

SNL 41

MARCH 2022

*Who was there yesterday, is gone today:
the world is thus.*

(Thirukkural, Chapter 34, 336)

*(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**

HOMAGES FROM JANUARY 2021 TO APRIL 2022

JANUARY 2021

Mridula Sinha (27 November 1942–18 November 2020)
Pala Thankam (26 February 1941–10 January 2021)

FEBRUARY 2021

Lakshmi Rajaratnam (27 March 1942 - 8 February 2021)
Sushila Maharao(19 December 1927- 21 February 2021)

MARCH 2021

Sisirkana Dhar Choudhury
(27 December 1937–9 March 2021)
Laxmipriya Mohapatra (1935–20 March 2021)
Anita Pagare (1971–28 March 2021)

APRIL 2021

Chandra Naidu (1933–4 April 2021)
Shashikala Jawalkar Saigal(4 August 1932– 4 April 2021)
Dr Fatima Zakaria (17 February 1936–6 April 2021)
Prathima Devi(9 April 1933–6 April 2021)
Comrade Sunder Navalkar
(16 September or December 1921–9 April 2021)
Usha Bhatnagar(27 February 1938–15 April 2021)
Jyoti Kalani(17 February 1951–18 April 2021)
Sumitra Bhawe (12 January 1943–19 Apr 2021)
Bhanu Kumar (June 5, 1953-April 20, 2021)
Bhitali Das(6 June 1969 – 21 April 2021)
Leela Nambudiripad (16 May 1934–27 April 2021)
Asha Savadekar(1949–22 April 2021)
ChandroTomar (10 January 1932–30 April 2021)
Sunanda Kumbhar(1976–30 April 2021)

MAY 2021

Geeta Behl (1957–1 May 2021)
Shashi Baliga(1953–2 May2021)
Subhadra Sengupta(1952–3 May 2021)
Mithlesh Rani Mathur(1938–4 May 2021)
Professor Savitri Vishwanathan (1941–5 May 2021)
Sriprada (1967–5 May 2021)
Abhilasha Patil (1974–5 May 2021)
Prerana Rane (1956–7 May 2021)
Ranjana Nirula(1945–10 May 2021)
K. R. Gouri Amma (14 July 1919–11 May2021)
Sunipa Basu (3 November 1949–11 May 2021)

Dr Padma Baliga (1965–12 May 2021)
Sitalakshmi (3 March 1930/31–12 May 2021)
Kanaka Murthy (2 December 1942–13 May 2021)
Indu Jain (8 September 1936–13 May 2021)
Muthulakshmi Raghavan
(27 September 1967–18 May 2021)
Kanaka FROM AIDWA (Demise 16 May 2021)
Tarannum Riyaz (9 August 1960–20 May 2021)
Monalai Gorhe (1977- 20 May 2021)
Sundarlal Bahuguna (9 January 1927–21 May 2021)
Shanti Pahadia (1 August 1934– 23 May 2021)
Brindha (Demise 23 May 2021)
Tambura Vijayalakshmi (Demise 23 May 2021)
Kantabai Satarkar (1939–25 May 2021)
Ranjita Rane (28 October 1977–26 May 2021)
Alka Raghuvanshi(4 April 1962–26 May 2021).
Dr K Saradamani (1928–26 May 2021)
Suryakantaben Thakorbhai Shah
(25 August 1934–27 May 2021)
Mythili Sivaraman(14 December 1939–30 May 2021)

JUNE 2021

Basappa Jaya (3 September 1944–3 June 2021)
Surekha Marie (1955–5 June 2021)
Kamla Verma(1928–8 June 2021)
Rani Poddar(1950–10 June 2021)
Nirmal Saini (8 October 1938–13 June 2021)
Swatilekha Sengupta (22 May 1950–16 June 2021)
Tapu Mishra (11 January 1985–19 June 2021)
Reshma (1978/1979 – 21 June 2021)
Parassala B. Ponnammal
(29 November 1924–22 June 2021)
Kadalur Sadula Amma (Demise 23 June 2021)
Gemini Rajeswari (22 September 1927–28 June 2021)

JULY 2021

Sanghamitra Mohanty (1 April 1953–1 July 2021)
Dr Phyllis Rodrigues (16 May 1923–1July 2021)
Delia 'Didi' Contractor (1929–5 July 2021)
Pushpa Trilokekar-Verma (1936–9 July 2021)
Snehlata Pandey (1936–10 July 2021)
Pavithra Srinivasan (15 April 1981–16 July 2021)
Gira Sarabhai (11 December1923–15 July 2021)
Surekha Sikri (19 April 1945–16 July 2021)
Shashi Sail (20 November 1946–18 July 2021)
Anannyah Kumari Alex (1993–20 July 2021)
Bhageerathi Amma (1914–22 July 2021))
Deepa Sharma (29 July 1986–25 July 2021)
Jayanthi (6 January 1945–26 July 2021)
Anima Guha (26 March 1932–29 July 2021)

Prabha Katyal (21 April 1935–29 July 2021)
Man Kaur (1 March 1916–31 July 2021)
Jyasree Kakumani (15 April 1960–31 July 2021)

AUGUST 2021

Kalyani Menon (23 June 1941–2 August 2021)
Padma Sachdev (17 April 1940–4 August 2021)
Saranya Sasi (1986–9 August 2021)
Jagjit Kaur (1930–15 August 2021)
Sabrina Lall (1968–15 August 2021)
Chithra (21 May 1965–21 August 2021)
Gail Omvedt (2 August 1941–25 August 2021)

SEPTEMBER 2021

Suraiya Hasan Bose/ Suraiya Apa
(1928–3 September 2021)
Sonal Shukla (1941- 9th September 2021)
Indumati Barve (1922–11 Sep 2021)
Kalpana Kumari Dayala (4 April 1977–19 September 2021)
Rati Bartholomew (1927 January–23 September 2021)
R Susheela (1958–23 September 2021)
Prof. Sheila Bhalla (1933–25 September 2021)
Kamla Bhasin (24 April 1946–25 September 2021)
Kausalya Paatti (1920–27 September 2021)
Sreelakshmi (1983–28 September, 2021)

OCTOBER 2021

Thanksy Francis Thekkekara
(10 November 1953–1 October 2021)
Farrukh Jaffar (1933–15 October 2021)
Jessie Tellis-Nayak (21 March 1925–15 October 2021)
Aparajita Sharma (20 September 1980–15 October 2021)
Uma Maheshwari (198–17 October 2021)
Minoos Mumtaz (12 June 1963–23 October 2021)

NOVEMBER 2021

Professor Rani Ray (1929–6 November 2021)
Mannu Bhandari (3 April 1931–15 November 2021)

DECEMBER 2021

Dr Sarada Menon (5 April 1923–5 December 2021)
Alaknanda Samarth (27 May 1941–6 December 2021)

JANUARY 2022

Afra Bukhari (14 March 1938–2 January 2022)
Dr Maria Aurora Couto
(22 August 1937–14 January 2022)
Shaoli Mitra (1948–16 January 2022)
Rathna (Panna C Shah) 19 August 1947–19 January 2022)
Keerti Shiledar (1952–22 January 2022)

Lakshmi Venkatraman
(12 October 1945–24 January 2022)
Prof. Aparna (Dutta) Mahanta
(20 August 1946–26 January 2022)
Dr Sakkubai Paturi Ramachandran
(12 January 1931–27 January 2022)

FEBRUARY 2022

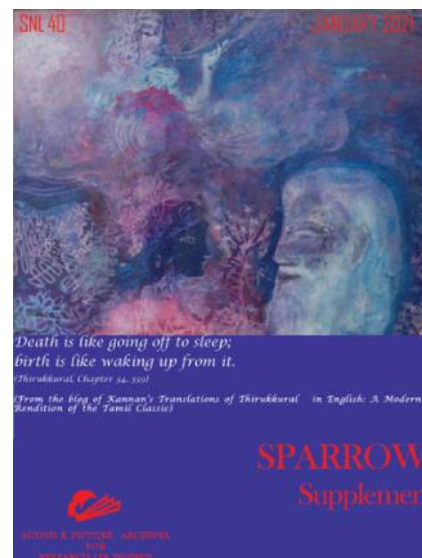
G Sundari (1929–3 February 2022)
Menaka Bhanuchandra Thakkar
(3 March 1942–5 February 2022)
Lata (Hema) Mangeshkar
(28 September 1929–6 February 2022)
Bhanumathi Rao (4 December 1923–12 February 2022)
Pa Visalam (5 November 1932–14 February 2020)
Sandhya Mukherjee (4 October 1931–15 February 2022)
Santha Bhaskar (6 October 1939–26 February 2022)

MARCH 2022

Mina Swaminathan (29 March 1933–14 March 2022)
Mallu Swarajyam (1931–19 March 2022)
Ambujam Vedantham (1938–22 March 2022)
Prema Gopalan (1 February 1956–29 March 2022)
Asha Bairwa and Dr Archana Sharma: (Demise 28 March 2022 and 29 March 2022)

APRIL 2022

Maya Govind (17 January 1940–7 April 2022)
“Didi” to All: Manju Singh (1948–14 April 2022)



SPARROW
SNL 40
SUPPLEMENT

<https://www.sparrowonline.org/downloads/SNL-40-SUPPLEMENT.pdf>

NOVEMBER 2020

**The First Woman Governor of Goa: Mridula Sinha
(27 November 1942–18 November 2020)**

When Sahitya Akademi held a literary meet in Goa a few years ago, Mridula Sinha was there on the inaugural day as the then Governor of Goa and later we saw her take on the role of a writer and read one of her stories. Many of the Hindi writers were familiar with her stories but for other language writers it was a pleasant surprise when she easily slipped from being a governor to a writer. While reading her story she had also spoken about how she hailed from a village and how she began to write stories.

Mridula Sinha's life, her stories and her politics were intertwined in an interesting way. She was born in a village in Muzaffarpur district in the Mithila region of Bihar. Her father was Babu Chhabile Singh and her mother was Anupa Devi. After studying in a small school in Chapra district she was put in a residential girls' school in Lakhisarai district. She got married even before completing her graduation to Jansangh Activist, Ram Kripal Sinha. She continued her education after marriage and got a Master's degree in psychology and also a B.Ed. She took up a job as a lecturer in the Women's College in Motihari. But she gave it up to start a school in Muzaffarpur, where her husband was working in a college.

It was at this time that she ventured into writing. She began with short stories. Villages and their cultural traditions interested her a great deal and her stories reflected this interest. Many of these stories were published in Hindi magazines. They were later compiled in two parts under the title *Bihar Ki Lokkathaen*. She also wrote several novels and a biography of Rajmata Vijayaraje Scindia entitled *Ek Thi Rani Aisi Bhi*. In 2017, a film was made based on the book.

When her husband was a cabinet minister in the Bihar state government, she wrote more than 46 books. Since she had knowledge of the local traditions and customs she could connect with the people, especially women, at the grass roots. This enabled her to help her husband reach out to the women of the constituency during his campaigns for election to the district committee. While it involved her in politics indirectly what really interested her was the social welfare aspect that needed to be attended to. She had no interest in electoral politics and never contested any election.

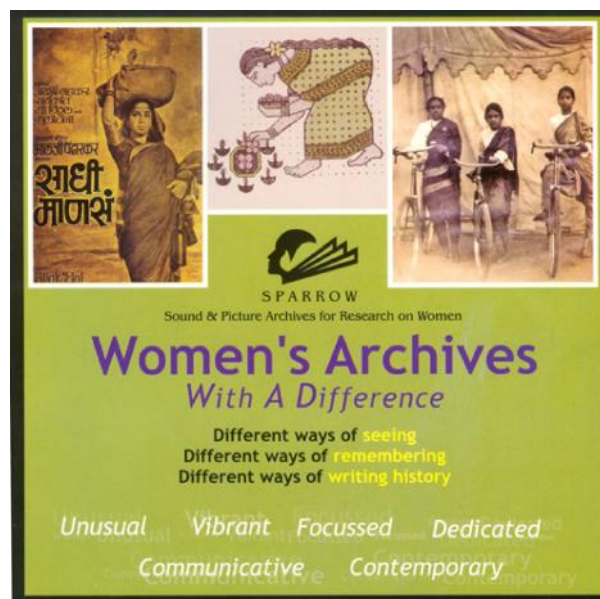
It was this aspect of bringing about a positive change that

made Mridula Sinha actively involve herself in Jayaprakash Narayan's 'Samagra Kranti' movement. Despite her disinterest in politics, her involvement with the J P Movement, generally referred to as the 'Holistic Revolution', got her membership in the the Bharatiya Janata Party's national executive. She was the President of BJP Mahila Morcha during the 2014 Lok Sabha election campaign. She was also the former Chairman of the Central Social Welfare Board, Ministry of Human Resource Development. She was the Governor of Goa from August 2014 to October 2019. She was also appointed as an ambassador for the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, by the Prime Minister.

Her political contribution, especially her tenure as Governor of Goa has been viewed critically by many who appreciated her more as a writer than as a politician. It was said that during her tenure as Governor of Goa, since she was a strong believer, she had adopted a cow and a calf at the Raj Bhavan to do her daily worship. This and her lifestyle, which was termed luxurious, came under criticism. She was also criticised for weakening the Right to Information as she did not want information about the cost of her lifestyle divulged. There were other controversies too like her inviting BJP to form the government despite not being the largest party.

It is difficult to be in politics and not face some mudslinging. Maybe Mridula Sinha should have stuck to writing and social work. It is a pity, however, that she did not live to receive the Padma Shri award conferred on her in 2020. She was given the honour posthumously.

—C S Lakshmi



JANUARY 2021

A Woman like Gold from Pala: PalaThankam (26 February 1941-10 January 2021)



Pala Thankam was a prominent supporting actress in Malayalam movies. She was also a singer and a dubbing artiste. She dubbed for both Malayalam and Tamil films. She was born as Radhamani to Kunjukuttan and Lakshmikutty at Sarathchandra Bhava in

Thiruvathukal in Kottayam's Velloor. She studied music from an early age. The first Guru was Puliyanur Vijayan Bhagavathar. Later she learnt music from Chang anassery LPR Varma. She became renowned in the field of art in the name Pala Thankam. Her name meant gold and she did become as valuable as gold in her life.

In the movie *Kedavilakku* (Eternal Lamp, 1957) starring the legendary actor Sathyan, she sang two songs: *Tamara Malar Pol* (Like a lotus) and *Thekku Pattin* (Water-wheel song). When Thankam came to Madras to record the songs little did she expect to get an opportunity to play the role of Sathyan's sister. Unfortunately the film did not get released. But this gave her an entry into the cultural field of Pala and become active in it. And that is how she became Pala Thankam.

Thankam was already a theatre artiste before she entered the cine field. She worked in many drama troupes like the famous KPAC, Vishwakerala Kala Samithi, Jyothi Theaters etc. She entered the theatre at the age of fourteen. She first acted in NN Pillai's Vishwakerala Nataka Samithi. After the unreleased film in 1957, she returned to cinema as a dubbing artiste. She dubbed for Kushalakumari in the film *Seeta* in 1960. In 1963 she did a film with Sathyan again. While in 1957 she had done a small role in a film which never got released, in 1963 when she made her debut film *Rebecca* Sathyan was still the hero but in six years she was found fit only to play a mother and she was cast as his mother!

Thereafter she took up dubbing seriously. The second film for which she dubbed was *Bobanum Moliyum* (Boban and Moli, 1971). She dubbed for the child character Boban and after that she became a much sought after dubbing artiste. She gave voice to young heroines, child actors, older women characters and even birds. She dubbed for Sadhana in the film *Shiksha* (Punishment, 1971). She has dubbed for more than 1000 characters and also done character roles in more than 300 movies. She was such a talented dubbing artiste that she had dubbed for 5 characters in a single movie.

She worked non-stop almost throughout her life and after her husband SreedharanThampi, who was a police officer, died in an accident she singlehandedly brought up her children. When she was just entering the evening of her life at the age of 72, she decided to become an inmate of Pathanapuram Gandhi Bhavan, a facility for caring for the aged. Thankam passed away while she was under treatment for debilitating illness connected with old age.

She had given an interview where she had said that she was happy in Gandhi Bhavan but she did feel her family and friends in the cine field had abandoned her. Everyone said they cared but no one really visited her at the Gandhi Bhavan. And in the end her body was kept in the mortuary of Gandhi Bhavan. After a chequered career in the world of films, a lonely death.

