting Odissi.

Minati's dance training was unique in many ways. She learnt from and collaborated with the three first-generation gurus of Odissi dance—Guru Pankaj Charan Das, Guru Deba Prasad Das and Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. In her own dance she has incorporated their sharply recognisable styles.

From 1959 began her many performing tours abroad. In 1959, she performed at Zurich, Luzern, Geneva and Winterthur in Switzerland on the invitation of the International Photographic Association. In 1963, she performed at the Berlin Film Festival. Present in the audience were the world famous actors Audrey Hepburn, Gregory Peck, Anthony Quinn and Cary Grant. Minati spent nearly five years giving recitals both in Odissi and Bharatanatyam in Europe. She also toured many countries in Africa, South East Asia and also went to the U.S. It was during one of her trips that she came in contact with a professor of Indology in Philipps University, Marburg, Germany. Since she was always very keen in exploring the theoretical aspects of dance, her interaction with him led to her taking up research on *Natya Shastra*. Minati received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Indology in 1962 from the Philipps University. Her entire research was done in Sanskrit. Her knowledge of Sanskrit helped her to explore many more areas of dance compositions like poetic rendering of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* which she composed as a dance drama in later years. Minati shared her memories of those years in Europe with a student Dipti who writes about it in *Namaste Switzerland* magazine (February 8, 2020). Minati had told her that she used to be very stylish in those days and loved wearing high heels and drove fast in convertible cars in Germany.

On her return in 1964, she was appointed the principal of the Utkal Sangeet Vidyalaya at Bhubaneswar, where she taught Odissi in the dance department and she worked there for

25 years till 1989. The year 1964 was also significant in other ways. It was the year she got married to Nityananda Mishra, an engineer by profession. She acted in five Odia films. Her debut film *Suryamukhi* (Sunflower) was released in 1963. In 1963, she also acted in the Bengali film, *Nirjana Saikate* (The Desolate Beach) in which she has performed an Odissi dance number choreographed by Kelucharan Mohapatra. In the same year she acted in another Odia film *Jeevan Sathi* (Life Partner) followed by *Sadhana*, which was based on a novel by the Bengali writer Ashapura Devi and another film *Arundhati* (1967). All four Odia films received the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Odia. Besides her stint in cinema, she worked as an "A" Grade Radio Drama artiste at AIR as well.

Minati put her time at the Utkal Sangeet Vidyalaya to very good use by taking up activities to promote and revive Odissi as a dance form. A well-formulated curriculum was implemented by the institution along with Odissi dance and music training that was academically formalised. The syllabus was made rich with the introduction of theatrical aspects into the syllabus and establishment of examination guidelines. It was during these years she got the opportunity to work with first-generation gurus of Odissi such as Pankaj Charan Das and Deba Prasad Das.

Mishra was awarded the 1975 Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. She also received the Kalinga Shastriya Sangeet Parishad Award the same year and in 2000, she received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. In 2012, the Government of India awarded her the Padma Shri. Unknown to many, Minati also received the award Sangeet Prabhakar in Hindustani vocal music. In 2012 she also received the Kaa Sanskriti Samman-2011 Lifetime Achievement Award. Minati also received the award Sangeet Prabhakar in Hindustani vocal music.

After the death of her husband, Nityananda Mishra, in 1980, Mishra retired from dance performances but her formal retirement happened in 1990. Although she settled down in Switzerland she came down to Odisha every year for six months to participate in Odissi festivals. In Switzerland, she had set up her school Kalinga Kala Tirtha where she taught the theoretical aspects of Odissi. She also organised dance festivals, lecture tours and workshops in Switzerland and Canada apart from India. Her Facebook page which she started in 2012, was always filled with news of her various activities.

In her 2014 interview with Diana Sahu she mentions that she is working on a book entitled *Devotional Dances: A Special Reference to Odissi* and that she hopes to complete it in one year. But there is no reference to that book and it is possible that it remains incomplete. Incomplete is also a biography

on her being written by Kedar Mishra whom *My City Links* (January 6, 2020) mentions. He has been working on it for four years but is only half way through it.

Asked "What has been your gain in life as a dancer?" in the interview given to Shyamhari Chakra for *The Hindu* (July 20, 2011) Minati Mishra replied "Dance has been my life and *moksha* (salvation). It has given me inner strength, peace and solace to my soul." It is sad that when she had a fall it was her leg that was injured. But Minati Mishra, from what we know of her life and her indomitable spirit, would have still been dancing in her mind at the age of 83, on her way to attain *moksha*.

—C S Lakshmi

Ritu Nanda (née Kapoor; 30 October 1948-14 January 2020)



Belonging to what may be easily seen as the first family of Bollywood, the Kapoor family, going back to Prithviraj Kapoor in the silent era of cinema, through four generations in films, it is remarkable that Ritu Nanda, the daughter of Raj Kapoor and Krishna Kapoor, and her sister Rima Jain, had hardly anything to do with films. Even her two children, Nikhil

and Natasha have stayed away professionally from the film industry. Married to the industrialist Rajan Nanda, she honed her skills to become an enterprising businesswoman and insurance advisor. She is mentioned in the Guinness Books of Records for selling 17,000 pension policies in a single day.

Ritu Nanda began her career by managing Nikitasha, a household appliances manufacturing company, which failed, and she then moved on to manage companies like Escolife and Rimari Corporate Art Services. She was the recipient of the *Brand* and the *Best Insurance Advisor* of the Decade awards from the Life Insurance Corporation of India, the largest life insurance company of India.

When she passed away in January 2020 aged 72, Nanda had been ailing with cancer for quite some time.

—Charanjeet Kaur

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

A Guruma Takes Her Leave: Sunanda Patnaik (7 November 1934-19 January 2020)



Sunanda Patnaik belonged to Odisha and was a classical singer of the Gwalior gharana. She was one among ten children of the Odia poet Baikunthanath Patnaik. Sudeshna Banerjee writes in her tribute to her in *The Telegraph* dated 23 January 2020 that in an interview given to *The Telegraph* in 2012 she spoke of herself as the wildest one among the ten siblings and narrated the incident of her going for an audition at the All India Radio. She recalled how she had secretly escaped from home, dressed in shirt and trousers, and appeared for the audition. They noticed her sitting there and waiting after all the registered singers had left. No one believed her when she said that she had cleared the audition. But two months later the contract letter from All India Radio arrived.

President Rajendra Prasad was so impressed with her singing that he arranged her training under Pandit Vinayakrao Patwardhan at Pune with a scholarship. She was awarded the degree of Masters in Music by Pune School in 1956. She had a mellifluous but powerful voice and was known for her tarana that she sang at a fast pace. Rumour goes that once she came on stage to perform during a festival and when she began her high-speed tarana a man who was dozing off in the front row was so startled that he fell off his seat!

The turning point in her life came when she performed at the All India Sadarang Sangeet Sammelan in September 1957 in Calcutta. She was just 23 and senior accompanists refused to accompany her on the stage. But her performance was so electrifying that the audience wanted her to perform two more times in the next two days. She was gifted 13 gold coins. She asked them if she could be given cash which would be more helpful for her large family. She came back home with Rs.1370, she said, in the 2012 interview. After that she did many performances and was known internationally. In 1983 she chose West Bengal as her adoptive state and lived in Purbachal in Kolkata. She lived alone and lived a frugal

life doing *riyaz* and offering prayers to Lord Sankatmochan. She called her home Vishnu Vinayak Sangeet Ashram after her guru and taught students at her home. Sudeshna Banerjee says that she also wrote poetry and that she showed her a bound book full of hand-written poems.

She was a great admirer of Subash Chandra Bose but refused to be drawn into any party politics or be a part of any government set up. Many awards came her way. She received the Odisha Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1970-1971. The degree of Doctor of Music was conferred on her by the Akhil Bharatiya Gandharva Mahavidyalaya Mandal in 1975 and an honorary doctorate was conferred on her by the Utkal University in 1999. She received Indian lifetime achievement award in 2009 and lifetime achievement award from The Orissa Society of the Americas (OSA) in 2012. She was the recipient of Sangeet Natak Akademi award (Tagore Akademi Puraskar) for the year 2012.

She had been ailing for a while and she passed away after living 86 music-filled years. A State level condolence meeting (Sunanda Smruti Sangeeta Sandhya) was jointly organised in her memory by Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra Odissi Research Centre, Odisha Sangeet Natak Academy and Information and Public Relations Department at Odissi Research Centre on January 29th.

It is heartening to know that the Odisha state government is going to take steps to honour her memory. The Odisha state government has decided to institute 'Guruma Sunanda Patnaik Chair' and 'Sunanda Samman' in her memory. Every year an eminent musician from the state will be awarded with 'Sunanda Samman' by Odisha Sangeet Natak Academy for contribution to classical music. The Odisha government will also institute the 'Guruma Sunanda Patnaik Chair' at Utkal Culture University for higher research in classical music. The Chief Minister announced that her houses at Puri and Cuttack will be developed as 'memorials' with permission from her family members. The government has requested her family members to donate all articles and instruments used by her and a special gallery will be created at Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya where her musical instruments and other articles used by her will be preserved. And every year anniversary of the great classical vocalist will be observed at Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra Odissi Research Centre by Odia Language, Literature and Culture Department.

A Committed Actor: Nanjil Nalini (1944-19 January 2020)



Since Nanjil Nalini did not write an autobiography or give a detailed interview of her life the popular version available of her life is that Nanjil Nalini was born in 1944, belonged to Thuckalay in Kanyakumari district but came to Tirunelveli at the age of 12 to join a drama troupe. Later she worked with many famous drama troupes including the T K Shanmugam drama troupe referred to as TKS Brothers. From drama she came to Tamil films. In 1968 she did a minor role in *Enga Oor Raja* (The King of Our Town) starring Sivaji Ganesan. This was followed by a few other films in which Sivaji Ganesan played the lead like *Thanga Pathakkam* (Gold Medal, 1974), *Annan Oru Koil* (Elder Brother is a Temple, 1977) and *Theerpu* (Judgment, 1982). From the seventies to nineties she acted in some films that became very popular, with Kamal Hassan, Rajnikanth and Satyaraj. But what the Tamil cinema fans remember even now is the glamorous lead role she played in the T Rajendar film *Uyirullavarai Usha* (Usha As Long As I Am Alive) in 1983. She married actor director Ramarajan in 1987 but divorced him in 2000. She has a son and two daughters leading their own independent lives in theatre and elsewhere. Even while she was acting in films she kept her interest in theatre alive and ran her own theatre group Revathi Fine Arts with her daughter Revathi as part of the troupe. In later years she was mainly known for the several TV serials she acted in. She received several film awards and was also given the Kalaimamani award by the Tamil Nadu government in 1978. She died at the age of 74.

If this version is to be believed, when she acted in her first film in 1968 she would have been 24 years old while she would have been 39 years old when she played the lead role in *Uyirullavarai Usha* in 1983. A second version says that Nalini was born on 3 September 1954 (another says 9 March 1954) as the second child among eight children to Moorthi and Prema in Tamil Nadu. Her father was a choreographer in Tamil movies and her mother was a professional dancer. She has 7 siblings, one sister and six brothers. She studied at TN government school till grade seven; she couldn't continue her studies as she became busy with movies by then. This also does not seem plausible for she could have been 14 when she did a minor role in *Enga Oor Raja* in 1968 but the earlier history of working in many drama troupes does not work out. Also it still makes her 29

C S Lakshmi

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years old when she plays the lead role in *Uyirullavarai Usha* in 1983.

Several other versions quote her age in various different ways. One version says 27 August 1963 and a private channel news film on her marriage and divorce says her date of birth is 22 March 1964. This seems more realistic considering she got married in 1987 to actor and director Ramarajan at the height of her career. Also, since all the films that are mentioned in her filmography until 1982 like *Enga Oor Raja*, *Thanga Pathakkam*, *Annan Oru Koil* and *Theerpu* don't even mention her name in the cast and crew it is possible they have been wrongly included in her filmography. It is also possible that the story of her being in drama troupes from the age of 12 maybe wrong information.

On the other hand, if she was born in 1964, she could not have got the Kalimamani award in 1978 at the age of just 14. Also she was a member of the South Indian Artistes' Association from 1973 and she would have been only 9 or 10 years old then whereas if she was born in 1944 she could have become a member at the age of 29. But then she would have been 43 when she married Ramarajan and at that time she was acting as a young heroine in films. Also, in her wedding photograph taken in 1987, where Chief Minister M G Ramachandran (lovingly referred to as MGR) himself is seen blessing them, they are a young couple.

So we really do not know if she was 56 or 74 or 76 when she passed away. What we do know is that Nanjil Nalini, a senior actor although we do not know how senior and what her true filmography is, passed away on 19 January 2020. At the time of her demise she was seen by everyone as an actor committed to theatre and to the roles she took up in cinema or TV serials. She divorced her husband because he forbade her from acting and she felt she could not give it up. *The Hindu* (January 30, 2020) reported that her demise did not stop her daughter Revathi from completing the schedule her troupe had committed to. She was determined to play her role in the play "Ponniyin Selvan" at the Corporation Kalai Arangam in Coimbatore and she appeared in both back-to-back shows that afternoon before leaving for Chennai. Revathi said that she imagined what her mother would have done in those circumstances and felt that her mother would have definitely kept her commitment because such was her passion. She spoke of her mother as "one of the finest actors on stage and cinema besides being an excellent dubbing artiste." She said that recently Nalini had returned to the stage after a hiatus of twenty years to act in the play "Karnan" and that they were planning to celebrate her 75th birthday but that sadly, she had been taken away before that.

Holding Her Head High: Jameela Malik (1947-28 January 2020)



The Film and Television Institute of India had an acting course initially as a part of its curriculum. Sometime in 1969 a young Muslim girl decided to apply for the course. The interviews for admission were being held in Madras, at the Adayar institute. There were three judges on the panel. There was the Telugu superstar P Bhanumathi, Vice Principal of FTII Jagat Murari and Tamil director Bhim Singh. Jameela got selected for the acting course.

Jameela belonged to Kollam and had just completed her 10th. Her parents Thankamma Malik and Malik Muhammad were both open to her idea of doing an acting course. Having had an unconventional marriage themselves—her mother was Christian and the father was a Muslim—they encouraged their daughter to choose what she wanted to do. Story goes that they, however, consulted Basheer, the famous writer, who was a close friend of the family who also approved of the idea of her going to Pune. Her mother Thankamma was a Gandhian herself and would not have ever thought of restraining her daughter.

Jameela, in fact, had everything going for her. In the Institute she did not lack the company of Malayalis. The entire Malayali group of future art filmmakers like John Abraham, K G George, Shaji N Karun and K R Mohanan were there with her. When K G George made his diploma film *Faces* he cast Jameela in it and Ramachandra Babu, who would become a much sought after cinematographer, shot the film. There was actor Ravi Menon who would later act in Mani Kaul's *Davidha*, with whom she did a campus film directed by Vishram Bedekar called *Jai Jawan Jai Makan*. She was the only girl in the acting course but she did not feel out of place. While talking about her FTII days she narrated once the incident of Mrinal Sen visiting the Institute in the early seventies. When he entered the class for a lecture he found only one girl. In his inimitable style, he began the lecture

with “One lady and gentlemen...” much to the amusement of the students.

Jameela should have gone places on her return but things did not quite work out for her. She lived in Mumbai for a while trying to get a break but it did not happen. She went to Madras then did her first Malayalam feature film *Ragging*, directed by N N Pisharody, a famous Malayalam film director, which was released in 1973. Before the release of her first film, she got a supporting role in *Aadhyathe Katha* (The Previous Story, 1972) directed by another well-known director K S Sethumadhavan. Her hope that *Ragging* will take her far crashed when *Ragging* flopped. After her return from Madras she had got married but the marriage lasted barely for a year and she was left with a baby boy. She did get a few more films but nothing sensational happened in her career.

Jameela has written about knowing many people in Hindi and Tamil films like Jaya Bachchan who was Jaya Bhaduri then, and in Madras acting with Jayalaitha in the 1980 film *Nadhiyai Thedi Vandha Kadal* (Sea that Came Searching for the River) the debut film of Director B Lenin, son of Bhim Singh and even meeting MGR. But her acting career did not take off. Later she did some television serials on Doordarshan during the nineties. She also began to dub for films. She has written novels and radio plays and she is supposed to have written 12 plays for Akashvani. But for regular work in order to bring up her son she took up the job of a hostel matron and a Hindi school teacher for a living.

Jameela did not lose heart and remained the spirited and independent woman her parents brought her up to be. She made no compromises in her life. It would be worthwhile to collect her writings and publish them because there are not many women like Jameela in the world of cinema. At 73 she died as a woman who held her head high and did not stoop low at any point in her life. That is an achievement not many can boast of.

C S Lakshmi



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Miloon Saryajani, All of Us Together: Vidya Bal (12 January 1937-30 January 2020)



Vidya Bal was a well-known Marathi writer and editor from Maharashtra. She was a social activist particularly in the area of women's equality. She joined the editorial staff of monthly *Stree* in 1964, and then worked for about 20

years as its editor. After leaving the editorship of *Stree*, she wanted to start a feminist journal. Maharashtra Women Writers' Forum made a public appeal to make contribution to start an independent feminist journal in Marathi that would provide a democratic platform to all progressive ideas for women's rights. That is how she founded the monthly *Miloon Saryajani* (All of us Together) in 1989. The name of the magazine was so like Vidya Bal herself. She could interact with everyone across ages.

When the movement of young women for entry into sanctum sanctorum of Shani Shingnapur was initiated in Maharashtra by young women like Trupti Desai in 2016, Vidya along with Pushpa Bhawe went on a hunger strike not because they wanted to enter the temple, but to express their solidarity with the young women spearheading the campaign for temple entry. Vidya Bal was co-petitioner along with activist Neelima Vartak, in the Shani Shingnapur temple issue in the Bombay High Court. When despite Bombay High Court Orders saying that anyone could enter the temple, people had stopped Bhumata Ranragini Brigade leader Trupti Desai and others from entering the temple premises, Vidya Bal spoke to the press referring to the Maharashtra Hindu Places of Public Worship (Entry Authorisation) Act, 1956, and said stopping them was a criminal act.

Kamlaki, the biography she wrote and her novel *Valvantatil Vat* (A Desert Path) are well-known works of hers. Her other literary works are *Sanwad* (Conversation), *Katha Gaurichi* (Story of Gauri), *Tumachya Majhyasathi* (For You and Me), *Aparajitanche Nihshwas* (Aparajita's Confidence) and *Shodh Swatahacha* (Self Realisation).

Vibhuti Patel, feminist activist, who has been a close friend of Vidya Bal, says that her respect for plural perspectives in the women's movement endeared her to all across the ideological spectrum from Gandhians to liberal-socialists and feminists. Recalling her association with her and her memories of her, Vibhuti says: “In 1985, we travelled together for End of the Decade (1975-1985) Nairobi Conference. It was a

long journey with a halt at Addis Ababa while going and returning. I never felt a generation gap in those 10 days of personal and political interactions with her. In the Nairobi Conference, there were feminists of 185 countries. Vidyatai interacted with all them with the spirit of a learner. Vidyatai was always open to new ideas. When I submitted the Report on “Socio-economic Status of Muslims in Maharashtra”, she asked me to write an exhaustive report on Muslim Women’s Status in Maharashtra.”

Vidya Bal’s daughter Dr Vinita Bal, who is a scientist has inherited her mother’s legacy in many ways. She is associated with the Saheli group in Delhi and was instrumental in SPARROW receiving a government grant to do a project on women scientists in India. The demise of Vidya Bal is not Vinita’s personal loss alone; everyone associated with Vidya Bal and known her warmth has lost a great friend. Vidya Bal was a friend of all women in Maharashtra interested in literature, women’s history and women’s struggles for justice in all fields. She was associated with SPARROW in many ways and supported us whenever we needed it. C S Lakshmi has warm memories of sitting with her in her house in Pune for a long interview talking with her about her life and work, especially about *Miloon Saryajani*. A long interview she gave Dr Neera Desai is part of the book *Feminism as Experience: Thoughts and Narratives* by Neera Desai, published by SPARROW. She was 83 and her life was a life spent in committed work for women. SPARROW will miss Vidya Bal for her warmth, encouragement and support.

—Vibhuti Patel & C S Lakshmi

Cabaret Queen of Bengal: Arati Das (1944-6 February 2020)



It is a blessing, indeed, that Arati Das, the famous actor-dancer from Bengal, was able to complete and see the publication of her autobiography *Sandhya Rater Shefali* (Shefali of the Evenings and Nights) before her death at the age of 76 at her Sodepur home in the 24 parganas. It is to be hoped that it will be soon translated into English and other languages so that her story can be heard by people across the linguistic barriers in India and abroad. Also that Konkona Sen Sharma completes the

web series she has planned around Arati’s life and the political and social environment of the Bengal of the 1960s and 1970s.

As it is, little is known about her except for the fact that her screen name was Miss Shephali, that she was popularly known as the ‘Cabaret Queen of Bengal’, that she worked in two films of Satyajit Ray (*Seemabaddha* and *Pratidwandi*) and that in her debut film, *Chowrangee*, she acted with stalwarts like Supriya Devi, Uttam Kumar, Utpal Dutt and Biswajit. Apart from Bangla films, she went on to perform in Hindi films like *Sahib Biwi aur Ghulam*, *Mere Huzoor*, *Baharonki Manzil*, *Heer Ranjha*, *Lal Patthar*, *Caravan*, *Hum Kissi Se Kum Nahi*, and the Odia film *Jaydeb*. Hers is the representative story of the grime and poverty which leads a 12-year-old girl to perform cabaret at the age of 12 in seedy hotels and aspire to a better life for herself and a family dependent through her earnings in films. Some reports also say that her life fell into penury again in her old age.

—Charanjeet Kaur

Mother of Micro-Financing: Vijayalakshmi Das/Viji (1953-9 February 2020)



Viji, as she was affectionately referred to, was called the mother of Indian micro-financing. We have information on the road she took to reach the pioneering micro-financing work she did. We know that her father was a Gandhian and he had a great influence on her and that she was brought up in Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu. We know that her mother and grandmother took up jobs quite unusual for women of their generation. She is lucid in her media interviews when she talks about her commitment to micro-financing and why it is important in a country like ours to understand the lifestyle and real needs of those who seek loans.

Her postgraduate dissertation was on rural economy and the problem of rural indebtedness. In her field work she observed how the low income groups were crushed by informal loans with high interest. Women especially had to depend on informal loans for they did not own property and so could not offer collateral or the formal documents needed for formal loans.

The turning point in her life came when she went to Ahmedabad for advanced studies after her Master’s. Friends of Women’s World Banking (FWWB) had been set up by

Ela Bhatt in 1982 in Ahmedabad. FWWB was promoted in 1981 as an affiliate of Women's World Banking, a global network created to focus on the need for women's direct access to financial services and recognising women's role in building a nation's economy. The aim of FWWB was to "extend and expand informal credit supports and networks within India to link them to a global movement." And towards this FWWB worked by striving to assist "in the formation and strengthening of people's organisations by bringing them into the mainstream of the economy and thereby participating in the process of nation building." Their strategy focussed on "building the capacity of promising and committed people's institutions to play a leading role in providing financial services to the poor."

In 1989 Elaben was looking for the right person to lead FWWB and that is how Viji met her. Piyush Nichat, a Fellow at Transforming India Initiative whose dream is to revolutionise agri-business, has written in his blog in 2019 about meeting Viji. Viji told him about how it is important for the community you are helping to feel that you are one of them. She told him that in the beginning when she was touring around in rural India to strategise her micro-financing work she avoided drinking water in the rural households she visited. When Elaben noticed this she told her to stop doing this. She explained to her each and every person in the community she was working with should be able to connect with her and feel that she is one of them. Viji learnt at a young age that in order to help people it is not enough to have a deep understanding of their problems but one should be open to include them in the decision making process to effectively solve the problems. She told Piyush Nichat that, that was how she was able to help a group of farmers interested in some capital to help them to take the tamarind collected to the market place for direct sale so that they can fetch better returns by eliminating middlemen. Once she was convinced that the farmers had a well-thought-out plan she extended the loans to them and the loans were returned without any problem. Similarly she was able to help the fisherwomen of Kerala who needed small capital loans on an everyday basis to buy fish from the auction and sell them. Since every day capital loans are not given and big loans were squandered by the community, Viji worked out a way of helping them and ensuring that the loans were returned.

Viji dedicated herself to micro-financing and has worked hard for 25 years in the financial inclusion sector. She has said elsewhere that policy makers and formal financial institutions like the banks now recognise that women have an important role to play in the mainstream economy and that ensuring that women have access to resources is

critical for the nation's economy. The nation needs more women like Viji. There is so much more that Viji could have done in micro-financing with her warmth and innovative ways of dealing with communities and women in particular. Viji could have trained and inspired so many young women to take up this difficult task of including women in the nation's economy as active participants. She was only 67 and had many active years ahead of her. It is a pity that we have lost her at this stage when her efforts were proving to be successful and transformative. It is also a loss for an archives like SPARROW that she is not part of our Oral History Collections.

—C S Lakshmi

SPARROW ENTERED ITS SILVER JUBILEE YEAR IN DECEMBER 2013. IN ORDER TO CELEBRATE THIS WE HAD TAKEN A FEW INITIATIVES, ONE OF WHICH WAS 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=PLTxTSSOEwjKbERIPDZ7pjc6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Vimmi Sadarangani & Puthiyamaadhavai

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTSSOEwjKbERIPDZ7pjc6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Jhelum Paranjape

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTSSOEwjKbERIPDZ7pjc6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Purvadhanashree & Ranjana Dave

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGQe116sLySGI55ZhsBEdaH0dnf8q0zc>

Conversation with Sumathi Murthy

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGQe116sLySGI55ZhsBEdaH0dnf8q0zc>

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>

Kaveri Amma: Kishori Ballal (1937/38-18 February 2020)



It is not often that you find an actor who has acted in films in five languages. Kishori Ballal, fondly called Kaveri Amma after her role in the Hindi film *Swades* (2004) directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, was one such actor. She acted in Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Tulu and Konkani films. She was born in Mangalore. She married Sripathi

Ballal, a Bharatnatyam dancer from the Bunt community, who was also from Mangalore, in 1950 when she was hardly 12 or 13. The husband and wife were mentored by none other than the legendary writers Dr Shivaram Karanth and Vysaraya Ballal. After marriage they moved to Mumbai. In 1960 they came into the advertisement field through Durga Khote Productions. In 1960 she also made her debut film *Ivalendha Hendthi* (She is My Wife) directed by G K Mudduraj. After that there was no looking back.

Kishori's husband Sripathi Ballal was also a stage actor and together they played leading roles in many Marathi plays in the seventies which were made in Kannada versions also. The Kannada versions were *Enna Muddina Muddanna* (My Sweet Elder Brother), *Himachalada Hinde* (Behind Himalayas), *Devara Kannu* (God's Eye), *Innilladavaru* (Those Who Are No More) and others. While in the camp of Kannada writer and actor R D Kamath (the author of *Innilladavaru*), Kishori Ballal directed plays also.

While her debut film was *Ivalendha Hendthi* she got a wonderful opportunity to work with the iconic director G V Iyer in the unreleased film *Kudure Motte* (Horse Egg) in 1977. Her role in the mega serial *Ye Jo Hai Zindagi* made her a sought after actor in Kannada serials. Her role as a matriarch in the long running Kannada serial *Amruthavarshini* (Amrutha and Varshini) was much appreciated.

In a career that lasted several decades she acted in more than 70 films with a number of different directors. While her later popular films are mentioned, her earlier films directed by Rajendra Singh Babu like *Muththina Hara* (Pearl Necklace, 1990), *Hoovu Hannu* (Flowers and Fruits, 1993), *Jeevanadhi* (River of Life, 1996) directed by D Rajendra Babu, and other films like *Maisooru Mallige* (Jasmine of Mysore, 1992) directed by T S Naghabharana and *Sparsha* (The Touch, 2000) directed by Sunil Kumar Desai have gone unnoticed.

Some of her popular films in Hindi and Kannada include *Ek Alag Mausam* (A Different Season, 2003) directed by K P

Sasi, *Quick Gun Murugan* (2003) directed by Shashanka Ghosh, *Ambari* (Howdah, 2009) directed by A P Arjun, *Kempe Gowda* (2011) directed by Sudeep, the horror film *Akhramana* (2014) directed by Prashanth Kumar, Kannada crime drama movie *Ring Road* (2015) directed by Priya Belliappa, *Bombay Mittai* (2015) directed by Chandra Mohan and *Kahi* (Bitter, 2016) directed by Arvind Sastry. Her roles in Kannada films *Marma* (Mystery, 2002) directed by Sunil Kumar Desai, dealing with schizophrenia and hallucination, *Akka Thangi* (Sisters, 2008), directed by S Mahendar, *Nannavanu* (He is Mine, 2010) directed by Srinivas Raju, which deals with a revenge story, were much appreciated. *Swades*, of course, made her Kaveri Amma to everyone but her role in Rani Mukherjee's *Aiyyaa* (Sir, 2012) directed by Sachin Kundalkar where she played the role of the hero's mother also won her laurels.

Not many know the interesting fact that in the 1989 Hindi film *Gair Kanooni* directed by Prayag Raj with Sridevi and Govinda in the leading roles, she played as Kishori Ballal, acting as herself! That must have been a great experience to play oneself.