—C S Lakshmi

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FEBRUARY 2021

Temple of the Heart: Lakshmi Rajarathnam (27 March 1942-8 February 2021)



When I was doing research for my book *Face Behind the Mask* in the seventies I had occasion to meet Lakshmi Rajarathnam. I spent a day with her. She strongly believed that women were the custodians of Indian tradition and no laws can stop that. In fact, in one of her stories, the protagonist commented that men can make laws but "as long as there is one last Indian woman breathing, your laws cannot do anything to this country's tradition and great customs." ("Ajmal Khan Road" in the short story collection *Pookkal Ganappadhillai*, Madras, 1972, pp. 24-32) I remember asking her if this would not circumscribe her life as a woman and I recall her saying that nothing can coerce or restrict a woman against her will.

Lakshmi Rajarathnam was a woman of strong convictions and a prolific writer. She was active till the end and passed away a little more than a month short of her 80th birthday. In those nearly eighty years she had written 1500 short stories, many novels, more than a hundred radio plays, 3 mega T V plays, 3 mega T V serials, more than 3500 spiritual essays and 40 historical stories.

Lakshmi Rajarathnam was born in Tiruchi and by the time

she was ten she had already won a gold medal for reciting *Thiruppavai* (devotional hymns of poet saint Andal and *Thiruvempavai* (devotional hymns of poet saint Manickavasagar). She got married when she was hardly 16 to Rajarathnam who was later Deputy Director in the Department of Employment.

When K R Vasudevan was the editor of *Dinamani Kadir* Lakshmi Rajarathnam wrote regularly in *Dinamani Kadir*. She continued to write in it even after other editors took over. She wrote monthly novels in *Kadaikkadir* the supplement of *Dinamani* groups and she was a much sought after writer by popular magazines. In recent times she wrote regularly in *Anmika Malar*, a spiritual magazine supplement brought out from Madurai by *Dinamalar* newspaper. Her spiritual seeking and her music went together in a way. She was also a trained musician who had given performances and had had the privilege to sing at the annual celebrations dedicated to saint composer Thyagarajar. She also sang for her daughter Rajasyamala, a writer and dancer, when she performed on stage. In later years she also began to give spiritual discourses which were greatly appreciated. She has given 2500 spiritual discourses to appreciative audiences.

With a husband who admired her talents and who accompanied her for all literary meetings Lakshmi Rajarathnam lived her life exactly the way she wanted. After that first gold medal she was honoured with many awards. She was honoured by the Kanchi Shankara Mutt in 1991 for her writing and in 1993 for her spiritual discourses. Earlier in 1978 for her novel *Idhayak Kovil* (Temple of the Heart) she had won the prestigious Narayanaswamy Iyer prize instituted by the *Kalaimagal* magazine. In 1999 she was bestowed with the *Senthamizh Selvi* award of Sriguga Sri Variyar. In 2002, the Hindu Maha Sabha in Colombo honoured her with the award *Sorsuvai Nayagi*. Recently the esteemed *Kalaimagal* magazine honoured her with the award meant for eminent writers in Tamil. She was awarded an honorary doctorate from Arizona University, Tucson.

Lakshmi Rajarathnam's life was a well lived long life in which she managed to reside in the hearts of many.

—C S Lakshmi with inputs from tribute by Thiruppur Krishnan on his Facebook page and T V Radhakrishnan's book *ThamizhIlakkiyam Valartha Penn Ezuththalargal* (Women Writers Who Have Contributed to Tamil Literature) Gangai Puthaka Nilayam, Chennai, 2020.

■■■■■

A Teacher's Long Life: Sushila Ramkrishna Maharao (19 December 1927- 21 February 2021)



Sushila Ramkrishna Maharao has penned down her life's journey in the book *My Story* at the age of 90. Dnyanesh Maharao, journalist and editor of *Chitrlekha* (Marathi), and vice-president of Natya Nirmata Sangh remembers his mother Sushila Ramkrishna Maharao as a strong and inspiring

person.

She started working at the age of fourteen. She joined as a teacher in the Mumbai Municipal Corporation's Education Department School in 1948 and retired as a Headmistress in 1985. Her husband passed away very early in 1977 and she took up the challenge of taking care of eight children all by herself. In the 37 years of her teaching career she was an inspiration to many students and made them aware of social issues and she continued to inspire and guide people even after retirement.

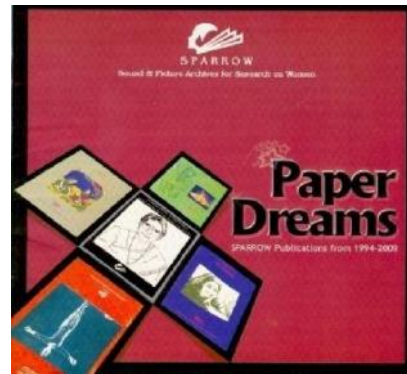
Her book *My Story* which was published by senior writer Madhu Mangesh Karnik was released in 2018, in the presence of MLA Kapil Patil, a teacher in the Legislative Council. The speech she gave then was as inspiring as it used to be in the years when she was active as a teacher.

Her dream of having a house in Shivaji Park, Dadar, Mumbai, was fulfilled on her 94th birthday.

She passed away due to brain stroke at Hinduja hospital. She is survived by five sons, two daughters, a daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

—Pooja Pandey

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MARCH 2021

Sisirkana, The Dew Drop: Dr Sisirkana Dhar Choudhury (27 December 1937-9 March 2021)



Dr Sisirkana Choudhury was a unique violinist. Musicians like her succeeded in making violin a concert instrument in the Hindustani music tradition.

Sisirkana belonged to Shillong. Sisirkana was just seven years old when she received her first lesson on the violin and vocal music from Ustad Moti Mian. Later, she received training from Pandit VG Jog. Ustad Ali Akbar Khan accepted her as his pupil in 1956. Those who have known her closely say that her father was the house physician to the governor of Meghalaya and that Pandit Jog used to come to their house in Shillong to teach her. A few years after Ustad Ali Akbar Khan accepted her as his student, she had the rare opportunity to learn from Annapurana Devi, daughter of Baba Allaiddin Khan Sahib. She also received training from Pandit Ravi Shankar.

When she was hardly 16 Sisirkana began to give public performances. Beginning at the age of 16 in 1953, Sisirkana became a regular performer. She frequently performed for All India Radio and later the television. Although people say that it was rare for a woman to take up violin as it was considered a male instrument, there have been several historical evidences of women performing with violin in the South. There is a Ravi Varma painting showing a woman playing the violin. In the Devadasi tradition Veenai Dhanammal's daughter Kamakshi was a violinist. So was her granddaughter Abhiramasundari. There was also Papanasam Balasaraswathi who was a violinist in the Devadasi tradition. The eminent Dwaram Mangathayaru began learning violin when she was very young and began accompanying her renowned father, the great violinist Dwaram Venkataswami Naidu, from 1954. There were also other women from non-performing families who learnt the violin. N Rajam, born a year after Sisirkana, played violin in the Carnatic music style and later took up Hindustani music and learnt from Pandit Omkarnath Thakur. And as a Carnatic music student she had accompanied M S Subbalakshmi at the age of 13 in 1951 itself. So although violin was termed a male instrument, there were several women who had played the violin in history. It could be said that Sisirkana, with her love for and expertise in violin, helped to revive a history of women playing the violin that existed in another part of India in the Hindustani

music tradition.

What was unique about Sisirkana was that she also played the viola and introduced it on the Hindustani music stage. In *Times of India*, Pandit Tejjendra Narayan Majumdar is quoted saying that she was among the rare musicians who played the 'dhrupad' 'alaap-jod' on the viola and subsequently switched over to the violin for the rest of the concert. There were also times when she did an entire concert playing the viola. What gave her recitals a new dimension was her repertoire that combined the best of both 'dhrupad' and 'tantrakari' style of Baba Allaiddin Khan Sahib's Maihar gharana. Old timers have seen Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Pandit Nikhil Banerji and Sisirkana performing as a trio in the seventies in musical conferences in Kolkata. In the same tribute Pandit Pallab Bandhopadhyay, a student of V G Jog, has spoken about how she added an extra fifth melody string to the violin which increased the range of octave. According to him she tried to imbibe the style of playing sarod in violin. (Priyanka Dasgupta, "Vidushi Sisirkana Dhar Choudhury passes away" *Times of India*, 10 March 2021). She also performed in international conferences, representing India as a cultural representative in Russia, Finland and Afghanistan, as well as at a conference in Nepal commemorating the country's independence.

Sisirkana had joined Rabindra Bharati University (RBU) in 1971 and retired in 1997 as a professor of instrumental music. She was Allaiddin Khan Professor of Instrumental Music as well. In 1990-92 she was Head of the Department of Vocal Music. From 1990-94 she was the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts. In between, in 1993 she officiated as the Vice-Chancellor for a brief period.

After retiring in 1997 she moved to the US to join the Ali Akbar College of Music in Bay Area, San Francisco, where she was also involved in transcribing the music of Ustad Allaiddin Khan. Her transcriptions were considered unique as she had a special insight into them having trained under the great maestro's son. Despite her work with the transcriptions she was willing to give her time as a consultant and share her knowledge of music with ethnomusicology scholars. In 2000 she released an album *Classical Violin* with two songs composed by her in Raga Kaushik Bhairavi (Gat) and Raga Darbari Kanara (Gat). She also wrote her own book, *The Origin and Evolution of Violin As A Musical Instrument: And Its Contribution to the Progressive Flow of Indian Classical Music* in 2010 which was published by Ramakrishna Vedanta Math.

Her student for thirty years, Indradeep Ghosh, has said in the TOI article that not many know that she has also created a few ragas like Rasaranjini and Tarangini. Once when she had gone to play at the Dakshineswara temple the head purohit requested her to present something new. That is

when she created the Raga Bhavatarini and dedicated it to Goddess Kali.

Sisirkana's students in India fondly referred to her as Bordi or Gruruma. They remember her gentle and humble nature and her advice to them on performance. As her student Indradeep Ghosh has said to the *SpaceInk* literary magazine (15 March 2021), she always advised them not to perform for claps from the audience; but to take the audience to a mental state where they forget to clap.

Sisirkana received the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1997 for her contribution to the field of Indian classical violin. Later, she was awarded the Dover Lane Music Conference's Sangeet Samman Award in 2017, four years ago.

Sisirkana suffered a brain hemorrhage followed by a cardiac arrest and passed away at the age of 83. The homage posted on her Face Book page said: "Dr Sisirkana Dhar Choudhury, fondly known as Didiji in Indian Classical Music community, transcended to her heavenly abodes, leaving all her mortal remains. A truly musical saint whose deeply moving spiritual music and legacy will continue through the innumerable disciples and connoisseurs whose lives she touched, enlightened and changed forever. It is an irreplaceable loss to Indian Classical music, a tremendous loss for Bay Area communities and a deeply personal loss to each one of us who have been blessed to have her in our lives...."

—C S Lakshmi

Guruma's Srujan: Laxmipriya Mohapatra (1935-20 March 2021)



Laxmipriya Mohapatra or Guruma as we all called her (we, meaning all of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's students who did not live in Odisha) was the first dancer to perform Odissi on stage. For those who do not know—Laxmipriya Mohapatra, is the wife of Odissi legend Padmavibhushan Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. And for those who further do not know, Kelucharan Mohapatra was the doyen of Odissi, the classical dance style from the state of Odisha. He is the one mainly responsible for spreading and popularising this beautiful, graceful fluid dance form all over India and all over the world. And it would have been impossible for him to do so without her.

Guruma's identity was not just "the wife" of Guru

Kelucharan Mohapatra. She made history when she became the first dancer to perform Odissi on stage, at a time when Guruji didn't really dance, but accompanied her and others on the tabla and the mardal, though in his younger days he had danced as a Gotipua. (Gotipuas are young boy dancers who would dress up as girls and dance. This is a tradition of Odisha).

Guruji would often talk about how she inspired him in his life and his art. It was this art that made them fall in love with each other and it was the passion for this art that bound them together, through thick and thin, through the highs and lows of life.

Much before her husband Kelucharan Mohapatra (Guruji) embarked on his dance journey and became a celebrity and a household name for Odissi, Laxmipriya (Guruma) had established herself as a star dancer at the famous Annapurna Theatre in Puri. Her actress-mother Tulasi Devi had sent her to the theatre when Laxmipriya was only all of seven. She was here for ten years, where she learnt the nuances of acting and dance, and was part of many plays. At 17, she moved from Puri to Cuttack, the cultural capital of Odisha.

The Home page of SRJAN, the Odissi dance school, a premier training institution that was founded by Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra at Bhubaneswar, Odisha in 1993, says this about Guruma: "In the early part of her life, Laxmipriya absorbed from her rural surroundings, an interest in the expressional arts like dance, music, theatre. Hailing from Khurda, Laxmipriya and mother opted to stay in Puri where the young Laxmipriya was introduced as a dancer in Annapurna "A" group by Bauribandhu Mahanty. She travelled with the theatre group, to remote villages, towns and every tribal district of Orissa, her reminiscences about these tours abound in lively anecdotes about people, tribal dance and costumes, rural methods of conveying ideas, phraseology and many other points of interest. Her powers of observation were sharp, and her sense of humour abundant. Her teachers in acting and dance were, in those days, the venerable Ram Mania, Kashinath Sahu, Lakshmidhar Patra and Lingraj Nanda, who were all hard taskmasters."

Under their tutelage she blossomed into a fine stage artiste. At the Annapurna theatre group in Cuttack, there was a tradition of presenting a small dance piece before the actual play started. Here she got an opportunity to share the stage with Kelucharan Mohapatra (who had a small role to play and it was the first time that he had danced instead of playing the percussion instruments), when the two danced together in a 15 minute dance drama *Mohini Bhasmasura*. Laxmipriya played the role of Mohini while Kelucharan was Mahadev, and Pankajcharan Das who had choreographed the piece played Bhasmasura. It was the first time that Guruji had



Guruji and Guruma doing Dashavatar 1946



Guruji and Guruma Documentation



Guruma dancing for students in the Cuttack house around 1982

Guruma with Jhelum Paranjpee and Debi



danced instead of playing the tabla or the mardal. This was much appreciated by the manager of the theatre and the audiences of Cuttack. Laxmipriya was then taught two solo dance pieces. Specially to be performed by her in the next play to be presented by Annapurna theatre.

This was her historic solo Odissi presentation, the first of its kind, in 1946, accompanied by Kelucharan on the mardal. The effect on the audience was stunning. People had not seen a performance of this graceful dance style in a solo form, they had never imagined the existence of such a graceful dance and that it could be performed by a woman, that too on the stage....they only knew of the women who danced in the temples only for the Lord and the young boy dancers who danced in public, but not on stage, they danced in mathas and akhadas, for religious functions or festivals. Laxmipriya was beautiful, young, endowed with a supple body and expressive liquid eyes. She captivated the audiences so much that there would be queues to buy tickets to watch her. It was this performance of hers, and others that followed, which in the coming years was to inspire the first batch of girls to learn Odissi dance despite social ostracism.

Later, Guru Pankajcharan Das choreographed *Dashavatar* with Kelucharan and Laxmipriya performing together. This and several other projects of the Annapurna theatre group, brought the two closer together and their relationship blossomed into love which then led to their marriage. Kelucharan admired her beauty and talent since he first saw her dancing. He had been by her side, as a mardal player, a dance partner as well as a trusted friend. Their marriage was a simple ceremony of exchanging garlands, and Kelucharan applying sindoor on Laxmipriya's forehead. This took place on the stage of Annapurna theatre, for the stage was what had brought them together. Two years later it was solemnised

in a temple.

Laxmipriya had also learnt folk dance and tribal dance. She had performed with the Annapurna theatre group in Delhi for Republic Day celebrations. But it was her solo presentations that catapulted her personal success.

With her strong foundation in theatre, she acted in a number of classic Odiya films. She guided and supported Kelucharan during his formative years as a choreographer. Guruji would keenly observe her moves and expressions and include them in his choreography. He would insist on his wife's presence when he worked on a new piece. He valued her inputs immensely.

Laxmipriya was and continued to be his inspiration until his death.

Though a highly accomplished artiste, Laxmipriya decided to step back from performances to take care of the family and support her husband. Actually, soon after marriage she conceived and after the birth of her daughter, within three weeks she was back on the stage performing and dancing. This did not go well with her body, she fell severely ill and hence both Kelucharan and Laxmipriya jointly took the decision of her stepping back. Had she not done this, maybe we would not have got the "Kelucharan Mohapatra" that the world admires, and Odissi would not have flourished in leaps and bounds, and reached the masses the way it has. Laxmipriya Mohapatra has to get due credit for this.

Let me talk about Laxmipriya as Guruma—the way I got to know her and then grew fond of her.