In 1984 Kishori was given the Kannada Rajyotsava award and Kannada Nataka Academy Prashasthi. The year 2005 brought her the best supporting actress award from International Indian Films Academy Awards (IIFAA) for her role in *Swades* and in 2014 she received the Smt. Lakshmi Bai Award for acting instituted by Sri Sahitya Samrajya Mandali.

Kishori Ballal died in Bangalore at the age of 82 after a long innings in the film industry acting in five languages. It will be interesting and informative to trace her Tulu and Konkani films. It will not only provide the history of the films in those two languages but also trace the history of her acting.

—C S Lakshmi

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Peace Was Her Name: Shantha Ramaswami (2 July 1933-23 February 2020)



This is not a tribute as much as a way of revisiting memories of a friend I got to know in the early seventies. She passed away on 23 February 2020 a few months before her 86th birthday. Let us say this is a collage of memories put together for a woman who lived her life quietly in the way best known to her: peacefully.

In the February 1-15, 2015 *Madras Musings* Shantha Ramaswami and her friend Vijaya Subramaniam wrote about their “gang of five” and about their alma mater Queen Mary’s College. I got to know Shantha Ramaswami in very different circumstances. The Indian Airlines Flight 440 was a Chennai-Delhi flight on 31 May 1973 that crashed and caught fire while on approach to Palam Airport killing 48 of the 65 passengers and crew on board. Shantha’s husband K S Ramaswami, who was with *Times of India* was one of the passengers who was killed in the crash. Shantha was offered a job in Indian Council of Historical Research where I worked as a Research Officer in the Grant-in Aid section. Shantha joined as a Research Assistant. She used to drive her car to work. We became good friends in a short while for she was interested in Tamil literature. Although I was ten years younger than her she sought me out whenever she felt like a good chat in Tamil. It was when she invited me home for lunch once that I really got to know her well. She spoke a lot about her life with her husband and one thing she told me then is still etched on my mind. She told me that she started regular work after her husband’s demise but that she had confided in her husband that she would like to take up a job. Both of them prepared her CV for she had been freelancing all along. She used to freelance as a translator for the AIR. She also did some French to English translations and also wrote a little occasionally. She had even applied for a job at National Book Trust. In fact, both of them had flown to Chennai for an interview. She had got back earlier and he was taking a flight. In that trip Shantha had bought a heavy stone griddle for making dosas and had asked her husband to bring it with him in the flight for it was too heavy for her to carry. After the crash the crash site was one heap of ashes, burnt steel and wires. But in the remains was the solid stone griddle unaffected by the fire. I think the recalling of that memory, the tears and the narration that followed brought us much closer. Although I left ICHR in 1974 we kept in touch and

later I visited her at her son Dasarathy’s house at Bangalore. Her daughter-in-law Chitra Dasarathy, the well-known dancer, was composing a dance based on one of my stories and I visited her to watch her dance the composition for me. But I spent more time catching up with Shantha. Many years had passed since our ICHR days but she remained the same warm and friendly person I had known.



In Shantha’s memory the drawing done by her son R Badrinarayan and a personal note of her daughter Sudhamahi Regunathan are included in this tribute. Sudhamahi Regunathan is a former vice chancellor of the Jain Vishva Bharati University in Ladnun, Rajasthan. An author and translator, her books include *Rishabhayan: The Story of the First King* (2014), *The Colours of Desire on the Canvas of Restraint* (2015) and *From One Birth to Another: Stories from Jaina Literature* (2019).

My Mother: My Friend, My Teacher

I had been asked, once earlier, to write about my mother, when I was in school. I was then about six or seven years of age and wrote the following lines: “My mother is tall, thin and beautiful. She cooks nice food for me. My mother teaches me. My mother gets me nice clothes. My mother loves me.”

It is difficult to distance oneself and write about that young girl who did her schooling and college in the different cities of Anantapur, Tellichery, Kumbakonam and Chennai (then Madras). To a storyteller, this information helps in describing her as knowing many languages. Telugu, Malayalam and of course, Tamil which was her mother tongue and in which what she wrote were gathered in her growing years while she learnt French and Italian formally. If she picked up Hindi out of necessity, she tried to learn Bengali out of choice because all her daughters-in-law were fluent in it. It is another matter that any time she was exasperated, she would resort to speaking in French!

Our mother was born to Prof. P R Krishnaswami and Smt. Rajalakshmi as their third and last child on the 2nd of July 1933. My grandfather, an English professor, who my mother herself knew more as the Principal of the colleges he was

posted in, was a very down-to-earth rational man, and his only prophetic act seems to have been that of naming our mother. She lived her name of Shantha, much as life tried to veer her away from it.

Shantha K Devi as she was known in her younger years had a treasure trove in her father's library. Whether it was the very first English novel (*Pamela* by Samuel Richardson which she had found boring) or Jane Austen, Dumas, Dickens, William Wilkie Collins, Baroness Orczy or so many others, she devoured them and they remained her constant companions. She told her many nieces and nephews, then her own children, grandchildren and great grandchildren these stories, often from memory. If she regaled them with the *Three Men in a Boat* she raced through the *Three Musketeers*, held her breath in *The Moonstone*, laughed with Wodehouse and escaped with the Scarlet Pimpernel. She revelled in the *Ramayana* of both Valmiki and Kamban, enjoyed Kalidasa and read out Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* constantly discussing aspects of these grand novels with the endless stream of visitors her hospitality and compassion ensured in her house.

Having secured admission to the prestigious Presidency College, Madras, she gave it up to join Queen Mary's because her friend Vijaya was joining Queen Mary's. Vijaya Subramaniam remained her closest friend till her last day. There were three others: Rajati Sarat, Kamala Kasturi and Shanthasundari. The five of them remained giggling friends through their life.

My father used to tease her, saying if she had taken admission in Presidency she may have met him (though he would have graduated by then). Fed as my mother had been on romance of the likes of *Pride and Prejudice*, she did the next best thing, she met her husband only on the day of her marriage and they promptly fell in love! A love that she cherished for just about twenty years. Leaving four young children in her care, her husband K S Ramaswami, special correspondent *Times of India*, passed on in an air crash on May 31, 1973

Our mother had many a choice to make. Shocked relatives and friends came with many ways in which she could engage herself, emoluments were not the primary concern. She chose her battle. "A high-pressure job," she told my father's colleague Dilip Mukherjee, "would take me away from my kids. They are my priority." (There were four of us: Sudhamahi, R Badrinarayan, Bharat Ramaswami and R Dasarathy.) History being her continuing passion, she joined the Indian Council of Historical Research. (She has told us how she wore a new khadi sari when India attained independence and joyfully attended the ceremony where her father hoisted the national flag. She has also told us how she

cried buckets and experienced a deep sense of loss when they got the news that Mahatma Gandhi had been assassinated).

Her experiences of translating, writing original pieces for Tamil magazines like *Kalki* and *Kanaiyazhi* (of which she was a founding member), she kept aside. Here, among other routine commitments, she translated Irfan Habib's book on Muhammad of Ghazni, enjoyed working in the "Towards Freedom" project, coming out with a voluminous work with Dr Parthasarathi Gupta. Later in her eighties she went back to translation... this time a work of Tamil writer Somasundaram (Mi. Pa. Somu). Among her unpublished translations are stories from Janakiraman, Sarvakan and a book on Dr Abdul Kalam written by his niece in Tamil. She has also translated some writings of Cho for her friend Vijaya, who was her partner in most of her translating ventures.

Soft-spoken and making gentle choices, she hid a woman of steel within her. At a time when society was still unsure how unlucky a woman was if she lost her husband and whether her ill luck was contagious, she stood tall, smiling and confident. Quietly but surely she gave her message to all women, those who had suffered similarly, those who did not know how to think. Elegantly dressed, she drove to work, moved into their own home and continued to paint a picture of romance and moral rectitude as the pleasures of life. Love and sincerity alone were qualifications for her children and grandchildren to choose their spouse.

As for differences, she accepted them in Kalidasa's words, "*loko bhinna ruchihi*" (people are of different tastes). When she was asked if she would like action to be taken against the pilot of our father's ill fated airplane, she replied, "Will that bring my husband back?" "*Vidiyin pizhai*," (destiny's mistake) she would say quoting Kamban.

Her compassion, her understanding; that everyone can make mistakes, her patience with the inefficient, the hurtfulness of poverty and the politics of poverty were some of her pet concerns. She believed in the dignity of human life whoever the person be and so her staff came to her home to turn on music and relax while doing their job.

She maintained a close relationship with the *Ramayana* and read the Sundarakandam everyday but she was also a skeptic... Is there life after life? Is this life all? Is there a God? And even as the question left her lips she was folding her hands in a constant prayer, *sarve jana sukhino bhavantu* (May all be happy).

—C S Lakshmi & Sudhamahi Regunathan



Taking Hindi to the West: Susham Bedi (1 July 1945-20 March 2020)



Susham Bedi has a substantial body of work on, particularly women in the diaspora and the psychological implications of migration and displacement in the form of her 8 novels, and collections of short stories, essays and poems. Her major novels are: *Maine Nata Tora* (I Broke the Ties), *Sarakki Laya* (Rhythm of the Road), *Morche* (Battle fronts), *Shabdon*

Ki Khirkiyan (Words as Windows), *Nava Bhumi Ki Ras-katha* (Epic of the New Land), *Gatha Amerbel Ki* (Song of the Amerbel), *Itar*, (The Other), *Chiriya Aur Cheel* (The Sparrow and the Kite), *Katra Dar Katra* (Drop by Drop), *Lautna*, (Returning), *Havan* (The Fire Sacrifice), and her most well-known novel is *Havan* (1989), which was translated into English by David Rubin and published by Heineman International in 1993. Some of her work has been translated into English, Urdu, French and Dutch and she has been honoured by the Sahitya Akademi Award (2006) and awarded by the Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan (2007).

Susham Bedi, apart from being a writer in Hindi has been an academic, a faculty of the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies at the South India Institute at Columbia University, and she has taught Hindi Language and Literature for 20 years before her retirement. She passed away at the age of 75, due to a respiratory illness, leaving behind her husband, Rahul Bedi and her two children, Purva and Varun.

She moved to the US in 1979, after completing her studies at Delhi University and being awarded her PhD at Panjab University, for her thesis *Innovation and Experimentation in Contemporary Hindi Drama*. She had a successful run in all that she took up: creative and academic theoretical writing, teaching at Columbia and NYU, Consultant for language instruction at several schools in the US, Hindi-Urdu Language Coordinator, Editor of *Vishva*—a quarterly journal published by the International Hindi association, journalist with *Times of India*, *Navbharat Times* and *All India Radio* in India and film and TV actor in India and the US. Some of her notable TV appearances are in *The Big Sick*, *True Crime*, and *Law and Order*, *Special Victims Unit* and in the films *ABCD*, *The Guru*, *A Walk Among the Tombstones*, *Walkaway*, *Loins of Punjab Presents*, *Extrospection*...

What is striking about Susham Bedi is that even though she has been in US academia almost for all her professional life, she chose to write in Hindi rather than in English; thus,

taking Hindi Literature into Western portals of knowledge, and generating a sustained interest literature in Hindi abroad.

Talking about her journey as a writer in an interview available at <http://hindiurduflagship.org/interview/susham-bedi/>, she says that her first serious work of literature was written when she went to Brussels and was comparatively free from family and domestic commitments, pointing to the fact that as a woman she could find her 'space' only when she could free herself—a reiteration that a writer needs what Virginia Woolf refers to metaphorically as 'a room of one's own'. But even though this kind of isolation is important for her as a writer, she also says that her main inspiration comes from the people around her, especially ordinary women and the younger generation who struggle with the vicissitudes of migrant life.

—Charanjeet Kaur

The Doe-Eyed Beauty: Nimmi (18 February 1933-25 March 2020)



The first film I remember seeing with Nimmi in the lead role was *Amar* (1954). I was ten years old and the image that stayed in my mind was Nimmi with her droopy eyes beginning the song *Na milta gham toh barbadi ke afsane kahan jaate* with the lines *Ho tamanna lut gayi phir bhi tere dam se mohabbat hai...* And that Nimmi stayed in one's mind. In later years one got to

know more about Nimmi, the actor and the person. Her real name was Nawab Banoo. And her life story also reads like a film script. Her mother Wahidan was a courtesan, a singer and an actress. Nimmi was born in Agra. Wahidan knew quite a few people in the film industry. Nimmi's father, Abdul Hakim, was a military contractor. Before Nimmi could be groomed as an artiste, her mother died. Nimmi was only 11 years old. She went to Abbottabad near Rawalpindi to live with her maternal grandmother. After the Partition Abbotabad became part of Pakistan. Her grandmother decided to come to Mumbai. A year later Mehboob Khan, with whom her mother had worked, invited the young Nimmi to the sets of his latest production *Andaz* at Central Studios. That is where she met Raj Kapoor who was looking for a young girl to play the role of an innocent shepherdess. He thought Nimmi would be perfect for that role. He cast her in the film *Barsaat* (1949) and the rest is history.

Nawab Banoo became the doe-eyed Nimmi of the Hindi film industry. She acted in many films like *Sazaa* (1951), India's

first technicolor film *Aan* (1952), *Amar* (1954), *Uran Khatola* (1955), *Kundan* (1955), *Bhai-Bhai* (1956), *Basant Bahar* (1956), *Char Dil Char Raahen* (1959), *Mere Mehboob* (1963), *Pooja Ke Phool* (1964) and *Aakashdeep* (1965). She acted with some of the best heroes of her time like Dev Anand, Sohrab Modi, Dilip Kumar, Bharat Bhushan, Raj Kapoor, Ashok Kumar and Kishore Kumar.

Story goes that when Mehboob Khan was making *Mother India* (it was supposed to be a kind of strong retort to Katherine Mayo's 1927 book *Mother India* which ridiculed Indian culture and its regressive ways) he had already spent forty lakhs on the film but desperately needed more money to complete the film. When Nimmi heard about this she tied bundles of notes in her *pollu* and reached his office. She gave the manager the money and told him, "*Picture jaroor banani chahiye; lekin, Mehboob Saheb ko na batayiyega ki Nimmi ne rupaye diye hain*" (the picture must be completed; but don't tell Mehboob Saheb that the money has come from Nimmi). That was her way of repaying Mehboob Khan.

Those were different times and the Hindi film industry had different people then. Nimmi married S Ali Raza who was a script writer in the Mehboob Studios. Nimmi lived a long life and the end came after a prolonged illness just a month after she had entered her 88th year. As I write this the songs *Na milta gham toh barbadi ke afsane kahan jaate* from *Amar* and *Nain mile chain kahan dil hai wahi tu hai jaha* from *Basant Bahar* are playing in my mind and the doe-eyed Nimmi singing those songs is the Nimmi who remains in the memories of many of that generation.

A Death without Dirges: Paravai Muniyamma (25/26 June 1937-29 March 2020)



Octogenarian folk singer Paravai Muniyamma passed away due to old age after being ill for a while. Many people came to know about Paravai Muniyamma after she came into films with her first appearance in hero

Vikram's film *Dhool* (Awesome 2003). She appeared as the rural character she was in real life and sang her extempore folk songs and acted in some 84 films. She also did a cookery show in Kalaigyar T V demonstrating village cuisine. She was awarded the Kalaimamani award by the Tamil Nadu State government in 2019 and at one point when she was really undergoing financial strains the then Chief Minister Jayalaita granted six lakhs to her to be put in fixed deposit so that she can support herself from the interest accruing from it. She has three sons and three daughters. One of her sons is retarded and that was her constant worry. These are general facts about her life which people following Tamil film related news know. But those in the village areas in Madurai know Paravai Muniyamma differently. A post written in Facebook by Muthurasa Kumar, a journalist, revealed much more about Muniyamma and her place among the folk singers of Tamil Nadu. He says that until a few years ago, in all the temple festivals and mourning events one could hear Muniyamma's songs on local deities, "themmangu" style folk songs and dirges. The folk performance of *Naiyandi Melam* performed during festivals with leather percussion instruments done with Muniyamma's *Karuppasamy* songs used to take the temple festivals to a different level altogether. Muniyamma has performed in many villages all over Tamil Nadu. Later when reel cassettes became popular, T-series cassettes with her recorded songs called *A Fragrance of the Village* became immensely popular. Muthurasa Kumar says that his mother used to listen to the cassettes very often. When his mother died fourteen years ago it was Paravai Muniyamma's songs that were running on the Philips tape recorder placed near her. Paravai Muniyamma's songs and dirges were close to the heart of many women in the villages. That she had to die during Covid times with no one to sing dirges for her is the tragedy of these pandemic times says Muthurasa Kumar and that statement contains the stark truth of the Covid times.

—C S Lakshmi

—Charanjeet Kaur

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.

A South African Indian Scientist Whom COVID Got: Dr Gita Ramjee (née Parekh) FRCPE (8 April 1956-31 March 2020)



Gita Parekh was born in Uganda and she grew up in Colonial Uganda. Her family was one of those driven into exile under Idi Amin in the 1970s. After completing her High School in India she did her further studies at the University of Sunderland in England graduating in 1980 with a BSc (Hons) in Chemistry and Physiology. She moved to Durban after her marriage to South African-Indian fellow student Praveen Ramjee. She began her career in the Department of Paediatrics at the Medical School of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She completed her Master's and later her PhD in 1994. A researcher in HIV prevention, she was awarded the 'Outstanding Female Scientist' award from the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership in 2018 for her outstanding work. The previous year, she had received the 2017 MRC Scientific Merit Award gold medal.

Gita Ramjee had just returned from London where she had gone to deliver a lecture at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine on 17 March 2020, entitled 'HIV: Diverse challenges among children and women in Asia and Africa'. She was hospitalised when she felt unwell on her return to South Africa. Unfortunately, she passed away in Umhlanga, Durban, South Africa, because of COVID-19 related complications.

As reviewer and editor of many scientific journals and as an academic she had a lot more to contribute to science and society. It is unfortunate that her scientific contribution was cut short by COVID-19.

Begum Akhtar's Daughter: Shanti Hiranand (1932-10 April 2020)



We remember Shanti Hiranand as the author of *Begum Akhtar: The Story of My Ammi*, published in 2005. In 2007 she was honoured with a Padma Shri for her contribution to Hindustani music. She had learnt thumri, dadra and ghazal under Begum Akhtar but she had a musical history of her own before that. She was born into a

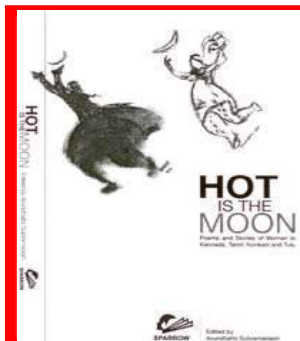
Sindhi business family based in Lucknow. She had studied music at the Bhatkhande Music Institute at Lucknow. Her debut music performance was for the radio in Lahore at the young age of 15. After Partition the family came to Lucknow and she continued to train under Ustad Aijaz Hussain Khan of Rampur. In 1952, she sang for the Akashvani Lucknow and it was after this that she approached Begum Akhtar requesting to be her student.

Shanti Hiranand was a much loved teacher of music and she also wrote her own ghazals in Urdu. She had a voice that touched the soul and a way of teaching that reached out to the romantic poet and singer in each student, according to her student Vidya Shah who wrote a tribute to her in *The Wire* on 13 April 2020.

It seems Begum Akhtar had once said, 'If you want to hear my music after my death, hear it through Shanti's singing.' Shanti Hiranand kept her Ammi's music alive along with her own music. During the lockdown many famous people have passed away and their admirers have not had a chance to bid them a final farewell. Shanti Hiranand's students and admirers also could not pay their respects to her when she was cremated in Gurugram.

C S Lakshmi

C S Lakshmi



HOT IS THE MOON is the first in a series of 5 volumes to be published with the writings of 87 writers from 23 languages and excerpts from interviews with them. Each volume will contain translated works of poets and short-story writers from four to five languages. Bharati Kapadia, well known painter and a friend of SPARROW, has done the cover and all the drawings. **HOT IS THE MOON** contains translated works from four languages: Kannada, Tamil, Konkani, Tulu

KANNADA writers include: Banu Mustaq, Kanaka Ha Ma, Mithra Venkatraj Tulasi Venugopal, Vaidehi. **TAMIL writers** include: Bama, Kutti Revathi Salma Malathy Maitri, Vaasanthi. **KONKANI writers** include: Hema Naik and Jayanti Naik. **TULU writers include:** M Janaki Brahmavara and Suneetha Shetty.

A Pioneering Journalist: Gulshan Ewing (1928-18 April 2020)



Gulshan Ewing was a name known practically to most women (and men) who read popular English magazines in Mumbai of the seventies and eighties. Between 1966 and 1979 she edited two of India's most popular magazines—women's journal *Eve's Weekly* and film magazine *Star & Style*. She was so popular that V S Naipaul in his book *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), called her as "India's most famous female editor".

She belonged to a Parsi family and was one of the first few women who took up journalism. She became a pioneering journalist when she became editor of two magazines after working in a few other magazines. *Eve's Weekly* was a traditional women's magazine with fashion news, beauty tips, recipes, and romantic stories. But in the seventies when young journalists appointed and mentored by her wanted to write about contemporary issues that affected women like rape, domestic violence and child abuse Gulshan Ewing made that possible.

As the editor of *Eve's Weekly* and *Star & Style* Gulshan Ewing had the opportunity to meet and interact with luminaries of that time. She interviewed and wrote about all the famous Bollywood and Hollywood actors and other celebrities of the period. As a celebrity editor she hobnobbed with the most famous people including her favourite Gregory Peck and others like Alfred Hitchcock, Danny Kaye and Prince Charles. In Bollywood she had easy access to everyone from Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor to Amitabh Bachchan. She was the only journalist to whom Indira Gandhi gave the longest-ever interview.

She married Guy Ewing, a British journalist, in 1955 and moved to England in 1990. After 1990 she took a complete break from her journalistic career. She was 92 when she passed away, a victim of COVID. An autobiography or biography of her life would have covered an entire post-Independence period and women's life during that period but that never happened. Maybe her daughter Anjali Ewing will decide to write about her mother, her life and journalistic career.

—C S Lakshmi



The Stage as Life: Usha Ganguly (1945-23 April 2020)



That Usha Ganguly remained a "rangakarmee" all her life those familiar with theatre know. As a theatre director and actor her activism was through theatre. Her family hailed from Nerva, Uttar Pradesh but lived in Jodhpur, Rajasthan which is where she was born. As a young girl Usha learnt Bharatanatyam. The family later moved to Kolkata, where she studied at Shri Shikshayatan College. She did her Master's in Hindi literature. Her career began as a Hindi lecturer at Bhowanipur Education Society College and she remained an educationist until her retirement in 2008. Her passion for theatre was pursued along with her career as a teacher.

Her debut performance was in 1970, as the courtesan Vasantsena in *Mitti ki Gadi* (Clay Cart), a Hindi adaptation of Sudraka's *Mrichchhakatikam* produced by Sangeet Kala Mandir of Kolkata. She founded *Rangakarmee* theatre group in 1976 in Kolkata to spearhead Hindi theatre in Kolkata although they also performed Bengali plays. In the 1980s Usha Ganguly began to direct plays and she did ensemble work with large casts of young people. Ensemble work needs not only discipline but also dynamism and energy all of which Usha had. The Hindi theatre was revived because of the untiring efforts of Usha Ganguly. Her important productions included *Mahabhoj* (Great Feast) in 1984, based on Mannu Bhandari's novel with the same name, Ratnakar Matkari's *Lokkatha* (Folktale) in 1987, *Holi* by playwright Mahesh Elkunchwar in 1989, and *Rudali* (1992), a story by Mahashweta Devi, *Himmat Mai*, an adaptation of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Court Martial* written by playwright Swadesh Deepak. She wrote a play *Kashinama* (2003), based on Kaane Kaun Kumati Lagi (Poisoning the Ear) from the classic work *Kashi Ka Assi* (The Assi Colony of Kashi) by Kashinath Singh. An original play *Khoj* (Search) was also written by her.

Despite many different plays it is for her play *Rudali*, based on Mahashweta Devi's story on professional mourners, that she is most remembered for. Usha Ganguly performed *Rudali* first in 1992. The play was designed like a picture in black. Often Usha also gave solo performances of extracts from the play. For many years *Rudali* was performed to packed houses. The story *Rudali* has been seen as feminist by many but Usha Ganguly herself did not want to use the term. In Anjum Katyal's article "The Metamorphosis of Rudali" for

Seagull Theatre Quarterly (Issue 1) she speaks about this to Anjum Katyal: “I feel that I differ from the way people tend to use the term feminism. This term has nowadays become a fashionable one, and I don’t believe in a particular brand of feminism. Therefore I don’t want the play (*Rudali*) to be labelled as feminist. On the other hand, I believe in the liberation of women and their freedom, and I’m trying my best as a person, as a teacher and as a theatre worker, to work towards that.” She also spoke about what the characters Sanichari and Bikhni meant to her: “Sanichari and Bikhni don’t appeal to me simply because they belong to a different class. There is something very human in them, and that breaks the class barrier. Everybody is able to communicate with them, their struggle becomes everybody’s struggle ... I strongly believe that *Rudali* is a women’s text. I believe that the Indian woman, whether it’s Sanichari or someone from the middle or upper class, is highly exploited in our society. Somehow in *Rudali*, I see Sanichari protesting against society as a whole. Somebody told me that *Rudali* is a play about a village. I don’t agree. It is not about a particular village or a city or even about a particular character, but about all of us: Sanichari represents women in general. It is the humanistic element that makes it acceptable to all of us...”

Rangakarmee’s reputation as an acclaimed theatre company was proved when in 2005, Rangakarmee was the only Indian theatre group to perform at the Theatre der Welt Festival in Stuttgart, Germany. Usha Ganguli also ventured into film script writing when she worked on the script of *Raincoat* (2004), a Hindi film based on O Henry’s *The Gift of the Magi*, directed by Rituparno Ghosh.

She was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Direction, in 1998. She was also honoured by the West Bengal Government as the best actress for the play *Gudia Ghar* (Doll’s House), a Hindi adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, directed by Tripti Mitra, one of the early directors of Rangakarmee.

Usha Ganguly packed her life with many things but theatre remained her eternal passion until the end. Such a life can only be celebrated with a play in her memory. Maybe young theatre directors are already thinking of one.

—C S Lakshmi

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.

Life As Her Subject: Zarina Hashmi (16 July 1937-25 April 2020)



Zarina Hashmi, an Indian American artist and printmaker, worked in various mediums like intaglio, woodblocks, lithography and silk screen; she has also created works using puncturing, scratching, weaving and sewing on paper, and sculpture in diverse media like bronze, aluminium, tin, steel, wood and paper pulp.

Associated with the Minimalist Movement, Zarina evokes spirituality through her geometric and abstract forms, which show strong Islamic influences. The major works for which she is remembered include *Home is a Foreign Place*, *These Cities Blotted into the Wilderness*, *Countries* and *Dividing Line*. Beginning in 1968, she has exhibited her work in international forums, in solo and group exhibitions, and her work is featured in the permanent collections in Tate Modern, London; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and The Menil Collection, Houston. Some of her last exhibitions from 2019 to 2020 were at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St Louis, MO, Harvard Art Museums and Kettle’s Yard, UK.

Zarina was the daughter of Sheikh Abdur Rashid, a History professor at Aligarh Muslim University and Fahmida Begum (who was from Sialkot), and she had a blissful and supportive childhood; the youngest of 4 siblings, she shared a particularly close relationship, throughout her life with her sister Rani, who influenced her work and with whom she collaborated on various art projects. Her interest in topology and architecture began in childhood at the age of 5, when her father took her for an airplane ride and she was mesmerised by the sight of Aligarh from above. Her love for flying led her to joining the Delhi Flying Club and remained a passion all her life.

Widely travelled, because of the postings of her husband, Saad Hashmi, who was in the foreign service, she etches her experiences in her art and writes about them with sensitive lyricism. Images of the cities she made her home—Aligarh, Bangkok, Delhi, Paris, Bonn, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Santa Cruz, New York and London—abound in her art and her writing. And there is always this quest and strain of nostalgia for the home which she left behind at the time of her marriage when she was 21. In *Cities I Called Home* (2010),

she writes:

I have learned a lot from my wanderings around the world and have always been very curious about how other people live. Now, in my old age, I want to go back to where I started. I often wonder what my life would have been like had I never left my house of four walls in India.

Multiple Awards came her way in the 50 years of her active career, beginning with The President's Award for Printmaking (India) in 1969, followed by Fellowships in Tokyo, New York, Morocco, and Residencies in various prestigious Art Centres in the US. Just two years before her death she was the artist in Residence at Asian/Pacific/American Institute at the New York University in 2017-2018. Zarina was one of four artists/artist-groups to represent India in its first entry at the Venice Biennale in 2011 and also on the editorial board of the feminist art journal *Heresies*. She passed away at the age of 83, after being afflicted with Alzheimer's, leaving behind a rich legacy, woven together with imagination and memory:

Memory is the only lasting possession we have. I have made my life the subject of my work, using the images of home, the places I have visited, and the stars I have looked up to. I just want a reminder that I did not imagine

—Charanjeet Kaur

Walking for the Nation: Hema Bharali (19 February 1919-29 April 2020)



We always imagine freedom fighters, especially women, as those who have come out of their homes to the public sphere, done their duty for the nation, and have later returned to their homes to be good daughters, wives and mothers. The fact is that the lives and deaths of many women freedom fighters

disprove this assumption. Hema Bharali's life can be presented as an example of this. We live in times when freedom fighters are referred to as "freedom activists" in Wikipedia and all the newspapers follow suit. Hema Bharali was a lifelong Gandhian who chose not to marry so she could work for the cause of the nation. When she dies two months after she turns 101 after a long life marked by ceaseless efforts to serve her country, we casually refer to her as a "freedom activist" and social worker.

Hema Bharali's exemplary life deserves to be told in great detail. Hema Bharali was born in 1919 in a remote village near Dhakuakhana in Lakhimpur and her family belonged to the Chutia community. Many may mistake the name of the community for a Hindi expletive used freely, but pronounced "Sutiya" Chutia is one of the oldest indigenous communities of the Assam State. Those who belong to the community speak the Assamese language and most of them are followers of Eka Sarana Naam Dharma (Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism), though they were ardent followers of Tamreshwari or Kesaikhaiti Devi (a form of Goddess Parvati) in medieval times. Coming from such an illustrious community it is not surprising that Hema Bharali was attracted to the teachings of Gandhi. We only know that she took to social work at an early age but we don't know much about either her parents or her family. Writing about her in *The Sentinel* e-paper published from Guwahati, Samudra Gupta Kashyap says that she was a direct student of Gandhiji at the Wardha Ashram. She was in the last batch of students under Gandhiji, but their course remained incomplete as Gandhiji had to rush to different places that were hit by senseless communal violence after Partition.

She was inspired by the legendary Gandhian and social worker Amalprava Das of Assam who had set up the Kasturba Ashram at Sarania. Also deeply inspired by the ideology of Acharya Vinoba Bhave, she led several *padayatra* programmes in several parts of Assam to not only promote the cause of voluntary land donation but through that to kindle the spirit of nationalism, voluntarism and patriotism. These marches on foot were an effort to reach out to many including illiterate and semi-literate women and to create an awareness in them about national integration and the importance of environment. The knowledge of forests being a crucial part of the environment which was an integral factor of development of the nation was a message these foot-marchers like Hema Bharali carried with them.

As part of the Akhil Bharat Mahila Lok Yatra, she took part in a number of similar marches across the country and even in parts of Nepal and Sri Lanka. Associated with the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust, she was deeply involved in the work to uplift the life of women and other marginalised sections of society. She was also a founder member of the executive council of the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB). Writing about her movingly in his tribute to her in *The Sentinel* Samudra Gupta Kashyap says there was not one cause but several causes that she dedicated her life to and that till her last day she could not say no to take up a cause. Listing in detail her work and her dedicated life he says she was "in rural development, in spreading of basic education, in enforcing prohibition, in weaning away village

folks from opium, in involving youth in voluntary work, in removal of social discrimination, in empowerment of women and children, in securing social justice and above all, in promoting peace and non-violence.... [She was] in Lakhimpur-Dhemaji when the great earthquake of 1950 had caused immense devastation and suffering; in Guwahati in 1956 to set up the pioneering Asam Shishu Kalyan Sadan at Sundarbori; in Nagaon in 1960 when the language disturbance had led to riots; in Tezpur in 1962 when the government had disappeared as the Chinese troops had advanced as close as Rupa; across India, Nepal and Sri Lanka in 1967-68 as a member of the Akhil Bharatiya Mahila Lok-Yatra; in Chamaria in South Kamrup in 1981 when suspected illegal migrants had set afire several indigenous villages and in Kokrajhar in 1996 when ethnic violence had rendered lakhs of people homeless..."

In 1996 when she reached Kokrajhar to deal with the ethnic violence there this Gandhian freedom fighter was 77 and still continuing her work for the nation. It was only in 2005 when she was 86 that the government chose to give her the Padma Shri award which she gracefully accepted unlike her inspirer Amalprava Das who declined both the Padma Shri award in 1954 and the Padma Vibhushan award in 1955. In 2006, Hema Bharali was awarded the National Communal Harmony Award by the National Foundation for Communal Harmony of the Ministry of Home Affairs. She also received the Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed Memorial Award for National Integration from the Assam government.

Lives of women like Hema Bharali not only inspire us to work harder but also teach us to work for causes we deeply believe in not in the hope of awards but for our own personal fulfillment.

—C S Lakshmi

Daring to Dream: Kundanika Kapadia (11 January 1927-30 April 2020)



Sometime before 2005 Dr Neera Desai, Divya Pandey and a few others including me from SPARROW, decided to go to Nandigram at Valsad, to meet Kundanika Kapadia and Makarand Dave and to see the work being done there. It was a memorable experience. I had read Kundanika Kapadia's *Seven Steps in the Sky* (*Sat*

Pagala Akashma) and some of her other works and also knew that she was an icon in Gujarati literature. But meeting her in person was another experience altogether. She seemed to be aware of her icon status but at the same time seemed open to listen to the experiences in life and literature of others. For someone who had participated in the Quit India Movement, had graduated in the late forties, done translations, married a person of her choice and written path-breaking novels and stories which delved into philosophy, music and nature, she was very unassuming and eager to share the story of her life and her work with the tribals, with those of us who had gathered there.

In soft tones she told us about her education and about marrying the Gujarati poet Makarand Dave in 1968. They had opted out of parenthood. She had co-founded Nandigram, an ashram near Vankal village near Valsad, with him in 1985. Many writers like Himanshi Shelat had acquired living space in the Ashram and the Ashram was conceived as an ideal place for keeping far away from the madding crowd of cities, doing some meaningful work and reflecting upon life. The Ashram was a place to take up projects for rural development, set up an educational campus to teach art and crafts and computer and also set up a dispensary that people could access.

Kundanika Kapadia received several awards from the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad and the Gujarat Sahitya Akademi. Her collection of essays on nature, *Chandra Tara Vriksh Vadal* (Moon, Stars, Tree and Cloud, 1988) won her the Gujarat Sahitya Akademi prize. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for Gujarati in 1985 for her novel *Sat Pagala Akashma* (Seven Steps in the Sky, 1984). She received the Dhanji Kanji Gandhi Suvarna Chandrak in 1984.

While she took up many different activities it looks like literature remained Kundanika Kapadia's first love. For the death anniversary of Makarand Dave she invited Varsha Adalja, another great writer, to come and read excerpts from her novel *Crossroad*. In her tribute to her in *Ahmedabad Mirror*, dated May 1, 2020, Varsha Adalja refers to her as the



person who inspired younger women to dare to dream. After 93 long years of living a meaningful life with nature and with thoughts on philosophy Kundanika Kapadia passed away peacefully at Nandigram Ashram fifteen years after her loving husband Makarand Dave.

—C S Lakshmi

Ubhaya Gaana Vidushi: Shyamala Bhave (14 March 1941-22 May 2020)



All those who lived in Bengaluru and were interested in music knew about Shyamala Bhave. She sang both Hindustani and Carnatic music. Her family was a musical family. Her father Govind Vitthal Bhave was a student of Vishnu Digambar Paluskar. Her mother Lakshmi Bhave was also a musician.

It was her father who had trained her in music and later she was tutored in the Carnatic stream by noted vocalists A Subbaraya and B Doreswamy. Shyamala Bhave was considered a child prodigy for she won a music competition at the age of 6 and started giving music performances at the age of 12. She was bestowed with the title of Ubhaya Gaana Vidushi (expert in both styles) by Sir M Visvesvaraya, the 19th Diwan of Mysore. Shyamalatai composed music for songs in 9 languages including Hindi and Sanskrit. She composed music for India's first Sanskrit serial *Kadambari*. She had also composed music for some films, including the first Sanskrit film *Adi Shankaracharya*. From 1997 to 2001 she served at the Karnataka Sangeeta Nrithya Academy. She was honoured with the Karnataka Rajyotsava Award.

A life filled with music came to an end but it leaves behind so many musical memories.

—C S Lakshmi



When Dreams Die: Preksha Mehta (5 July 1994-25 May 2020)




When young people choose to end their lives it shows how much depression has taken hold of the lives of young actors in the Hindi film industry and television industry. Preksha Mehta was a young television actor. She has acted in television serials like *Meri Durga*

and *Laal Ishq*. The latest serial she was acting in was *Crime Patrol*. Due to the COVID lockdown she had gone to her native place Indore and it is here that she decided to hang herself on the night of May 25th. Her body was discovered the next day and even though she was rushed to the hospital by her father she was declared dead on arrival. The Hindi feature film *Sakha* (Friend) that she has acted in is yet to be released.

It is reported that before hanging herself she had posted a message on her Instagram Stories saying “*Sabse bura hota hai sapnoka mar jaana* (The worst thing is when dreams die).” In a one page suicide note also she had written: “*Mere toote huye sapno ne mere confidence ka dam tod diya hai, main mare huye sapnon ke saath nahi jee sakti. Iss negativity ke saath rehna mushkil hai. Pichle ek saal se maine bohot koshish ki. Ab mein thak gayi hoon* (My shattered dreams have broken my confidence; I can't live with dead dreams. It is difficult to live in this negativity. I have been trying since past one year. I am tired now).”

It looks like depression is a virus that is worse than the corona virus.

—C S Lakshmi



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**Chronicling the Film World: Lalita Tamhane
(14 November 1959-30 May 2020)**



Film journalism is generally seen as sleazy writing that sensationalises the lives of film stars and news about the film world to keep the gossip mill going. Lalita Tamhane was a film journalist who was different. Lalita Tamhane started her career in film journalism with *Chitrananda* magazine. She

began to write differently, in a realistic manner, about the film world and the film stars. After *Chitrananda*, she began to freelance in Vidyadhar Gokhale's *Chitrarang*. She also edited *Loksatta's Lokmudra* supplement. After giving up her job in a newspaper, she was associated with Prasad Mahadkar's *Jivangani*.

A few years ago she was diagnosed with cancer but that did not deter her from continuing to write even while fighting cancer. Her books *Nutan: Asen Mi Nasen Mi* (*Nutan: I May Be There Or I May Not*), *Smita, Smit Ani Me* (*Smita, Smile and I*) *Tenchi Priya* (*Ten's Priya* referring to Tendulkar as Ten as he was fondly called in the Marathi literary world) and two volumes of *Chanderi Soneri* (*Silvery and Golden*) on the film world ran into several editions and were very popular. She also wrote two novels: *Ujalalya Dahi Disha* (*All Ten Directions Lit Up*, 2016), *Jhale Mokhale Aabhal* (*The Sky Became Clear*, 2015)

Where journalism that caters to gossip gets easy recognition and fame, Lalita Tamhane chose to write about the reality of the film world. It is a pity she succumbed to cancer.

—C S Lakshmi & Sharmila Sontakke



SPARROW BOOKS

Olinda Pereira (15 August 1925-31 May 2020)



The youngest daughter of Martin and Lily Pereira, Olinda Pereira, who hailed from Falnir, Mangalore, went on to become a major educationalist and social worker, primarily associated with the Daughters of the Heart of Mary (DHM) as a nun. She worked with Maria Paiva Couceiro and Maguerida

Lancaster, to establish and strengthen the Indian Provincialate of DHM in Goa in 1951, and with her constant interaction with academics, community leaders and bureaucrats helped to raise funds, and set up a number of community outreach service agencies such as the Urban Community Development Centre, the Fibre Centre, School for the Blind, Home Science Institute, Family Service Agency, and Anganwadi Training Centre in and around Mangalore. Today DHM has 27 Centres all over India.

Olinda, after completing her graduation and teachers training, joined BHU for her MA in Psychology and earned her PhD degree at Mysore University on the adjustment problems of pre-adolescent. After a 12-year stint as a teacher, she joined the French religious congregation DHM and travelled to Paris in 1961 for her religious initiation. On her return she was one of the founding members of School of Social Work, Roshni Nilaya, which she headed as Founder Principal from 1961 to 1982. During her tenure, the College grew into a research centre offering degrees up to the doctoral level in Social Work, Counselling, Criminology and Forensic Science. Post retirement, Dr Olinda established the Institute for Working Women's Hostel and Women's Development Centre in Delhi. She stayed in Delhi until 1991 and was then transferred to Nairobi where she set up a new Provincial House, returning to Delhi in 1994. In 1998, she founded the Vishwas Trust to cater to the needs of the elderly, with a 24-hour dedicated helpline for counselling, training of care givers and general assistance for them.

Her services to the community and to the cause of education were well recognised. The awards that came her way include the Mahatma Gandhi Peace Award by McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada (1979), Women Achiever Award by St Agnes College (1997), Sandesha Award for Social Service (2002), Rachana Woman of the Year (2008), the prestigious *Abbakka* award by the Veerarani Abbakka Utsava Samitiin (2011), The Outstanding Community Leader for the year 2013-2014 by The International Institute for Public Policy (IIPP), and the Karavali Honorary Award (2015-'16).

Remembering Dr Olinda fondly on her 90th birthday, one of her past students, Dr Henry J D'Souza, of the Professor Grace Abbot School of Social Work, University of Nebraska at Omaha, USA, paid rich tributes to her in the following words: As an indebted recipient of her generosity and grace, I am, and will always remain, grateful to Dr Olinda Pereira. She is, indeed a blessing—Punya Athma—not only to me, but also to the community of Mangalur and has exemplified the Roshni Nilaya motto adopted from Tagore: “Love is made fruitful in service.”

—Charanjeet Kaur

A Rare Academic: Vijaya Ramaswamy (1958-1 June 2020)



SPARROW was hoping that Vijaya Ramaswamy would be one of the consultants for the project on women and religion that we have been planning to do. She had retired as chairperson from the Centre for Historical Studies and was holding the Tagore Fellowship at the Indian Institute for Advanced Study,

Shimla. We were hoping she would now have the time to guide us in this project. But her sudden death due to pneumonia and myocardial infarction at the age of 67 has plunged her students and everyone who knew her, into gloom.

Vijaya Ramaswamy's sister Lalitha Ramaswamy was in my batch when I registered for a PhD in the Indian Institute of International Studies which later got affiliated to Jawaharlal Nehru University. Lalitha got married and did not continue her doctoral studies. I remembered the connection with the family when Vijaya's mother Sethu Ramaswamy, persuaded by Vijaya, wrote her autobiography *Bride at Ten, Mother at Fifteen*, which I got to review. Sethu Ramaswamy mentions Vijaya as the scholar of the family. Of course, all those involved in Women's Studies were familiar with the works of Vijaya Ramaswamy. Her familiarity with many languages like Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Hindi and Sanskrit and her own spiritual inclination made her language very different from the normal dry academic language and discourse and brought her works closer to those in Women's Studies who were interested in understanding women's lives and histories through women's own writings, quests and life stories. *Divinity and Deviance: Women in Virasaivism* (1996), *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India* (1997; 2007) and

Neelambikai Ammaiyar: Profile of a Marginal Player (2014) were her books which brought fresh insights and approach to women's diverse spiritual quests. She won the Best Woman Historian Award in 2000 for her book *Walking Naked*.

She had begun her research with craft workers. Her doctoral research was on textile workers of South India which later was published as *Textiles and Weavers in South India* (1985; 2006). She went back to her doctoral area of research to research on weaver folk traditions involving their evolution as weaving communities and the stories and songs of their lives and published the book *Song of the Loom* (2013).

There were also other areas of research that she took up that not only expanded her range of work but became important reference books for researchers in history. *Women and Work in Precolonial India* (2016) was an anthology she edited. A pioneering work of hers was *A Historical Dictionary of the Tamils* (2007).

Vijaya Ramaswamy was a rare combination of academic brilliance and warmth. Her death is not only a loss to all those who knew her personally as a teacher and colleague but also to those who read her and appreciated her.

—C S Lakshmi

Olandatana, Crossing Over: Leela Patil (28 May 1927-15 June 2020)



A daughter who was bitter about a father who was a famous writer but a callous one who left his wife Manorama and his children to marry a student of his, twenty-two years younger than him, could have lived all her life traumatised by this act of betrayal, wallowing in self-pity. But Leela Patil,

was made of sterner stuff. While crossing the road of her life to the other safer and meaningful side, she did her BA from Mumbai University and went on to do her BEd from Pune University. Throughout her student days from 1942-46 she was active in Sevalal and also took part in the 1942 Movement. When it came to marriage she chose a person of her choice. She married Bapu Saheb Patil, a social worker like her, from Kolhapur. It was an inter-caste marriage. Even as principal of the College of Education she continued to be passionate about education and did not allow anything to deter her from her path. Not even the death of her beloved son who died in an accident in 1973. Leela Patil plunged deeper into activism to overcome the loss of a son. Apart from being active in educational organisations she guided

organisations like Mahila Dakshata Samiti. She served as Principal for 28 years and with her retirement benefits and whatever prize money she had received in various awards she founded the Srujan Anand Vidyalaya and dedicated rest of her active life in educating poor and helpless children of Kolhapur and also creating public awareness regarding education for children. Principal Leelatai Patil established Srujan Anand Vidyalaya to give new direction to education in Maharashtra. This school was founded on June 1, 1985. It was a Marathi medium school catering to classes 1 to 4. Since the last 30 years Srujan Anand is working towards a more creative way of educating students. Many women and men came forward to offer their time, talent, skills and contacts free of cost for this experimental school. The education system of the school followed the "Antarbharati" model of Sane Guruji. The idea of education was not to spoon feed children with information but to develop their critical thinking. The school used interactive method of teaching and learning. Hence members from the police department, medical helpers, carpenters and firemen were invited to the school to talk about what their work involved. Famous personalities like scientist Dr Jayant Naralikar, social activist Dr Abhay Bang, cartoonist S D Phadnis and writer Vijay Tendulkar also came to talk to the students. The students were also taken out to learn from different social happenings and social organisations. Leelatai Patil's desire to work out an educational policy with Rajiv Gandhi did not work out due to his assassination.

Leela Patil did write about the father who had left his family to marry another woman. She wrote about the silent and tremendous suffering of her uneducated mother in the article "Lekicha Avyakta Prashnopanishad" (Unuttered Questions of A Daughter) which was published in a book entitled *Baapleki* (Father Daughters) edited by Padmaja Phatak, Deepa Gowarikar and Vidya Vidhwans and published in 2004 by Mauj Prakashan. She wrote for her mother who had suffered in silence. The article recalling events in her life has been written in the third person. There is an interesting memory of her father that she recalls. When she was a small girl, a needle pierced her thigh and got stuck there. Her father could not remove it himself for he could not see her in pain nor could he bear to see someone else removing it. She asks how such a sensitive person could become so devoid of emotions that he could leave his wife and four children for some other woman.

But maybe there is something that is left behind even if a man physically abandons his family. In this case it was the gift of writing and Leela Patil seems to have got it from her father. She wrote many articles in many well-known journals like *Miloon Saryajani*, *Stree*, *Kirloskar* and many other dailies.

These articles were based on her experiences as an educationist and social worker. She wrote some thirteen books when she was the principal of the College of Education. Apart from that she wrote many books for children like *Mulanno Thoda Aika* (Children, Please Listen a Bit), *Shikshanatil Oasis* (Oasis in Education), *Parichya Ghari* (In the House of A Fairy), *Sant Ramdas*, *Sant Chokhamela*, *Sant Muktabai*, *Olandatana* (Crossing Over), to mention a few. *Olandatana* received the Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad award in 1988. For her work in the field of education, and literature including children's literature, Leelatai received Dr Govardhandas Parekh award, Shreemati Rajmati Patil award, Shreemati Mangala Pote award, the Yashwantrao Chavan Pratishthan award (2008) and the Maharashtra Foundation Award.

When active people like Leelatai whose memories, experiences and writings have shaped the minds of many young people and children get afflicted with dementia people mentored by them have to fill their life with the same love that they gave others. That is what Leelatai's colleagues at the Srujan Anand School did when towards the end of her life, Leelatai became a victim of dementia. They read books to her, chatted with her and made her feel needed. That is the least one can do to a woman who spent almost her entire life dedicated to the cause of humanity and education.

—C S Lakshmi & Sharmila Sontakke

Death of a Gandhian: Vidyaben Shah (7 November 1922-19 June 2020)



Vidyaben was 97 when she passed away. People remember her as the Behenji as she was affectionately called, who was a social worker and activist who worked for the welfare of children, women and the aged people. However, Vidyaben's activism began even when she was a High School student. Influenced by Gandhi even at that young age, she spoke about non-violence to her classmates which caused quite a stir in the school. Her parents Vrajlal Mehta and Champaben Mody wanted all their children to be educated. Vrajlal Mehta was an educationist who from a school teacher rose to the position of Director of Education in Saurashtra Government. She left home after completing her B A in Economics in 1942, to pursue her Master's in Economics as Jetpur, her hometown, had no postgraduate colleges. Child Welfare and women's rights have been causes she has been passionate about all through her life.

Around 1940 she met Manubhai Shah who became her

husband five years later. He was a freedom fighter and hence a kindred soul. They married only in 1945 as Manubhai Shah was released from jail in 1945. The way they conducted their marriage became a statement of their politics throughout their life. Both of them wore plain khadi clothes for their wedding. What is more, the wedding gift that Manubhai gave his wife was a khadi sari which he had woven himself while in prison using yarn spun by him on a charkha. Manubhai went on to become a Union Cabinet Minister in the governments of Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi. When he came to Delhi in 1956 to be in the Council of Ministers, Vidyaben also shifted to Delhi. But even before that she had laid the foundation for the Bal Bhavan movement by establishing the very first Bal Bhavan in Rajkot and from 1948 had held the post of Honorary Magistrate for Juvenile Courts for eight years till she left for Delhi. In Delhi she continued her child welfare work by being actively associated with Bal Sahyog (she became its President in 1966 and remained its president till 1976) an organisation meant for rehabilitation of vagrant children. Vidyaben was also the President of the Indian Council for Child Welfare (ICCW) for twelve years from 1976 to 1979, and 1985 to 1994.

Where women's issues were concerned right from her college days she had been involved with those issues. She had set up the first craft centre for underprivileged women in Saurashtra. Indira Gandhi had handpicked her to appoint her as the ex-officio chairman of the New Delhi Municipal Council in 1975 and it was not surprising that in later years she was recruited in many pioneering programmes initiated during the time of Jawaharlal Nehru. The Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) had been set up in 1953 promoted as an idea by Jawaharlal Nehru and Durgabai Deshmukh. In 1995, Vidyaben Shah became its chairman for three years and initiated many programmes meant for vocational training and for the benefit of working women and women who were homemakers.

Being a Gujarati meant keeping the welfare of Gujaratis in mind wherever she was. True to that she was active in the Delhi Gujarati Samaj setting up a Higher Secondary School and under her leadership the Samaj developed the Sardar Vallabhbhai Bhavan, a hospitable guest house for economically weaker sections and students coming from outside Delhi. A Gujarati Samaj in many cities in India today was inspired by Vidyaben Shah who was keen on not only spreading the traditions and culture of Gujarat but also in inter-cultural exchanges. Also as President of Gujarat Education Society she founded the now famous Sardar Patel Vidyalaya in Delhi. Triveni Kala Sangam which is now a hub for all cultural activities in Delhi was established by Vidyaben Shah.

There were many other areas like civic administration especially projects meant for the weaker section like slum children and women that Vidyaben excelled in after she had been handpicked by Indira Gandhi in 1975. The Navyug schools meant for talented children from the weaker sections of the society was her initiative. In whatever she did whether it was fund raising during national calamities like Bihar floods and Andhra Pradesh cyclone in the 1970s and Gujarat floods in the 1980s or peace marches that she undertook after Indira Gandhi assassination and after the Godhra riots in Gujarat in 2002, spreading the message of peace and communal harmony at the age of 80, Vidyaben Shah remained a true Gandhian embracing all and reaching out to all.

Till the end she remained active in helping the alternatively endowed people and the aged. She won many awards from the government and other agencies in the long life she lived working in many different areas. She was awarded the Padma Shri in 1992. Women like her embrace death as victors having lived a long life where they have worked tirelessly.

—C S Lakshmi

A Career in Films from the Age of Eight: Usharani Nair (29 May 1958-20 June 2020)



Usharani entered the film world as a child artiste. She was the eldest among three children. Her father Mothi was a Saurashtrian Tamilian and her mother Sudeshini was a Malayali hailing from Varkkala, Kerala. Her father was a cloth merchant. Her parents got divorced when Usharani was a child. Usharani grew up in the city of Chennai where she was born and studied in Church Park Presentation Convent.

Her first film as a child artiste was in the Malayalam film *Jail* (1966) directed by Kunchacko which was immediately followed by the 1967 Malayalam film *Balyakalasakhi* (Childhood Girl Friend) based on the novel of the same name by the legendary writer Vaikom Muhammad Basheer and directed by J Sasikumar. Her first film as a teenager at the age of 15 was *Pattikaattu Ponnaiah* (Ponnaiah from a Backward Village, 1973) directed by B S Ranga where she acted as MGR's sister. The very next year at the age of 16, she had a role with Kamal Haasan in the Tamil film *Gumastavin Magal* (Daughter of a Clerk, 1974) directed by the veteran director A P Nagarajan, where her name appeared in the credit as Usha Shakeela. This was followed by the film *Ennai Pol Oruvan*

(Someone Like Me, 1976) directed by P Madhavan and T R Ramanna in which she acted as Shivaji Ganesan's sister.

A year after the 1976 film, when she was 19, Usharani's mother passed away. It is possible that this may have prompted her marriage in 1977, the same year as her mother's death, with Malayalam film director N Shankaran Nair. It was a marriage that created a sensation because he was thirty years her senior but it turned out to be a happy one. Shankaran Nair brought her over to Malayalam films entirely. She acted in character roles in more than 200 films the best remembered of which are movies like *Hitler* (1996) directed by Siddique in which she played the role of a dance teacher, *Ancharakkalyaanam* (Five and a Half Weddings, 1997) directed by VM Vinu and *Thenkasipattanam* (City of Thenkasi, 2000) by Rafi Mecartin.

Her husband passed away in 2006 and Usha Rani breathed her last at the young age of 62 due to kidney-related ailments after a career that spanned over three decades. After her husband's death Malayalam actor Mohanlal came to her help to educate her son and she has openly acknowledged his help and his warmth. He kept in touch with her even during the pandemic times enquiring after her health and safety. Her popularity can be gauged by the fact that the Malayalam film industry's well-known heroes have paid her rich tributes.

C S Lakshmi

A Different Kind of Revolution: Sheila Borthakur (1935-21 June 2020)



Sheila Borthakur and Sadou Asom Lekhika Samaroh Samiti that she founded in 1974 have become synonymous. One can't mention one without mentioning the other. A year before 1975 was declared the International Women's Year, at a small gathering in Tezpur, Sheila Borthakur, then lecturer in Darrang College, proposed a separate literary organisation for women in Assam following which Sadou Asom Lekhika Samaroh Samiti was formed with its head office in Tezpur. There was a background to this move by Sheila Borthakur. In an interview given in 2004 to *Telegraph India*, she recalls an incident in the early seventies, when she had requested the Asam Sahitya Sabha, which was organising a yuva sanmilian, for a few hours' slot for women. Her plea was turned down. That is when she realised women needed a forum of their own. Launched with a handful of women it now has more than 200 branches all over Assam and also in Kolkata, Shillong and Dimapur.

The Samiti has become the platform to unite women from various walks of life. The Samiti's greatest achievements have been its publications. Apart from their mouthpiece *Lekhika* which is a biennial magazine the Samiti has several valuable publications. Its four volumes of *Lekhikar Jibani* (Life of Women Writers) has meticulously chronicled Assamese literature. The first two volumes of the book contain lives of women writers from the 15th century onwards. The third volume of *Lekhikar Jibani* was edited by Swarna Saikia, includes lives of 27 women writers of the 19th and 20th centuries. All this work done to record women's history was not easy to do. It needed painstaking research. In an interview Sheila Borthakur has said that the first Assamese women's magazine called *Ghar Jeuti*, edited by Kamala Laya Kakati and Kanaklata Chaliha, which was published from Sivasagar in the thirties, was a valuable source material while compiling the works of women writers.

Not just these four volumes, the Samiti has accomplished something that even the Sahitya Akademi could not accomplish. It brought out the complete works of Nalini Bala Devi, Dharmeswari Devi Baruani and Sneha Devi. A manuscript with a collection of the songs of the visually impaired poetess Dharmeswari Devi Baruani was lying in a tattered state in Guwahati's All India Radio Office. The Samiti extricated the manuscript from a pile of documents and compiled four books of poetry entitled *Dharmeswari Devi Baruani Rachana Sambhar* (A collection of Poems of Dharmeswari Devi Baruani) in 1992, her birth centenary year.

The Samiti has also brought out short stories written by women over a hundred years in a collection. The other great accomplishment of the Samiti was the publication of the bibliography of Assamese women writers called *Lekhikar Grantha Panji*. A book of literary criticism published by the Samiti, *Asamiya Sahityat Nari* (Women in Assamese Literature) edited by Binita Dutta, is a critical analysis of women characters in the works of eminent male writers. The Samiti members travelled to nondescript villages to identify women writers and to encourage women to write. Sheila Borthakur sincerely believed that "a writer cannot be created but an atmosphere for intellectual development can." In the 2004 interview she has said, "I want a woman even in a remote village to express herself, be it through a poem, a letter, a story or a small speech at a public gathering. I want the woman to discover herself." All the branches of the Samiti also bring out their own publications. The Samiti's work was a monumental effort in transforming women's lives. Since its inception, the Samiti has held annual State conferences marked by symposiums, release of books, poets' forums, open sessions, book fairs, exhibitions and cultural processions where women from all over gather.