In Odisha, in every home, it is the norm, or one can say the tradition, to show respect to elders by touching their feet, whenever one sees or meets them. In Mumbai, in my home, it was not at all the norm to touch anyone's feet. Respect was shown through behaviour. As a child, I only

remember touching my grandparents' feet while going for an exam. Then later when I started learning dance, I was told to touch the feet of the Guru, which is a very strong Indian tradition. So, when I started learning with Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, (I first met him in Mumbai) I was aware of this tradition and touched his feet, not only for tradition, but because I genuinely felt it from within. But when I went to Odisha to study with Guruji further, I was unaware of the Odisha tradition. When I reached his house, I touched Guruji's feet, but not Guruma's. The other students were flabbergasted at what they saw, and someone said to me: "You've had it, better go touch her feet." But I did not, because it did not seem natural to me, I did not feel it in my heart... And I hate doing what doesn't ring true to me. But after about a week, the atmosphere, the Odiya culture, the people and mainly Guruma herself—her personality, how she dealt with different people and different situations—changed the feelings in my heart and one morning very naturally, I touched her feet. She laughed and teasingly told me—"Ah, so now you think I am up to the mark of your Guruji, eh...?" And then she lovingly held me close.

She was a darling.

We used to have four to six-week long workshops in Guruji's house in Cuttack. He would start the class at 8 in the morning, when we would have had only a cup of tea. Around 10.00 Guruma would start calling us for breakfast, but Guruji would be reluctant to leave us. She would then barge into the class and make him stop teaching. She would say, "How do you think they are going to have energy if you don't let them eat, and make them slog like this?" She was very particular about how and when and what we ate. She would not like any of the students to go hungry. Guruji, the creative person, would forget time and hunger, but Guruma had to be the practical person; otherwise we would have had a very hard time. This whole process would be repeated at lunch time, evening snack and dinner time too. In fact, it had become a daily routine.

Whenever she was not caught up in any household chore, she would come and sit in the class. She was a very keen observer. She would watch each one of us carefully and give her own suggestions on how we could improve ourselves: Keep your back straight, don't move your backside, look up, don't drop your chin and so on.

When Guruji was in the process of creating and choreographing something new, he always wanted Guruma near him, seated next to him. She would sometimes complain: "I have work to do, and why do you need me now? I have been away from dance for several years and you are steeped into it..." But Guruji would make her sit. He valued her inputs a lot. She was not at all generous with her inputs but with

her aesthetic sense and keen observation prowess she would give a few but apt and subtle suggestions. Guruji would be pleased as punch.

For one of the workshops I had taken my two-year-old son with me. He did not understand Odiya and Guruma did not understand Marathi, but the two got on very well and she lovingly looked after him while I was in class. She had to play several roles at the time of the workshops. Wife of this creative yet sometimes difficult man, mother to the 20 odd students that were living in their house and of course, mother to her own son (her daughter was married and gone by then), host to the several musicians that popped up at any time for Guruji, either because they wanted to meet him or because he had called them. And many more roles as the situation demanded.

I have seen her helping Guruji dress before a performance. It was the cutest scene ever. When helping him make the pleats of his dhoti, he had to be very still. If he moved even a bit, she would admonish him like one would admonish a fidgety little child and like a child, Guruji would put down his head and stay still.

She loved gifts. And she made no bones about it which is what made her so lovable. If on some occasion one forgot a gift, she would be quick in asking: "You didn't bring anything this time?" And seeing the guilty look on the student's face, she would laugh and say: "I was pulling your leg, my dear." She had a beautiful smile with a set of wonderful teeth. This smile of hers looked equally beautiful even after she lost a few teeth. In fact she started looking very cute as she got older.

My last memory of hers is the cute old lady, my Guruma, with her beautiful toothless smile.

—Jhelum Paranjape

Jhelum Paranjape is a well-known and much admired Odissi dancer and the founder of Smitalay, an Odissi dance institute.

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A Voice of Inspiration Gone Too Soon: Anita Pagare (1971-28 March 2021)



Anita Pagare's sudden demise has caused a void in the social movements not only in Nashik but in the state of Maharashtra. Anita Pagare was a leading social activist and considered a revolutionary. Born in Phulenagar area of Nashik city, Anita started her social work

in early 1990. She began working at the Nashik Women's Rights Protection Committee. Pagare was an influential force in the city's women's liberation movement and tirelessly worked to empower tribal women.

She founded the Sangini Mahila Sanstha that raised awareness about HIV-AIDS in the Turbhe region of Navi Mumbai. She was a very good speaker who understood the core aspects of issues. With her clear voice and confident appearance she used to keep the audience engaged. With her networking abilities she could reach out to activists outside Maharashtra also. She was a close friend of the well-known feminist thinker Kamla Bhasin. In various seminars and conferences she has raised the issues of landless people and the deprived and the question of education for girls of school-going age.

She was the voice of the youth as she related to them and their problems with great understanding. She worked for the youth as the coordinator on behalf of Vishwas Gyan Prabodhini and Research Centre. She was honoured by the Yashwantrao Chavan Centre, Mumbai, in 1998 with the state level 'Youth Award' for her work with the Navbharat Yuva Andolan. Anita was active in various movements like Samata Andolan, Chhatrabharati, Dakshinayan and Narmada Bachao Andolan.

She was involved in the research project of the Ration Action Committee, a Vigilance Committee Under Public Distribution System in 2001-2002 and also worked as a coordinator in the Special Cell for Women and Children of the State Government from 2006-2008. Even during the lockdown period she kept herself busy on the social media to advocate and create awareness.

For her own development as a person she always gave credit to her mother-in-law who she said had played a big role in her life. Anita Pagare could have done so much more and had many more active years ahead of her and it is a pity the pandemic has taken her away from those who relied on her to speak for them.

She is survived by her activist husband Manohar Ahire and daughters Kalyani and Kirti.

Pooja Pandey

APRIL 2021

First Woman Cricket Commentator: Chandra Nayudu (1933-4 April 2021)



Although she has not been in news in recent times Chandra Nayudu's name is a familiar one to many because of her book on her father C K Nayudu, the country's first Test captain. She passed away at the age of 88 after a prolonged illness at her house in Manoramaganj, Indore. Chandra Nayudu was one of the first women

cricket commentators of India. Her career as a commentator began in 1977 at a match between national champions Mumbai and MCC in Indore. Chandra Naidu witnessed the Golden Jubilee Test match played between India and England at Lord's Cricket Ground in 1982. There she also addressed a programme in the Lord's Committee Room. Her book, "CK Nayudu: A Daughter Remembers" on her father's life was received very well when it was published in 1995.

She did not remain active as a cricket commentator for a long time and became a professor of English in a Government Girls' College, Indore, and retired as a professor of English from the same college. Though she did not continue as a commentator her deep interest in cricket remained and BCCI Secretary Sanjay Jagdale has rightly said in his homage to her that she contributed immensely to the advancement of women's cricket in her state, Madhya Pradesh, by taking up responsible roles as manager of women's cricket teams for matches held in different cities and encourage the players.

Chandra decided to remain single and lived alone and was looked after by domestic helpers as she was unable to walk in her old age. Chandra lived a life of her choice where she kept alive her love for cricket and lovers of cricket and women who play cricket will remember her with special love and affection.

Pooja Pandey

The Gentle Woman Who Acted As a Termagant: Shashikala Jawalkar Saigal (4 August 1932-4 April 2021)



Many remember Shashikala, the actor, for the vampish roles she played as the foul-mouthed sister-in-law or mother-in-law or an office secretary with no scruples. But an earlier generation of audience know her for the roles in which she revealed herself as not only an able actor but also a modern

urban young woman who knew how to view caste (*Sujata*, 1959) and a bold woman from the village who could face a bunch of aggressive men with a scythe to protect a younger woman (*Mera Karam, Mera Dharam*, 1987). Thanks to a discerning journalist, her positive and powerful roles in films have been recalled in an article in *First Post*. (Vikram Phukan, "Shashikala passes away: Revisiting the 'good woman' roles portrayed by the iconic Bollywood femme fatale", April 5, 2021)

Born into a Maharashtrian family Shashikala had started performing even when she was 5 years old. She got into films at a young age too when the family circumstances became bad. When she was just thirteen, she got included in the filming of the Qawwali sequence in the film *Zeenat* (1945) by Noor Jahan's husband Shaukat Hussain Rizvi. She got a meatier role in the 1948 comedy film *Pugree* (Security Deposit Paid for Tenancy) directed by Anant Thakur, which was supposed to be a take-off from the Bollywood film *It Happened on 5th Avenue* (1947). In the credits of the film Shashikala's name appeared with that of Kamini Kaushal and Gope. She was only 16 although in the film she looks older. A few other films later she did *Sujata* where she was an educated playful girl who knew how to respect others for what they are. In the sixties came the negative roles with *Arti* (1962) and *Gumrah* (1963). She was a shrewish wife in one and in another she was an unscrupulous Secretary. In the "good woman"- "bad woman" stereotypes that became common in films Shashikala, even though she did play a few interesting roles which were slightly different from these stereotypical characters, got typecast as the "bad woman" and it is as a vamp that she is remembered.

She was married to Om Prakash Saigal who belonged to the Kundan Lal Saigal family and she has two daughters. But in the later eighties she was very unhappy with her life and she is supposed to have gone and met Mother Theresa who asked her to serve in her various homes and ashrams. She started working for the Missionaries of Charity and worked with them for nine years. She also became a regular church-goer and later she converted to Christianity as she had several

visions of Jesus and Mother Mary, as she has said in an interview. (Gloria D'Sa, "The lesser-known Shashikala", *The Indian Express*, 5 April 2021). She was baptised in Pune by Bishop Valerian D'Souza.

Her contribution to Indian cinema did not go unrecognised or unrewarded. Shashikala was conferred with the prestigious Padma Shri award in the year 2007. In 2009, she received the Lifetime Achievement Award at the V Shantaram Awards. Towards the end she lived with her granddaughter Soniya and her great-granddaughter Shanya and regularly went to the church for her spiritual solace. The lockdown made her housebound and she passed away during the lockdown times of COVID-19 on an Easter Sunday. Gloria D'Sa writes that "she had a beautiful funeral service with all her favourite priests celebrating the mass..."

—C S Lakshmi

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A Doyenne of Education: Dr Fatma Zakaria (17 February 1936-6 April 2021)



Dr Fatma Zakaria was the editor of the *Mumbai Times* and later the Sunday editor of *Times of India*. She also served as the editor of the *Taj* magazine of the Taj Hotels.

In 1958, when she was only 22, Fatma Zakaria established an institution of childcare and a Women's Industrial Home in Mumbai that fulfilled the educational and healthcare needs of over 500 underprivileged children. Her career in journalism began later in 1963. She began as Kushwant's Singh's assistant editor and also wrote a column for children in *Illustrated Weekly*. Later she rose in ranks when she joined *Times of India*.

Although she worked and lived in Mumbai a lot of important work that she did was in Aurangabad, her husband Dr Rafiq Zakaria's constituency. He was a well-known Indian politician and Islamic religious cleric. He was closely associated with the Indian independence movement and Indian National Congress Party. He was a Member of Parliament and a Minister in the Maharashtra government. In 1963 Rafiq Zakaria had set up Maulana Azad Educational Trust (MAET). The Trust's home page says: "The city of Aurangabad with a glorious past was in deep slumber before the late Honorable Dr. Rafiq Zakaria (Ex. Minister and Member of Parliament) discovered it. Among many other plans, he envisioned a centre of higher learning at the site of this legendary base of learning at Rauza Bagh, Aurangabad. Maulana Azad College of Arts, Science &

Commerce is the first institution on the campus which was started in June 1963. The college is situated in the large and beautiful campus with its Mughal architecture and beautifully laid gardens. Today there are two separate campuses running seventeen educational institutions.” The very first task Dr Rafiq Zakaria and his wife Fatma Rafiq Zakaria faced when they took up the mission, was to ensure that the new buildings, would harmonise with the old. Today there is a “pleasing blend of medieval and modern structures including an open-air auditorium with a futuristic dome embellished with minarets, Darwazas, arches and mausoleums with their old-world charm.”

A trust called Maulana Azad Education Society to manage the affairs was formed in 1970 with Fatma Zakaria as its chairman. After the death of her husband in 2005, Fatma Zakaria assumed the mantle of the Chairperson of the Maulana Azad Educational Trust and President of Maulana Azad Education Society, Aurangabad. The note on her on the homepage of the institution says: “She worked alongside her husband all through the long years of their relentless struggle in trying to provide affordable, quality education to the student community. As Chairperson, she helped all the Institutions on the campus take major strides and nurtured each of them into models of excellence.” She was also the chairman of the Khairul Islam Trust Mumbai and was also the executive vice-chairman of the Board of Governors of the Trust’s Institute of Hotel Management which is run in collaboration with the Taj Group of Hotels.

Both Fatma Zakaria and her husband were keen to promote education of women. After the educational institutions set up in 1963, as the home page of Dr Rafiq Zakaria College for Women writes, “the year 1968 was yet another landmark in the educational environment of Aurangabad City. It witnessed the establishment of a Ladies Section of the Maulana Azad College, in a rental building in the City Chowk area with 35 Students on its rolls. The need for a separate Ladies Section was keenly felt by a section of the society. It was meant to cater to the educational needs and aspiration of those women students who wanted to be exclusively educated as a matter of custom and tradition. Keeping this in view the genuine demand of the establishment of a separate section for women in Arts faculty was justified. In 1973 the Ladies Section came to be housed in a hoary surrounding of the Nizam’s Palace called Navkhanda Palace with strength of 100 students. It was free from noise pollution and ideal for a women college. In 1990 the Ladies Section of Maulana Azad College was a bifurcated and an independent college named Aurangabad College for Women came into being under the aegis Maulana Azad Education Society. The college has arts and science streams, and apart from Home

Science the college also has Analytical Chemistry and Computer Science. The motive of establishing a college for women was in tune with the educational work that had been taken up by Rafiq Zakaria and Fatma Zakaria. They deeply believed that to educate women was to educate the whole society and the motive as stated by the college on its page reflected this. The motive, it stated, was to emancipate women from the shackles of ignorance and to mould them, to nurture their courage and assist them in their pursuit of excellence, to pave way for their successful future and self-empowerment, to see that they attain the highest levels of nobility and self-respect, to foster in them the spirit of secularism and national integration.

Fatma Zakaria was also keen to establish a centre for higher learning on the lines of Centre for Advanced Studies, Shimla. It was to help genuine scholars and academicians to carry on research activities. Dr. Rafiq Zakaria Centre for Higher Learning and Advanced Research came up in 2007 offering post graduate and research programmes in multiple disciplines of knowledge. Fatma not only carried forward her late husband’s legacy but with vigour and commitment she also kept transforming the educational institutions to take up the challenge of new needs. She brought in foreign educational collaborations and succeeded in making them the best centres of learning not only in India but Asia.

In her tribute in *The Print* for Fatma Zakaria (*Khuda Hafiz, Fatma Zakaria*, 7 April 2021) Shobhaa De whom she recruited, says that she remembered her as an imposing, imperial, supremely elegant lady with a long braid touching the small of her back who always was “clad in a traditional shalwar-kameez, a gauzy dupatta covering her broad shoulders.” She also wore bangles and matching jhumkis and her bejewelled fingers used to wave in a royal fashion Shobhaa De recalls, and found her the same even after she met her several years later in Aurangabad.

Shobhaa De remembers her as an adventurous person as an editor, not stymied by any challenges and she says, “It was this sense of adventure, daring and flair she brought to *The Taj Magazine* when she took over as editor. She brought scholarship, style, erudition and more to make *The Taj Magazine* a collector’s item—I have preserved so many volumes myself. Each one, thoughtfully themed, meticulously researched. Fatma made the rich cultural history of India jump out of those glossy pages. It was not just an in-house PR publication raving about India’s leading luxury hotels chain, it was a tribute to the beauty and craft skills, architecture and rituals, festivals and feasts from across the land. Fatma’s faultless eye for detail ensured the magazine retained its glory to showcase all that we can be rightfully proud of—our priceless heritage.”

Shobhaa De says Fatma's final years may have been her finest legacy "as she built educational institutions in Aurangabad with complete dedication and commitment." During Shobhaa De's visit she "saw Fatma's kohl-lined eyes shine with pride as young girl after young girl came forward to share her story." Shobhaa could tell "Fatma had come into her own magnificently... it was her shining hour."