Sheila Borthakur who has made this quiet cultural revolution possible was born in a small village called Charingia in Jorhat to Nabin Sharma and Pritilata Devi. It would be relevant here to reproduce excerpts from an interview she gave in 2004 to *Telegraph India* to understand how Sheila Borthakur took the less travelled route in life. Her life reads like a story and it is a story everyone must know.

Sheila's childhood was spent in Dhaka where her father Nabin Sharma had been sent as an inspector of the tea expansion board. Her mother Pritilata Devi was someone who was open to new ideas educated as she was in the Brahma Girls' School in Kolkata. As a young girl Sheila loved to sing, dance and act in plays. Although liberal, her family members did object to her acting but despite that she acted in Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwalla's famous play *Sonit Konwari*, when she was a student of J B College. Her family also disapproved of her going all the way to Guwahati All India Radio to record after she had got through the audition held at Jorhat Sangeet Vidyalaya. But Sheila protested in her usual way and went for the recording.

Sheila Borthakur met her soul mate Saranan Borthakur, who was a dancer and disciple of Kalaguru Bishnu Rabha. After marriage, she came to Tezpur and joined Tezpur High School as a teacher. It was followed by a Visharad in sitar under Ustad Illias Khan from Bhatkande Sangeet Vidyalaya, Lucknow in 1961. She had also taken lessons in Rabindrasangeet at Vishwa Bharati, Shantiniketan. She had her own cultural troupe and they used to perform dance dramas. Along with all these activities she also did her Master's and a PhD after marriage. In 1991-92, she completed her PhD on Social Change in Assam Since Independence with special reference to Sonitpur district. She retired as a lecturer of philosophy from Darrang College in Tezpur. She was also the founder principal of Gopinath Bordoloi Kanya Mahavidyalaya, the first girls' college established in Tezpur in 1979. She had also conducted several adult education programmes in five villages near Tezpur in 1975.

That a woman could do so much in a lifetime is a wonder and a miracle. But Sheila Borthakur has achieved it by quietly but firmly pursuing her goals. She has not allowed anything to hold her back. She did not wait for recognition or honours to continue her work but she was honoured with a Padma Shri in 2008. Living a long life is possible for many but to make that long life meaningful is possible only for a few like Sheila Borthakur.

The Agonies of Existence: Geeta Nagabhushan (25 March 1942-28 June 2020)



Geeta Nagabhushan died at the age of 78 in a private hospital at Kalaburagi. Tributes to her mention her 27 novels, 12 plays and short story collections and refer to her as a feminist writer, all in a few short paragraphs. It was by accident that I found Sahitya Akademi's brochure on Meet the

Author programme with her held on 28 July 2012. After reading it I realised how much SPARROW as an archives has lost by not interviewing a writer like her. In this tribute to her I would like to make amends and give all the details of an extraordinary life. Much of it is from the Sahitya Akademi brochure and from TV programmes in which she has spoken.

Geeta Nagabhushan was born on the 25th of March 1942 in Savalagi, a small village in Gulbarga District. Her parents Shantappa and Sharanamma lived in Kalaburagi town to eke out a living. Her father Shantappa worked as a labourer at MSK Mill, a cloth mill. Her parents were not educated and they belonged to the extremely backward Talavara caste. Geeta (first named Shanta) was their eldest daughter. Shantappa was a freedom fighter and had associated with the leaders of the freedom movement and other freedom fighters. He knew how important education was and so sent Geeta to school.

It was a village where let alone girls, even boys of Talavara caste did not attend school. So Geeta attending school invited a lot of criticism from those around them. None of this deterred Geeta from continuing her studies. She walked barefoot to school in the scorching sun with clothes that were patched up. But did not give up going to school. She carried some roti to school on which she choked often because they were dry. Her school teachers threw her out often for not bringing books. But the family found a kind soul in Eeranna, who was himself a poor man, who bought her books. And thus through sheer determination she always managed to stay ahead in her studies.

Geeta's mother also did not want her daughter to study, worried that no one would marry an educated girl in their caste. She thought that an uneducated groom would never marry an educated girl. But the father and the daughter had no hesitation about going further with studies despite opposition. While in High School she borrowed books from a rich friend of hers, Meera Jaaji. Poverty and the caste she belonged to inflicted a lot of suffering on her but these experiences made her tough and gave her the determination



to face life.

Geeta worked as a clerk at the District Collector's office in Kalaburagi after completing matriculation. Though no woman worked in an office amidst men those days, supported by her father, Geeta continued to work. She completed PUC and BA even while working and was eager to pursue a Master's degree. The Post-Graduate Centre of Karnataka University at Kalaburagi had not been established then. There was only one at Dharwad. She resigned her job at the office and joined a local school as a teacher. Fortunately for Geeta, Shivaji University, Kolhapur, in Maharashtra, had started Post-Graduate Centre in Sholapur. Geeta successfully pursued her Master's degree course from this centre. She also did her BEd.

Meanwhile Geeta's first marriage ended in a divorce and she married Nagabhushan of another caste which brought a traumatic phase of domestic violence into her life. She was insulted, humiliated and physically abused. She could not seek help from her family for with her inter-caste marriage she had broken up with her family. She was all alone dealing with the crisis in her life. As if to add insult to injury, the school where she worked asked her to resign for they did not approve of her marriage. She was jobless for 6 months. Later she joined as a teacher, became Headmistress and then a lecturer and finally the Principal of educational institutions established by the Nageswara Rao Welfare Society.

She began her career as a writer in 1968 and published her first novel *Thavareya Huvu* (Lotus Flower). In a T V programme Geeta Nagabhushan has said that the need to write arose from seeing the oppression and violence underprivileged Dalit women faced in a patriarchal society. As Gulbarga did not have magazines she began to write in magazines like *Lankesh Patrike*, *Sudha*, *Taranga* and *Mayura* from Bengaluru. Her subject was always the rural women in her village and the women who lived in slums and hutments in whose lives she saw both oppression and resistance. Her novel *Maapura Taayi Makkalu* (The Children of Maapura Goddess, 1978), later published as *Jogini* was initially serialised in *Mayura* magazine. The novel was about young adolescent girls from poor families and of lowered castes being dedicated to a goddess and later being pushed into prostitution. She chose to write in the rural dialect of Hyderabad-Karnataka region Javari, which was suited to deal with the rural themes and the women characters. Her short stories in the collections *Jwalanta* (Effulgent Like Fire, 1989) and *Avva Mattu Ithara Kathegalu* (Mother and other Stories, 1993) were vignettes that revealed worlds of women from the rural areas where they struggled to resist oppression, violence and suppression in their own ways, overcoming sometimes and succumbing sometimes.

Her novels were appreciated and also faced a lot of opposition. Her novel *Hasi Maamsa Matu Haddugalu* (Fresh Meat and Vultures, 1978) serialised in *Taranga* was about a village girl exploited by the village head and how she delivers a boy and drowns the male child. She is then arrested for murdering the child. This was made into a film *Hennina Koogu* (Woman's Cry). Her novel *Dange* (Rebellion, 1997) was about a poor rural widow who becomes mistress of a rich man. Her daughter from the deceased husband grows up to study in the college where the rich man's son is also student. They fall in love and decide to marry. The rich man decides to get rid of his mistress and takes her in the train and conspires with a killer. Overhearing his conversation with the hired killer, she invites him to stand by the door for some fresh air and pushes him out.

Her novel *Baduku* (Existence, 2001) is considered her magnum opus. It is an autobiographical novel talking about her own life and the village women and the community she knew and their resistance against oppression of many kinds. The novel had no protagonists as such and was the story of her community. Her novel *Maapura Taayi Makkalu* mentioned above, faced the most severe opposition. In the village Chinchooru in Gulbarga the presiding goddess is Maapura Taayi. The Dalits in the village, whenever faced with a problem would make an offer to dedicate their daughters to the goddess. The girl to be dedicated would walk in a procession in the nude to the temple. She would be called a Jogini. In reality these pubescent girls were pushed into flesh trade in the name of the goddess. A rich man would buy the rights for her and during the day she would beg for alms and sing songs of the goddess and in the night she would become available to any man. This is similar to the custom of girls being dedicated to Yellamma in Saundati. This novel was opposed by her own community of Dalits and brought her death threats and also severe opposition from the pontiffs of some Mutts.

Geeta Nagabhushan was the first Kannada woman to receive the Kendra Sahitya Akademi award for her novel *Baduku* in 2004 and the first woman to receive the Nadoja (Honorary doctorate) award from the Kannada University, Hampi, in the same year. She served as the Chairperson of Karnataka Sahitya Academy. She chaired the 76th Akhil Bharat Kannada Sahitya Sammelan, at Gadag in 2010. Other honours and awards she received include Karnataka Rajotsava Award (1998), Danachintamani Attimabbe Award (2002), Bhasha Parishat Award from Kolkata (2012) and another honorary doctorate from Gulbarga University.

Geeta Nagabhushan often said that marriage is not the only thing in life for women and that there is life beyond marriage too. Her life is a wonderful example of how a woman

did not make a bad marriage pull her down and how she spoke for many other women like her from a rural background and gave them hope.

—C S Lakshmi

Always a Fighter: Nagam (November 1944-30 June 2020)



This is what Aravindan Neelakandan wrote about his mother Nagam when she was ill in January 2018.

“1960s. Madurai. Anti-Hindi agitation was being carried out by students. An influential section of student leaders wanted education in mother tongue. No imposition of Hindi. They were apolitical. They

were inspired by a student leader—a girl, who in turn was deeply influenced by Rajaji and Bertrand Russell. However, this group of students wanted to end their agitation once DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), the Dravidian Party, got in. The students with the girl decided to see Kamaraj who had come to Madurai and give him a memorandum and announce in public that they were withdrawing from the agitation as it was taking a political and violent colour while they still hold on the principle of non-imposition of Hindi. Knowing nothing about protocols and security clearances they simply breached the security and went to the dais and were promptly stopped by the security. All of them, including the girl, were about to be arrested. But Kamaraj intervened: ‘You cannot arrest a girl student,’ he strictly told the police officers and then talked to the students. The girl leader quoted Russell and said even he wanted education in mother tongue. Kamaraj looked at her for a few seconds and answered in his own charming colloquial Tamil, ‘So Russell in his pacifist frenzy even wants India to desist from all military operations and wants to gift our regions to Pakistan and China. Shall we do that also?’ The students were taken aback—particularly the girl. She never knew that Kamaraj was so clearly aware of the worldviews of the contemporary intellectuals. Of course, she held her stand but her impression of Kamaraj changed forever. She was shadowed by State Intelligence and whenever she attended an interview, the management would be informed that the girl was a potential troublemaker. However, she had some relatives in Kanyakumari district. So she got a job as an economics lecturer in S T Hindu College, despite the usual warning.

How I came to know all this is because she is also my

mother.

However till 1990 I did not know about this aspect of her life. It was when a CB-CID official came to our house on the eve of Rajiv Gandhi visiting our town that I came to know about this dimension of her life. He had come to check if she had any contacts with Tamil nationalist forces still. Then she talked about this aspect of her life to me.

It is not surprising though. Orphaned at a very early age, she and her sisters were brought up by step-parents who walked the extra mile caring for the children. She has very fond memories of her early life in Srivilliputhur. And remembers also how the family suffered poverty and moved to Sivakasi and how she worked part time in the matchbox industry and studied. She recalls how the convent nuns told her that Andal was a devil and Hindu deities were false. She was influenced by those nuns and told everyone in the house that they would all go to hell worshipping false gods while she would go to heaven. In course of time, she came out of the influence of the nuns. She became a voracious reader. She was influenced deeply by Mahatma Gandhi, Rajaji and of course, Bertrand Russell. She became an atheist too at one time, but always held Dravidian race politics with disdain. This is despite the fact that she had suffered caste discrimination as a child. She remembers how when she was eight or ten years of age she would go to the temple pond and old Brahmin women used to shout at her, ‘Go away you Shudra urchin.’ But she never gave into hatred. I always know her as a loving mother. She fed me with a lot of Gandhi in my early years. She introduced me to the pleasure of reading. Bharati, Azha, Valliappa, *Thiruvagam*, *Sakalakavalli Malai*—she gave me everything I have today. Her Ishta-Devata has always been Saraswathi. Not a day passed when she was healthy without her reciting *Saraswathi Anthathi* and *Abirami Anthathi*. She used to take classes on *Abirami Anthathi* for a small group of young girls. Wish those sessions had been tape-recorded. Every summer she would get books for me from the college library. She introduced me to Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. She gave me Maxim Gorky’s *Mother*, Leo Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*. Huckleberry Finn became so much a part of me that she would later tell in a mockingly regretting way, ‘With that book I spoiled you forever.’ From the beginning it became clear that I was a troublemaker. Wherever I went I created problems. Or problems gravitated towards me. She would always be there. She had to visit school and explain to teachers that when I brought the skeleton of a snake to the classroom it was out of my curiosity and not to disrupt the classes.

A few days ago I met a friend of mine—a schoolmate in primary school, after more than thirty-five years almost. And the first question he asked was, ‘How is your mother?’ The

reason? One day it rained heavily and all parents had come to school with umbrellas to get their children back and she came with two umbrellas because while she would get home her own son she could also help another stranded child. He still remembers this. He said that this act which he witnessed as a Fourth Standard boy he still remembers and it has defined his own life values. When I discontinued my BSc Agri., she was there supporting me. She was also there in my inter-caste, inter-religious marriage supporting it. Then she had cancer in 2002. She fought it and survived. She has always been a fighter. However the chemotherapy left in her a permanent scar—psychological. She became hyper-anxious. Slowly I see her going down but then she recovers too. Pulls herself and fights back and then slips. The other day she was teaching her grandchildren Bharati's *Om Sakthi Om Sakthi Om* song. She loves that song—particularly the lines 'Let us hold the feet of Ganesa so that He will raise our character and collectively immerse us in freedom.' Then she looked at me and asked pathetically, 'This is Bharati song. Is it not?' The words pierced me like a dagger.

She has a life-vision, a dream project—to write a book on 'Peace Economics'. She hates arms race. With a cost for single nuclear submarine we can electrify all the villages in India and Pakistan—that kind of stuff. She has not written it so far. But she wants me to write it. However she knows her Hindutvaite son may not be the right person to carry out her dream project. However, all my social conscience I derive from her...."

Sometime in 2017, I had gone to Nagercoil and having known about Nagam I wanted to meet her and document her life for SPARROW archives but she was not keen on her life being documented. Nagam was a retired professor of Economics and when I met her she was a cancer survivor. Although she did not want to be recorded she spoke to me at great length about her life. She told me that she was a deep believer in religion and astrology. Life had not been easy for her and the one thing that dominated her mind when she spoke to me was what the astrologer had told her father when she was born and her horoscope was taken to him. He had said that the child was a harbinger of bad luck for the family and there would be a death followed by poverty and the child would be responsible for all the misery of the family. When Nagam was one and a half years old (she was the fifth child) her mother died while delivering the next child. The family had several financial losses and fell into bad times all of which was blamed on the bad horoscope of the fifth child which was Nagam. All her life Nagam fought to prove that with her efforts she could break what she considered as the destiny determined by whatever that goes into astrology. So she was determined to bring love, peace,

justice and prosperity wherever she was. She could do this with the help of her paternal uncle who stood by her and encouraged her. Her marriage was also one of her own choice. She married her colleague N Subramania Pillai, in the Tamil Department.

From what I gathered from the family, she wanted to defeat astrology even while believing in it. So all her life she would go and help voluntarily whoever came into her circle of contact. She would go to extraordinary lengths to help. She would go through the 'Wanted' columns and 'Employment News' religiously and alert anyone she knew of any opening that would come up. She had a phenomenal memory and remembered the landlines of everyone she knew. So she networked with people to benefit everyone. Anywhere she went she would have a person who had benefitted from her going that extra length. There was a flipside to this. Any misfortune happening to anyone she knew she would somehow consider herself responsible. This aspect accumulated in her last years when she had undergone chemotherapy and then a bone fracture and got bedridden. She became hyper-anxious and all her belief in the negative horoscope came back in full force to wreck her mind. She fought bravely with some brilliant successes. But ultimately her mind caved in.

Her last conscious advice to her son in the typical Nagam style was—treat your wife with dignity, cook for her when she asks and never ever get angry. Nagam went to hospital many times but always returned. But on June 30th she gave up her fight. Nagam also died a deep believer. The last thing she heard while she was still conscious, were the lines from the sixth section of *Thiruarutpa* of the saint poet Vallalar which said, "Cross this shore, Sweet Chidambaram lies ashore..."

Nagam's life is not documented in the SPARROW archives. Many such lives go undocumented. The truth is that the lives of many mothers may not be put in words and images but they always live on as stories in the family. A gesture of a grandchild, a smile, an object or a few rain drops can bring on the memories of many mothers. That is a different kind of archives—digitised in the mind. Nagam will remain in such an archives.

—C S Lakshmi & Aravindan Neelakandan

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

Dancing Through Life: Saroj Khan (22 November 1948-3 July 2020)



Saroj Khan represents simultaneously the glamour, the aspirations and the dark side of Bollywood. Beginning as a child artiste at the age of three, she rose to be one of the most successful and sought-after choreographers of the industry, dictating her terms to the most powerful of the stars. In the forty years of her career she has choreographed more than 3000 songs in about 64 films, the chief ones being blockbusters like *Geeta Mera Naam* (her debut as a choreographer), *Hero*, *Nagina*, *Mr India*, *Chandani*, *Beta*, *Darr*, *Khalnayak*, *Baazigar*, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenye*, *Taal Lagan*, *Devdas*, *Saathiya*, *Swades*, *Saawariya*, *Jab We Met* and with the highest paid actors of these films. She was associated as a writer with 12 films. Post 2005, Saroj was a familiar presence in TV dance and reality shows.

Saroj has been feted by almost all film forums for her choreography. She got the Filmfare award eight times and the National award three times. In fact, it was her work for the song *Ek do teen* in *Tezaab* which prompted Filmfare to institute the Choreography award. Many more awards came her way: the American Choreography Award for *Lagan*, Nandi Award for *Chhodalani Vundi*, Zee Cine Award for *Devdas*, and the Annual Kalakar Award for Outstanding contribution to film choreography. She is the recipient of the IIFA Lifetime Achievement Award and another IIFA Award for her work in the film *Devdas*, starring Shah Rukh Khan, Madhuri Dixit and Aishwarya Rai.

Her early struggle and her stupendous success have been well documented in the documentary made on her in *The Saroj Khan Story* directed by Nidhi Tuli for PSBT and the Films Division of India. Daughter of Kishanchand Sadhu Singh and Noni Singh from what came to be Pakistan, Nirmala Nagpal (her real name) made her first appearance in the Raj Kapoor-Vyjayanthimala starrer *Nazrana* as a child artiste, and paved the way for her big time entry into the industry. At 13, she married her mentor, B Sohanlal, who was 43 and father of four at the time. The marriage did not last and after her divorce, she married Sardar Roshan Khan in 1975, and took on the name of Saroj Khan. She has three surviving children from her two marriages and her youngest daughter, Sukaina Khan runs a dance academy in Dubai. Saroj Khan had cut down on her work in the past few years due to health concerns and she succumbed to cancer at the age of 71 in 2020.

Though Saroj Khan succeeded and prospered in the film industry beyond her wildest dreams, she was not able to

overcome the bitterness of her domestic life, her uninspiring, failed marriage and the ill-treatment she received in the industry in her initial years. However, Saroj Khan opened up the choreography to women, and her pioneering trail led to women like Farah Khan, Geeta Kapoor and Vaibhavi Merchant taking off with her as an inspiring presence.

—Charanjeet Kaur

Infusing Ceramics with Laughter and Surprise: Jyotsna Bhatt (6 March 1940-11 July 2020)



It seems like yesterday that I approached Jyotsna Bhatt for a work of hers for the SPARROW fund raising art exhibition that was held in 1992. She readily agreed to give one of her works. I had met her before that in connection with my research project on women artists and she had spoken to me at length about her life

and work. She is a ceramist who had a way of explaining her works clearly for what they are not couching them in jargons or analytical terms that a common person may not follow. That was the nature of her art also. It seemed very simple to understand yet when you spent time on it, her art revealed several meanings. I wrote this note about her in my monograph:

“Jyotsna Bhatt took to sculpture at a time when not many women thought in terms of sculpture. Her passion has been bronze but as bronze has a lot of functional problems she prefers to be a ceramist although she does make constant forays into bronze. The problem with bronze, she feels, has nothing specifically to do with gender. It has to do with access to a form.

The traditional potter is a male who sits at the wheel; while his wife helps she has no access to the wheel. But we live in different circumstances. Jyotsna used her wheel for her work and enjoyed it immensely. Jyotsna likes to work with a notion of completeness and does not like distorted forms and fragmented pieces. She likes to simplify her forms but likes to imagine them in movement and not seem static. She likes to make functional things and animals. But she likes to infuse it with a sense of joy, laughter. If you hold one of her animals looking perfectly in repose you suddenly realise that its head moves. A bird sitting on a tree can

come apart turning one work into three. The cylindrical portion of the tree will become a vase and the rest of the work will now be a vessel. This constant transformation of things from one to the other building the transformation into the nature of the work itself has been Jyotsna's preoccupation for several years.

Jyotsna calls it her way of bringing surprises into her work. Jyotsna has had phases when she had to choose materials readily available to continue her work. She worked with acrylic sheets when there was nothing else possible at that time. But at all costs, what was important was to keep working. Space is a very important aspect of her kind of work. Space and equipment like the foundry, the wheel and the kiln. And creative space for herself, having access to to a certain kind of equipment has meant working in a certain way with certain materials. Jyotsna does not stress these functional aspects of her work. She would like to bring joy into her work and her way of giving a new meaning to it is to see one piece of work as many things, taking many shapes."

Jyotsna studied at the JJ school of Art in Mumbai and later when she joined the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in 1958, she studied sculpture under Sankho Chaudhuri and ceramics under the famous Jolyon Hofsted who had inspired a generation of students. He was a Professor of Art at Queens College CUNY. He went to New York in the early sixties on a scholarship to the Brooklyn Museum of Art School. He became an instructor at the school and the Head of the Ceramics Department. Later he was the Director of The Brooklyn Museum Art School. Jolyon Hofsted believed in working with many different materials and in retaining the simplicity, elegance and natural quality of the material. Jyotsna learnt ceramics under him at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in New York in the mid 1960s.

She had met Jyoti Bhatt, who is now a well-known painter, during her college years and he became her partner in life. She joined the Faculty of Fine Arts in the Department of Sculpture's ceramic studio as a professor in 1972. She retired as the Head of the Department of Ceramics after 40 years in 2002. She suffered a stroke and passed away at the age of 80. This must be a terrible loss to Jyoti Bhat, her husband, and six years her senior. It is difficult to accept her death. One feels as if one is holding one of her terracotta works where the bird sitting on a tree suddenly moves away from the tree, in a moment of surprise.

Patiyaale Di Queen: Divya Chouksey (14 November 1990-12 July 2020)



It is a pity when a young person who is four months short of her thirtieth birthday dies of cancer. More so when she is a talented spirited person like Divya Chouksey whose first song 'Patiyaale Di Queen', which she called a feminist song, took the music world by storm.

Speaking about the song she had said, "It's time a song came where a girl replies to all the misogynists and gives it off to them. I am a strong woman of today and I don't like misogynists. This is my answer to all those who feel and say that what a woman wears, invites rape! Yes, *meri dress hai chothi phir bhi tere soch se hai badi*. (Yes, my dress is short but it is larger than your narrow mind). The song is fun, it's not preachy, girls are definitely going to relate to it and dance on it...." She had released it on International Women's Day in 2018 and said that it was a song written as an answer to Yo Yo Honey Singh for his misogynist lyrics. She said that she wanted to bring out a song that is not sexist but is for women who are strong and bold. Yo Yo Honey Singh's controversial song 'Brown Girl' with lyrics '*Ban mitran di whore*' (You lovely, come be my whore) was severely criticised by Vithika Yadav, human rights activist and founder of Love Matters in India. She created an online platform #NotMusictoMyEars in 2017 to create awareness regarding such lyrics set to lilting tunes.

That Divya wrote the lyrics in Punjabi is interesting because she was from Bhopal and had learnt Punjabi during her sojourn in Delhi for four years. After finishing her schooling in Bhopal she came to Delhi to pursue her graduation in Mass Communication. She then went to UK to do her Master's in Documentary Filmmaking from Bedfordshire. Divya came to Mumbai to explore possibilities of pursuing a career as an artist. She was a part of MTV's Making the Cut 2 and MTV True Life. She was a participant of the I AM SHE Miss Universe conceptualised by Sushmita Sen embodying her vision for the spirit of the Indian women in the year 2011. She strayed into acting quite by accident one could say. She made her debut in Bollywood with the 2016 Rom Com movie *Hai Apna Dil Toh Awara* (The Heart is a Wanderer). Writing and singing a song was not something she planned either. It just happened maybe because she felt the need to express her feelings against misogynist song lyrics.

Divya had her battle with the Central Board of Film Certification which wanted the classroom portion in the song cut for telecast. But on other channels the full song was allowed. It was her battle with cancer that Divya lost. She

was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer one and a half years ago and succumbed to it. It was a painful end and in an Instagram message a day before her death she had said that she was on her deathbed and wished for another life without suffering. One does not know if there is rebirth but if there is one, Divya certainly deserves one where there is no pain.

—C S Lakshmi

Moonlight: Jothsna Das/Jyotsna Das (1927-14 July 2020)



After the first film *Sita Bibah* produced in 1936 the growth of Odia language films was slow. The next film *Lalita* happened only thirteen years later. The notable films of Odia that others are aware of happened only from the sixties onwards. It is no wonder then that when even characters who played minor roles in other language films found a place in the film history of the region, actors like Jothsna Das hardly get mentioned anywhere. Her name appears in the cast and crew of the film but there is no image available. Three films in which she did character roles are mentioned. They are *Gauri* (1979), *Samaya* (Time, 1975) and *Devajani* (1981). Two of the films she acted in are interesting in terms of history. *Gauri*, directed by Dhira Biswal was based on the Bengali novel *Swayamsiddha* (Self-determined) by Manilal Banerjee. As early as 1955 a Telugu film *Ardhangi* had been made based on the novel. The film was remade in Tamil as *Pennin Perumai*, in Hindi twice as *Bahurani* in 1963 and as *Jyoti* in 1981. It is about a rural woman's fight for justice. *Gauri*, the main character, was played by Mahasweta Ray, the famous Odia actor. What is also interesting is that the south Indian playback singer S Janaki has sung the Odia song *Rajani Go Mo Priya Nayane* composed by Prafulla Kar for the film. The earlier film *Samaya* directed by Ganesh Mohapatra in which Jothsna played a minor role also has an interesting history. It is the first partially coloured Odia language film. The music for this film was composed by the duo Bhubaneswar Misra and Hariprasad Chaurasia. In fact, Chaurasia's film career began with this film. She was named 'moonlight' and we do not know what she did before she acted in her first film *Samaya* in 1975 at the age of 48. But she was part of the history of Odia films and has passed away at the age of 93. Hope those long years were filled with joy Jyotsna Das, and that your end was peaceful!

—C S Lakshmi

A Woman with Many Missions in Life: Neela Satyanarayana (5 February 1948-16 July 2020)



Neela Satyanarayana had met headlong several crises as an IAS officer in a career spanning 42 years. Writing about her in *Free Press Journal* on July 16, 2020, Sanjay Jog, a longstanding friend, says that she was a great human being and a no nonsense bureaucrat who was always ready to listen to people and find solutions for problems. When she was Principal Secretary Textiles and had to deal with the contesting issues of textile lands she was keen to deal with the problems of the workers but also take development forward. It was because of her efforts that several committees were formed so that not only the mill owners but also the workers would benefit from government actions. Whatever post she held she made it clear to the concerned government that she would write only what she thought was right on the files. She held on to this stand of an upright government officer throughout her career. She held senior positions in various departments like home, forest, medical, education, health, information and public relations and revenue. She is credited with turning Dharavi into a leather business hub during her stint at the industry department. Wherever she was posted she gave it her best. When she was MD in Film City Development Corporation she showed a keen interest in film and cultural development. She retired as the Additional Chief Secretary (Revenue) in 2009. Immediately after her retirement, she was appointed as the State Election Commissioner in Maharashtra, the first woman to occupy this post.

It was not as if all this was easy for she was also a fairly prolific writer, author and columnist and a mother with a child with Down's syndrome about which she wrote a book in 2007 entitled *Ek Purna, Apurna* (One Full, One Half). After her retirement on 5th July 2014, she started a blog (satyanarayana.com) where she profiled herself as the retired election commissioner, a poet and writer and a music director. She introduced herself saying "I write in English, Hindi & Marathi. My best expression is in Marathi because this language is widely read. I have written approximately 10 poetry books and 17 novels, short stories and others. My 42 long years in the Indian Administrative Service and a 5 year stint in Maharashtra State Election Commission gave me long experience in administration and human nature." Explaining why she wanted to start a blog she said, "My long term idea is to introduce myself to people. My introduction

can best be given by my creative writings, poems and songs. I also have some academic work to my credit. I want people to know what I am and then go on to talk about my mission.” She added that during her career as a civil servant there were certain things she felt passionate about and that she would now like to launch projects to promote those causes. And she detailed those projects and programmes and her other involvements.

An important project she mentioned in her blog which she pursued later was Kranti-Jyoti. This was a training programme for elected women representatives (EWRs) at Gram-panchayat level. She explained that there were approximately 100,000 EWRs spread all over Maharashtra. Seventy five percent of these EWRs were first termers. Their educational levels were not very high. She wanted to give them necessary confidence and train them for competence in governance. She had named this programme ‘Kranti-Jyoti’ after Late Savitribai Phule who started the first girls’ school in India in 1848. At the time of writing the blog the project had trained 10,000 EWRs in 10 districts of Maharashtra. The programme was later taken over by the government in Rural Development Department (RDD) for implementation. The project is supposed to cover the whole of Maharashtra under RGPSA Scheme (Rajiv Gandhi Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyan). Neela Satyanarayana wrote in the blog that the feedback which she got from the 10,000 trained women was amazing and that she wanted to further empower women both socially as well as economically.

The other mission she had in mind was to develop motivational talks based on her writings. It was in the format of value education and motivation. She thought it would be useful for college students and corporate employees. She wanted to use the website as a tool to promote these ideas. There were also other things she was involved with. She was doing a series of episodes on women for DD Sakhi Sahyadri channel meant for women viewers. There was a Marathi film *Babanchi Shala* (The School of Baba) based on her story drawn from a real life experience which was released in 2016. It was about rehabilitation of prisoners. A serial based on her novel *Ratra Vanavyachi* (Night of the Forest Fire) about the life of a young woman who strives to establish an upright image in a male-dominated society was directed by Vikram Gokhale, a legendary Marathi stage and cinema icon.

There was another academic service of hers which also was very successful. It was called Aarohi, a programme meant for students aspiring for competitive exam. She had put together a team consisting of herself, a counsellor, an in service officer, a nutritionist and a couple of junior officers helping the students with interviews, conversational English,

personality development and actual one to one interaction with senior level officers from all services. This programme was aimed at rural students who lacked necessary skills for interviews. She reached out to students from all over Maharashtra by visiting the divisional Head Quarters.

In the blog she talks of missing her high speed civil service career. But she made up for it by successfully launching so many educational and social programmes. It was a pity that that she had kidney and lung complications that made her succumb to COVID. Her husband Pillashetty Satyanarayana and son Chaitanya had also caught the virus. Only her daughter Anuradha was not affected but she was isolated at the time of Neela’s death. A woman, who had led a high speed administrative life surrounded by other civil service workers and people, had to be cremated by the BMC team with no family or friends around. It was a lonely death; not the kind of death a person as passionate as her about reaching out to people and taking up causes deserved. But then COVID is a ruthless virus.

—C S Lakshmi

An Actor and Her Life: B Shanthamma (1905-19 July 2020)



For Shanthamma death at the age of 95 is a death that came after a long active life. She was acting even at the age of 90 and was still struggling to live with dignity in Bengaluru spending all her time in her mentor actor Rajkumar’s house where she was considered a member of the family. It was heartrending to see her in one of the Janata Darshans of Siddaramaiah when he was chief minister. Shanthamma was seen submitting her petition to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah seeking financial help. Later, Shanthamma told reporters that her daughter and son were bedridden due to cancer. She said that one of her sons was born deaf and dumb. She added that pending medical bills for her daughter alone amounted to Rs. 7 lakhs, while that of her son was Rs 8 lakhs. The Chief Minister’s office released the funds needed for her. She had also appealed to the CM to raise the pension for artists from Rs.1000 as in the present times Rs.1000 hardly covered even basic expenses. Shanthamma leaves behind four sons and two daughters.

Shanthamma was born in an orthodox family and although she had the talent her parents were hesitant to allow her to

act. Later they got her married to Anil Kumar, a dance teacher in Gokak Theatre Company. He was the brother of Jeyamma, the wife of Gubbi Veeranna, the legendary Kannada theatre personality who founded the Gubbi Theatre Company and later owned the Gubbi cinema theatre. The Gokak Theatre Company director asked her husband if she would act in a mythological play *Draupadi Vastraharan*. Her husband persuaded her and she agreed but was so nervous that she forgot her dialogues in the first scene. The director encouraged her to act without fear.

All the film studios like Golden Studios, Sharada and Film Centre were all in Chennai at that time and all the films were shot there. She was approached by G V Iyer, another legend, to act in the film *Haribhakta* (A Devotee of Hari, 1956) in which he was also doing a role. She had a child by then and along with her family all of them stayed in Pandy Bazar in the Vishwakala office of G V Iyer. *Haribhakta* was followed in the same year by a Rajkumar-starrer, *Ohileshwara* (1956). Thus began a lasting relationship with the actor Rajkumar and his wife Parvathamma and their family which lasted a lifetime. She has spoken about the life and career of artists then. She said that they were given breakfast of idli and vada in the morning and were given packed lunches of tamarind rice or lemon rice. There was a lot of camaraderie among the actors and they ate the food given to them like blessed food.

After fifteen years in Chennai the family moved to Bengaluru and since not many films were being produced she acted in plays but later many films came her way where she did character roles. She acted in Tamil films also. She acted in Director J Mahendran's films *Mullum Malarum* (Flower and Thorn, 1978) with Rajanikanth, and in his film *Poottatha Poottukal* (Locks that Don't Lock, 1979) with actor Jayan. Director Vijayaganesh's *Oppantham* (Contract, 1983) with Sripriya was another Tamil film she did. She also acted in a Telugu film *Bharathamlo Oka Ammayi* (A Woman of Bharat) released in 1975 directed by Dasari Narayana Rao.

Shanthamma acted in more than 200 films and also in television serials. Some of her memorable films are *Naandi* (Invocation Song, 1964), *Indina Bharatha* (Today's Bharat, 1984), *Chinnari Mutta* (Sweet Boy, 1993) *Karulina Koogu* (A Cry from the Gut, 1993) and *Kamsale Kaisale* (The Folk Cymbals of Kaisale Village, 2012). The last film she acted in was *Endendigu* (Forever) in 2015. Acting in *Naandi* must have been an emotional experience for the film was on the problems of the deaf and dumb.

Strangely, there is no information available on her husband who brought her into movies. In the T V Programme she did she refers to him with photographs but does not name him nor does she say what happened to him later. In the 2013 interview on the TV Shanthamma said that she had

lived a long life and it was time to go now. Seven years later her end came in Mysuru where she had gone to live with her daughter just a few months ago.

C S Lakshmi

Keeping Imagination Alive: Amala Shankar-Nandy (27 June 1919-24 July 2020)



If Amala Shankar's life story could be composed as a dance ballet it will probably cover the social and cultural history of an independent India that was trying to rediscover itself in many different ways. For those who studied in schools and colleges in the two decades after Independence Uday Shankar and Amala Shankar were cultural icons. For those interested

in dance his style that blended many classical styles and also incorporated folk dances within it seemed like a new emerging creative language. Uday Shankar was admired as the dancer who had danced with the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova and performed in Europe. Amala was seen as the person who lent "lasya" (grace) to his "tandava" (vigorous dance) when they performed together and this, in many ways, extended to their life together as well.

She was born in Jessore, now in Bangladesh, and Akshay Nandy, her father, was a jeweller. But he was not just a businessman. His children were encouraged to read Rabindranath Tagore and Michael Madhusudan Dutta among others. It was purely by chance that at the age of 11, she met Uday Shankar in Paris where she had accompanied her father who had been invited to represent India at the International Colonial Exhibition in France to showcase India's craftsmanship. Uday Shankar and his brothers were there too. Uday had seen some promise in her although she had not learnt any dance and he was thirty years old and already a well-known dancer. He persuaded her father to allow her to accompany him on his European tour. At the young age of 14, Amala wrote a book, *Saat Sagorer Paare* (Beyond Seven Seas), where she documented the European dance tours with Uday Shankar and the excitement of performing to an appreciative audience.

It was later when he established his Uday Shankar Centre for Dance in Almorah that Amala joined his academy in 1940 to train. They got married in 1942 but soon after in 1944 the dance academy closed down due to lack of funds and

both of them came to Chennai to begin another phase of their life together: the making of the film *Kalpna* (Imagination) which was released in 1948 in which Amala played the female lead. It was a film about a dancer's dream of setting up a dance academy. The film also reflected on the society and offered arts and a creative education system in a proper environment as a solution to solve what ailed the society. That was the kind of dream that came with the forties and fifties where art and creative education were seen as transformative forces. Not much has been written about Amala's contribution to this film but writing about her in *The Wire* July 24, 2020 issue, her student Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, currently associate professor, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, says that it was an "extraordinary contribution." *Kalpna* film was lost for many years and it was restored and screened in Cannes in 2012 and Amala Shankar walked the red carpet to watch the film that she and Uday Shankar had created.

After the Madras sojourn Uday Shankar and Amala came to Kolkata and founded the Uday Shankar India Culture Centre (USICC). Although Uday Shankar and Amala separated a few years before his death in 1977, along with her own creative expressions, Amala also kept his dance legacy alive through this institution in Kolkata. Many of Amala's well-known choreographies and recreations of Uday Shankar's original choreographies were done as a part of this institution where many learnt dance. Until 2015, till the age of 96, Amala kept the institution going. In fact, her last performance was at the age of 93 when she played the role of King Janaka in the dance drama *Sita Swayamvar*.

Her own extraordinary life and her creative expressions have not been documented by her in an autobiography. Often she is referred to as the person who kept Uday Shankar's dance legacy alive and no separate space has been allotted to her in the history of dance. But her creative legacy and her life as a dance teacher must have been written into the life of not only her own family of artists like her daughter Mamata Shankar, daughter-in-law, Tanushree Shankar and son, Anand Shankar but also into the life of all her students who learnt from her not only how to dance but also how to live life and who felt empowered by her. As Urmimala Sarkar Munsri writes in her tribute to her Guru, Amala can be "found every day, in all our work, dance related or otherwise."

C S Lakshmi



Album Queen: Dipa Sahu (25 October 1985-27 July 2020)



Dipa was known as the Album Queen of Orissa. She was from a village Dhenkanal but she took the Odia music industry by storm in the nineties. Nineties was the period when independent music was very popular in Orissa. Her Odia and Sambalpuri music albums like '*Tora krushna chuda rangara nali odhani*' (Your odhani in the colour of red krushna flower), '*Hai Hai To Malli Phula Gajara*' (Oh, your jasmine garland), '*Mate Dhire Dhire Jhataka*' (Shake your head slowly) and '*Ekda Ekda Raa Re Pila, Ekda Ekda Raa*' (Come here o'boy, come here) became big hits. Later she went on to act in Odia films and television serials. Her debut film was *Nari Akhire Niyan* (Final Justice for Women, 2003). Her music albums and television serials made her a household name in Orissa. She retired from acting, in fact, to take care of her mother who was suffering from cancer. That Dipa herself succumbed to uterine cancer is a great pity. She was just a few months short of her 35th birthday. She has a ten-year-old daughter and had many things to look forward to. A life snatched too early. A great loss for her husband Manindra Dutta and her little daughter and all her fans who loved her music and acting.

C S Lakshmi

Teeri Nazar, Eyes Like Arrows: Kumkum (22 April 1938-28 July 2020)



Kumkum, (screen name of Zaibunissa), belonged to what is popularly known as the golden era of Hindi films, the 1950s and 1960s, in which soft family and romantic films were the norm. With about 116 films in which she acted, she was immensely popular, especially because of her vivacity and dancing skills, trained in Kathak as she was under the tutelage of Pandit Shambu Maharaj. It was also the era of soulful music, and the images of Kumkum in songs which still resound in public memory till today are legion: *kabhi aar kabhi paar laga teere nazar* (Your eyes like arrows go aslant) in Guru Dutt's *Aar Paar* (Aslant, 1954), *ai dil hai mushkil jeena yahan* (Oh heart, it is difficult to live here) in *C. I. D.* (1956), *Tera Jalwa Jisne Dekha Wo Tera Ho Gaya* (One who sees your charisma becomes yours) in *Ujala* (Light, 1959), *Khoobsurat Hasina* (Beautiful woman) in *Mr X in Bombay* (1964), *Ghunghat*

Nahin Kholungi (I will not remove my veil) in *Mother India* (1957)... and of course her robust dance in *Kohinoor* (1960)—*Madhuban Mein Radhika Nache Re* (Radhika danced in the beautiful forest)...

Mainly because of the songs that were picturised on her it is not surprising to find people of a certain generation also citing her as one of their favourite actresses. Thus, though Kumkum could never make it as a top-grade actor in the hierarchy-driven film industry, she had a consistent record of working with top-ranking actors and directors, even though in secondary roles, except in a few films she did with Kishore Kumar.

Like most actresses of her time, Kumkum came to films because of financial compulsions of the family. Though she was the daughter of Nawab Manzoor Hasan Khan of Hussainabad in Bihar, he deserted the family to fend for itself when he moved to Pakistan after a second marriage and Kumkum and her family moved to Mumbai in search of a livelihood. Her first recorded screen appearance is a brief role on Sohrab Modi's *Mirza Ghalib* and she was last seen in the Vinod Khanna starrer, *Ek Kunwari, Ek Kunwara* (A Maiden and A Bachelor, 1973). She produced and acted in several Bhojpuri films, including the first Bhojpuri film *Ganga Maiyya Tohe Piyari Chadhaibo* (O Mother Ganga, I Will Offer You A Yellow Cloth, 1963) and she also launched the first ever Bhojpuri film magazine, *Bhojpuri World*, in 2006. She was married to Sajjad Akbar Khan, and moved to Saudi Arabia with him, returning to India only in 1995. She is survived by a son, Hadi Ali Abrar and a daughter, Andaleb Akbar Khan.

—Charanjeet Kaur

Marathi Theatre World Without A Lady of Elegance: Lalita Kenkre (1934-28 July 2020)



Lalita Kenkre was an all-round theatre artiste. She hails from Chicalim village in Bardez, Goa. Her father, Taty Amonkar was a strong supporter of the theatre wing of Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh, an important cultural, literary and educational organisation of Marathi language. That is why both his daughters Lalita and Sudha (Karmarkar) grew up in the environment of theatre culture. He wanted both his daughters to get proper training in arts. Lalita got trained formally in singing, drama and dance. She learned dance from great Guru Parvatikumar, music from Pt. Govindrao Agni and theatre from Parshwanath Altekar, a well-known Marathi

director and actor. Later Lalita got married to noted theatre director, actor and stage designer Damoo Kenkre and her theatre journey continued. The training, family support and the family's theatre background enabled her smooth entry and continuation as an actor in plays, music dramas, folk dramas, Hindi and Marathi films as well as television serials. She did many major roles in plays by Sahitya Sangh and Lalitkaladarsh Natak Mandali and in films by Sai Paranjape, *Katha* (1982) being one of the films she acted in. Her much acclaimed role was in the Marathi film *Tuzya Vachun Karmena* (Can't Live without You, 1986) directed by her husband. She made a mark in plays by P L Deshpande, Vijay Tendulkar, Vidyadhar Gokhale and Shirwadkar. She put her stamp on the roles she played in plays like *Panditraj Jagannath*, *Sangeet Saubhadra*, *Tuze Ahe Tujhpashi* (You Have Your Stuff) and *Pati Gele Ga Kathewadi* (Husband Gone to Kathewadi). Even after she stopped acting, she still kept connections with theatre activities. She was supportive of young theatre people and experimental groups. With love and warmth she generously gave her top floor flat at Kala Nagar to young theatre artistes, with tea and often snacks on the house, as recalled by Lilette Dubey, in her tribute. Lalita died peacefully in her sleep having lived a full life in which she earned all the laurels she much deserved.

—C S Lakshmi & Sharmila Sontakke

A Lotus in Politics: Kamal Rani Varun (3 May 1958-2 August 2020)



Kamal Rani Varun was a Cabinet Minister in the government of Uttar Pradesh. She was twice elected to the Lok Sabha in 1996 and again in 1998. In 2017, she won from the Ghatampur Assembly seat securing 48.52 percent of the vote leaving her opponents far behind. In 2019 she was inducted in the council of ministers as a Minister for Technical Education. She was the only woman minister in the state after Rita Bahuguna Joshi, the Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee (UPCC) chief, who had resigned after the dismal assembly results in 2012.

Kamal Rani Varun belongs to the Pasi community classified as a scheduled caste community, which forms 16% of the SC population in the state. It is the second largest group in the category after the Jatav community. She was born in Lucknow. Her father's name is Moti Lal Rawat. It is not unusual that when we look for details of her parents and family only her father's name is given prominence and against her

mother's name is always a NA (Not Available) sign. But Kamal Rani herself sculpted her life in a way in which her name cannot be ignored by her family. Her work in the public sphere has been a dedicated one aimed at promoting education and self sufficiency for the underprivileged. Kamal Rani did her M A in Sociology from Kanpur University. She got married in 1975 to Kishan Lal Varun, a volunteer of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, very early in life at the age of 17. Her public life began around 1989. She held this post till 1995. In 1996, she was selected to contest from the Ghatampur parliamentary constituency and she won the elections. In 1998, she was again reelected to the Lok Sabha seat. During her tenure as a Member of Parliament, she served on advisory committees on labour, welfare, industry, women empowerment, official language and tourism departments. Kamal Rani unsuccessfully contested the 2012 Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly election from the Rasulabad constituency but was elected from the Ghatampur assembly constituency in 2017. In 2018 the Chief Minister of UP did the Pasi community proud by announcing in a programme organised by the Pasi community, that chapters on the icons of the Pasi community like Maharajah Bijli Pasi, Lakhan Pasi, Raja Gunga Bux Rawat and Uda Devi would be introduced in the school syllabus. Not many of us know that Uda Devi was a warrior in the Indian rebellion of 1857 against the British East India Company.

It is interesting to note the social and cultural activities Kamal Rani was interested in. She has mentioned elsewhere that she was especially interested in rendering help to helpless and the poor, educating the illiterate (especially women) to become self-reliant. Towards this she set up through Seva Bharati, Sanskar Kendras (Centres to provide traditional knowledge and human values) in *Seva Bastis* Seva Bastis (Slum colonies where different kinds of voluntary services including health and education are taken up) for small children. She initiated efforts to impart education to illiterate women in slums and made efforts to make them self-sufficient by opening knitting and weaving centres and giving them training. She established Milan Kendras and promoted education through them.

It is a pity Kamal Rani served as a cabinet minister for just a year and that the corona virus took her away at the young age of 62, before many of her dreams were realised.

In the Heart of Islam: Sadia Dehlvi (1957-5 August 2020)



Socialite, writer, journalist, Sadia Dehlvi, who was steeped in Sufism, belongs to the first family of modern Urdu journalism, which ran the Shama group of publications. Her father, Hafiz Yunus Dehlvi single-handedly and successfully took Urdu writing to the masses through magazines like *Shama*, *Sushma*, *Bano* and *Khilauna*, which featured the writing literary stalwarts like Ishmat Chughtai, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander, along with more populist writers, and occasional writing film stars like Meena Kumari and Nargis. Sadia tried to keep the family tradition alive and kept *Bano* afloat till 1987, but Shama publications (established by her grandfather, Hafiz Yusuf Dehlvi) could not survive the declining fortunes of the Urdu language in India. She wrote regularly in English, Hindi and Urdu and her columns in newspapers like *Hindustan Times* and magazines like *Frontline* were well received.

She was a devotee of Chisti order of Sufism, of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz of Ajmer and Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi and her three books on Sufism—*Sufism, the Heart of Islam, The Sufi Courtyard: Dargahs of Delhi and Jasmine and Jinns: Memories and Recipes of My Delhi*—will keep her in the public memory. Her writing stressed the pluralistic understanding of Islam and she was ever the sensitive and sensible voice in public discourse about religion on TV and other forums. She has also produced and scripted documentaries and TV programmes, and her documentary on Zohra Sehgal, *Amma and Family* (1995) is an extremely sensitive portrayal of the life and times of the veteran actor.

Perhaps, it was also her friendship with Khushwant Singh, which kept her in the limelight in Delhi circles. His book *Not a Nice Man to Know* is dedicated to her: “To Sadia Dehlvi, who gave me more affection and notoriety than I deserve,” it reads. She later produced a television show in 1998, *Not A Nice Man To Know* with Khushwant Singh interviewing women from various fields.

Sadia's tryst with cancer lasted two years. Married to Reza Pervaiz from Pakistan in 1990, and later, after her divorce in 2002, to Sayyed Karamat Ali, Sadia is survived by a son, Armaan Ali Dehlvi, who is equally devoted to Sufism and music.

C S Lakshmi

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Charanjeet Kaur

CONTRIBUTIONS TO SPARROW QUALIFY FOR 80 G.

Committed to Changing Tribal Lives: Ilna Sen (1951-9 August 2020)



Ilna Sen succumbed to cancer. She was someone who was as strong as they make them. She was a much admired activist who took up the cause of mine workers and trade unions in Chhattisgarh along with her husband Binayak Sen. She fought for tribal rights and was vehemently against corporatisation. The public health movement found a great champion in her to promote the cause of alternative health. She did dedicated work in her husband's NGO Rupantar which took up the cause of alternative health care in remote areas.

She made several appointments to visit SPARROW with her students from TISS many times; one time it was immediately after her return from CMC, Vellore after radiation treatment. But she could not keep the appointments due to health and other reasons. We were hoping to record her interview for SPARROW sometime. But it did not happen. But despite bad health she came for a SPARROW event. It is a pity we could not sit down to have that long chat with you, Ilna. But you have left behind your political memoir *Inside Chhattisgarh* and *Sukhvasin: the Migrant Woman of Chhattisgarh* for us to read many times to know you and understand your life and your work.

—C S Lakshmi

The President's Wife: Vimala Devi Sharma (1927-15 August 2020)



Vimala Devi Sharma was a social worker and women's rights activist, and a politician. She was originally from Rajasthan and spent most of her early life in Jaipur. She was former President Dr Shankar Dayal

Sharma's second wife. Even before he became the Vice-President of India in 1987, Vimala Devi had remained active in public life and she was the first woman to win the Udaipura constituency seat in 1985 and enter the Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly. She headed the Madhya Pradesh Social Welfare Board for several terms. It was the same constituency from which Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma had won in 1962 when the district had been created.

In 1987, when Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma became the Vice President of India serving under R Venkatraman, the

President, Vimala Devi carried out her duties as the Second Lady of India. When Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma became the Ninth President of India, she served as the First Lady of India from 1992 to 1997. She continued to be involved in the work of social and charitable organisations in the Bhopal and Raisen districts, even after leaving the Rashtrapathi Bhavan and after the demise of her husband Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma in 1999. She became a victim of COVID-19 and passed away on August 15th. She was 93 and it is sad that she succumbed to the corona virus but one must say she had had a good innings and life had been satisfying and meaningful to her.

—C S Lakshmi

Mruthyoma Amruthangamaya: Indu Ramesh (July 1937-26 August 2020)



Like war veterans Indu Ramesh was a media veteran. She was a radio broadcaster whose life was spent in being an author and dealing with many different media organisations. She was associated with All India Radio as a producer and director and a longtime contributor to Women's

International News Gathering Service (WINGS) and **The International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT)**.

She studied in Kannada medium schools in small towns and later studied in maharaja's College, Mysore. She began to write at the age of fifteen and first wrote in Kannada. Later she wrote articles and short stories in Kannada and English. In the early 1960s when she joined All India Radio, there were very few women in radio. Women in AIR then were only handling music programmes or programmes meant for women and children. Gathering news, interviewing politicians and similar activities were considered men's jobs. Indu changed all that. In her thirty years of work with AIR, under her directorship, the Bangalore CBS won the Best Station Award twice in a row. She retired as Station Director, Commercial Broadcasting Station (Vividh Bharati), Bengaluru. It is during her time with AIR that she also produced programmes for WINGS. Her radio shows on tribal women, "Forest Women Dwelling in India" done for WINGS won an honourable mention at an international media competition. Indu Ramesh did not really retire because it was after her retirement that she became even more active. She became active in community radio and was one of the pioneers of the movement in India. She was one of the signatories to the

1996 Bangalore Declaration for a media policy on community radio. Many community radio stations were set up under her guidance: the nongovernmental organisation MYRADA established their community radio station *Namma Dhwani* (Our Voice) in Kolar district; she mentored Sarathi Jhalak, a community radio station in Hosakote run by Network of Women in Media (NWMI) member Shamanthaka Mani. The Ramana Maharishi Academy for Blind ran a station *Ramana Dhwani* (Ramana's Voice) with her as programme advisor. Community radio was her passion and she travelled all over rural Karnataka to produce programmes.

As an author what she wrote was written from her heart. Her novel *Four Tales and a Lifetime* got very good notices. It was an English novel which told the story of four women born before independence in India and coming of age in Independent India. It was a story of her times. Her Kannada book *Mruthyoma Amrutangamaya* was a moving account of her battle with Guillain Barre Syndrome, a rapid onset of muscle weakness. She also wrote a biography of Lakshmiiji, the founder of Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana. Till the end she continued to paint, to embroider so that she could retain flexibility and strength of hands and fingers and edit community radio programmes. And she loved to feed friends and family with traditional Indian food. Finally, at the age of 83, she succumbed to COVID-19 in a hospital in Bangalore.

In September 2019, the Mitra Tantra Archive of Personal Narratives and Oral Histories published 81 short videos (from 20 seconds to 3 minutes) of Indu where she shared details and stories of her life. Indu had told her family that when she died they should post it on Facebook so that her friends come to know about it. Her family posted this on her death:

"When I die, make sure you post the news on Facebook so that my friends know about it," she had said. So here it is... Indu Ramesh was grandmother, mother, mother-in-law, wife, sister and a dear, dear friend to so many. Radio person, author of several books, embroiderer, painter and maker of pickles, she was tech-savvy enough to communicate and shop online when she couldn't go out on her own. She was an extremely good host and loved to feed people. She held strong opinions, and lately, did not hesitate to make them heard! Most of all, she had a fighting spirit, overcoming challenges that would have flattened a lesser spirit. Indu Bai Ramesh passed away at 9:54 am on 26th August 2020 after a battle with Covid. We will miss her."

—C S Lakshmi



Singing Folk Songs of Assam: Archana Mahanta (18 March 1949-27 August 2020)



The Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal tweeted "Today, we have lost a shining star among the cultural stalwarts of the state" when Archana Mahanta passed away on 27 August in Guwahati. She had suffered a stroke in July and was ailing since then. She was 71 and a much loved person in

Assam.

Archana Mahanta was a much loved singer of folk songs of Assam. Along with her late husband Khagen Mahanta, popularly referred to as 'King of Bihu', Archana had made an enormous contribution in popularising and preserving Assamese folk music. The musical couple often performed together, singing many duet hits like *Bhor Duporiya* (A Hot Summer Afternoon), *O Phool Pah Haliso Jaliso* (Oh flower, swaying gently in the breeze), *Bhal Lagi Jai O Chateo Matile* (I feel so good, the month of Chauth beckons) and *Junti Ulale Torati Ulabo* (The moon has come out, the stars will too). She is the mother of popular singer Angaraag 'Papon' Mahanta.

Not many singers choose to popularise folk music and Archana's demise will be a great loss to the genre of folk music.

—C S Lakshmi with inputs from Priyakshi Goswami



Death of a Pioneer Cardiologist: Dr Padmavati Sivaramakrishna Iyer (20 June 1917-29 August 2020)



Dr Padmavati's life reads like a thriller novel. Not one with murders and mysteries but one involving exciting journeys in the medical field. She was a pioneering cardiologist whose career coincided

one could say with the progress of an independent India. She was director of the National Heart Institute, Delhi, and the founder president of the All India Heart Foundation.

Padmavati was born to a barrister in Burma (Myanmar) in 1917. She had five siblings. She received her MBBS degree from Rangoon Medical College, Rangoon, and she was the first woman student there to be awarded the degree. She moved to London in 1949, where she received a FRCP from Royal College of Physicians. It was followed by FRCPE from Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. While she was in UK, she worked at the National Heart Hospital, National Chest Hospital, and the National Hospital, Queen Square, London. She moved to Sweden for three months after her FRCP to take cardiology courses at the southern Hospital there. She had also applied meanwhile for fellowship at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, which was part of Johns Hopkins University and she was selected. At Johns Hopkins she studied with the noted cardiologist Helen Taussig. After this she joined Harvard Medical School (Harvard University) in 1952 and studied under Paul Dudley White, a pioneer in modern cardiology.

She returned to India in 1953 because she missed her country after all that travel, just when the country needed specialists like her to strengthen its different areas of public health. She was the first woman cardiologist of India. She began her career as a lecturer at Lady Hardinge Medical College, Delhi, where she opened a cardiology clinic. By the 1970s, three major institutions like Maulana Azad Medical College, Lok Nayak Hospital and G B Pant Hospital were under her charge. She was the chief administrator of all the three institutions at the same time. In 1978, she retired as the Director (Principal) of the Maulana Azad Medical College. Not one to rest after retirement she began to plan to set up a heart institute and in 1981, set up the National Heart Institute (NHI) under All India Heart Federation (AIHF),

in South Delhi, a federation she had founded in 1962, with a group of physicians and industrialist Ashok Jain of Bennett, Coleman & Co. Ltd.

Under her guidance the Institute expanded in many ways extending its activities to crucial areas of health care like tertiary patient care, research and population outreach and Dr Padmavati continued to work there and also function as Emeritus Professor of Medicine and Cardiology of the University of Delhi. In an amazing feat of commitment to medicine, in 2007, at the age of 90, still not giving up her enthusiasm to work, she became a fellow of the European Society of Cardiology; it made her the most senior fellow of the ESC.