Fatma Zakaria fulfilled all the missions that she had taken up in life. She richly deserved the Sarojini Naidu Integration Award for Journalism conferred on her in 1983 and the Padma Shri in recognition of her work in education in 2006. With her demise due to COVID-19 at the Kamalnayan Bajaj Hospital in Aurangabad at the age of 85, the educational field has lost a great doyenne who would have continued to inspire young people, especially girls.

—C S Lakshmi

Remembering Mohini: Prathima Devi (9 April 1933- 6 April 2021)



Prathima Devi started her career at the age of 11 from theatre. Though she made a debut in Kannada films with *Krishnaleela* (1947) at the age of 15 she came into limelight when she acted as a lead in *Jaganmohini* (1951), which was the first Kannada film to achieve a 100-day phenomenon in

the theatres.

Born as Mohini in Kalladka, a town in Karnataka, as a fourth child to Upendra Shenoy and Saraswatibai, she lost her father at the very early age of four. Her family then had to move to different places before settling down in Udipi. She developed a liking for the silver screen even as a child, and used to watch films with great interest. The role M S Subbulakshmi played as Naradar in the 1941 Tamil film *Savithiri* influenced her so much that she decided to take up acting as a career. As was often the custom where film acting was concerned, she took up the new name Prathima Devi for the film world. She shared screen with Kemparaj Urs in the film *Krishnaleela* (1947) and also met her future husband D Shankar Singh on its sets.

She acted in more than 60 movies in which some were major successful films like *Krishnaleela* (1947) *Jaganmohini* (1951), *Dallali* (1952) *Shiva Parvathi* (1950), *Sri Srinivasa Kalyanam*. (1952) and *Nagakanye* (1975). Most of her films

were produced by her husband D Shankar Singh under the banner Mahatma Films.

She was awarded the Dr Rajkumar award for her contribution in Kannada cinema by the Government of Karnataka in 2001-02. She is survived by four children who all are part of the film fraternity. Son Rajendra Singh Babu is a film director, Sangram Singh and Jairaj Singh are producers and daughter Vijayalakshmi Singh is an actress.

Prathima Devi's career had been satisfying and she had got the recognition she deserved. Her life had come to a full circle when she passed away at the age of 88 in her sleep at her residence in Saraswatipura, Mysore.

—Pooja Pandey

Jasood, the Messenger: Comrade Sunder Navalkar (December 1921-9 April 2021)



Comrade Sunder Navalkar died at the age of hundred and throughout her life she remained a staunch believer in Mao's thoughts. When she turned hundred on 16 September in 2020 and after her demise many articles were written on her. This tribute is based on

details taken from the articles by Harsh Thakor in *Counter Currents* dated 28 December 2020 and his tribute to her in *Counter Currents* on 11 April 2021 and the beautiful tribute written in www.rediff.com by Sanobar Keshwaar on April 14, 2021.

Comrade Sunder was born into a middle-class family of the Pathare Prabhu community, a community that is said to be original inhabitants of the island of Mumbai. She was born in Dadar where she lived her whole life. Her family was a family of lawyers. She is supposed to have been a rebellious child and had to often stand outside her class for being naughty. Her lawyer father was in the Hindu Mahasabha, But Sunder was drawn towards Gandhi and his freedom struggle. She also became a lawyer following the family tradition. Later she moved away from her initial attraction towards Gandhiji's ideas and became a communist.

She joined the Communist Party of India and later, she joined the Maoists after the split of the party in 1964. Although she was not a member she was close to the Revolutionary Socialist Party and she formed the Communist League. The Naxalbari movement inspired her in later years and she formed the first unit of the Communist Party of India

(Marxist–Leninist) in Maharashtra and was its first secretary. She worked closely with Comrades Sunil Dighe and Laxman Pagar. She was amongst the first group of four to be arrested as “Naxalites” in Maharashtra and spent almost seven years in jail.

She had made up her mind to be a people’s lawyer and the working-class movement became her field of activity. From her young days she began to organise workers, forming unions and fighting their cases. She also felt that the working classes needed to know what the world view of Marxism was and hence organised study classes. She helped establish several unions but her main work was with the construction workers, especially on Shapurji Pallonji construction sites. In the course of time she set up the United Labour Union, and that helped in organising construction workers and Air India’s contract sweepers and cleaners at Mumbai airport. After many years of struggle, she won the Air India’s contract sweepers a great victory in the Supreme Court in the case of Air India vs United Labour Union in 1996. It became a landmark case even though the judgment was reversed later.

Maybe there was still a bit of Gandhi in her for her lifestyle was very simple. She lived in a modest house in a minimalistic fashion. She always took the public transport even when she was 90 and a white cotton sari with a border and a long white blouse that was tucked into her petticoat, was almost like her uniform. Sanobar says that speaking about her some trade unionists have spoken of her as the only woman leader who totally identified with the working class. The only other person they could think of was Geetha Ramakrishnan of Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangam, a construction workers’ union, in Chennai. (SPARROW has an interview with Geetha’s mother Dr Kamala Ramakrishnan, wife of the communist leader S Ramakrishnan) They also said that Comrade Sunder took part in all the activities and thought nothing of making placards, putting up posters all over the city at night, typing letters, attending meetings with labour commissioners, typing petitions and doing her own posting. There were times when she stood at the factory gates and physically resisted violent assaults by goondas the management would set on them.

Harsh Thakor writes that she was a staunch believer in socialism and when the USSR broke up in December 26, 1991, she still believed in socialism as the only ideology to follow and gave speeches defending it. However, he says that she had her drawbacks in that she was very rigid and that “she was reluctant in adopting any positive stance to Marxist-Leninist outside the pro-Charu Mazumdar camp.” But those who knew her forgave her for what they thought were her errors.

Sanobar has some interesting anecdotes which reveal both her warmth and her humour. In her early eighties she tripped

and fell while in a morcha and broke her leg. But she recovered very fast considering her age. When asked the secret of her physical strength she smiled and replied: “Eating half a kilo of beef every Sunday!”

Sanobar also raises the question of what her life was as a single woman. Many may have been curious but they never dared to ask her. But there was that incident when she advised an activist when she felt distressed about a broken relationship. Sanobar says, Sunder told her, ‘Don’t grieve, Comrade. Consider yourself as being liberated from the confines of a woman’s responsibilities. Concentrate all your energies on advancing the movement that will give you greater solace and satisfaction than any relationship with a man can.’

When she approached 90, Sanobar says, a young comrade advised her to take it easy and rest. Sunder’s reply was what one would expect of her: ‘There is so much work still to be done, there is no time to rest. There will be lots of time for me to rest, once I am dead!’ Sanobar says, when some comrades met her a year before her death, she had pointed to a set of three hand-written ledgers lying on her table. She had said that those were her memoirs and that in writing them she had not held back any punches when it came to people she had known and worked with. Comrade Sunder wanted the memoirs to be published only posthumously.

One hopes those memoirs get published now. One would then know how she viewed the world she lived in and how she placed herself in that world as a woman and as a communist who believed in Mao’s thoughts.

—C S Lakshmi

Paintings, Stories and Songs: Usha Bhatnagar (27 February 1938-15 April 2021)



Usha Bhatnagar’s house was an open house to all writers and artists. Many literary meetings took place surrounded by music and her paintings wrote many writers who condoled her death on Facebook. Sudha Arora, the Hindi writer, commented that Usha’s house offered shade to all writers. She was a self-taught artist who worked on water colours initially and later on she began doing oil paintings with Indian rural themes. She became interested in figurative work, especially in painting rural women in their natural surroundings. She had four solo exhibitions and group shows at well-known art galleries in Mumbai. Many of her paintings are in private collections in India and in countries like UK, Sweden and Kenya. ‘Ponds’ had chosen

her for their campaign for international woman of the year 1998, and had reproduced five of her paintings in the popular magazine *Meri Saheli*.

Many prominent writers chose her paintings for their book covers. Prestigious magazines covered her paintings in their pages. Oxford University Press, New York, chose one of her painting for the cover of their book *Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime*. She was not just a painter but also a well-known Hindi writer. Her stories were published in many esteemed Hindi magazines. Her short story collections *Gangajal* (2011) *Yeh Din Ve Din* (2012) and also her other books *Apna Apna Aasman* (1998) and *Aur Jang Abhi Jari Hai* were well received.

She was awarded the Munshi Premchand Sahitya award by the Maharashtra Sahitya Akademy for her book *Apna Apna Aasman* in 1999. In 2012 Abhiyan Sanstha honoured her with "Utter Sahitya Shree" award.

Her death is a great loss to all those to whom her house was open and all those writers and artists who spent many evenings basking in its shade.

—C S Lakshmi

A Politician Till the End: Jyoti Kalani (17 February 1951-18 April 2021)



Former NCP (Nationalist Congress Party) MLA, Mayor Jyoti Kalani was known as the Iron lady of Ulhasnagar in Maharashtra. She established herself in politics with her own identity from 1989 and was considered to be an important candidate of NCP. She served as a corporator for many years and later in 1995 became the first President of Ulhasnagar Municipal council. She was further elected as first lady Mayor of Ulhasnagar in 2005.

In 2013 her Husband Pappu Kalani, former MLA from NCP, was sentenced to lifetime imprisonment in a murder case and went out of politics. She continued in spite of her husband being out of politics and in 2014 she decided to stand for MLA election. She won against BJP MLA Kumar Ailani in 2014. However, her son Omie Kalani with his local party TOK (Team Omie Kalani) had later joined hands with BJP because his wife Pancham Kalani was the mayor of Ulhasnagar on a BJP ticket. In 2019 Jyoti Kalani resigned from NCP apparently to make way for younger people but in truth because her daughter-in-law Pancham or someone from the Kalani family was expected to be given a BJP ticket. Omie Kalani was even

rumoured to become the poster boy of BJP. However none of them got the ticket since BJP was wary of associating with the family. It chose Kumar Ailani as its candidate. NCP placed trust in Jyoti Kalani and gave her a ticket to oppose Kumar Ailani. Her daughter-in-law Pancham, despite being a BJP mayor, campaigned for her mother-in-law. Unfortunately, in this election Kumar Ailani trounced Jyoti Kalani. It was a neck to neck fight and he defeated her by a margin of just 2004 votes. In 2014, when she had defeated him also it was by a slim margin of 1863 votes. Despite the drama of her resignation NCP had placed faith in her popularity which unfortunately did not work this time. Apart from Pappu Kalani's imprisonment Jyoti Kalani had also faced several charges of intimidation and forgery in 2004. She had been arrested by the State CID and put in jail at that time. She was the director of Raigad-based Nivitat Distilleries at that time. Despite all this, it is her determination to be in male-dominated politics and face the challenges that earned her the sobriquet Iron Lady.

She passed away due to cardiac arrest. She did not stop working till the end and remained active in politics. She is survived by her husband Pappu Kalani, son Omie Kalani and his wife Pancham and two daughters, Seema and Pinky. Her popularity as a politician could be seen when hundreds of people broke COVID rules to gather at her funeral.

—Pooja Pandey

Seeing Death, Seeing Life: Sumitra Bhave (12 January 1943-19 April 2021)



Well-known Film Director, Producer and Screenwriter Sumitra Bhave made several films which revealed the inner recesses of the minds of women especially in the rural areas. However, the films relate to all classes of women.

Sumitra did not begin her life as a filmmaker. She was a post-graduate in social work from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). In a long interview given to Shoma A Chatterjee (*Cinestaan*, 23 February 2020) Sumitra talks about how she came into filmmaking and her career before that. Much of the information in this tribute is taken from that interview. She says that after her post-graduation she did a short stint with Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) and then she got a UGC fellowship to study Gandhian concepts of social work. Later she joined the Karve Institute of Social

Service and worked there for ten years. Here she realised that social problems have to be studied through indigenous research methods that may not fit into academic theoretical frameworks which have their own research methodologies. This is where she did two important projects on women criminals and unwed mothers. Later she worked as a Project Manager for Community Aid and Sponsorship Programme, Mumbai. She has even worked as a Marathi language newsreader with All India Radio, New Delhi, at some point in her life.

Streevani in Pune was involved with participatory research in an around Pune among women in urban slums. Sumitra Bhave joined Streevani inspired by Dr Francis Maria Yassas, a UN representative. Her work there resulted in the book *Tava Chulyavar: Oral Life Stories and Self-Images of Women*. Dr Yassas asked her to consider making films based on some of the stories in the book. And that is how she became a filmmaker.

Streevani produced her first film (a docu-feature) *Bai* (1985) based on a poor working woman in a slum with an alcoholic and violent husband faced with the problem of frequent childbirth. The film was screened as part of the Focus on Woman Directors at Filmotsav '86 in Hyderabad. It won the President's Silver Medal for the Best Social Welfare Film in 1985. She made a few more films under the auspices of Streevani: *Paani* (Water), on women collectively trying to solve water problem and *Mukti* (Liberation), on drug addiction.

In later years came her collaboration with Sunil Sukthankar a graduate from the Film and Television Institute of India. Together they directed 14 feature films, more than 50 short films, television serials and telefilms, all of which were written by Sumitra. Their films have received six international awards, 11 National awards and more than 45 state awards. Their first film together was a short fiction film *Chakori* (1992) which was received very well at the Mumbai International Festival of Documentary, Short and Animation Films in 1994. It was followed by a feature film *Doghi* (Two, 1994) on two sisters and their bonding despite the fact that one of them goes to the city to support the family and becomes a sex-worker. *Doghi* got 11 state-level awards and three National awards, including the G Aravindan award for Best Debutant Filmmakers of 1995. Many more films and awards followed. Noteworthy among them are: *Astu* (So Be It, 2015), that dealt with Alzheimer's disease, *Devrai* (Sacred Grove, 2004), that tackled the issue of schizophrenia and the much acclaimed *Kaasav* (Turtle, 2017) based on a disturbed, alienated and suicidal boy who is sheltered by a woman battling loneliness.

Sumitra's 2019 film *Dithee* (Seeing), a film she did on her

own without Sunil Sukthankar's collaboration, which dealt with the grief of losing a near one and seeing life sprout elsewhere, unfortunately became her last one. Sumitra has received a Chitra Ratna Puraskar and Kamdhenu Award for her film and literary contribution.

In March 2021 Sumitra Bhave had been detected with interstitial lung disease which took a turn for the worse in April and she had to be admitted into hospital for lung infection on 6 April 2021. She succumbed to the disease on 19 April 2021. She had been working on three films and their scripts at the time of her death.

NGOs that did workshops with students could never do a workshop programme without showing one or two of Sumitra Bhave's films. Her beautifully crafted and down to earth films were so much an integral part of awareness raising workshops and they will continue to be, hopefully with the help of her daughter who is also a writer.

—C S Lakshmi

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Scripting Her Life Differently: Bhanu Kumar (5 June 1953-20 April 2021)



Mumbai based dance critic Bhanu Kumar passed away after a brief illness. She was 67 and was on a ventilator for a few days at the non-Covid Jupiter Hospital in Thane. Bhanu was diabetic and was suffering from pneumonia as well. She wrote regularly for many publications particularly for the suburban supplements of *Times of India* and the Mumbai and Chennai editions of *The Hindu*. She was also actively involved in Tamil theatre in Mumbai.

Very often when drama competitions were held she was invariably invited as a judge. Her own plays have received many awards including the one from Chembur Fine Arts. She was also awarded for her 'Contribution to the field of Theatre' by Chennai's prestigious Mylapore Academy on March 25, 2018.

Streenergy and Synergy was the Ladies and Youth wing of a drama troupe founded by Bhanu Kumar & Late Jayashree Raj. It is the troupe that has entertained audiences across India with the Tamil plays "*Shaadi Knot Com*", "*Vara Vara Mamiyaar*", "*Naya Puraana*", "*Hare Drama Hare Krishna*", "*Vikram Betaal Remixed*" and Multi-Entertainment programmes like "*Pinky Kalyanam Vaibhogame*" and "*Kalviyaa?*"

Selvamaa? Veeramaa?"

Bhanu Kumar's daughter Sukanya Kumar is a performing artiste and creative culturist who lives in the US. A graduate in Electronic Media, Post Graduate in Fine Arts (Bharatanatyam), MBA in Educational Management and MFA in World Dance-Dance Medicine and Technology, she is also someone who actively raised funds for Mission Oxygen India through ArtlCurate organisation that she cofounded with her mother. She has written a note on her mother and why she would always be with her.

Bhanu Kumar June 5, 1953-Forever

Too many things happened too quickly. Amma was admitted to the hospital, and we were praying and hoping for a miracle that did not happen. I was even annoyed that it didn't. But then I realised, a miracle happened, and it happened 67 years ago. The miracle is my mother, Bhanu Kumar.