Dr Padmavati was honoured with a Padma Bhushan, in 1967 and a Padma Vibhushan in 1992 at the age of 75. She was 103, the oldest living doctor in India, when she was affected by COVID-19. The first woman cardiologist in India who established the first cardiac clinic and cardiac catheter lab in India, breathed her last at the NHI which she had set up. The ESC website wrote a note on her when she became the fellow and quoted Dr Ashok Seth of Fortis Escorts Heart Institute who said, "She created the whole concept of heart treatment in India from scratch." The note on the website also said "Dr Padmavati has survived wars, met India's founding father, Mahatma Gandhi, and has been part of the changing face of cardiovascular medicine in India for more than 70 years." Asked her secret to good health, Dr Padmavati said it was walking and daily swimming! A life such as hers will certainly be an inspiration to all those young girls who aspire to be doctors and researchers in science. As Adlai Stevenson, the American diplomat once said, "It is not the years in your life but the life in your years that counts." Dr Padmavati managed to put a lot of life into her years. A rare life lived to the fullest.

—C S Lakshmi



Western Canto: Meena Deshpande (14 March 1934-06 September 2020)



Writer and stage producer Meena Deshpande passed away in Augusta, Georgia, at the age of 86. She was the daughter of the legendary Indian writer Acharya Atre and sister of writer / poet Shirish Pai. But that's not her only identity. After graduating in Arts in Philosophy, she managed Acharya Atre's theatre company Atre Theatres which staged numerous performances. Later she managed the distribution of Atre's national award winning films. She was a great writer herself. Her first book was *Paschim Gandha* (Western Canto, 1975)—a travelogue of a young Indian woman in Europe. Fascinated with European literature, she translated works of Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, and Ionesco. Her well-known works include books like *Kali America* (Black America), based on the American Civil Rights movement, Marilyn Monroe, based on the Miller-Monroe romance and her latest one on Pop icon Michael Jackson is yet to be published. She has also written a short story collection, *Ye Tarunya Ye* (Come Youth, Come). Her novel *Hutatma* (The Martyr) based on the Samyukta Maharashtra movement in which her father played a leading role, won the best novel award of Maharashtra State. It has also been made into a web series. Apart from this she also edited a collection of articles with many contributors written on Atre's literature entitled *Acharya Atre: Pratibha ani Pratima* (The Genius and Image of Acharya Atre). Another collection of articles she edited on her father was entitled *Pappa: Ek Mahakavya* (Pappa, An Epic). She also wrote supplementary volumes to her father's autobiography *Karheche Pani* (Water of the River Karha). Her book *Ashrunche Natey* (A Relationship Dipped in Tears, 1995) talks about troubled relationship of her parents and its impact on the family. When Atre was gaining fame, his wife was left to fend for herself with two little daughters, Meena and Shirish and seek a life in Nashik, away from Pune. She was a talented, well educated, good looking woman who could not grow further due to lack of opportunity. After years of separation the family was reunited but the scars remained. Atre was involved in a relationship with a Marathi actress. Meena was enthusiastic about writing even when she was 80 plus. She was trying to collect material for a big novel and also working on her memoirs of the Indian stage. But unfortunately Covid-19 took her away.

Going Beyond Binaries: Kapila Vatsyayan (25 December 1928-16 September 2020)



Kapila Vatsyayan touched many lives in innumerable ways. Her passing away at a few months shy of 92 felt both too abrupt and too soon.

For me, the loss was personal. Kapilaji and my aunt had worked closely for a Hindustani classical music project back in the 90's. Kapilaji had also invited my mother to deliver a lecture on Classical Ragas at IGNCA in 1996, when I was not yet a teenager. Over the years, I grew up idolising Kapilaji. As a teenager, I wanted to be versatile and multi-faceted like her. I used to watch her programmes on DD Bharti with sheer awe, enthralled by her attractive persona and her mammoth intellect. I finally met her much later, after completing my MPhil, and we met on several occasions in the past few years.

Possibly the first vivid meeting was on 11th August 2015, at the launch of the festschrift in honour of Professor Harish Trivedi: a book entitled *India and the World: Postcolonialism, Translation and Indian Literature* (Essays in honour of Prof. Harish Trivedi) edited by Ruth Vanita, published by Pencraft (2014). It was held in the seminar hall of the India International Centre, New Delhi. The book discussion was chaired by Kapilaji.

I was stumped by the disarming way with which she initiated the proceedings: by casually recounting what she called her 'previous birth' as a litterateur, and in the same vein, plainly expressing her discomfort with the term 'postcolonialism', easily the central theme of the volume. In her trademark style, she had firmly set the ball rolling in the distinctly Eng-Lit setting of the evening. The discomfort with the term 'postcolonialism' became a chief concern shared thereafter by every discussant, including Trivedi himself. By the end of the discussion, the researcher in me was hooked on to Kapilaji's exposition and her no-holds-barred style of asserting herself, refreshingly different from most academics I had met so far.

The next memorable meeting was on 17th September 2018, at the launch of five of her latest books at the IIC, when I finally mustered the courage to share our mutual connections. She quickly recognised our association, asked me in detail about my research and, invited me to visit her in her office some day to talk further. When I told her that I looked like the youngest person present in the hall, she replied smiling, "*Theek kehrahi ho, tumhare hi baal kale hain* (That is right. Only your hair is black)."

We met later on 2nd March 2019, at IIC again, on the

occasion of Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul Kumar's book launch of their book *Speaking for Myself*. We spoke for almost 15 minutes and Kapilaji instructed me to complete my research soon: "Tumhi logon ne scholarship ka beeda sambhalna hai, hum log toh boodhe ho gaye hain (You people have to take over the responsibility of scholarship. We have become old.)"

During the book launch proceedings, she spoke very less and expressed the desire to listen to the others. It was evident that she was not keeping too well. I am deeply saddened that I never could find the time to visit her at the office. I had always taken her to be eternal, a given, someone who is forever.

Earlier in August 2020, Tamil writer Ambai (C S Lakshmi) and I had begun sharing our mutual admiration for Kapilaji. Ambai had earlier posted on social media that during her trip abroad in the course of her lectures, she found many in the audience placing tradition and modernity as binaries and that she had to introduce Kapila Vatsyayan and one of her books, *Plural Cultures and Monolithic Structures: Comprehending India* to them and tell them about Kapilaji's idea of maintaining the principle of *chira nutan, chira puratan*, where the old is continuously transforming into new and the new is in the continuing process of becoming old. Ambai also shared with me a quotation from a talk by Kapilaji in 2006 on "Understanding India on and through its Own Terms". Kapilaji had said then:

"We are made aware of the fact that the categories evolved were not absolutes, instead they could inter-penetrate. Nor is a pyramidal structure being suggested, of gradual refinement. Yes, there is an emphasis on 'location' or 'regional'. Now when we turn our attention to the contemporary discourse on India, we may recall the theoretical construct of the great and little traditions in sociological terms, classical and folk in artistic terms, Brahmannical and non-Brahmannical, or Dalit, etc. etc., and of course, the Sanskrit and the vernaculars (i.e., modern Indian languages and dialects). This discourse is pervasive and active. Despite the diversity of theoretical positions, there is a tacit acceptance of in-built tension as also a hierarchy. The Great is poised against the Little, the classical against the folk, the Brahmannical against the non-Brahmannical, the Sanskrit against the bhāshas, and on and on. However, a careful perusal of the primary sources reveals that mārṅa and desa were not polarities, they were complementary and reversible in space and time, certainly at the artistic level but not exclusive only to the 'arts'. No one-to-one-equation was made between the societal, sociological and the artistic. The texts do not speak of a nagara art equal to mārṅa and a rural grāma art equal to desa, nor is there a mention of Brahmannical and non-Brahmannical art. The absence of this discussion in self-

reflection should not be overlooked if we wish to comprehend India on its own 'terms', at least in the artistic sphere, extendable to the larger area of 'culture' and creativity."

Ambai and I also purchased several of Kapilaji's books for our personal collections, and decided to prepare for a possible interview with her in the next couple of months, once the Covid-19 crisis abated. Ambai's own plans to interview her had got scuttled many times due to various reasons. The books got delivered on 8th September. She passed away on the 16th.

You are immortal Kapilaji, in the countless institutions you created and nurtured, in the myriad lives you touched, and in the colossal, virtually insurmountable body of work you produced over several decades.

—Kalyanee Rajan

Dying Young: Sharbari Datta (1957-18 September 2020)



Sixty-three year old women who are working women normally don't consider themselves old. They chalk out plans for at least the next two decades. Sharbari Dutta, a Kolkata-based fashion designer must have also done so. Her life as a fashion designer was going well. Her name and her brand Shunya which had outlets in Kolkata, was well-known. She had ventured into revival of ethnic designs in men's clothing and her clientele included film stars and former cricketers and she lived at Broad Street, a posh residential colony in South Kolkata. She had everything going for her. It is a pity she had a sudden cardiac arrest and merged with *shunya*, the void, so early in life.

—C S Lakshmi

What others say.....

"...SPARROW is an extraordinary undertaking. The only women's archives in India, it is an institution that practices history in public spaces. Perhaps most important, SPARROW challenges conventional ideas about archives and what is worth archiving."

Dr Geraldine Forbes
Distinguished Teaching Professor Emerita
Department of History
State University of New York Oswego

The One Who Was Named After Rosa Luxembourg: Roza Deshpande (1929-19 September 2020)



Roza Deshpande was born during tumultuous times when her father Sripad Amrit Dange, one of the founders of the Communist Party of India, was spending his life going in and out of jail as part of the freedom movement. She was named after

Rosa Luxemburg, the founder of the German Party who actively fought for women's rights and against fascism. The political ideology that she believed and practised all through her life as a trade unionist and a political leader, was instilled in her by not only her father who was not always present during her childhood years, but also by her activist mother Ushatai. Ground Zero: Facts as Resistance blog in its Episode 2 on Comrade Dange and Dr Ambedkar, mentions Ushatai and her daring political activities along with her husband. It records that at a time when militant strikes were rocking the mills and Dange was one of the key leaders in the industrial workers' movement, "on one occasion, Dange's wife, Com. Ushatai, put down her 6-month old daughter Roza in front of "goondas" sent by the management in order to break the strike and said, "You will have to drive over her if you must open the gates."

It is not surprising that Roza Deshpande grew up to take part in the freedom movement and also work for the Girani Kamgars (Textile Workers) Union. She also was an active participant in the Samyukta Maharashtra Andolan, a movement to form a linguistic state and to make Mumbai a part of Maharashtra. In 1974, she was elected to the Lok Sabha from the Bombay South Central constituency. She was also active in fighting for the rights of working women in her capacity as member of various Central and State Government committees.

Dange's support of Emergency and Indira Gandhi brought much criticism against him and in 1978 he had to leave the Party he had founded. Following this Roza along with her husband Vidyadhar (Bani) Deshpande formed the All India Communist Party. The Party did not make much of an impact in the Left political economy but Roza's support for her father's ideology and his stands remained steadfast. She wrote a book in Marathi entitled *S A Dange: Ek Itihash* (S A Dange: A History) and a book of memoirs on Dange in Marathi and English along with her husband Vidyadhar Deshpande, entitled *S A Dange and the Problem of Indian Renaissance*. In his article in *Mainstream* dated 9 October 2020, entitled "On

Roza Deshpande and Redlining Dange-line in Indian Politics" Pratip Chattopadhyay writes touchingly about meeting Roza Deshpande in April 2018 at her residence where the drawing room is lined with photographs of Dange. Pratip Chattopadhyaya's basic question to her was about the left circles viewing her father as a Congress agent. Roza Deshpande told him that it was a false imagery. She further explained that "Dange was highly moved by the mass appeal and populist following that Indira Gandhi as a political leader possessed across the country in early 1970s along with her anti-imperialist position in world and regional politics, particularly in the wake of Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971." Roza Deshpande emphasised that "Dange's preference for leadership of Indira Gandhi should not be equated with his support for the Party she represented, i.e. Indian National Congress." Whether one agrees with Dange's support of Indira Gandhi or Roza Deshpande's justification of his stand or not, fact remains that Roza Deshpande is an important part of the history of the nation. Seeing the twists and turns of the Left movement in Indian politics, a well researched book is very much needed on Roza Deshpande's life and her unwavering conviction regarding Dange's politics and her own political stands and activities for women and workers throughout her life.

—C S Lakshmi

Gard Sabhowati: Ashalata Wabgaonkar (2 July 1941-22 September 2020)



In 1964 Vasant Kanetkar's Marathi play *Matsyagandha* became very popular. The song *Gard Sabhowati Ran Sajni* (Surrounded by a dense forest, my beloved) written by Balkavi Thombare and set to music by Jitendra Abhisheki sung by Ashalata Wabgaonkar was on everyone's lips.

It is no wonder that when she wrote her memoirs about her life's journey as an artiste she chose this part of the first line of the song as the title of the book and called it *Gard Sabhowati*. Wonder if the title was a recall of the beautiful song or if she felt that the film world and the art world was surrounding her as a beautiful, life-giving dense forest, and used it as a metaphor.

Ashalata belonged to Goa's Palolem village and was a highly qualified woman who came into the art world. She was an actor who was also famous as a Marathi singer, and a playwright. She was also closely associated with the Goa Hindu Association in Mumbai. She did her schooling at the famous St. Columba's Girls' High School at Gamdevi, and

did her post-graduation in Psychology from the SNTD Women's University. She began by performing in Konkani and Marathi plays. She was trained in classical music and was one of the best Marathi Natyasangeet singers. She became a name to reckon with in Marathi theatre in the years that followed.

Ashalata's theatre debut was in the play *Sanshay Kallol* (Suspicion Rages), a play by G.B. Deval which was a popular musical comedy presented by the Kala Vibhag of The Goa Hindu Association in 1956. She played the role of Revathi in the play. But it was *Matsyagandha*, the musical play, which became the turning point in her career. The play was a retelling of the mythological story of Maharaja Shantanu, his infatuation with the fisher girl Matsyagandha and his relationship with his son and erstwhile heir, Bhishma. This drama was a great success and was staged more than 500 times. The play's music composed by Jitendra Abhisheki took the music world by storm and Ashalata became a part of this rising storm. Some of her memorable Marathi plays are *Guntata Hridhaya He* (Entangled Heart), *Varyavarchi Varaat* (Irresponsible Work), *Chinna* and *Mahananda*.

Ashalata acted in more than 100 Marathi and Hindi films. She acted in films such as *Apne Paraye* (Our Own and Outsiders, 1980), *Ahista Ahista* (Slowly, 1981), *Shaukeen* (The Enthusiast, 1982), *Namak Halaal* (A Loyal Person, 1982), *Woh Saat Din* (Those Seven Days, 1983), *Yaadon Ki Kasam* (Swear by Memories, 1985) and *Ankush* (Elephant Goad, 1986), *Do Ankhon Barah Hath* (Two Eyes and Twelve Hands, 1997), *Beti No. 1* (Daughter No. 1, 2000), *Police Force: An Inside Story* (2004), *Arunoday-Sunrise* (2014). The last film was a Marathi film which was co-produced by NFDC and Dolce Vita Films in Paris which told the story of a grieving father who was an inspector searching for his daughter who was kidnapped at the age of 6. Ashalata for the first time played a negative role in this film: that of Radhabai, a brothel madam. The film was sent to several international festivals and won many awards.

That Ashalata was acting at the age of 73 in a non-commercial film and dared to do the negative role of a brothel keeper speaks a lot about her prowess as an actor and also her spirit to take up challenges. She died in what is idiomatically referred to as dying with your boots on. She was shooting for a Marathi serial *Aai Mazi Kalubai* (My Mother Goddess Kalubai) at Satara when she got infected with the COVID virus. Alka Kubal, a co-actor whom she considered her daughter and whom she had instructed to take charge of matters if anything happened to her conducted her last rites at Satara. It was reported that she was cheerful and appeared to be getting better when the end came. It is possible she felt surrounded by the dense forest of love in

her last moments. Artistes like her deserve to be surrounded thus.

—C S Lakshmi & Sharmila Sontakke

Glass Ceilings to Shatter and Stories to Tell: Isher Judge Ahluwalia (1 October 1945-26 September 2020)



When Isher Judge Ahluwalia passed away of brain cancer on 26th September 2020 at the age of 74, it was just a few weeks after the publication of her brief Memoir *Breaking Through*, which has been transcribed partly by her equally famous economist husband Montek Singh Ahluwalia, whom she fondly refers to as “the highest qualified Research Assistant I could hope for.” The Memoir is of special interest not only for the obviously emotional context of her illness in which it was written, but more so because it records her journey from a middle-class, semi-educated, patriarchal business Sikh family of Lahore and later Calcutta to some of the highest echelons of power as economist, public policy researcher and economist.

After a brilliant academic career which materialised mainly because of the merit scholarships that came her way, at the Presidency College, Calcutta, Delhi School of Economics and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), she rose to eminent and influential positions in her long career—Policy Economist at the International Monetary Fund, Professor at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, Chairperson Emeritus and Board of Governors at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), Chairperson of the Board of the International Food Policy Research Institute, and of the Government of India's High-Powered Committee on Urban Infrastructure Services. Apart from *Breaking Through*, she authored two books—*Industrial Growth in India: Stagnation Since the Mid Sixties*, (for which the Batheja Memorial Award for best book on Indian Economy, 1987 was bestowed on her) and *Productivity and Growth in Indian Manufacturing*. She was awarded the Padma Bhushan for her contribution to Public Policy.

What is striking about her journey is that she recognised her calling at a very early stage, and being one of 11 siblings, 10 of whom were girls, she was able to pursue her academic, research and professional dreams, mainly because she was not afraid to take bold decisions. Deeply steeped in the Sikh faith and well versed in the scriptures, Isher did not, however,

give much importance to the external symbols of her religion: she wore cropped hair though she knew that the community would not take it kindly; when she got married to Montek, they decided to go in for a civil marriage in America because, as she says, she was averse to the enormous expenses of a traditional marriage in India. She and Montek made a conscious decision to return to India after lucrative assignments in the US, because she wanted her two sons to have their basic education in India. Above all, she believed strongly that education is the key to a life of value, and it is her initiative in aspiring to the highest academic credentials that paved the way for her younger sisters to take to professions at a time when it was rare for women in the Sikh community to move beyond pre-defined roles.

As a woman who exuded strength and power, one who interacted with some of the finest minds of her time, her prime concern remained the family and especially the upbringing of her two sons Pavan and Aman. As a role model which she was seen as by many, her belief system is simple and candid. She shares her hopes for the future in her moving memoir in these words: "I draw strength from the belief, based on my own life, in a general force of goodness in this world. Many individuals, many women, many from less-privileged backgrounds will shatter glass ceilings that still exist. They will write their own stories."

—Charanjeet Kaur

A Grandmother Who Sang a Song With the Hero: Sarada Nair: (1928-29 September 2020)



Sarada Nair who passed away at the ripe old age of 92, is fondly remembered as the person who acted as the heroine Manju Warrier's grandmother in the film *Kanmadam* (Viscous Rock, 1998) directed by A K

Lohithadas and even sang a song with the hero Mohan Lal, in the film. She was a grandmother again in the film *Pattabhishekam* (Coronation, 1999) directed by P Anil. Sarada Nair's full name is Peroor Mooppil Madhathil Sarada Nair and she belonged to the Peroor Moopil Madam family and was the wife of the late Padmanabhan Nair of Thathamangalam. Everyone remembers her as the earthy grandmother with a pleasant smile in the film *Kanmadam*. Story goes that Lohithadas, the director of *Kanmadam*, had come looking for a woman who lived in Sarada's neighbourhood for the role of the grandmother in his film.

But he did not find the woman suitable for the role he imagined in the film. It was by chance that he met Sarada. He asked her if she would be interested in playing the role and she readily agreed. The rest is history. Not many grandmothers have the opportunity to sing a song with the famous Mohan Lal in a film but Sarada Nair seems to have been quite cool about it. Along with her own happy family of two daughters and a son and a daughter-in-law and sons-in-law who will remember her, the Malayalam cinema audience have also got a grandmother to remember.

—C S Lakshmi

Memories of a Woman Named Pushpa: Pushpa Bhave (23 March 1939-2 October 2020)



Pushpa Bhave passed away on the 2nd of October. For all of us who have associated with her it is an immeasurable loss. She was named flower but was firm and strong as a mountain. Whether it was Samyuktha Maharashtra Movement which she joined in 1956 or the Dalit Panther

Movement she was part of or the progressive theatre movement that she took part in or the struggle to rename Marathwada University which she joined wholeheartedly, Pushpa was very clear about what her perspective and values were. From organising Beedi workers in Nippani to working with Baba Adhav to organise the Hamal and Mapadi (head-loaders and sweepers) workers' movement, her commitment to the cause of the weaker section of the society whether it is women or labourers was steadfast.

During the Emergency period she opened her house to offer shelter to underground political workers. As a lone woman she fought for justice for Ramesh Kini who was murdered. Her courage inspired none other than Supreme Court lawyer Soli Sorabjee—who later was appointed Attorney General of India—to represent Kini's family without any charge. She took a strong stand against the 1992 communal riots after the demolition of Babri Masjid.

Pushpa was one of the trustees of the Social Gratitude Fund, which supports activists who do not wish to take funds from international agencies. She was also a member of People's Forum for Peace and Justice.

SPARROW's association with her began even during its struggles to get established. She continued to stand by us because of her deep bonding with Dr Neera Desai, one of

our founder trustees, and Dr Divya Pandey, who was also a Trustee of SPARROW until recently. So when we decided to inaugurate the Dr Neera Desai Memorial Library on 26 September, 2009, we could not think of anyone other than Pushpa Bhawe to inaugurate it. She graciously accepted the invitation and came all the way to Dahisar and made it a memorable occasion for all of us at SPARROW.

You lived your life on your terms, Pushpaji, and despite periods when you fell ill, there was always a smile on your face to greet anyone who visited you. It is a smile that has inspired many of us to carry on with our work with a never-say-die attitude. Thank you for being part of our life.

—C S Lakshmi

Dying to Succeed: Mishti Mukherjee (1993-2 October 2020)



The official announcement in a social medium platform of Mishti Mukherjee's untimely death at the age of 27 reads: "Actress Mishti Mukherjee who marked her brilliance in many films and music videos with her ace acting is no more. Due to keto diet, her kidney failed in

Bangalore and she breathed her last on Friday night, the actress suffered a lot of pain. Unforgettable and unfortunate loss. May her soul rest in peace. She is survived by her parents and brother." Her brother, Samarth, is a scriptwriter, and her father, Chandrakant Mukherjee, is a retired engineer,

The regret is for a life cut short and the compulsions of the showbiz which drive young women and men to extremes in their attempts to stay abreast in this competitive ethos. She acted in a little-known Ranvir Shorey Bollywood film, *Life Ki Toh Lag Gayi* (Screwed Up Life) in 2012, acted in Telugu and Bengali films, made Music videos—all, perhaps in the hope of making it big in the film industry or in one of the OTT entertainment platforms. Such a death is tragic; more so, because of the sense of futility and meaninglessness it reveals.

—Charanjeet Kaur



Trapezing Through Life: Dhanalaxmi Shetty (1944-6 October 2020)



A five or six-year old girl and her brother lost their parents. Unable to take care of them, their relatives or a neighbour took them to Royal Circus Company that was visiting their town and placed them in the company. The little

girl remembered two cities Trichi and Mysore and had vague memories of knowing Tulu and Kannada. Other than that the circus company became her family. She knew how to play with the animals in the circus. Her life continued as a trapeze artist dangling dangerously high holding a bar looking like a fairy in a white costume. When she became a young woman the circus owner asked her if she would like to get married and leave the circus or stay on in the circus company. She told the owner that if someone really loved her and married her she would like to get married. The Circus Company was then camping in Mumbai. The driver who drove them around Mumbai was a Tamilian living in Dharavi. When he came to know about her desire to marry he suggested a young man who was related to him. His name was Velu Mayil. He came to see her trapeze performance and also wanted to meet her during the day once. They met and she agreed to marry him. She came with him to live in Dharavi. The Dharavi Tamil community was very accepting of Dhanalaxmi. As a circus artist she had travelled all around India and the world. Her travel to Italy especially Rome, Paris, Egypt, South Africa and undivided Singapore were memories she recalled often. She gave up all that to live with Velu Mayil in Dharavi. Life must have been difficult. But love between the two of them must have made it possible or so we imagine. She had four sons and a daughter. Only two sons and a daughter are alive now. Velu Mayil died young and she must have struggled to bring up the children. She got her eldest daughter Selvi married early immediately after she completed her 10th. She lived all her life with a widowed daughter-in-law to help her and her children. What Dhanalaxmi's married life was and what her struggles were to bring up her children one would never know for Dhanalaxmi never spoke about her life to anyone or recorded her struggles to bring up her children anywhere either in a diary or an interview. She remained a very private person. All that her children remember is her taking them to the circus when it came to town and seeing the two photographs of hers given here. Nothing is known about her brother who was also with her in the circus. Dhanalaxmi

was active till the end and did not have any health problems at all. When she complained of some uneasiness she was taken to the hospital and she took her knitting needles and some wool with her saying she did not want to waste her time in the hospital. No one expected her to really die so suddenly. I wanted very much to bring her home after the pandemic crisis and talk to her for in an interesting way Dhanalaxmi is connected with my family. Her daughter Selvi's daughter Praveena is my daughter-in-law. With her death goes unwritten the life story of a woman who lived a fairly glamorous but strenuous life in a circus company but chose to get married and live in Mumbai's Dharavi in the M L Wadi Chawl. She spoke fluent Marathi but could speak only an accented Tamil. From whatever I have heard about you Dhanalaxmi, I admire you and your courage.

—Puthiyamaadhavi

Vishranthi, A Place to Relax: Savithri Vaithi (1 October 1931-10 October 2020)



Savithri Vaithi had just turned 90 on the first of October 2020. She had been ailing but her being there gave a great sense of support to many around her and in Vishranthi, a home for aged destitute women situated in Palavakkam. Her passing away on the 10th plunged many into a sense of great

loss.

For many of us who have visited Vishranthi and met Savithri Vaithi there, Vishranthi was synonymous with Savithri Vaithi. It was her dream for a place of relaxation for abandoned women in a changing society where families were losing their values of integrity and support and old people, especially women, came to be seen as burdens in families already burdened with economic problems or even in families that were well off but did not feel inclined to keep the old. Savithri took to social work at a time when women doing social work were ridiculed as rich women who left their own homes unattended. In the case of Savithri, serving others in need came to her as an opportunity to learn about life and living. She was born into a family of judges and lawyers and lived in a joint family. But the family fell into hard times and she had to leave to fend for herself and her mother at the young age of 16. But even while she was in school, during the time of Mahatma Gandhi, she had volunteered with Congress Seva Dal and worked with the legendary Gandhian Manjubhashini. When she left home she had to look for a job to support the

family and she found one in Ashok Vihar Women and Children's Welfare Centre in Periampet. That is how her social work began in the slums of Choolai, Periampet and other slum areas. Welfare workers went to these slums with a nurse and a group of doctors. They always went walking for there was no other way to go into the interior areas of the slums to find out about their health, sanitation, education and other needs. So they were often referred to as "Barefoot Walkers."

In 1954, Savithri got married to R Vaithi, a photographer, and she began exploring other things in life. She joined a Catering Technology course and learnt to bake cakes, to cook a variety of food and to make juice. She also learnt Ikebana. A normal homemaker would have stopped at that but Savithri Vaithi was made of sterner stuff. So she started her own cookery classes and Ikebana classes. But the women who gathered to learn were eager to do other things which would benefit the society, along with Savithri Vaithi. Thus was born the one-day-charity programme with each person paying Rs. 2 subscription every month and the Monday Charity Club was born in 1974. The subscription money was used for various activities like 'Oondru Kol' (Walking Stick) where provisions and vegetables were given to some selected old people who had no family support. There were also other activities like the book bank to help needy children and later the 'Adoption' programme which helped needy children to get educated.

The success of these programmes also brought to them face to face with the plight of old women who were destitute, uncared for by their families. These women could be seen in railway stations, on the streets or pushed to corners in families which had literally abandoned them. Unlike other activities this was an ambitious one but generous help came from Rajeswari Meyyappa Chettiar, wife of A V Meyyappa Chettiar, who donated money to buy an acre of land in Palavakkam. Help Age came forward to give them a grant for construction of a building. While they were eager to help old destitute women, they knew they needed much more than enthusiasm to run a home for the aged. They had to know that the problems of the old were not just physical but also psychological. Their health and diet needed to be attended to by an expert. In geriatric physician Dr V S Natarajan they found just the right person they needed to guide them in all these matters. Thus was born Vishranthi, a place to relax for old destitute women, in 1978. It was a home for old women of all castes and religion. It meant not only giving a new life to these women but also dealing with their deaths. When the first death happened, no one from the family of the woman came to perform the last rites. Savithri Vaithi lit the pyre for the first time and since then

she has lit many. Those who live there are made aware that they are not victims but survivors and they need to be strong in their minds. They are given dignity in their life and given the same dignity when they are cremated or buried according to their religion, when they breathe their last. Vishranthi also does organ donations.

As an extension of this work Savithri Vaithi's group also started Malarchi (Blooming) in 1990, a home for children of single parents and Nizhal (Shade) a short stay home for women in distress. Savithri Vaithi has won many awards for her pioneering service, the most important being the Valuable Age Care Services by Help Age India, Jawaharlal Nehru Award, Melwin Jones Worthy Fellow Award and Annai Teresa Social Service Award.

Savithri Vaithi did not write an autobiography maybe because her life was an open book and she did not hold back anything from anyone who interviewed her. But inspired by her life the well-known Tamil writer Sivasankari wrote the novel *Nerunji Mull* (Puncture Vine) in 1981. Savithri Vaithi will live on in and beyond Vishranthi not only as a person who held compassion as the core value of life but also as Bhooma, the heroine of *Nerunji Mull*.

—C S Lakshmi

The Bulbul of Gujarat: Kaumudi Munshi (1928-13 October 2020)



The legendary Gujarati sugam sangeet performer passed away on the 13th morning of Covid 19. She was the first popular Gujarati singer with a background in classical music. Her father Nandlal Munshi was the adopted son of Raja Munshi

Madhorao, a very rich and powerful landlord from U.P. Kaumudi Munshi's mother was from the Gujarat part of their caste and a sister of Ramanlal Vasantlal Desai, the most successful Gujarati novelist in the first half of nineteenth century. Munshi remained the most important woman in the music world; as a singer for at least four decades and then as the producer of music albums. The most successful album was a two cassette album of the traditional prayers of the powerful Pushtisampraday of Vaishnavs. She also took contracts for production of special music albums. Her being fluent both in Hindi and Gujarati helped her in this venture.

Kaumudi completed her degree in Arts from the Benaras University in 1950. She came to Mumbai in 1951 from her home town Benaras. The family wanted to get a match for

her. Kaumudi's own agenda included becoming a famous singer through radio and HMV records. Women of her background did not aim at getting into film music. Once in Mumbai she joined composer Avinash Vyas's chorus. Vyas was the top most Gujarati composer. He was responsible for Gujarati women beginning to sing. Singer, lyricist and composer Ninu Mazumdar was considered number 2. Kaumudi's brother once came to request him to try and fix a match for her sister with Mazumdar's neighbour and to give her a chance in the music world. They were related vaguely through intermarriages. Mazumdar was floored when he heard Kaumudi's good and sweet voice and her rendering. He created special songs for her to highlight these points in her voice and cast her in his radio musicals and for HMV records. They grew close and got married after Mazumdar's wife Sharada died in January 1954. I am one of his daughters from his first marriage. Mazumdar, a socially liberal person encouraged her to retain her own surname. By then he had become a music producer on All India Radio, an important position for which only field experts were appointed such as P L Deshpande for Marathi drama and Azmar Hussain Khan and V G Jog for classical music. Many people said she had come up because of Mazumdar and his clout with AIR. This was not true. She was such a good a singer that several other composers wanted her to sing for them and each of their compositions became a major hit. During the early stage of her career, Kaumudi Munshi sang mostly in Gujarati, gaining fame with songs like *Sachi Re Maari Satre Bhavani Maa* (Truly Ma Bhavani is with me), *Koi Aghe Aghe Thi Vai Che* (Someone is going ahead). She also sang Bhojpuri songs; for the 1963 movie *Bidesiya* (Foreigner) she sang *Neek Saiyan Bin* (Without the affable husband) with renowned singer Geeta Dutt.

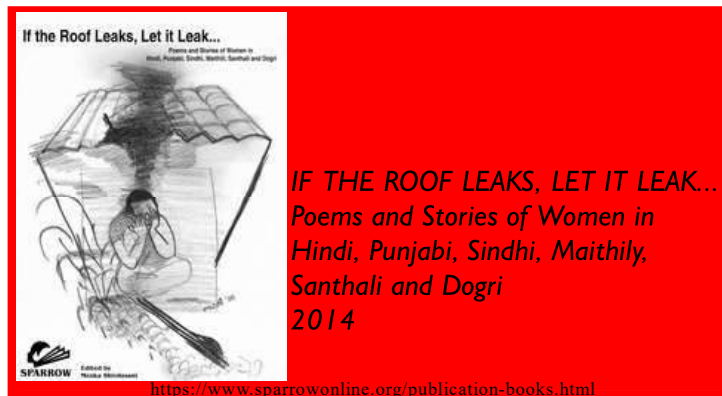
In later years she became a Guru and produced excellent singers. Among her disciples are singers like Jahnavi Shrimankar, a well known singer on stage and in music albums and Falguni Dalal Shah whose album of children's songs under the name Falu was shortlisted for Grammy Award this year. The Pandya sisters, Upagna and Parigna, have also performed and received praise for their performances. Upagna was selected by Vishal Bharadwaj to sing for his children's film *Makdi* and Parigna for an important play of Narsing Mehta.

Kaumudi Munshi was truly a professional. She would enrich her repertoire with songs and compositions, negotiate with clients and access best possible resources. During her visits to Benaras she would want to visit Siddheshwari Devi, known as the queen of Thumris then, and refine her own rendering of thumri, hori, chaiti and other women's folk songs. Her family would not allow it. No woman from their family had been allowed to attend any jalsa the men organised in their

gardens, boats or in their Diwankhanas at home. Her mother used to close the doors and windows so that no sound went out when Kaumudi did her riyaz. Daal ki mandi, the neighbourhood, was seen as a Red Light area. Once when Mazumdar was also in Benaras to be with his brother there, he said he would take Kaumudi to meet Siddheshwari Devi. When Siddheshwari Devi found out Kaumudi was Raja Munshi's granddaughter she was very happy; she accepted her as a disciple and never charged her. Siddheshwari Devi had grown up on Raja Munshi's estate as her aunt was one of the resident singers. Nandlal had also been her patron. Siddheshwari Devi's daughter Savita Maharaj acknowledges this in her biography of her mother. Mazumdar and Munshi are also mentioned in the preface. Kaumudi would have long stays in Benaras or in Delhi to follow her teacher. Siddheshwari Devi would always send someone to take this student home from Daal ki Mandi. Once there was no one to accompany her so the Guru decided to go with her disciple in an auto rickshaw. When they reached Kaumudi's home, an ordinary building by now, Kaumudi invited her in. Siddheshwari Devi refused but Kaumudi insisted. Siddheshwari Devi came in and sat on the floor near Munshi's mother who was sitting on a Diwan. The mother told her to come up and sit on the diwan. Siddheshwari Devi is known to have said, 'Not in this home and not by your side. I must sit on the floor.' Munshi's mother said, 'All that is gone. Now you are my daughter's Guru and you must sit by my side' and Siddheshwari Devi did. That was the moment when Kaumudi's feudal background ended and her status as a modern singer emerged fully.

Kaumudi lived a long life and was hailed and appreciated as The Nightingale of Gujarat. She deeply believed that music was goddess Saraswathi herself and that singing was an act of worship. Her son, Uday Mazumdar, a well-known music producer himself, will certainly take forward the legacy of her music.

—Sonal Shukla



<https://www.sparrowonline.org/publication-books.html>

The Lustre of Truth, Satyabhama: Sobha Naidu (1956-14 October 2020)



It is difficult to imagine the Kuchipudi dance world without Sobha Naidu and her eternally inspiring performance as Satyabhama. In every performance she was a new Satyabhama with a new lustre of truth shining

in the portrayal of Satyabhama, the possessive and argumentative wife of Krishna. From Sidhyendra Yogi who originally wrote the Bhama Kalapam in the 15th century, Laxmi Narayana Sastri who made it possible for women to perform Kuchipudi in the 1900s to gurus like the legendary Vempatti Chinna Satyam who changed it to suit present needs without taking away its classical purity, many have contributed to making Kuchipudi what it is today. From an art form that was initially performed only by Brahmin men it has become an inclusive art open to all and with women an important part of it. Many dancers have contributed to making it an internationally appreciated dance form and the contribution of Sobha Naidu as a dancer and as a guru of more than 1500 students, has been immense in this regard. In 1980 when the Kuchipudi Art Academy of Hyderabad was established, Sobha Naidu, the most famous disciple of Vempatti Chinna Satyam, became its director. Since then the academy has produced more than 15 ballets and 80 solo items. The academy also threw its doors open to all talented students and the talented but underprivileged students were given free tuitions. Sobha Naidu has won many prestigious awards for her dedicated work including the Nrithya Choodamani award from Krishna Gana Sabha in 1982, The Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1991 and the Padma Shri in 2001.

For a dancer of her stature and her way of dedicating herself to promoting Kuchipudi as a dance form, death has come too early at the age of 64. Her husband, retired IAS officer Arjun Rao, who stood by all her efforts, has been left bereft. Her many students in India and abroad, including her daughter Sai Shivaranjani are left with the task of continuing her work to make up for this colossal loss to the Kuchipudi dance world.

—C S Lakshmi



Making an Art of Costume Designing: Bhanumati aka Bhanu Athaiya (28 April 1929-15 October 2020)



Many know Bhanu Athaiya as the elegant costume designer who has worked with international directors like Conrad Rooks and Richard Attenborough and who won the Oscar Award for costume designing for the film *Gandhi* directed by Attenborough.

Not many know how old she was or her background. It came as a shock to know that she was born in 1929 and that the first costumes she designed were for Kamini Kaushal for the films *Shahenshah* (1953) and *Chalis Baba Ek Chor* (Forty Children and One Thief, 1954) and that she was part of the Guru Dutt team after designing costumes for the film *C.I.D* in 1956.

Bhanu Athaiya was the third among seven children. Her father Annasaheb Rajopadhye, a painter, passed away when Bhanu was just 9 years old and her childhood years were spent in Kolhapur. How her mother Shanthabai had brought up her seven children one can only surmise. But art was very much a part of their life. An art teacher used to come home and teach Bhanumati drawing. In 1945, when she was 16, Bhanu came to Mumbai to join the Sir J J School of Arts. She was the only woman invited to join the Progressive Artists' Society generally referred to as Bombay Progressives, founded by Francis Newton Souza. When they held a seminal exhibition in 1953 at the Bombay Art Society's salon at Rampart Row, Bhanu was very much a part of it. Later she began to pursue a career as a fashion illustrator and after that began to design costumes for films.

She got married to Satyendra Athaiya, a poet and a lyricist. He was the lyricist for some seven films including *Anhonee* (Impossible, 1952), *Naaz* (Pride, 1954), *Tanhai* (Loneliness, 1961) and *Badi Maa* (Elder Mother, 1974). He also did a character role in an experimental film *Uski Kahani* (Her Story) directed by Basu Bhattacharya in 1966. Their marriage did not last and their daughter Radhika Gupta currently lives in Kolkata.

In a career spanning more than 50 years Bhanu won several awards including two national awards for *Lekin...* (But..., 1990) and *Lagaan* (Cess, 2001) respectively. She also was honoured with the Filmfare Lifetime Achievement Award and Laadli Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009 and 2014. But it is the Oscar Academy Award that she won in 1983 for *Gandhi* that she is always associated with.

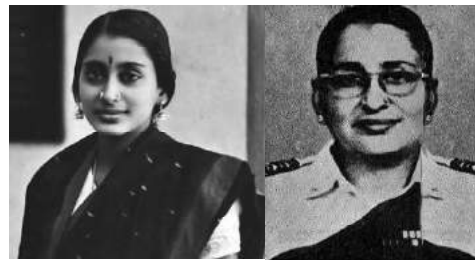
She put together her experience as a costume designer in the book *The Art of Costume Design* in 2010 and the first

copy of the book was presented to none other than the Dalai Lama. In 2012, she was diagnosed with brain tumour but that did not stop her from working, which is not surprising for when her daughter was born she was working till the last minute. Her last film was the Marathi film *Nagarik* (Citizen, 2014).

When she was diagnosed with meningioma, she returned her Oscar to the Academy for safekeeping. The last three years she was bedridden because she was paralysed on one side of the body and death came to her quietly on the 15th in her sleep. But she will be remembered for her efforts to make people understand that costume designing was not something that had to do with just measuring tapes, scissors and a sewing machine but that it was an art based on understanding the history and culture of the country.

C S Lakshmi

Pioneering First Woman IAF Officer 4971: Dr Vijayalakshmi Ramanan (27 February 1924-18 October 2020)



There are times when an archives like SPARROW fails to document the significant life of a pioneering woman and that is when we

feel that we should strive harder to document as many lives as possible and not leave anyone out. And often this feeling of not having done enough happens when news of death of one such woman reaches us. And we felt this deeply when we got the news of Dr Vijayalakshmi Ramanan's death in Bengaluru at the age of 96. She had lived a long life and yet we had not been able to document it. Luckily for us Dr Vijayalakshmi has appeared in several T V programmes and in a 2018 interview to the Devi Project, a documentary film company, she has spoken extensively about her life and her career in the Indian Air Force.

Vijayalakshmi was born on 27 February 1924 in Madras. Her father T D Narayana Iyer was a First World War veteran and later a public health official in Madras. She joined the Madras Medical College and earned her MBBS degree in 1943. She did her MD in Obstetrics and Gynaecology and began to work as a surgeon in Madras. Her husband K V Ramanan was an Air Force Officer and he encouraged her to apply to the Indian Army.

Vijayalakshmi joined the Indian Army Medical Corps in

1955 under a short-service commission. She went on to be seconded to the Indian Air Force, and was commissioned as its first woman officer in 1971.

In the documentary, Vijayalakshmi, at the age of 94, talks about her life with enthusiasm, clarity and humour. Officially known as Officer 4971 Vijayalakshmi had never worked with men before and if she was a little scared she did not allow it to daunt her much. She says that for years she was the only woman officer in the Air Force. Altogether there were only about a dozen of them in the military. There were no special uniforms in the air force for women either. Vijayalakshmi decided to have a custom-made sari tailored in air force blues and a tan blouse. Later the Air Force adopted this as a standard issue.

Vijayalakshmi was subsequently posted to Air Force hospitals in Jalahalli, Kanpur, Secunderbad and in Bengaluru. Besides delivering babies as a gynaecologist she also had administrative duties of the Medical Board, and led military efforts to encourage family planning in the services. Besides she also had to take classes for nursing officers in Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

When the wars broke out in 1962, 1966 and 1971, she provided medical care to the wounded troops and airmen. Finally, in 1971, her short-service commission became a permanent commission. When she retired in 1979, she held the rank of Wing commander. Two years before her retirement on 26 January 1977, she was awarded the Vishist Seva medal by President Neelam Sanjiva Reddy for meritorious service.

In the context of the recent disclosures of Gunjan Saxena, in the documentary, she is asked if she faced any discrimination in the Air Force and Vijayalakshmi answers in the negative. She says she never felt unwelcome.

Vijayalakshmi seems to have been a multi-faceted person. She was not only a doctor but also a musician. She was trained in Carnatic music and was a 'A' grade artiste of All India Radio from the age of 15 broadcasting regularly from Delhi, Lucknow, Secunderabad and Bengaluru. And as a student she had participated in music competitions.

Vijayalakshmi has a daughter Sukanya and a son Sukumar. But all those years in the Air Force must have made her strong and self-reliant. So until 2013, she preferred to live independently by herself at her own home in Ulsoor, Bengaluru. She only had a helper to assist her. Later she moved in with her daughter but continued to be her robust and energetic self. She was not ailing but collapsed all of a sudden and when the end came, it was a peaceful death for this brave woman.

Tragic Death of a Transgender Woman: Sangeetha (1965-18 October 2020)



The residents of the R S Puram area and the transgender community in Coimbatore and elsewhere were shocked when the murdered body of Sangeetha, a transgender woman, was recovered from her flat on 21st October, wrapped in a blanket and dumped in a plastic water drum. Sangeetha was an activist

who was keen to create a new life for trans-genders to take them away from begging and prostitution that they are always associated with. She had started a new catering business to live a life of dignity. She opened Covai Trans-Kitchen in the R S Puram area in Coimbatore in September which was doing well. It employed trans-people. The pandemic affected the transgender community the same way it did all the others; in fact, they were affected even more badly. Sangeetha's venture was to give jobs to her community people many of whom had become jobless in Covid times. Sangeetha had tried catering business before also. She has spoken elsewhere about how difficult it was for her to rent a place when she set up a catering business in 2014. The Covai Trans-Kitchen, however, seemed to be picking up business since most restaurants were shut down during the lockdown. It was a kitchen designed to seat 32 people opened with the intention of helping her own community and also others. The police are investigating the matter and are on the trail of the unknown assailants. Sangeetha was a much loved figure and had no enemies. She had tried to bring so many welfare schemes to her community.

Referring to the murder of Sangeetha and expressing her concern about a series of deaths of people from the transgender community, and urging the police to do speedy investigation, artist and transgender activist Kalki Subramaniam posted on the social media saying: Sangeetha, a senior transgender person, social activist and entrepreneur from Coimbatore has been brutally murdered. "Her tragic death has caused big shock, grief and sorrow to the transgender community. Every transgender person maintains her existence only after a long struggle in her life. Our lives continue to face many hardships, not just one or two."

Sangeetha made her life and that of many others like her meaningful. That she had to die in such a violent manner is a great tragedy.

Singing for Five Rupees and a Bun: T S Ramaa (1950-19 October 2020)



In 1972, when the first batch of P G students of Carnatic music came out of the portals of the University of Mysuru, T S Ramaa was one among them. She had already done her post-graduation in History but music had been part of her life from her

childhood, so she went on to acquire a post-graduate degree in Carnatic music as well.

Ramaa's love for music began at the tender age of 3. Her family did not have any musicians; she developed an interest in music when Jayam-Bhagyam Sisters and their brother, percussionist T A S Mani performed in a family acquaintance's place. She has spoken about her childhood and her interest in music to Ashwini Anish of *New Indian Express* in December 2017: "When I was six years old, there was a ceremony happening at my neighbour's place. Jayam-Bhagyam and T A S Mani were invited, and they put up a wonderful concert. After we were back from the ceremony, I told my father that I wanted to learn music and my parents created that environment for me," Ramaa said.

Her parents took her seriously and spoke to Jayam-Bhagyam Sisters and requested and convinced them to give their six-year-old daughter music lessons. Ramaa had to reach their house early in the morning at 6.30 a.m. and throughout the day the sisters taught her while cooking, cleaning and doing other daily chores. Once the lessons got over, their brother T A S Mani, seated her on his bicycle and dropped her home. Ramaa elaborated in the interview given to *New Indian Express* about learning music those days: "During those days, disciples of music didn't have distractions except for the radio. We had a radio at home, and there was a special programme for kids on Sundays called Baalajagat. I wanted to perform for the show and approached AIR. I was offered a chance to perform without an audition. I sang two devaranamas, for which I was given an appreciation amount of Rs.5 and a bun. That is my most memorable moment as a kid."

When she was twelve years old, her family shifted to Jayanagar and then began a search for a new guru. Fortunately for her Bangarpete Krishnamurthy, a renowned musician, agreed to teach her. She learnt from him for ten years and after his demise she trained under L S Narayana Swamy Bhagavatar, the then principal of Vijaya College of Music. She also trained under Prof. V Ramaratnam of Mysuru, Seethalakshmi Venkateshan and Suganda Raman. She

completed her BA (Music) from APS College, MA (History) from Central College and MA Music from Mysore University. Later, she served as professor and head of department of music at APS, and a member of Board of Studies, Bangalore University. Ramaa also established the Postgraduate (PG) music course at Jain University, Bengaluru.

While recalling her memories of performance to *New Indian Express* Ramaa recounted a cherished musical memory. M L Vasanthkumari's concert that was arranged in Fort High School Grounds got cancelled for some reason. The audience knew nothing about it. Ramaa was requested to sing in her place. She was a bit nervous but she agreed to sing. She was able to impress a discerning audience that had been waiting for the doyen of music.

Ramaa was conferred with the title 'Ganakalasri' by Sangeet Natak Akademi in 2006. She was also felicitated with the Doordarshan Chandana award in the field of Carnatic music in 2017.

Music was Ramaa's life from the age of 3. Her voice has now gone silent at the age of 70. For those who have heard her and appreciated her, her voice must be resonating in their minds.

—C S Lakshmi

A Fulfilled Life: K K Usha (3 July 1939-5 October 2020)



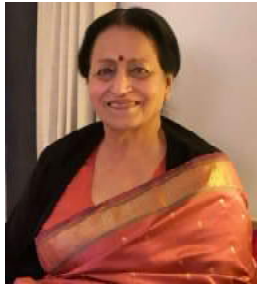
It is not difficult to have a fruitful career if one works hard for it but K K Usha did not want just a career she also wanted fulfillment as a human being. She was a judge who served as Chief Justice of the Kerala High Court and the first woman to do so. Her legal career began in 1961 when she enrolled as an advocate. In 1979

she was appointed Government Pleader in the Kerala High court and later rose to be the judge. She was involved in many other activities: she was a member and President of the University Women's Association; she was involved in "Sree Narayana Sevika Samajam", an orphanage and home for destitute women in Trivandrum. When the International Federation of Women Lawyers and the International Federation of Women of Legal Careers decided to organise a United Nations Joint Seminar on 'Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination as regards women' it was K K Usha who was chosen as India's representative. Her husband K Sukumaran was also a lawyer and judge and they were a rare judge couple of the country. K K Usha's 81 years of life were well spent in serving others and in fulfilling

the requirements of her career in the best way she could. A better life one cannot ask for.

—C S Lakshmi

**A Quiet Art Historian: Karuna Goswamy
(1941-25 October 2020)**



Everyone knew B N Goswamy, the art historian and his important work on Pahari painting. Karuna Goswamy did her important work as art and culture historian quietly. She retired as professor of History at Punjab University. Her PhD thesis was on “Vaishnavism in the Punjab Hills and Pahari Painting”. Later she published

many books which were critically important to understand Indian art and tradition. *The Glory of the Great Goddess: An Illustrated Manuscript from Kashmir in the Alice Boner Collection, Kashmiri Paintings: Assimilation and Diffusion; Production and Patronage, and Sacred Tree and Indian Life* to name a few. Five years ago she brought out a significant work *Dilipranjani (An 18th Century Chronicle of a Hill State)* of the Himachal region translated for the first time from Avadhi Hindi and introduced with a lucid introduction. *The Dussehra of Kulu: History and Analysis of a Cultural Phenomenon* was another important work of hers. She was the co-author with her husband of the book *Wondrous Images: Krishna Seen as Shrinath-ji (Pichhwais of the Vallabha Sampradaya)*. Lives such as hers when they mingle quietly with nature leave a fragrance behind that last forever.

—C S Lakshmi

DIGITAL VIDEO FILMS ON

- Pramila (Lester Victoria Abraham, a Jewish actress of yesteryears)
- Kanksha Murthy (A traditional sculptor)
- Dhanrajeshi Inshi (A dancer)
- Sushama Deshpande (A theatre artiste)
- Alaya Raa (A dancer and theatre artiste)
- Rima Devi (A traditional painter)
- Vithabai (A Samashu Artiste)
- Maitanamma (A theatre actress)
- K R Ambika (A folk drama artiste)
- Honal Vyavallia (Photographer)
- Salyarani Chaddha (Founder member of Shakti Studio)
- From Silence to Words, From Words to Silence (A visual report of women writers' camp, 2006)
- Degham (A film on the transgender experience)

SPARROW FILMS

**A Beautiful Life: Pratibha Rawal
(15 September 1939-7 November 2020)**



Pratibha Rawal, beauty personified even in her seventies, was a versatile stage artist. She was beautiful and was also considered bold and hence fondly referred to as the Marilyn Monroe of Gujarati theatre. She lived life on her own terms, never compromising with her own principles and her self-respect. Over the course of her illustrious career spanning for more than six

decades, she experimented across various genres—one-act plays, three-act plays, street plays, radio plays, films, short films, television serials and documentaries. She not only acted in plays, but also produced and directed many plays. She got a chance to act in films as well. However, she devoted most of her life to the service of her first love—Gujarati theatre. At the state level competition she was awarded the Best Actress award for six consecutive years (1969-1974) and then again in the years 1976 and 1979 by the Gujarat Sangeet Natak Academy. She was also awarded the prestigious Gaurav Puraskar by the Gujarat Sangeet Natak Academy in the year 1991. Even at the national level competition Akhil Bharatiya Natya Harifai, Delhi, she won the Best Actress Award for her plays *Ranine Game Te Raja* (The One Whom the Queen Likes is the King) *Alakchalaanu* (Name of a Game Played by Children) and *Maunna Padgha* (Sounds of Silence) in the years 1971, 1972 and 1974 respectively. She acted in 78 Gujarati plays, directed 11 Gujarati and 2 Hindi plays, acted in 11 Gujarati films, *Sati Sorath* (Saint Sorath), *Vikram Vetaal*, *Sati Toral* (Saint Toral),

Jode Rahejo Raj (Please Stay With Me Love), *Vanechandno Varghodo* (Marriage Procession of Vanechand) to name a few, and directed 15 documentaries for the Information Department of Govt. of Gujarat. She acted in 2 TV serials. As an expert in her field, she conducted several workshops (Natya Shibir) that helped in developing new, young artistes. These workshops covered participants across all age groups. She was ever ready to help senior and junior artists, directors, producers and back stage artistes in whatever way she could. She also served as the President of the Senior Artist Forum for 5 consecutive years and produced a number of noteworthy programs. But for the male dominated society, we would have witnessed Pratibha Rawal as the first woman to become the Head of the Department of the Gujarat College Natya Vibhag. Finally as the curtain falls marking an end of the life of this multifaceted personality, Pratibha Rawal's

significant contribution in the field of Gujarati theatre will always be remembered.

—Maitreyi Yagnik

Voice of the Voiceless: Nau Gora (24 November, 1948-7 November 2020)



Women and child upliftment leader, change maker par excellence, Gandhian, humanitarian, social reformist—this is how Mrs. Nau Gora is described on the news bulletin announcing her sad demise on 7th November, 2020 due to septicemia. It was indeed shocking to hear that her voice for the voiceless has gone silent.

How did she achieve so many goals, spreading her Gandhian principles through various development programmes for the upliftment of women and children?

She was named 'Nau' meaning both nine and new, by her parents, well-known social reformers Goparaju Ramachandra, popularly known as Gora, and Saraswati Gora, as she was their ninth child and also was born in a new India after its political independence. As her first cousin (she was one of the nine children of my maternal uncle), just a year older than her, I interacted with her at personal level during my visits to Nastik Kendram, the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh which was started 80 years back with rooms with thatched roofs. The lifestyle the extended family followed was akin to Gandhi Ashram. What was started by Gora, who worked along with Mahatma Gandhi and Vinobha Bhave inculcated values of casteless and classless society. It was natural for Nau Gora to absorb the principles and take part in various activities of the centre.

She graduated from Maris Stella College, Vijayawada, and did her post-graduation studies in Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati. After her Master's she went to the US to undertake a course in 'Peace and Non-Violence'. She married Veeraiah, a Gandhian, and lived in Delhi for six years. In 1977, when the tidal wave hit Divi taluk in Krishna district, she immediately rushed to take part in the relief and rehabilitation works which had to be taken up on a massive scale. At that time Prabhakarji, an associate of Mahatma Gandhi in Sevagram, organised a volunteer group called 'Shav Sena' for the disposal of the dead bodies of humans and carcasses. Nau Gora and her husband Veeraiah were active volunteers in the Shav Sena.

Nau Gora and her husband Veeraiah were inseparable in their social activities carried out at the centre called Ardhik

Samatha Mandal (ASM), in Srikakulam village, about fifty odd kilometers from Vijayawada. After a gap of some years I met her in 1980s on the way to Kuchipudi village where I was going for my PhD research studies. But for the hospitality extended by the couple, I could not have travelled to Kuchipudi village, approach to which by road was not easy. Besides completing my field work at Kuchipudi comfortably, I had the opportunity to see the activities at ASM. The couple involved me and my husband, Vijay N Seth (an eminent cartoonist of India, known by pen name 'Vins') to teach dance and drawing, to the teaching staff and students. The experience was very rewarding.

Her upliftment activities for women were based on Gandhian philosophy and ideas. The women were taught sericulture, dairy farming, handloom skills, development of waste, land development and many other vocational skills to make them economically independent. After the demise of her husband, she became the Chief Secretary of ASM and continued the developmental activities in various directions finding sustainable solutions. She became 'Amma', the mother, for women and children in both rural and urban areas of Andhra and Telangana. Befitting her contribution to society in various sectors, she received many awards and accolades both at national and international level.

As one who worked for a classless and casteless society, she was the 'voice of the voiceless' catering to the needs of the marginalised. Nau Gora emphasised that children and women should be at the centre of discussion, decision, action and change and that once given the space and opportunity, they would carve out their future. In a recent visit to the Atheist Centre in January 2020 to participate in the 11th Humanist World Humanists Conference, my sister Vijaya Ram and I were honoured for our involvement in art and for following the principles of the Atheist Centre in our lives. On that occasion, we noticed that Nau's enthusiasm and energy had in no way diminished.

As her first cousin, I have interacted all these years with Nau and have admired her principles of casteless and classless society followed at the Atheist Centre. She is survived by a son, Rajat, and a daughter, Sabala, grandchildren, brothers, sisters and a large extended family and many other humanist activists associated with Atheist Centre, who will carry forward her legacy of Gandhian activities for the marginalised.

—Rajyalakshmi Seth



A Tireless Translator Decides to Rest: Santha Sundari (8 May 1947-11 November 2020)



Santha Sundari Ramavarapu (R Santha Sundari) introduced herself in her blog as someone who was interested in all good books and a freelance translator. She also said in her self-introduction that she was interested in literature, music, arts, environment issues and any issues related to human rights. A renowned translator and a great litterateur, Santha Sundari enabled many literary enthusiasts to traverse the distance between literatures in Telugu, English and Hindi. She was famous Telugu writer Kodavatiganti Kutumbarao's daughter and companion of another famous writer R Ganeshwara Rao.