Born in 1953 in Vellore, Bhanu Kumar was a student of English literature. Always focussed on the importance of good education, she enjoyed her academic pursuits. She won 16 gold medals in a single year, across multiple subjects and domains, while she was in college.

She started her career as a Banker and later answered her calling for the arts, as a dramatist, writer, actor, director, and dance critic, and has contributed significantly, to the field of arts, in numerous ways.

Apart from being a journalist, she also wrote for many Tamil and English weekly magazines. Among the many awards she received for her short stories, one of the most prestigious is a special critics award, at the Kalki centenary story writing competition.

With excellent command over four languages, she has translated numerous books for children and adults.

She built her legacy ground up with minimal resources and no complaints, in her own unique and personal way. Constantly questioning conventions and challenging them, she swam against the current, never making big splashes, but quietly, one stroke at a time towards excellence.

Her theatre productions always had a lighthearted approach to socially impactful topics like organ donation, gender discrimination, and autism. Staged all over India, they have received many awards, including, most recently

"The Best Drama Award" from the Fine Arts Society, Chembur. She has also been invited to judge many theatre competitions.

Amma was not only considered an extremely ethical professional, but a very straightforward and simple person. The world is her family, and her family was her world.

Her genuine interest in people touched many lives positively. She connected with people of all age groups, her community spreading beyond boundaries. She gave people the most important of all resources—Time.



She lived a simple life, with no frills, working towards contributing to society. She never sought appreciation or recognition for her philanthropic work. Amma never liked her life being captured in a camera, but her life is carved in our conscience.

Her organisation, ArtlCurate is designed to create equal artistic opportunities to all. Known for her simplicity, admired for her courage, grit and strength;

her contagious cheer and enthusiasm will continue to inspire us.

Amma enjoyed and appreciated the little things in life and truly lived with a child-like innocence. My mother taught me how to be a child. She is the backbone to our life and her physical presence will be missed greatly. We don't have to remember her, for she can never be forgotten.

So Bhanu Kumar lives on in the hearts of not only theatre lovers who enjoyed watching her plays but also many others for whom she was generous with her time.

—C S Lakshmi & Sukanya Kumar



Voice of Bihu Songs from Assam: Bhitali/Vitali Das (6 June 1969-21 April 2021)



Bhitali Das was born at Majgaon, North Guwahati. She studied in the Senairam Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School and chose to be a singer. Bhitali Das had a long career of singing of twenty years. During these twenty years she had sung over 5000 Bihu songs, and she was considered a favourite entertainer of

the Assamese audiences. She has sung more than 3000 Assamese song with the famous singers Zubeen Garg, Anindita Paul and Tarali Sarma. She produced multiple hit songs like “Junbai dekhote xajim ghar akhoni” (I will build a house in the land of the moon), “Torae jolabo saki” (The stars will light the lamp), the song with a line from a popular Assamese poem, “Junbai ai beji ati diya buli” (Moon, give me a needle), “Kinu Sawonire sala muk oi deha xir xirai gol moina jan oi” (The kind of look you gave to me sent shivers down my body, Moina, my love), “Nodi barhile oi” (The river has become swollen), “Ujan uthile oi” (The river is moving upstream) and “Hate nu melimeli a jaanmoni aha nu kaxesapi” (Beloved, you come near me with your arms out stretched). A few of her popular albums are *Jaanmoni* (Beloved), *Joonbai* (Moon), *Rangdhali* (Joyful) *Rohedoi*, *Bogitora*, *Enajori* (A Loving Relationship), among many others.

On 14 April 2020, Bhitali Das was infected with COVID-19 and was admitted to Guwahati’s Kalapahar COVID care centre. On 21 April, she was in a critical condition from complications of COVID-19 and was shifted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). Unfortunately she died on 21 April at the Kalapahar COVID care centre. She was just 51 and still had many more songs to sing for the Assamese audience. Her last rites were performed at Nabaragha crematorium in Guwahati. She is survived by her husband and daughter.

—Pooja Pandey with inputs from Priyakshi Rajguru Goswami



SPARROW
FILMS

A Brilliant Academic Life and A Lonely Death: Dr Asha Savdekar (1949-22 April 2021)



Asha Savdekar was a noted author, researcher, editor and critic and professor. Born and brought up in Nagpur she was a brilliant student all through her academic years. Her maiden name was Asha Gajanan Bhawalkar. After secondary education at Bhide Girls’

School, she did her BA (Marathi Literature) in 1968 from Nagpur University. She was a recipient of Jayantibai Kolte Silver Medal in BA (Marathi Literature) exam in 1968, N K Behere Gold Medal of Nagpur University, and P K Atre Award of Vidarbha Sahiya Sangh for securing first class in MA (Marathi Literature) from Nagpur University in 1970. She was also a recipient of Bhasha Vidnyan Parishad Award for securing first class first position in MA (Linguistics) from Nagpur University in 1991, and UGC Scholarship for doctoral research in 1972. In 1975, she received her PhD with a dissertation on *Critical study of Poetry of B R Tambe*. This dissertation was published as a book in 1979.

She is known for the excellent critical work she has done which won much praise and admiration when they were published like *Pu. Bha. Bhava: Sahityavedh* (1989), *Bharateeya Sahityache Shilpakar: Na. See. Phadke* (Sculptor of Indian Literature: Na. C. Phadke, 1995) and a review of poetry, *Mushafiri* (A Journey, 2000). Asha Savdekar also wrote an article introducing many famous poets of Vidarbha. It is like a historical document for the students of Marathi literature. She edited and wrote a scholarly prologue for the poems of poet J K Upadhye published as *Kavi Jaykrishna Keshav Upadhye Yanchi Kavita* (Poems of Poet Jay Krishna Keshav Upadhye, 1985).

In 2001 she received a grant from Nagpur University for a research project on poet Ba. Bha. Borkar entitled *Kavi Ba Bha Borkar Yanchya Kavitechi Pruthagatmata* (A Critique of Poems of Ba. Bha. Borkar) which was later published as a book in the year 2008. What is considered her most important work is *Kavita Vidarbhachi* (Poetry of Vidarbha, 1991) which was followed by many more works like *Kahi Shodhnibandha* (A Few Research Articles, 2002), *Vidarbhacha Vangmayeen Vaaras* (Literary Legacy of Vidarbha, 2003), *Gulabpani* (Rose Water, 2005), *Kavyagangechya Tatavar* (On the Banks of River of Poetry, 2005) and *Vaalyacha Mala: Nivdak Shewalkar Sahitya Bhag-I* (The Field of Vetiver: Selected Shewalkar Literature Part-I) (Foreword and Editing), 2005.

She also had to her credit many articles published in the

Sunday supplements of various local Newspapers of Nagpur like *Tarun Bharat*, *Lokmat*, *Loksatta*, *Nagpur Patrika*, etc. Many of her creative works were published consistently in different Marathi periodicals of repute like *Yugawani Lalit*, *Padmagandha*, *Pratishthan*, *Maharashtra Sahitya Patrika*, *Milun Saryajani* etc., and also in many Diwali Magazines

Apart from critical writing, at the very beginning of her writing career, she wrote the novel *Me Tulas Tujhya Angani* (I am the Basil Plant in Your Courtyard) in 1977. She also worked as Editor-in-Chief of *Yugwani*, a publication of Vidarbha Sahitya Sangh. She was the also the Chief Editor of the University Research Journal of the Department of Humanity, Nagpur Universtiy, Nagpur. Through her writing she introduced many unknown poets of Vidarbha. She was not just a writer or critic but also a student-friendly professor, who had served as Reader with Post-Graduate Teaching Department of Marathi in Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University.

Dr Asha Savdekar was honoured with various literary awards like Vasant Krishna Varhadpande Smriti Vishesh Puraskar of Vidarbha Sahitya Sangh, Nagpur, in 2001; Lekhan Puraskar of Pu. Bha. Bhav Smriti Samiti, Mumbai in 2000 and Go. Ra. Dodke Lalit Lekhan Puraskar. She worked as a Member, and later as President of Marathi Bhasha Samiti of K K Birla Foundation for the coveted Saraswati Samman Puraskar and VyasaPuraskar for four years. She was appointed as Representative of Marathi Language on the Regional Committee of five Indian languages viz Marathi, Konkani, Sindhi, Gujarati and Sanskrit.

With such a brilliant career and critical and creative work for which she was held in awe, it is a pity that personal tragedy befell Asha Savdekar: her younger daughter Aparna Dasgupta died suddenly of heart attack and her husband Balasaheb Savdekar died some eight or ten years ago. She took these tragedies badly. Her son is settled down in Denver, USA. In the last few years she began to forget things and was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She lived in Sonegaon in the H B Estate Area with a caretaker to attend on her and take care of her needs. Her doctor friend Nikhil took very good care of her. She was to undergo Corona test, when she passed away. Well-known Marathi writers Mahesh Ehlunchwar and Ashatai Bage, expressed how deeply affected they were by her lonely end. Her final rites were performed by Nikhil, her friend and her doctor, who did all he could for her.

—Sharmila Sontakke

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The Enid Blyton of Malayalam: Leela Nambudiripad (16 May 1934-27 April 2021)



Leela Namudiripad who wrote under the pen name Sumangala, started her career as a writer in 1959. Her parents were reputed Sanskrit scholars OMC Narayanan Nambudiripad and Uma Antharjanam in Vellinezhi from Palakkad and as such, she was a scholar herself in both Sanskrit and Malayalam. Her translation into Malayalam of the *Panchatantra* won much appreciation. She has also translated the *Valmiki Ramayanam* into Malayalam from Sanskrit. She also was the compiler of *Pacha Malayala Nikhandu*, a dictionary of colloquial Malayalam. Many critics felt that the dictionary of such depth and variety could have been written only by someone who had knowledge and deep insight into the language and who understood the language in its diverse aspects. Having served in the Public Relations Department of Kerala Kalamandalam, a centre for performing arts and learning in Kerala, she utilised her experience to write a book on the history of the renowned institution. Malayalam film *Chenda* (Percussion Instrument, 1973) had a beautiful song “*Akkareyakkare ambalamuttath ashokamaramonnu nilppu/pookathe theere thalirkathe*” (Far far away in a temple stood an ashoka tree/It had no blooms nor any sprouts) written by her.

In a career spanning over 40 years, she did many different kinds of writing. She wrote more than 50 books, of which only 23 were for children. However, her children's books were so delightful and so much loved that she came to be known as the Enid Blyton of Malayalam.

The awards she was honoured with were also for her work in children's literature. Sumangala was the recipient of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the best work in children's literature in 1979 and the Bala Sahitya Institute award for lifelong contribution towards children's literature in 1999. She was the recipient of the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award for children's literature in 2013. The Kerala Sahitya Akademi president Vaisakhan praised her for leading generations of Malayalam children into the world of reading: her books instilled the importance of human values and were simple and readable for children. He compared the tone of her writing to that of a “grandmother telling stories to her grandchildren.”

Her most celebrated works include *Mithayippoti* (Sweetbox), *Neypaayasam* (Rice Pudding with Ghee) *Manchaatikuru* (Rosary Pea), *Kurinjiyum Koottukaarum* (Kurinji

and Friends), *Ee Kattha Kettittundo* (Have you Heard This Story?), *Nadodi Cholkathakal* (Folk Stories), *Rahasyam* (Secret) and *Kudamanikal* (Canopy-Shaped Bells). She was also a contributor to *Poompatta* (Butterfly), a Malayalam-language comic for children.

Sumangala's husband Desamangalam Ashtamurthy Nambudiripad, predeceased her in 2014. Sumangala died in her home at her hometown Wadakkancherry, a little more than a month before she turned 87. She leaves behind her two sons and a daughter and of course, her innumerable books, especially the ones children loved reading.

—C S Lakshmi

Age was just a number for Shooter Dadi: Chandro Tomar (10 January 1932-30 April 2021)



It is strange but sometimes a biopic needs to be made to know who the oldest (woman) sharp shooter in the world is. After watching a Bollywood film *Saad Ki Aankh* (Bull's Eye, 2019) many people started to google her name to know about her. Chandro Tomar made her village Johri from Bagpat

district in Uttar Pradesh proud by winning more than 30 national championships in shooting. One can't say that she started her career at the age of 65. She must have been very good in her skills since childhood but it took 65 years to showcase her skills. Until then she was a regular homemaker. It all started when her granddaughter Shefali and niece Seema Tomar, the first Indian woman to win a medal at the Rifle and Pistol World Cup in 2010, decided to learn shooting. Both Chandro Tomar and her sister Prakashi Tomar, known as the second oldest (woman) sharpshooter in the world, decided to support them.

Her granddaughter Shefali wanted to learn professional shooting and decided to go to the Johri Rifle club. She was very hesitant to go alone and asked Chandro Tomar to accompany her. When her granddaughter Shefali could not load the gun she started loading it and shooting at the target and her shot hit the bull's eye. Club coach Farooq Pathan who saw it was surprised by Chandra Tomar's proficiency. He immediately told Chandro Tomar to get trained and become a shooter. All the obstacles she would face like how she would manage the house, what her husband and society would say, crossed her mind but finally Chandro Tomar made up her mind to train and never looked back.

She faced a lot of resistance from her husband, relatives and others but she remained focussed and dedicated. Her dedication and hard work got her many awards including a gold medal at the Veteran Shooting Championship conducted in Chennai. She became an inspiration not only to her granddaughters but also the local people. People were inspired to take up shooting professionally. A sharp eye, steady hand and extraordinary skill made her an international shooter.

She has received many awards from the year 1999 including Stri Shakti Sanman awarded by the President of India.

Chandra Tomar passed away due to COVID-19 at the age of 89. Chandra Tomar was quoted in *The New York Times* 2021 talking about her strength and agility. She had said: "All the household chores I used to do from a young age, like grinding the wheat by hand, milking the cows, cutting the grass.... It's important to stay active. Your body might grow old, but keep your mind sharp." And those words would always remain alive not only for sportswomen but for all women.

—Pooja Pandey

First Lady ST (State Transport) Conductor of Solapur: Sunanda Kumbhar (1976-30 April 2021)



Among the many young lives taken away by the pandemic Sunanda Kumbhar's became one. Sunanda from Solapur joined Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) in 2000 and she became the first lady ST conductor from the first batch in the state of Solapur.

Despite being a mother of three children, from 2000 onwards she did her service in various places from Osmanabad, Tuljapur, Barshi to Solapur. She was also honoured by various social organisations for her service. Unfortunately during the second COVID wave she tested positive and could not survive. She is survived by her husband and three children. Women like Sunanda who take up professions not usually taken up by women and make a name for themselves are role models for many women who aspire to take up careers. She will always be remembered as the first woman ST conductor of Solapur.

—Pooja Pandey

MAY 2021

**Another COVID-19 Death: Geeta Behl
(23 November 1957- May 2021)**

Geeta Behl started her acting career in the eighties. Her first film *Main Tulsi Tere Aangan Ki* (I Am the Basil Plant in Your Courtyard, 1978) was very successful. She came from a family with a film background as her father was producer Sham Behl, who was a cousin of the well-known actor Rajendra Kumar, and her brother Ravi Behl, an actor. Kumar Gaurav, Rajendra Kumar's son who was a hero in Hindi films, was her cousin.

She studied in Bombay Scottish School and graduated from Xavier's college in 1977. Around 1975 she decided that she would take part in production work, take up fashion designing and also be an actor. She acted with many stars like Rishi Kapoor and Shatrugan Sinha in films like *Do Premee* (Two Lovers, 1980), *Maine Jeena Seekh Liya* (I Have Learnt to Live, 1982), *Meraa Dost Meraa Dushman* (My Friend, My Enemy, 1984), *Zamaane Ko Dikhana Hai* (Show the World, 1981).

She also acted in other language films like *Naseeb nu Khel* (Game of Fate, 1982) in Gujarati cinema and Punjabi films like *Yaar Gariban Da* (Friend of the Poor, 1986) *Husn De Hulaare* (The Thrill of Beauty, 1987). While she was noticed in films her acting career was not a great success. She took a break from her acting career in 1991. This was around the time Ravi Behl began to take up an acting career. She was married to Prem Mohindra and we can find her photographs with him on her Facebook page. However, it looks like they remained friends after a separation and his marriage to someone else.

She went into home quarantine when she was infected with the COVID-19 virus. However, her condition became serious and she had to be admitted into a hospital and put on ventilator. But complications set in and she could not survive. She was 63. It was not just Geeta but even Ravi and their mother were found to be COVID positive. On top of that their housemaid was also infected but all three recovered over time and only Geeta succumbed to the virus. She has a sister Gitanjali Bhatia whose daughter Amrit Kaur Bhatia announced Geeta Behl's demise and asked for privacy to mourn her death saying that since they had not broken the news to her grandmother about Geeta's death calls of enquiry were not acceptable. A pity that Geeta Behl whose happy smiling photos always

adorned her Facebook page along with her friends and family is no more. She was a great believer in Shirdi Sai Baba and her family hopes she would have found peace at his feet.