Santha Sundari was a tireless translator. Her well-known translations are translations of poems by legendary poets Varavara Rao and K Siva Reddy and Hindi translations from the Telugu works of N Gopi, Dr Devaraju Maharaju, C Bhawani Devi, Volga and Varanasi Nagalakshmi as *Samay Ko Sone Nahi Doonga* (I Will Not Let Time Sleep, 2008), *Samay Par Hastakshar* (Signature on Time, 2010), *Akshar Mere Astitva* (Words are My Existence, 2011), *Swechcha* (Free Will, 2011) and *Bolti Tasveer* (The Picture That Speaks, 2018) respectively. She also wrote a book for children entitled *Balaranjani* (2013). She translated into Telugu Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished*, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* and the second part *Ajaya: The Rise of Kali* as *Asurudu Paraajitula Gadha* (2014), *Ajayudu* (2015) and *Rekkala Enugulu* (2017).

Her translation of Syed Saleem's novel *Kaalutunna Poolatota* (Burning Flower Garden) into Hindi as *Nai Imarat Ke Khandhar* (Ruins of New Structures, 2009) and Kodavatiganti Kutumbarao's masterpiece *Chaduvu* published in 1982 into Hindi as *Padhayee* (Education) and her collection *Jharoka* (Window, 2012), a translation into Hindi of 23 contemporary Telugu stories, *Katha Kani Katha* (Story of Story, 2013), a translation from Hindi of Dr Shri Gopal Kabra's real life stories seen as a doctor entitled *Cancer ki Vyatha Katha* (Agonising Tale of Cancer) and *Katha Bharathi* (2018), a collection of translated stories by Santha Sundari from different languages into Telugu received very good notices. As recently as last year she translated into Telugu Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens* into Telugu entitled *Maanava Jaati Parinaama Kramam* (The Evolution of the Human Race). Her last Hindi translation was *Vridhohanishad* (Upanishad of the Aged, 2020) from Telugu of the same title by N Gopi.

She received the Dr. Gargi Gupta Dwivaagish Puraskaar, her very first award in the field of literature in the year 2005,

from the reputed Bharatiya Anuvaad Parishad. Later in 2010, the National Human Rights Commission of India, New Delhi, awarded her the first prize for her Hindi translation of Syed Saleem's Telugu novel *Kaalutunna Poolatota*. In 2014 she won the Sahitya Akademi Award for translation for her book *Intilo Premchand* (Premchand At Home) translated from the Hindi *Premchand Ghar Mein*, a biography of Premchand by Sivarani Devi Premchand. Many other awards including Sri Potti Sriramulu Telugu University Translation Award, Amruthalatha 'Apurupa' Award, Lekhini Puraskaaram were bestowed on her in the last ten years.

Santha Sundari passed away at 8.22 pm on the 11th of November, 2020, after a 6-month long battle with brain cancer. She was 74 years old. Her demise leaves a great void in the world of literary translation for she brought many best-selling novels as well as non-fiction books into Telugu and Hindi. It is unfortunate that her companion Ganeshwara Rao, who tirelessly accompanied and served her during the testing times of Covid-19 pandemic with immense love and optimism, has lost not just his companion, but also his best friend in the journey of life and literature.

—Satyavati Kondaveeti and Varanasi Nagalakshmi

War and No Peace: Dr Sheetal Amte-Karajgi (1981-30 November 2020)



The news of Dr Sheetal Amte's alleged suicide shocked everyone familiar with her work with Maharogi Seva Samiti. Those familiar with her work knew that she had founded the motivational programmes 'Mashaal' and 'Chirag' to inspire and train medical professionals to take up leadership. 'Nijbal' centre was also her brain child to rehabilitate the disabled. She was also instrumental in the installation of solar panels in Anandwan. She was selected as the Young Global Leader of 2016 by the World Economic Forum. The same year she was also chosen as a UN Innovation Ambassador. She was also awarded a grant by Lancet Commission on Global Surgery and WHO alliance for setting up 'Centre for Excellence for Medical Leadership, Ethics, and Motivation'.

When she joined Anandwan after her medical degree to work with her parents Dr Vikas Amte and Dr Bharati Amte and her uncle Dr Prakash Amte and Dr Mandakini Amte, the family and others in Anandwan knew that she would only take the work of her grandfather, the iconic Baba Amte to greater heights, which she did as CEO of Maharogi Sewa

Samiti. Since in addition to her MBBS degree she had also completed her Master's from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, it was obvious she had equipped herself well to take up the task of taking MSS further. And she used her training to make Anadwan an ideal smart village.

That Dr Sheetal Amte could end her life due to some family feud about her being discriminated against as a woman is deeply distressing. Although she removed her allegations against the family and her own family issuing a statement denying her allegations, her alleged suicide has certainly opened up a Pandora's box. She had posted her painting (acrylic on canvas 30x30 inches) War and Peace on her Twitter feed just the morning of 30 November at 5.45 a.m. What happened in those few hours between the morning post of her painting to when she is supposed to have ended her life plunging into grief, her husband Gautam Karajgi, an engineer, and six year old son Sharvil and social workers all over, is a mystery that will be solved only by the investigation that has been taken up of her death.

—C S Lakshmi

Another COVID-19 Death: Divya Bhatnagar (1986-7 December 2020)



Those who watched the serials *Ye Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*, *Sanskaar*, *Udaan*, *Jeet Gayi Toh Piyaa Morre*, *Vish and Sanware Sabko Preeto* will remember Divya Bhatnagar as the actress in all of them. From what her colleagues have tweeted she seems to have been a much loved person who always went

out of her way to help and support others. She got married last December but her marriage to Gagan Gabru, also in the entertainment industry, was short-lived and she was living alone. She had started shooting for the comedy show *Tera Yaar Hoon Main* (I am your Friend) when she had to be admitted to the hospital. She was young and strong enough to come out of a COVID-19 attack but she also had pneumonia and her condition suddenly deteriorated and she passed away at the Seven Hills Hospital. A pity the life of a young person still building her life and career was cut short.

—C S Lakshmi



One More Suicide in Pandemic Times: V J Chithra (2 May1992-9 December 2020)



TV actor and host V J Chithra fondly referred to as Chithu hanged herself this morning. She had just got married to a businessman Hemanth Ravi a few months ago. It was a quiet civil marriage. She was staying with him at a five-star hotel in Nazarathpettai, Chennai, where she was shooting. Since Thiruvanniyur, where she lives was far away from the shooting spot, she had decided to stay at the hotel which was closer to the studio where she was shooting. She was a much-liked TV anchor and was doing the role of Mullai in a popular TV show *Pandian Stores*. It is reported that she had just returned from a shoot at EVP Film City in the early hours of the morning. She told her husband that she wanted to have a bath and when she did not come out for long he called the hotel staff and the bathroom door was broken open and they reportedly found her hanging from the ceiling fan. Investigations are on and depression is stated as the reason for her death. No one knows what reasons she had to be depressed considering the fact that she was a trained psychologist. The photographs she posted on her timeline in Facebook were all happy ones. Someone ending her life is a tragedy because it is not only because of her loneliness but also because somewhere when someone mentally closes the door to others people feel they should let her be for it is impolite to force the door open. But we live in times when behind a closed door can be a muted cry for help.

—C S Lakshmi

TRANSLATIONS
Into 7 languages in 2 volumes each of SPARROW booklets.

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 प्रसारक अकादमी - *Nihabandara Omandarara* - Breaking Silence
 प्रसारक अकादमी - *Srijanashree Suktakar* - Epiphany of Creativity
 Editors: Anjali Malvi

Gujarati volumes : June 2001
 સર્વજ્ઞ - *Tejmayee* - Of Those Brilliant
 સર્વજ્ઞ - *Kaladhari* - The Artist
 Editor: Vinod Meghani

Tamil volumes : July 2001
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 Editors: A Srinivasan, M Sivasubramanian

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 ಕನ್ನಡದ ಹೊಸ - *Rajasevalathu Belaku Tumbi* - A Lamp in the Palm
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**SPARROW
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A Soul on Pilgrimage: Roshan Vajifdar Ghose (15 May 1929-18 December 2020)



In July 2018, under our Oral History Research Project (OHRP) we interviewed Roshan Vajifdar Ghose and also made a short documentary on her. Roshan Vajifdar Ghose was born on 15th May 1929 and when she was 7 she and her younger sister Khurshid began to learn dance from their elder sister Shirin who was a pioneer among the Parsi community to take up classical dancing. The three of them performed together as Vajifdar Sisters. The three sisters trained in many styles of dance like Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, Kathakali and Mohiniattam.

In the early fifties Roshan Vajifdar earned a national scholarship in Bharatanatyam and studied in the Indian Institute of Fine Arts, Madras, for two years. Her guru was Chokkalingam Pillai, the son-in-law of the legendary Natyaguru Meenakshisundaram Pillai of Pandanallur School of Dance. Her arangetram took place in 1955 in the presence of then Governor Shri Sri Prakasa.

In 1954, she and her sister Khurshid danced for the song *Yeh barkha bahar soutaniya ke dwar* (This rainy season bothers me like the other woman my husband has fallen for) written by Shailendra and set to music by Shankar-Jaikishan and sung by Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle in the film *Mayur Pankh* (Peacock's Feather) directed by Kishore Sahu which was sent to Cannes Film Festival and got nominated for the Grand Prize. Roshan also did a stage dance with Gopi Krishna for the song *Ae Bandi Tum Begum Bani* (Hey partner bound to me, you have become a begum) written by Bharat Vyas and composed by Arun Kumar Mukherjee and sung by Kishore Kumar and Asha Bhosle in the film *Parineeta* (Married Woman, 1953) directed by Bimal Roy.

Roshan Vajifdar lived in Bangalore for seven years to train under Kittappa Pillai, nephew of Meenakshisundaram Pillai. During her stay in Bangalore, she spent a lot of time with her actress friend Devika Rani and her husband Russian painter Svetoslav Roerich. Roerich painted several life-size portraits of Roshan. Some of these have appeared as covers of *Illustrated Weekly*, *Femina*, *Dharmayug* and several other magazines. Many of these paintings are housed in the Karnataka Chitrakala Parishad, Bangalore, and the State Museum of Oriental Arts, Moscow.

Although she danced in several styles Bharatanatyam was close to her heart and she sought out gurus to teach her the intricacies of Bharatanatyam. Her third main guru was Mangudi Durairaja Iyer, who was an excellent mridangam artiste and

dance guru from whom she learnt how to give life to *sollukattu*, rhythmic beats in a time sequence.

Shirin Vajifdar married the well-known writer Mulk Raj Anand and Khurshid married the painter Shiavax Chavda. Roshan married Dr Hiranmoy Ghose, a renowned chiropractor and a connoisseur of art from Mumbai who was 30 years elder to her. Her last performance was in the year 1992 in Bangalore and that was the year she and her husband shifted to Kodaikanal also. The same year she joined the Kodai International School and taught dance there till 2007. She had since settled down there in Vilpatty village and her son Prasanna Ghose runs the most successful pastry shop Pastry Corner also known as Daily Bread in Kodaikanal. Her daughter Meenakshi Ghose lives in Dindigul with her husband Chandrasekhar.

Her dance compositions she is proud of are "The Pilgrimage of the Soul" set to Meera Bhajans sung by Gujarati singers and "Gita Govindam" which combined Odissi and Bharatanatyam movements.

In a life dedicated to dance Roshan Vajifdar Ghose earned praise for her exquisite costumes and chiselled movements. She was not only muse to Roerich but inspired others too. When Mulk Raj Anand brought out his short story collection *Lajwanti and Other Stories* in 1999, he dedicated the first story "Anjali Hasta" to Roshan Vajifdar.

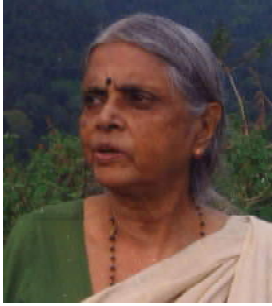
Roshan Vajifdar passed away peacefully with her son Prasanna and her daughter Meenakshi by her side, just the way she wanted. She had just entered her 91st year this May. Those who love dance and know how it transforms one's life, will remember Roshan Vajifdar Ghose, one of the three pioneer Vajifdar sisters, and her contribution to dance.

—C S Lakshmi



SPARROW HAS
MADE A SHORT
DOCUMENTARY
ON ROSHAN
VAJIFDAR

The One Who Prayed to Trees and Mountains: Sugathakumari (22 January 1934-23 December 2020)



Sugathakumari, the lover of nature, the conservationist, feminist, Gandhian, the one who created a refuge for children and women in distress is no more. Many tributes to her mention her poetry, her awards and her work as a conservationist and her work for destitute women and children. Wikipedia can give all those facts.

This homage is about the Sugathakumari I met and came to know in 2011 and whom I came to respect and admire.

Before I met her in person, I had already known about her writing and about her work as a conservationist and how she had led the nationwide movement known as Save Silent Valley which was started in 1973 to save some of the old natural forests of Silent Valley in Kerala. She fought to prevent this forest from turning into a hydroelectric project. I knew about her poem “Marathinu Stuthi” (Prayer to a Tree) which was like an anthem of the movement. The poem compared the tree to Siva who swallowed poison to preserve the universe. Sugathakumari’s poem said the trees protected the world similarly. She was the founder secretary of Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi, an organisation for the protection of nature. She was also the secretary of the Society for Conservation of Nature, Thiruvananthapuram. Abhaya was the ashram she had established for destitute women and children. I also knew about her Gandhian father Bodheswaran who was a freedom fighter. However, meeting her in person was a different experience altogether.

In March 2011, Sahitya Akademi had organised an All India Writers’ Meet at Gangtok. Sugathakumari had been invited as the chief guest. She delivered a moving address speaking for humanity in general and about her writing and her life. Gangtok was cold and it was raining. Sugathakumari wanted to visit the Ganesha temple which was 6000 ft. above in the mountain known as Ganesh Tok. All of us hopped into a jeep with Sugathakumari. We could not go to the temple because of the rain but saw it from afar and on our return Sugathakumari in her soft voice told our guide, “Can you stop for a minute? I have to touch the mountain.” There was still a heavy drizzle. The driver stopped the jeep to oblige her. She got down and a few of us got down with her. She went and touched the mountain and folded her hands in prayer. “I can’t come all the way and not pay my respect to the Himalayan mountain,” she told us later. Her gesture of gently

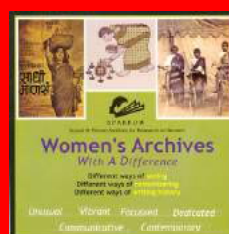
touching the mountain and then folding her hands moved me immensely. I asked her if I could come and see her at Thiruvananthapuram and talk to her. She said she would definitely meet me.

In June 2011 I went to Thiruvananthapuram and met her. Poet and writer Sukumaran Narayanan took me in his scooter to Abhaya Ashram where she had agreed to see me. Although greatly respected for her work Sugathakumari had also come under criticism by many including some feminists. Sugathakumari had argued that calling prostitution sex work cannot give it dignity for one cannot deal with the binaries of choice and force alone in this question. It was not a free choice. A feminist had told her once that a woman sold her body just as Sugathakumari sold her poetry. Sugathakumari had found the comparison abhorrent. When writer Paul Zachariah had written her off calling her “a closeted RSS supporter” her response to this had been a poem where she spoke about her twin gurus Gandhi and Vivekananda.

I spent almost half a day with her at Abhaya. That day she was in an expansive mood and recalled her childhood, her father, her writing and her environmental activism. She spoke with great emotion about visiting the mental hospital and about rescuing minor girls from brothels and from the clutches of traffickers. When she took me around Abhaya where I saw girls from the age of 4 to 20, some of whom had been rescued from brothels, she told me gently and firmly not to interview them and ask them about their lives. Their stories are sad but can easily be sensationalised by even people who may be genuinely interested to help, she told me. She did not want the girls to go through the agony of recounting their lives to everyone who came along.

She spoke to me later about some of the little girls and she told me that the work she was doing in Abhaya was what kept her relentlessly continuing the fight for justice and dignity for women. It is a fight that cannot be given up, she told me. Her work will be continued by others she has left behind. She had some health issues but I wish COVID had spared her for now because her being there was a moral support to so many of us. Her prayer to the tree will resound not only in the forests of India but also in our hearts.

—C S Lakshmi



**SPARROW
ARCHIVES**

A Writer's Wife: Haimavathy La. Sa. Ramamirtham (12 June 1927-31 December 2020)



Writing for The Writing Cooperative in March 2019, Marie Eberle titled the article “Behind Many Great Male Writers, There Are Even Greater Wives” and proceeded to write about many writers beginning with Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. About Sophia, Tolstoy’s wife, she says this:

A few years into their marriage, Leo Tolstoy found himself in a bad spot. He stopped writing and earning money. So his wife, Sophia, took matters into her own hands. She asked for money from her mother and started her own publishing office, to sell her husband’s books.

To find out the best way to go about doing this, she travelled to St. Petersburg. There, she met up with Anna Dostoyevsky—the wife of another author who is generally considered one of the greatest of Western culture.

But as it turns out, over the past 14 years, Anna had done the same work as Sophia was planning to do. She edited Fyodor’s writing, corrected proofs, advertised his works, argued with censors, and much more. Arguably, we wouldn’t have a fraction of his work as we know it today if it wasn’t for Anna.

Sophia had already been helping her own husband with his writing career. While she gave birth to their 13 children (eight of whom survived childhood), she turned Leo’s illegible manuscripts into publishable copies. The final draft of *War and Peace*, the brick of a book he’s most famous for today, measured 3,000 pages in length; before Sophia copied it seven times, went over its spelling and grammar, and edited large parts of the plot. We owe much of the romantic storylines to her rather than to Leo, and it is also her influence that prevented the book from containing even more excruciating details about military strategies.

But a few weeks before his death, Leo decided to hand over his literary estate to a male friend

rather than his wife, who, for all intents and purposes, had been in charge of it since she was 19 years old. He also handed over all the copyrights to his works to the public domain—taking them from Sophia, who had owned them through the publishing company she ran for him. On that day, Sophia wrote in her diary:

“Now I am cast aside as of no further use, although I am, nevertheless, expected to do impossible things.”

Haimavathy, the wife of the renowned Tamil writer La.Sa.Ramamirtham generally known as La.Sa.Ra, whom all of us grew up reading, was a different kind of a wife. She was very much an admirer of her husband’s writing but she was also her own person. Thiruppur Krishnan, the editor of the Tamil magazine *Amudhasurabi* has written a touching homage to her. Here is a translation of excerpts from his homage:

“Haimavathy, wife of La.Sa. Ramamirtham, a writer who has left his stamp on modern Tamil fiction, passed away this morning. She was past 90. [She was 93]. I respected her like my own mother. All that she knew was love. She wrote regularly in the monthly magazine *Ilakkiya Peedam* being brought out by Kannan Vikraman. She had the habit of keeping a diary and she wrote in it every day.

“She had a quality that all women of her generation had: the quality of accepting everyone who was the age of her son as her own son and being affectionate towards them. So she had many children; both biological and otherwise. Many including actor Sivakumar, loved her and respected her a great deal.

“I had gone once to Amabathur to escort La.Sa.Ra. for a meeting in Thiruvallikeni and after the meeting I went with him in the electric train back to Ambathur to reach him home at night. It was past eleven in the night but Haimavathy served me food with the love of a mother. I praised the tender mango pickle that she had served with the curd rice. By the time I washed my hands she had put a bottle of tender mango pickle in my bag without my knowing. When I came home and saw it I was moved by her affectionate gesture.

“I wrote about this incident in an article in the magazine *Kanaiyazhi* once and Komal Swaminathan, the theatre legend and filmmaker, told me laughing, “It looks like she loves you more. I have also been there but she did not give me any tender mango pickles!” All the writers who were close to La.Sa. Ra. equally respected Haimavathy.

“I took part in the La.Sa. Ra centenary celebration held at the Soviet Centre and I spoke about La.Sa. Ra. His son La.Sa. Saptharishi and many others also spoke. The surprise of the

evening was that Haimavathy also spoke and she spoke beautifully. No one expected her to speak so eloquently and so beautifully....

"I was meeting her after a long time that day. I gave her my books and told her that my son Arvind was publishing them through his Thiruppur Kumnaran Publishing House. She pressed the books to her eyes in respect; she called my son and placed her hand on his head and blessed him. She had a great respect for writing and writers.

"La.Sa.Ra. had insisted that if he were to depart before her she should not give up putting the vermillion mark on her forehead and keeping flowers in her hair, like widows are expected to do. Haimavathy does put the vermillion mark on her forehead but she, for some reason, does not keep flowers in her hair after La.Sa.Ra's death. Her son La.Sa.Ra. Saptharishi was concerned about this and mentioned this to me that day.

"La.Sa.Ra. created literature. But his wife Haimavathy lived as if she was literature itself. She was the one behind La.Sa.Ra. who made it possible for him to be a great literary personality. She must be remembered by litterateurs forever."

It is heartening to know that Haimavathy's diary entries published in the magazine *Ilakkiya Peedam* have been brought out as a book entitled *Thirumathi. La.Sa.Ra.vin Ninaivuk Kurippukal* (Mrs. La.Sa.Ra's Memoirs) by Vijaya Publishing House in Coimbatore just two years ago. It is a pity that the title does not even mention her name and she remains only La.Sa.Ra's wife although her name is given below as the author! Wonder what stopped them from giving the title as *Haimavathi La.Sa.Ra's Memoirs* for that is what the book is about.

Her Work Was Her Life: Dr V Shanta (11 March 1927-19 January 2021)



What can one say about a person who was an icon of her times? Shanta Viswanathan was born on 11 March 1927, at Mylapore, Chennai, into a distinguished family that included two Nobel Laureates: Sir C V Raman was her grand uncle and Dr S Chandrasekar was her uncle. She was mentored by Dr Krishnamurthi, son of Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy, and joined The Cancer Institute at Adyar in 1955 and spent all her life working there helping cancer patients. The Cancer Institute was set up in 1952 by the Women's Indian Association Cancer Relief Fund under the leadership of Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy, and the foundation stone was laid by none other than Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Its mission statement says that it was set up "as a "mission" to provide scientific treatment and promote health education amongst all sections of people. The ethos of the Cancer Institute (WIA) is "service to all" irrespective of social or economic class...." Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy set up the hospital in 1954 with just twelve beds. In an interview given to Tamil writer Madhumitha, Dr Shanta says that she was drawn to this work after she heard a speech given by Dr Krishnamurthi where he spoke about the need for people to come forward to work in this field to help and serve cancer patients.

Dr Shanta was educated in Chennai, Canada and England. To say that as an oncologist, she dedicated her life to cancer medical service will be an understatement. She gave herself body and soul to the cause of cancer. After 1955 The Cancer Institute became the only focus of her life. From 1997 she was the Chairperson of the Cancer institute. Her work as an oncologist dedicated to cancer service took her to many places and gave her many responsibilities. She was on WHO Advisory Committee on Cancer till March 2005. She was also Convener of the State Advisory Board on Cancer. She has been Chairman of the INDO-US Collaborative Group on Lymphoid Neoplasias (Indian Chapter), member of many ICMR Committees, member of the ICMR Task Force on Registries and member of the Syndicate of the Anna University. She was President of the Indian Society of Oncology (88-90), President of the Asian & Pacific Federation of Organisations for Cancer Control (97-99) and President of the 15th Asian & Pacific Cancer Conference (1999). She has participated in a number of Scientific International Collaborative Programmes. She has published over 95 papers in national and international journals, contributed chapters in

C S Lakshmi & Thiruppur Krishnan



8th March
2006
International
Women's
Day

A Non-gallery Based Photo Exhibition: Marching on the Roads: Making Oneself, Making History-Photo Exhibition on Double-Decker Buses

oncology books, delivered many prestigious orations and participated in many international and national conferences.

Many honours came her way: Padma Shri (1986), Padma Bhushan (2006), Padma Vibusahn (2016), Magsaysay Award (2005) Nazli-Gad-El-Mawla Award from Belgium, Avvaiyar Award by Government of Tamil Nadu (2013) and D.Sc. Dr NTR University of Health Sciences & D.Sc. Sathyabama University for Life Time Achievement Awards—13 (2013). In her interview given to writer Madhumitha she says that accepting the awards did not bring her any personal joy but she always thought of the awards as bringing attention to The Cancer Institute and its work and helpful in promoting its work. She also explains that she held Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy and Dr Krishnamurthi in great awe and always remembered the ethical code of Kumara Guruparar that Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy always quoted:

*Physical comfort, hunger, sleep
Negativity of others, valuable time spent,
Humiliation in the course of work –
None of this will affect
Those focussed on their work*

News reports say that on the night of 18 January 2021 she complained of chest pain and was rushed to the hospital and that they found a massive block in her heart that could not be removed. That block must have been the love that always filled her heart while dealing with her cancer patients. One could say that just two months short of her 93rd birthday, Dr Shanta died of too much of love that blocked her heart true to the ethical code she practised which said that for those focussed on their work bodily comfort is never a concern.

Warmth Was Her Middle Name: Subhadra Patwa (10 January 1942-24 January 2021)



When Subhadra used to work as a Research Assistant in the eighties at the Research Centre for Women's Studies anytime one walked into the research room at the Centre one would be greeted with a warm smile by her despite all the work and she would always have time to listen to what one had to say and ask softly if one needed a cup of tea. She was also working on her thesis "A Comparative Study of Female and Male Workers in Diamond Trade and Industry" under Dr Maithreyi Krishna Raj. It was an important study because the general research tendency regarding export oriented industry focussed on looking at female labour only from the point of view of cheap labour. Subhadra belonged to a family that was in the trade and so she was attempting a more differential analysis of gender in export oriented industry in contrast to the then prevalent approaches to gender roles. She was going to argue that while there was some truth in the "cheap labour" theories, her study would focus on the various patterns of production organisation in terms of ownership, scale, technology etc., and demonstrate that cultural specific characteristics such as caste, influence the pattern of labour specialisation. All this she would explain over the cup of tea lovingly offered.

She submitted her thesis in 1994. Later she worked as a lecturer at M D Shah Mahila College of Arts and Commerce at Malad where she was a much loved teacher. She continued to stay in touch with friends and researchers in Women's Studies, always willing to help out when needed. Along with SPARROW's well-wisher and mentor Dr Divya Pandey who was also our trustee then, she did some interviews of Gujarati writers for us.

Some years ago she had a virulent attack of herpes that impaired her movement and speaking ability. With the loving encouragement and care of her husband Rajnibhai Patwa, she recovered slowly. It was a painful time for her but she never lost her smile. Even when she lost her husband all of us saw her being strong and resilient. She continued to take care of herself and also be there for other friends who needed her. She lived alone by choice and liked being on her own. She just turned 79 this January but it looks like she had made up her mind that it was time to go. Less than a fortnight after her birthday she had a heart attack in the morning and quietly passed away.

Her entire extended family was there to bid her farewell. That is the way Subhadra would have liked to go. She was

—C S Lakshmi & Madhumitha Raja



Exhibition
of Maya
Kamath's
cartoons

<https://www.sparrowonline.org/project-maya-kamath.html>

very much a family person. Farewell, Subhadra. We will miss your warm smile and generous love.

—C S Lakshmi

A Tribal Activist from Ambabari: Sitabai Ramdas Tadvi (1965-27 January 2021)



Saddened by the death of Sitabai Tadvi, a tribal activist who has been fighting for the cause of tribals for the past 25 years. Fifty-six-year-old Sitabai Tadvi, who took part in the protests against the new farm laws at Shahjahanpur border died in Jaipur on her way back to her village after the Republic Day. She died because of the effects of severe cold, it is reported. She died even as she was being transferred to a hospital in Jaipur. Sitabai had been in Delhi at the Shahjahanpur border since January 16 and even participated in the Republic Day parade by farmers on January 26.

Sitabai was a tribal and marginal farmer from Maharashtra's tribal-dominated Nandurbar district. She was associated with Lok Sangharsh Morcha (LSM) which has worked for tribal rights in the tribal-dominated district of Nandurbar in Maharashtra. Tadvi took up activism after she was uprooted from her village due to the construction of Ambabari dam on the Dehli river, a tributary of Tapi river. The Dehli river ran close to her village.

Sitabai has been working closely with Pratibha Shinde, the LSM leader. Their main fight has been against dam projects blocking rivers to create massive reservoirs, in the hope that this will solve the country's water and electricity problems. The LSM's fight was for a uniform national rehabilitation policy for the people displaced in dam projects. The LSM argued that apart from merely being assigned new land, actual practical assistance should be provided to displaced people. The LSM wanted the government to do more than just give official permission to people to settle on some random new piece of land; it wanted the government to ensure that these people have the opportunity to prosper in their new homes.

Over the past 25 years, Tadvi was detained and arrested a number of times for her activism. In 2019, she was in Delhi, and took part in the agitation demanding the proper implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006. She was always at the forefront of all agitations fighting for the rights of tribals and the farmers in Maharashtra including the march against Reliance Industries in Mumbai on December 22.

Her body was brought to Ambabari village to be cremated. Pratibha Shinde and other leaders of LSM were there in Ambabari village to pay their respects to her and Pratibha Shinde said that her death was a huge setback to the cause of the tribals for she and her family were deeply committed to the tribal cause. Every notable social activist in the state visiting Akkalkuwa taluka would make it a point to visit their home. The cremation took place on the 29th. Nobody lighted the stove to cook that day in her village. The entire village fasted for her. Sitabai leaves behind her husband, four daughters and a son who will, no doubt, carry on her fight.

—C S Lakshmi



Working Hours

Monday-Friday 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.

Visiting Hours - Library

Monday to Friday 11.00 a.m to 4.00 p.m.