—Pooja Pandey

**Keeping Literature Live: Shashi Baliga
(1953-2 May 2021)**

Tata Literature Live! Festival, the annual Mumbai literary festival, has lost a second person who made the festival possible. The first loss was the death of Anil Dharker, who had conceived the festival in 2010, in March 2021, which was a shock for the possibilities of having a physical festival were being discussed. The festival had gone virtual in 2020. Then came the second wave and took away Shashi Baliga, Anil Dharker's formidable right hand. A reputed journalist and a professor at the Xavier Institute of Communication, she also took on the responsibilities of the Tata Literature Live! Festival. While Anil Dharker made all the plans Shashi Baliga made them come to fruition. She could deal with egos of authors and others efficiently and never allowed anything to affect her calm and graceful nature, as many have said about her.

About his memories of working with Shashi Baliga, theatre producer and director Quasar Thakore-Padamsee wrote a touching note on his Facebook page on May 2nd: "Shashi Baliga and myself were among the first two recruits for Anil Dharker's crazy idea to start what eventually became Tata Lit Live. It was 2010. For a dozen years we were almost opposing forces. We wrestled good naturedly on ideas, designs, and topics. Sometimes we took it in turns to temper Anil's ambition. I learned so much from her about writing, and the art of putting engaging sessions together. She would often joke that she was leaving Literature Live! And I would counter with lyrics from Hotel California, "You can check-out any time, but you can never leave." She'd look at me incredulously. Half smirk, half frown. I'd do anything to see that look again. Earlier today, Shashi left us after a month long battle with Covid. I'd like to think that maybe she and Mr. D are already plotting a new Litfest wherever they are. Goodbye Shashi. I will miss your gentle heart. Your manic panic. Your brutal

honesty. And your incredible drive.”

Literary festivals come with their baggage of controversies but Shashi Baliga made the Mumbai one seem like a fun festival where everyone was having a good time. With her death the Mumbai literary festival has lost a person who could put it all together and make it seem effortless.

—C S Lakshmi



Taking the Children Time Travelling Through History: Subhadra Sen Gupta (24 June 1952-3 May 2021)



Subhadra Sen Gupta took children seriously. She did not want to talk down to them. She respected them. She wrote historical fiction for children that were both fun and factual. If she took them time travelling in some books, she seriously told them

about caring for nature in some. She did not shirk away from the duty of telling them the history of our civilization without any bias nor did she avoid telling them what the Indian constitution was all about in a way that they would understand it.

Subhadra belonged to Delhi. She was a graduate in history. She began as a freelance writer early in life and wrote for kids’ magazines like *Target*. She wrote for many other publishers like Children’s Book Trust, Puffin, Scholastic, Rupa and Talking Cub, an imprint of Speaking Tiger. She also wrote for organisations like The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI). She wrote in many genres like short stories, novellas, illustrated books and comic strips and history. And they were on many different themes like mystery stories, ghost stories, stories about food, biographies, mythologies, and serious history told in simple and evocative language. She was a chronicler but a very responsible one. While many of her books were fun they were not flippant. Between 2013 and 2017 she wrote 8 books for the Caring for Nature series of TERI with titles like: *Caring for Nature: Rao Jodha and the Curse of the Hermit*, a wonderful tale that teaches about conserving water through traditional wisdom and *The Forests Belong to Us: (If You Cut a Tree You Cut Your Life)*.

Her historical fiction for children had a way of transporting a child to another era and bringing the past very much into a child’s present. Like her book *Goodbye Pasha Begum!* was a

horror story where a girl holidaying in Delhi finds herself as a slave in the Mughal era and *Bishnu-The Dhobi Singer* was about a dhobi boy who becomes a student of Tansen. A *Mauryan Adventure* was about the daughter of a soldier in Asoka’s army finding herself travelling the world. *The Teenage Diary of Jodh Bai* was about the Hindu princess who married Akbar and what her thoughts would have been had she kept a diary. Her *Mahabharata Stories* would have kept many a child glued to the chair. She also wrote biographies of Asoka and Mahatma Gandhi and about the freedom movement of India not in an easy template format but with all their complexities bared and not hidden.

Her book, *Mystery of the House of Pigeons*, was adapted into a six-part television series by Feisal Alkazi as *Khaj Khazana Khojher* on Doordarshan. Her works were also chosen as part of NCERT textbooks. Three of her books, *Twelve O’Clock Ghost Stories*, *The Teenage Diary of Jodh Bai* and *A Clown for Tenali Rama* were included in the annual White Ravens catalogue at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair.

In 2015, she was awarded the Bal Sahitya Puraskar by the Sahitya Akademi for her contribution to children’s literature in the English language. Subhadra Sen Gupta one is sure, had many more important stories to tell Indian children. Unfortunately the children and all of us have lost someone who could tell stories of India in all its variety. It is unfortunate that she died of COVID-19. Her last book *The Story of the First Civilizations* was published posthumously on October 21, 2021 by Talking Cub.

—C S Lakshmi



Pillar of Narayan Family: Mithilesh Rani Mathur (1938- 4 May 2021)



Mithilesh Rani Mathur passed away after a prolonged illness. She was a mother who held the family together. She was the mother of PTC Network's MD and President Rabindra Narayan, who started the first Punjabi channel in 1998 and who now heads world's biggest Punjabi TV network. Announcing his mother's death on his Facebook page, he said:

"Losing your mother is like being cut from your roots. She was a singer, an entrepreneur who defied norms to start a retail cloth shop in the early 80s, but above all, she was a mother who instilled courage and daring into a born Asthmatic child like me. A highly progressive woman for her times, she took great care to see that no harm comes to me and my two younger brothers ever. She fought a long and courageous battle with diabetes (which she got when I was born) and arthritis but gave up early morning today...."

Nearly 800 people responded to his announcement and offered their condolences. Former Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal and Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) President Sukhbir Singh Badal also expressed their deep condolences at the passing away of Mithilesh Rani Mathur. Former Union Minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal and former minister Bikram Singh Majithia also expressed their sympathies with the bereaved family.

It is strange that a woman who showed such determination and courage and was an independent woman who was an entrepreneur and a pillar of her family is known as only someone's mother. There is no other reference to Mithilesh Rani Mathur anywhere else. Her life must have been an extraordinary one and we hope her family decides to write her biography so the world can know about her life and her times and the choices she made in her life. Our respect to this 83-year-old woman who led a courageous life.

—Pooja Pandey

We often pause to recall the statement of Gloria Wekkar: "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.

Flowing with the Cauvery: Dr Savitri Vishwanathan (1941-5 May 2021)



Anyone in Delhi who wanted to know anything about Japan or Japanese literature or history would not hesitate to approach Professor Savitri Vishwanathan who headed the Department of Chinese and Japanese Studies in Delhi University. She was very approachable and even after her retirement when she settled down in

Bengaluru, the Japan Foundation and the officials connected with Japan Foundation remained in touch with her and visited her in recognition of her immense contribution to the field of Japanese Studies.

In 2010, nine years after her retirement she received The Japan Foundation Award and the citation said: "As a teacher and researcher of Japanese language, history, and politics at the University of Delhi, where she headed the Department of Chinese and Japanese Studies, Dr. Vishwanathan has made an immense contribution to the development and promotion of Japanese language education and Japanese studies—both through her academic work and nurturing of next-generation scholars. She has assisted the prime ministers and foreign ministers of India in their official talks with their counterparts in Japan, and was a member of the Japan-India Eminent Persons' Group (2000-2002). Her numerous publications include a translation of Shimazaki Toson's novel *Hakai* into Hindi (*Avagna*) and into Tamil (*Dalit Padum Padu*). The Japanese government awarded her the Prime Minister's prize in 1967 and the Order of the Precious Crown, Wistaria in 1982."

In February 2018, The Japan Foundation's director for Japanese Language/Japanese Studies and Intellectual Exchange, Mr. Kousuke Noguchi, made a visit to Bangalore and met Dr Savitri Vishwanathan. The Japan Foundation made a special mention of it saying that she was "one of the first Indian Japanologists who paved the way and opened the door for the Japanese Studies and Japanese Language for Indians. Not only she was one of the first recipients of the Japan Foundation Fellowship from India in 1974, but also the fact that she was awarded with the Japan Foundation Award in 2010 for her great achievements shows how much she did for bridging India and Japan. Of course, she still speaks great Japanese and the Japan Foundation, New Delhi, is very happy to be reconnected with her and be able to hear so many great experiences as well as hardship she has gone through. She is surely the role model for anybody who wants to pursue higher studies in Japanese studies."

It is not often that a retired professor is remembered so

warmly. Dr Savitri Vishwanathan lived in Bengaluru with her sister Dr Mahalakshmi Athreyi in Jeevanbhima Nagar, Sector 10. Her enthusiasm for Japanese Studies continued even in Bengaluru. She found that there was acute shortage of faculty members in Bengaluru University's Japanese Language Department. As a member of the Government of India's Eminent Persons Group, Savitri mailed the then Chief Minister S M Krishna. The Chief Minister not only immediately acknowledged the mail, but also helped resolve the matter. Savitri Vishwanathan's old friends and colleagues never really forgot her. When both Savitri and her sister Mahalakshmi were diagnosed with COVID infection and hospitalised Savitri passed away on 5th May. With the help of friends her body was cremated in the electric crematorium. With her sister Dr Mahalakshmi Atreyi, still in hospital, and with none of their family members was available to perform the rituals since many lived outside Bengaluru and some were abroad, the Congress Rajya Sabha M P Dr Syed Naseer Hussain who was a family friend came forward to perform the last rites along with his wife Mehnaz and his sons. Hussain said that he had known Savitri from his Delhi University days when he worked there. He said more than a family friend she was like a mother to him. He asked her sister and the Hindu priests if he could perform the final rituals and immerse her ashes. On their approval he did the *asthivisarjan* and other rituals in Paschima Vahini near Srirangapatna on May 18th. Hussain knew that *asthivisarjan* was the immersion of mortal remains in flowing water so the five elements air, water, earth, fire and ether are restored and he wanted to do this for someone who was like his mother. A Hindu priest helped him, his wife and sons to conduct the rituals connected with the immersion. Her ashes were immersed in the Cauvery river.

Savitri Vishwanathan is now part of the elements aided by Hussain, a son she never bore. This final ritual symbolised Savitri's own life for her heart and home were always open to everyone irrespective of their religious and other affiliations.

Covid Second Wave Takes Away A Bhojpuri Star: Sripada (1967-5 May 2021)



Despite all the precautions of vaccination and masks the second wave of COVID-19 had not been kind. Many deaths occurred during the second

wave. The film industry lost many artistes and in May 2021, Bhojpuri actress Sripada's name was added to the list.

Sripada also acted in many Hindi movies. She was one of the popular actresses in the 80s and 90s. Sripada worked in more than 70 movies. Her first movie was *Purana Purush* (Ancient Men) in 1978. She worked in popular films like *Khooni Murda* (Bloody Corpse, 1989), *Dharam Sankat* (Embarrassment, 1991) *Sholay Aur Toofan* (Embers and Hurricane, 1993) *Intaqam Ke Sholay* (The Embers of Revenge, 1995), *Umar 55 Ki Dil Bachpan Ka* (Aged 55 With A Child's Heart, 1992), *Aakhir Kaun Thi Woh?* (So who Was She?, 2000), *Lootere Pyar Ke* (Looters of Love 2001), and many more. She was also part of Bhojpuri films like *Hum Toh Ho Gayi Ni Tohar* (I Have Become Yours, 2015) with co-star Ravi Kishan.

Apart from Hindi and Bhojpuri films she also acted in some south Indian movies and later was part of a few television shows. She acted in some of Doordarshan's serials like *Sansar*, *Aparajita*, *Waqf Ki Raftar* and *The Zee Horror Show* on Zee TV.

She was just 54 when she passed away due to COVID complications. Cine And TV Artistes' Association (CINTAA) has mourned her sudden and untimely demise.

C S Lakshmi

Pooja Pandey



SPARROW is a Women's Archives that collects oral history and visual material connected with women's lives and experience as important material for future research on women. Our intention is to make such material more visible and accessible to people interested in women's lives and history. Kindly visit our website, www.sparrowonline.org which will give you an idea about the work we are doing.

Dying Young: Abhilasha Patil
(6 April 1974-5 May 2021)

The Corona second wave took away one more from the film fraternity. Abhilasha was an emerging actress from Marathi and Hindi cinema. She came from a non-filmy background and started her career in Marathi cinema with films like *Te Aath Diwas* (Those Eight Days, 2015), *Pipsi* (2018) *Bayko Deta Ka Bayko* (Can Anyone Arrange A Wife For Me, 2020) *Prawaas* (Journey, 2020), *Tujha Majha Arrange Marriage* (Arranged Marriage of Yours and Mine, 2021).

Apart from Marathi films she did different kinds of roles in Bollywood movies like *Chhichore* (Frisivolous, 2019) *Badrinath Ki Dulhaniya* (Badrinath's Bride, 2017) *Good Newwz* (2019). She also acted in several television serials including *Baap Manus in Zee Yuva* daily soap.

Abhilasha Patil had gone to Benaras for some project and while coming back got fever and tested positive for Corona virus. She was shifted to a hospital but could not survive. All her co-stars and friends were in great shock after hearing the news of her demise. They paid their last respects through social media. She is survived by her husband and a son.

Actor-director Shashank Udupurkar, who worked with Abhilasha in the Marathi film *Prawaas*, expressed his condolences on his Facebook page saying, "Abhilasha Patil, very hard working and energetic co-artist. We worked together in *Prawaas*. Don't have words to express it...."

Abhilasha was only 47 and had many more active years left for her family and career. It is sad that a young life was snatched away so suddenly and tragically.

—Pooja Pandey

WHERE THE INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT IS CONCERNED **SPARROW IS CONCEIVED OF AS A NATIONAL ARCHIVES** COLLECTING ORAL HISTORY AND VISUAL MATERIAL FROM ALL OVER INDIA.

Prerana to Many: Prerana Rane
(1956-7 May 2021)

'An activist engineer' could be a correct nomenclature for Prerana Rane. Brought up in a working class area of Parel in Mumbai she completed her engineering from VJTI in 1977 and post-graduation in 1983. But during this period itself she attended camps conducted by Baba Amte in which the seeds of

'Doing something for society' got cultivated in her. Whether it is a village or a city, social problems like superstitions are common everywhere. Prerana had noticed them and she tried to eradicate them through 'Lokvidnyan Chalval' (People's Science Movement). She tried to spread awareness about Total Lunar Eclipse of 1980 to remove blind beliefs. She wrote and sang songs in the tunes of popular movie songs or folks songs so that the message could reach the people. For the same reason she organised a poster exhibition of people's science in the famous Vithhal Mandir of Wadala on Ashadhi Ekadashi day.

She used to do these activities simultaneously with her teaching at VJTI. Later she did her PhD in Computer Science and joined Tech Mahindra as Head of the Training Department for almost six years. But later she left that job and dedicated herself to spreading scientific perspective in the society. She founded 'Prerana Rane Trust' in 2010 which is committed to empower needy and capable students and youths residing in Maharashtra. She conducted training classes, scholarship tuition classes for needy students of her native place Hodavade (Vengurla Taluka, Maharashtra) through this Trust. She was also doing experimental farming in Hodavade. From 2011 she was working in ISABS (Indian Society for Applied Behavioural Science) first as Chief Scientist and later in the capacity of Head of West Region, India. She was also a blogger who used to write in Marathi and English.

Prerana lost her brother, who was an environmentalist, last year because of COVID-19. And on 7th May 2021 Prerana also died due to the second wave of COVID-19. Prerana's name means inspiration. Her life, her work and her thoughts were an inspiration to many and would continue to be so.

—Sharmila Sontakke

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

Fighting for Hope, ASHA: Ranjana Nirula (1945-10 May 2021)



COVID has taken away some very precious women from our midst. Ranjana Nirula is one of them. Ranjana was working committee member and former Treasurer of CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions). She was the Convenor of All India Coordination Committee of ASHA workers (CITU). She was

being treated for Crohn's disease, an inflammatory disease of the intestines, when she got infected with COVID-19. She succumbed to COVID on the 10th of May.

Ranjana Nirula's aristocratic family belonged to Delhi. She was born in 1945 in Delhi. Ranjana's father was a doctor in the UN. Ranjana studied in the US. Like many young people she became active during the Vietnam War in the Anti-Vietnam War Movement. This brought her close to the Left Movement and when she returned to India she naturally leaned towards the Left Movement in India. She became a whole timer in CITU in 1978 and was Treasurer of Delhi State CITU. In 1979, she was one of the founders of the Coordination Committee of Working Women (CITU) in Delhi.

Even those who were not closely associated with Ranjana knew her as a great humanist and appreciated the passion with which she worked on causes close to her heart. She chose to stay in working class localities. She worked among the factory workers in South Delhi and also in Faridabad. She was trained in teaching of children with special needs and she served as a teacher for them for a short period. She was also one of the founders of All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) in Delhi and was a member of the Central Executive Committee of AIDWA. She was also a member of Delhi State Committee of CPI (M).

Although in 1998 Ranjana became the Working Editor of "The Voice of the Working Woman", the journal of CITU for women workers published since 1980, and was also a part of Co-ordination Committee of Working Women apart from being associated with Beedi Workers it is her work with ASHA (Accredited Social health Activist) that many remember her by. In 2009, when CITU formed the All India Coordination Committee of ASHA Worker (CITU), Ranjana became its Convenor. Eversince her name has been associated with ASHA.

For those who are not familiar with health services, ASHA is a community health worker instituted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. It was a project that began in 2005 as part of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and ASHA was expected to provide primary medical care for

minor ailments such as diarrhoea, fevers, and first aid for minor injuries. ASHA would inform about the births and deaths in her village and any unusual health problems/disease outbreaks in the community to the Sub-Centres/Primary Health Centre. The dream was that there would be an ASHA in every village. When COVID broke out, 9,00,000 ASHA workers were designated to assist with healthcare management. They have been expected to educate and advise people on precautions to be taken. In some states they were also expected to go door-to-door and collect information. Those associated with ASHA like Ranjana Nirula argued all through these years and especially after the pandemic that where the ASHA workers were concerned, considering they were primary health workers, there was no pay equity. Even during the COVID their honorariums were not raised. And till the end Ranjana Nirula kept her fight for the ASHA workers on and kept pressing for their work to be recognised with a regular honorarium and other benefits. It was her aim to bring hope to ASHA workers and bring recognition to their crucial role in health services.

One hopes the work of Ranjana Nirula will inspire many to take up from where she left off and kindle hope in the minds of many ASHA workers.

C S Lakshmi

A Lifetime Spent in Politics: K R Gowriamma (21 June, 1919-11 May 2021)



The tragedy of documenting women's lives is that there are so many women whose lives have to be documented and often one misses out on some women and their lives remain in the the crevices of history. But there are some prominent women whose life and work SPARROW has not been able to document because of

various reasons like not getting an appointment, not pursuing hard enough, non-response from them and so on. Although we had a Malayalam writer friend in Mumbai and she was willing to go to Kerala to meet and talk to K R Gowriamma it was not possible to get a date from her. So the meeting never took place and SPARROW does not have an interview with K R Gowriamma in its archives and that is a pity. Fortunately for us we have her *Atmakatha* (Autobiography) although it ends with her first jail experience in 1948. There is also the book *K R Gauriyammayum Keralavum* (K R Gowriamma and Kerala) by Geetha published by Current Books, Thrissur, in December 2019.

K R Gowriamma was born in 1919 at Pattanakkad village, as the seventh daughter of Arumuriparambil Parvathamma of Cheruparambil and Kalathilparambil Raman in an aristocratic Ezhava family. Her early education was in Cherthala and later she studied in Maharaja's College and St. Teresa's College in Ernakulam. She was the first woman from the Ezhava community to become a lawyer. She got her law degree from Government Law College, Thiruvananthapuram. Her father had taken part in the Vaikkom Satyagraha and her mother was president of SNDP (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) organisation's Sthree Samajam (women's wing). Gowriamma entered Kerala politics through student politics and the Communist movement and was a minister in the Kerala ministry of 1957, 1967, 1980, 1987 and 2001. She is known for introducing the Land Reform Act of 1957.

K R Gowri whom everyone in Kerala addressed as Gowriamma was known as a firebrand communist. She was an advocate, a politician and also an author. She was one of the founding leaders of the Communist movement in Kerala. She headed the Janathipathiya Samarkshana Samithy (JSS) (Association for the Defence of Democracy), a political party based in Kerala. In 1994 K R Gowriamma was expelled from the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The JSS was in alliance with United Democratic Front although in recent years it offered support to the Left Democratic Front and Gowriamma came closer to the Communist Party in her last days.

She had been a minister both in the Communist governments and Congress governments. She was a minister in the Communist-led ministries in Kerala in 1957, 1967, 1980 and 1987. She also became a minister in the Congress-led cabinet from 2001 to 2006. She held the record for the second longest serving MLA in Kerala Legislative Assembly. The first Communist government was formed under the leadership of EMS Namboodiripad in 1957 and Gowriamma was the Minister for Revenue and Excise under the ministry. She was the last member of the ministry who remained active and influential in the politics of Kerala till the end. In fact, in 2016 when rebels in the JSS gave her a letter asking her to retire from political life and give way to the younger generation, she expelled B Gopan, the JSS State Secretary who had led the rebels.

Gowriamma and Communist leader T V Thomas (whom she married in 1957) who was in the Communist Party of India had both been legislators and ministers although they were in rival Communist Parties and were considered Communist icons of Kerala. Gowriamma stood with the CPI(M) and TV Thomas referred to as TV, with the CPI, during the historic split of the Communist Party in 1964. In

an interview quoted in *The News Minute* (Saritha S Balan, "The story of Gouri Amma: One of Kerala's tallest woman politicians turns 100", June 21, 2019), she talks about this period. "I had taken leave from the Party at the time and lived with TV at the house in Chathanad, Alappuzha. We had decided not to let members from both the parties inside our house and that TV could do his Party work outside the house. It was like life had become peaceful after a long time. TV gifted me a Kashmiri silk sari. It was the first time he gifted me a sari, which I have treasured even today."

However, things did not remain tranquil and happy for long. Both the CPI and CPI(M) had been allies in the government, formed in 1967 and both Gowriamma and TV were ministers. She has spoken about how the Party dealt with their lives in 1967 when they left their house in Chathanad, Alappuzha, to assume charge as ministers in Thiruvananthapuram. *The News Minute* article of the same date mentioned above, quotes her as having said in the interview: "We were allotted separate official residences, which were in the adjacent compounds. We literally destroyed the wall between the two houses and built a door to reach each other's house. But the CPI shut that door, which came as a huge shock for me. That [door] separated us. I had a heart attack and was in the hospital for a month."

Gowriamma was appreciated for her dedicated work by both the Communist Party and the Congress. Although she was a known communist, the first volume of her autobiography *Atmakatha* was released by Chief Minister V S Achuthanandan in 2010 at a function held in Alappuzha. The first copy was handed over to Congress leader V M Sudheeran. In fact, Gowriamma had started writing her memoirs through CPM's mouth organ *Desabhimani* although it was not completed. Her turning 100, as a matter of fact, was celebrated on 21 June 2019, with a centenary conference. The Kerala government announced a year-long birthday celebration in the state for Gowriamma. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, inaugurated a centenary conference to celebrate her 100th birthday. In fact, the ongoing session of the Kerala Legislative Assembly did not convene on her birthday so that the legislators could be a part of the celebrations.

The estrangement with T V Thomas due to Party ideology must have remained a thorn in the flesh all her life. Obviously, despite Party loyalties, it was an event in her life that so deeply affected her that she needed to talk about it again and again. On at least two other instances Gowriamma had felt the need to talk about her life with T V Thomas and about the estrangement. One of them was when a documentary was made on her by K R Mohanan in 2013 and another when she gave an interview to *Onmanorama* two days before she turned

100. (V Sasikumar, "Tribute: The lesser known facets of K R Gouri Amma's eventful life", *Onmanorama*, 11 May 2021; M A Anooj, "K R Gouri Amma's 2019 interview", *Onmanorama*, June 19, 2019) V Sasikumar was part of the movie crew that shot the documentary. She had recalled her life with T V Thomas for the documentary. What she narrated about their life was deeply moving. She said that they had got married as the Party had asked them to. "When the party split in 1964, I was with the CPM and Thomas was with the CPI. We bought this house in Alappuzha after our wedding. We were living together even after we pledged our loyalties to different parties. When we joined the 1967 ministry, we went to live in two houses in Thiruvananthapuram. We would drive from Alappuzha to Thiruvananthapuram and go on to live in separate houses. Thomas used to get food cooked but I relied on a nearby restaurant. The Party wanted us to live separately in Thiruvananthapuram...."

They had split up after a while. But when she gave the interview to *Onmanorama* when she turned 100, she was surrounded by black and white photographs of herself with her husband. She had said in the interview, "TV (Thomas) lost the election after the dismissal of the ministry of 1957. He had no income. He was dependent on me. I used to slip in Rs. 2 into his wallet every day, for his bidi, cigarette and drinks. I did not want him to go out for a drink. So I got someone to bring him lighter toddy. When we shifted here, TV wanted to drink and smoke. I started vegetable farming to raise money. I also raised a cow to sell milk."

The estrangement had come just ten years after their marriage. And when Thomas had fallen ill in 1977 she had wanted to go and be with him but EMS Namboodiripad had objected as they were in different political parties. Finally a party forum allowed her to spend two weeks with him. When it was time for her to leave TV cried. She never saw him again. She received the news of his demise from the Thiruvananthapuram District Collector. She went and paid her last respects and accompanied her former partner's body back to his native place in Alappuzha. She had wanted to cremate his body near her house but she could not.

When she had written her autobiography she had given it to a Party leader who gave it to someone else who told her she may have to face legal suits if she published it. No such thing really happened. In fact, she got the Kerala Sahitya Akademi award for it in 2011

When it came to expressing her views Gowriyamma was not one to mince words. In her autobiography *Atmakatha*, the synopsis of which was written by Dipu P K in the *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research* ("History Narrated in Gowriyamma's *Atmakatha*" Volume 10, Issue 3 (6), March 2021) her views on the role of

Communist Party during the Second World War is clearly stated. She is quoted as saying that the "Communist Party became active by giving study classes to workers. Discussions on war was common in public places like barber shop, tea shop etc. Communist ideology was propagated through open discussions. The Communist Party took a stand that the working class should support Soviet Union." Gowriyamma had clearly said: "The Communist Party failed to integrate war activities with freedom struggle; instead of developing strategies to oust British from the country, Communists supported war activities of the British and worked only for that" and that is how the Second World War became a people's war, according to her.

As told in a tribute to her, as an administrator also she held on to principles she valued as her own. A young IAS officer D Babu Paul who had not obliged a Minister in the 1968 Namboodiripad government was transferred without any reason being given and Gowriyamma who was Minister of Revenue and Excise at that time stood by him. In his autobiography *Katha Ithuvare* (The Story So Far) Babu Paul, who died in 2019, mentions that he realised two things about Gowriyamma. One, she protected bold honest officers, even when her Party's interests were hurt. Two, even her wrath was edged with motherly warmth. (Ayyappan R, "How a young IAS officer felt both Gouri Amma's warmth and wrath", *Onmanorama*, 11 May 2021)

Many have claimed that one of the comrades in the 1990 Malayalam film *Lal Salam* which revolves around the lives of three comrades, was inspired by Gowriyamma's life. The film was quite a hit. It is also said that the 1994 Malayalam film *Chief Minister K. R. Gowthami* was based on the life of K R Gowriyamma. Gowriyamma has rejected the notion that *Lal Salam* was inspired by her life. She categorically said that it had nothing to do with her life and that it was the story of another communist leader Varghese Vaidyan's wife.

Her death at the age of 102 has evoked an emotional response from everyone. The Chief Minister of Kerala, Pinarayi Vijayan, who announced a year-long celebration for her 100th birthday has tweeted: "Com. K R Gauri was a brave fighter, dedicated her life to end exploitation, build an egalitarian society. She made seminal contributions in building the Communist movement & as an administrator. Let's show respects, by pledging to build a more progressive society. Red Salute!"

A Red Salute is the least honour they could do to Gowriyamma considering how much the Communist Party interfered with her personal life and how it stopped her political life in the Party coming to full bloom. In 1967 her personal life was in shambles because of the Party and she had a heart attack. She could have become the first CM of

Kerala in 1987, according to Saritha Balan, when the Assembly elections were fought with the slogan “Keralanaattil K R Gouri Amma bharikkum” (K R Gouri Amma will rule Kerala).” But she was denied the CM’s post. It was alleged that senior leaders of the Party had sidelined her in the final round of discussions. And in 1994, when she was 75, they expelled her from the Party.

Towards the final years of her life, as Sasikumar says, she had many visitors to the house where she lived alone and she sat through the day in a chair facing the Krishna idol. Next to the idol was also the photograph of her elder sister Narayani, whom she mentions in her autobiography. The sister, who sang, played the violin and the veena and what is more, was probably the first woman rider of a motor cycle. She rode an imported Royal Enfield her husband had gifted her, probably in the 1930s with a crowd that would gather around to watch her ride. In the 2019 interview Gowriamma had said that she had no regrets in life. “I have no children but I do not think about it. I never prayed to god earlier, but now I do. I am alone but I can go on.”

—C S Lakshmi

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A Bengali Woman in Chennai: Sunipa Basu (3 November 1948-11 May 2021)



A visual tribute to Sunipa Basu says that she liked to paint on any surface. She made crafts out of used bottles and other household items. Her short stories were translated into multiple languages. After Chennai she had settled down in Pondicherry. Sunipa Basu and her husband Pranab Basu, lived in Serene Pelican Retirement Homes which was in between

Pondicherry and Cuddalore. In September 2013 she started the week-end non-formal school *Patti Veettu Thinnai* (Grandmother’s Courtyard) in Pondicherry. It was formally inaugurated in 2014. It was a school for economically and socially backward children where they were encouraged to be creative in many ways. The children were taught to save money in piggy banks, make greeting cards, do pot painting and much more. She loved to grow plants.

Sunipa Basu who had made Chennai her home was born on 3rd November 1948 in Cuttack, Orissa, to Akshay Kumar

Chakrabarthy and Sudharani. Her family moved to Chennai in 1950 itself. She studied in IIT Chennai and worked as Divisional Manager, United India Insurance Company. She took voluntary retirement to be a full-time writer. She had written earlier but not really seriously published anything. But a chance story she sent for an international story competition got selected and got good notices and she began to publish her works. She began to write stories, reviews of plays and films, book reviews and so on.

For the theatre enthusiasts of Chennai Sunipa was the Bengali who was part of the theatre movement in Chennai. She was part of the theatre group Casual Dramatics formed in 1981 in Chennai. In a note on themselves Casual Dramatics writes its history saying, “thirst for excellence drove a few theatre enthusiasts, who earlier were forced to be part of claptrap melodramatic theatre, to stage thought provoking dramas acclaimed the world over. The enterprise of a few people who were serious about drama gave birth to CASUAL DRAMATICS, popularly known as CD, in 1981. This dramatic forum refrained from having any hierarchical system and proposed to groom directors and actors with total faith on 4 Es, Explore, Experiment, Excel and Entertain....” Sunipa Basu and her husband Pranab Basu were very much a part of CD as playwrights and directors of Bengali plays.

The Chennai theatre groups fondly remember her as the person who translated into English the Bengali play *Palok* by Sudipta Bhawmik so that it could be translated into Tamil as *Veli* (Fence) and produced by Amshan Kumar directed by Pranab Basu and presented as a Theatre First presentation in 2015. Sunipa Basu did the stage lighting, the make-up and the costumes. It was staged in Alliance Francaise.

Filmmaker Amshan Kumar warmly remembers Sunipa and her association with the theatre groups in Chennai in his homage to her published on 15 May 2021 in *Hindu Tamil Thisai* newspaper. He says that after the cinematographer Nimai Ghosh the other Bengali to come and settle down in Chennai was Sunipa Basu. In his tribute he talks about how she became part of the theatre activities in Chennai. He says that she became a part of the modern Tamil theatre people. She took part in the plays of Koothu Pattarai [founded by the well-known writer Na. Muthusamy]. Apart from taking interest in different aspects of theatre like make-up, costumes, and stage lighting she was also interested in direction. He mentions that she translated the plays of Utpal Dutt. He also mentions that writer Ashokamitran wrote a very appreciative review of Sudipta Bhawmik’s play that was translated and directed by her husband Pranab Basu. He says that the credit for making the journalist Gnanai who was the founder of the theatre group Pareeksha act in a Bengali play goes entirely to Sunipa. She was very helpful to Amshan Kumar when he

produced a Badal Sircar play and when he made a documentary film on C V Raman.

A Mangai, the well-known theatre practitioner of Chennai, bidding an emotional farewell to Sunipa on her timeline says, "I can't recall anyone else who has been part of almost all the theatre groups in Chennai...." She recalls her role in the theatre conference Kulavai 96 where she did simultaneous translations since she spoke Tamil fluently, and made the Jana Sanskriti Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed group from West Bengal feel at home. She also says that Sunipa Basu was integral to her interest in Mahasweta Devi and her staging *Rudali to Mother of 1084* at the Stella Maris College in 2000 and her own role as Mother in *Mother of 1084* and the lockdown shows they did.

Sunipa's first short story collection was *The Man in the Red Maruti* which was a Writers' Workshop Greenbird book published in 1994. Her monograph on Nimai Ghosh, the legendary filmmaker, is considered her best non-fictional work. It was published by the National Film Archive of India in 2009. Sunipa's only novel was *Ponds of Jaldanga* published by Kabitika in 2020. It was a novel that spoke about urban life and how it impacted the rural environs. It was released by Madras Literary Society on 7th March 2020. It was an occasion when many associated with her like Amshan Kumar were present. Amshan Kumar gave the welcome address and Rajeev Anand and Dellphine Rajendran who had acted in the play *Veli* read out passages from the book.

Sunipa Basu was at her best in 2020. Although she was ailing no one in Chennai was prepared to lose her. Her death is seen as an irreparable loss to theatre in Chennai.

Understanding Tradition and Dissent: Dr Padma Baliga (1965-12 May 2021)



Dr Padma Baliga who was still in her fifties when she passed away, had a dream of setting up libraries for children and it was becoming a reality in so many places. She has left behind not only her family but also her family of children who read the books she has introduced them to and all of us who had so much to learn from her.

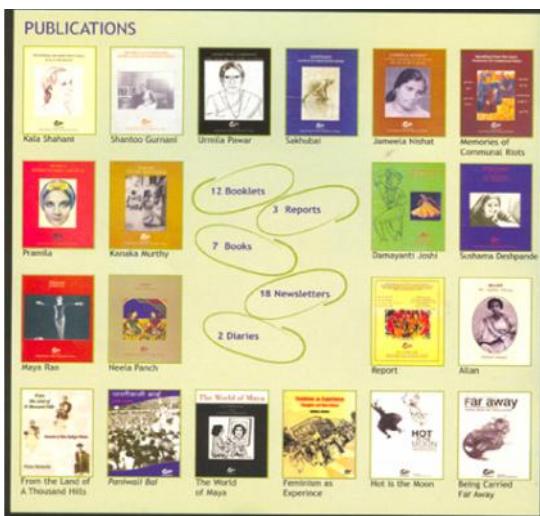
In LinkedIn Dr Padma Baliga talks about herself as a people person who is passionate about teaching. She has taught English for twenty-two years from Grade II to Post Graduate students of English literature. Her special interests included children's literature, Konkani folklore, feminism, Indian writing and translation. Her doctoral research was in the area of gender studies and contemporary children's literature in India. She has presented papers at national and international conferences and has published in academic journals and written chapters in six books. These include an essay in the three-volume encyclopaedia on translations of *Alice in Wonderland* entitled *Alice in a World of Wonderlands*, and in two books on young adult literature published by McFarland and Modern Language Association, USA. She has also co-translated *Alice in Wonderland* into Konkani published by Konkani Sahitya Academy. She worked with schools, helping them build up their libraries, and encouraged children to develop a reading life. She loved to read. And write. And blog.

How did all this come about?

Padma Baliga was the second daughter of late civil engineer C V Kumar of Mangalore. She did her M A in English Literature from Mangalore University in 1987. She was professor at St. Aloysius College, Mangalore. In 2013 she did her PhD from Gandhigram Rural University, Dindigul, and her doctoral thesis was on feminist outlook on Indian authors writing fiction for children.

Around 2017 she decided that she had to do much more than just teaching and must engage in encouraging children to read and become interested in books and started wondering if setting up community libraries is what she should do. In 2018 this dream became a possibility and this is how it happened. Shahnaz Sultana, an M.Tech in Thermal Engineering who had considerable industry and teaching experience was a visiting faculty with PES University, Bengaluru, was pursuing her PhD. She discovered that her maid's children who went to an English medium school were unable to read independently. Determined to help, she started

C S Lakshmi



reading about the crisis in our school system, talking to stakeholders in the educational sector and figuring out an effective low-cost solution for the malady that ails our schools. She had always believed that our children lack inspiration and vision to follow their dreams and this prompted her to start Reading Stars India in 2018 to provide underprivileged children with books from all over the world and enable them to read, learn, enjoy and pursue their dreams.

And then the dream of Shahnaz drew Amthul Tabassum and Padma Baliga to this project. Amthul Tabassum brought almost three decades of corporate experience to Reading Stars India. A mechanical engineer by training, she was all-India (after market) Head of Packaging—Design & Development at Bosch Ltd. A driving desire to make a change among the underprivileged sections of society made her quit her corporate career and join hands with Shahnaz and Padma. When Padma met Shahnaz she had already decided that she needed to focus on primary education and try and make a difference. A lifelong reader, she wanted every child to experience the magic of books in their life. Apart from her teaching experience she also had acquired a Library Educator Certification from Parag. The three of them joined hands to create classroom libraries for children.

On her media posts Padma Baliga has posted about reading as children and the many different ways she has pursued her project of promoting reading among children. On a Ganesh Chaturthi day she wrote: "Much of my love for stories and books and travel are rooted in the stories of Ganesha that I heard as a child. How Ganesha got his elephant head, the exotic place he lived in, how he balanced on his tiny mount, the friendly sibling rivalry between him and his brother, why there's a snake wrapped around him, and why he is often pictured with a book and pen in his hand, in addition to the world-famous modaks—each story rocked my imagination and made me want to know more. No wonder Ganesha set me off on a life-long journey of learning."

A year after joining Reading Stars India she wrote: "In January this year, I went to Nagaland as part of Team Naga Chethana and visited several schools there. Since then, we have been busy with fund raising and curation and purchase of books. Finally we sent off 12 boxes of books to set up small libraries in four schools. The Governor of Nagaland graciously visited each school to hand over the books as part of our mission. It's been a year since I joined Reading Stars India and what a satisfying year it has been!"

Her love for folk literature and her work in folk literature and her view of Indian traditional children's literature in Indian languages were clearly stated in two programmes she participated in. One was the Saraswat Darpan TV Programme on November 28, 2020 where she spoke to Smitha Shenoy,

Head of the Department of Journalism, on "Cultural Reflections in Konkani Folklore" and the other was a lecture she gave on "Children's Literature in India: Contesting Sites of Tradition and Dissent" at the St. Joseph's Evening College, Bengaluru, on December 21, 2018, as a part of the "Hopkins Lecture Series" which was an initiative of the Department of Post-graduation Studies in English of the college, named after Gerard Manley Hopkins a Jesuit priest, poet and a visionary. The Lecture Series help the students to engage themselves with themes, ideas and concepts beyond the scope of syllabus and Padma Baliga made excellent use of this opportunity to steer them towards children's literature in Indian languages both traditional and the more recent ones.

In the Hopkins Lecture she began the lecture saying that what one read as a child stayed with one. She also said that there was really no need to make children's literature reductive, moralising and simplistic. She explained that there should be clearly no differentiation between children's and adult's books and that childhood began to be seen as a separate stage in life in the west in late 19th and early 20th centuries and that before that the borders between childhood and adulthood were very porous. She accepted that she found children's literature in India that was written during the period of colonisation boring and moralising. Soon she realised that it was because of her own mono-lingual reading of only books in English and that she had in the past never really respected Indian literature. The 19th century printed text books for children in Britain as opposed to oral tradition of colonised countries including India, were associated with instruction, didacticism and moralising. They were born out of a puritan notion of childhood as a stage that needed strict discipline. In contrast, Padma Baliga says, right up to Bhakti period the child in India was referenced as someone to be loved and someone seen as a playful person. But during the period of colonisation there was a switch over to the child as someone in need of discipline and moralisation.

Padma Baliga referred to the *Panchatantra* tales and Akbar and Birbal stories as stories where a fair amount of dissent was built into the stories. They were iconoclastic and the figure of authority was not always right nor was the figure of authority bowed down to. She says the new text books of the colonial period made Indians disassociate with the past and the past was rendered inferior. Instead of our own literature there were translated classics from the west and religious literature which destroyed our systems of knowledge and supplanted indigenous forms of knowledge which spoke of plurality instead of a singular dominant belief system. She pointed out to many Indians who came out with books to subvert the colonial project and cited books of Tagore, Vidya Sagar, Jagdish Chandra Bose and Satyajit Ray in

Bengali and Munshi Premchand's *Bade Bhai Saheb* story in Hindi which broke the stereotypes the British primers created of children with moral and ethical identity to create an educated, obedient and diligent workforce.

Padma Baliga concluded the lecture saying she was happy with new books being written currently with feminist perspectives for children in several Indian languages. In her own social media post in 2019 on World Environment Day she posted on two children's books, one in Kannada and another in Konkani—"Here are two children's books—one of Nagesh Hegde's *Kereyali Chinna, Kereye Chinna* [Gold in the Lake and Lake Itself Gold], a humorous tale [in Kannada] about conservation of our aquatic environment; and one of Satish Dalvi's *Harish, Pirishani Devchar* [Harish, Pirish and Devchar] a [Konkani] story about two boys who seek the help of Devchar—a tree-dwelling spirit—a reminder of the days when we in India revered the environment every day through preservation and worship of sacred groves and water bodies such as rivers ponds and seas, and thought of nature as a divine force."

In a review in *The Book Review Literary Trust* (November 2020, Vol.44, No.11) of Varsha Seshan's book *Sisters At New Dawn* (Young Zubaan, 2020) that deals with the issue of adoption, Padma Baliga says, "Adoption is not an alien concept to Indians. Our epics and legends abound with adopted children beginning with the *Ramayana* in which King Janaka adopts Sita, or the *Mahabharata* with its multitude of adoptions, including the well-known tales of Kunti, Karna, and Krishna being raised by loving adoptive or foster parents. We also know that adopted children were awarded legal recognition for, wasn't Sita known as Janaki and Kunti whose real name was Preetha better known as her adoptive father, Kuntibhoja's daughter? In South India, many of the Tamil saints or Alvars were raised by adoptive parents. It is common knowledge that even in 'modern' times, kings and other royals have turned to adoption as a means of securing continuation of their lineage or dynasty." She says that Indian children's books "have by and large ignored the reality of adoption..." and she sees Varsha Seshan's book as a book that ingeniously normalises adoption.

The review reminded me of an incident in my own life. A veena teacher I learnt from was someone I revered for her attitude towards life. Her granddaughter was an adopted child. As a child they did not tell her about it and waited for her to grow up so she could understand it. Someone in the neighbourhood who liked to gossip told the child she was, after all, adopted. The child came to the grandmother crying and asked if she was an adopted child. My veena teacher told her, "Yes, you are adopted like the way Sita was by Janaka and Krishna was by Yashodha. Isn't that wonderful?" The

child's face brightened and she said, "Like Sita? Like Krishna?" and she broke into the most brilliant smile I had ever seen on a child's face. The teacher did not refer to Anne Shirley (of the 1908 classic children's novel *Anne of Green Gables*, by LM Montgomery where an 11-year-old orphan becomes part of a family) which children who studied in English medium would definitely know, but she spoke about Sita and Krishna, two characters the child had imbibed through tradition.

People refer to Dr Padma Baliga as a library evangelist. I would rather call her a library propagator for propagation not only means to spread an idea, a belief or a piece of information among many people but it also means to produce new plants from a parent plant. Both would suit the activities of Dr Padma Baliga for not only did she want new ideas and new visions but she also wanted traditional knowledge systems to be valued and did not see tradition and dissent as being opposed to each other.

—C S Lakshmi

Not just Late Ku. Alagirisamy's Wife But Also a Single Mother: Sitalakshmi (3 March 1930/31-12 May 2021)



Sitalakshmi, my mother, was born on March 3rd into a Brahmin family that had migrated to Malaysia but they were not orthodox in terms of caste. She was born on March 3 but no one knows for sure which year. My father in one of his journals had written that she was 7 years younger than him. Based on this we can assume she was born in 1930 or 1931. She was born in Tiruchendur. Her father Harihara Iyer was a very famous and a talented harmonium player. Great musicians of that time like T N Rajaratnam Pillai had great respect for his music.

My grandfather moved to Malaysia with his wife Meenakshi Ammal to teach Harmonium and Carnatic vocal music to earn a living. But he died very young. They had seven daughters and a son and Sitalakshmi was the third daughter. She, at a very young age, supported the family by teaching music to the kids and staging dance dramas along with her sisters in Malaysia.

She and my father met in 1952 in Malaysia. He was the editor of the newspaper *Tamil Nesan*. He helped my mother's family to compose dance dramas like *Kuttrala Kuravanji* and *Villi Bharatham* of Srivilliputhoorar. They fell in love but my



19th January 1956

mother's family was against it. Their objection to Sitalakshmi marrying Alagirisami was more because he was not economically in a good position. They themselves were only middle-class but offers from very educated and well-to-do families were coming for Sitalakshmi. That is why they objected to her choice. The other siblings of Sitalakshmi also had marriages of their choice. Two of them married Christians. One of them married a Portuguese from Goa. Only one of the siblings had an

arranged marriage. Anyway, since there was objection from the family they eloped and got married in January 1955.

She had read his short stories before she met him and chose to marry him in spite of many rich doctors and engineers wanting to marry her. They had a son (Ramachandran-1956) and a daughter (Radha-1957) in Malaysia. Due to differences of opinion with the management my father Alagirisami resigned his job as editor of *Tamil Nesan* and moved back to India in October 1957. They had another son (Sarangarajan - 1960) and a daughter (Bharathi - 1961).

My father worked for Gandhi Nool Veliyeettu Kazhgam (Gandhi Book Publishing House) for some time translating Gandhi's writing and these were published under somebody else's name. Then he joined and worked as editor of *Navasakthi* in 1960 and worked for 5 years and later became full time freelance writer till the end (1970). He joined *Soviet Nadu* in early 1970 but fell sick within weeks and was admitted in hospital. 3 months later he passed away on 5 July 1970.

My mother who had studied only up to 8th Standard was promised a government job by a good friend of our father and the then housing secretary Mr. V S Subbiah IAS, if she passed the SSLC Exams. She did not have any proof for her studies and with great difficulty managed to get the ESLC (8th Standard) certificate with the help of some friends in Malaysia. She took private coaching classes to write the exams for SSLC. My sister Radha was one of the people who coached her because Radha herself was writing the for SSLC exam the same year. I remember my mother keeping the books open all the time even while cooking or when she was involved with household work otherwise. She passed SSLC and was given a clerical job at The Tamil Nadu Housing Board.

My father had not been able to save any money or buy any property because he never made that kind of money and was not that kind of a person. In fact, when the owner of Tamil Puthagalayam offered to buy him a plot of land with a

small house in Nandanam instead of paying royalty he got furious and tore up the agreement.

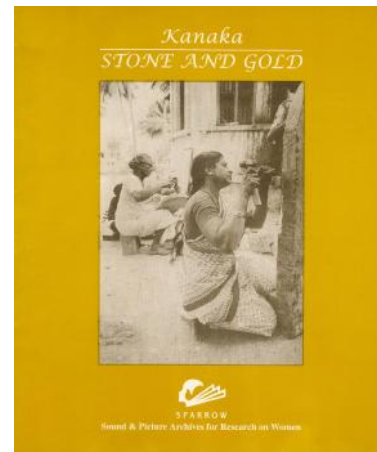
My mother with her salary and the award money she got from Sahitya Akademi purchased a flat in Besant Nagar from the Housing Board which was very cheap in those days. You had to pay a lump sum of Rs. 4000 and Rs. 151 per month for 20 years. She bought it and rented it so that we could have some additional income. Later we moved to that flat in 1975. She managed to educate all of us. Ramachandran became a banker, Radha, an Electronics and Telecommunication Engineer and I became a Sound Engineer and Cinematographer and Bharathi, a Psychiatrist. She also bought a small land in Tiruvanmiyur where my sister now lives and runs a psychiatry clinic. My mother was living in the house with my sister when she breathed her last on 12 May 2021 at 1:30 PM. She was very proud of her 4 children and loved her 8 grandchildren.

She was a generous mother; very liberal and understanding. All of us had marriages of our choice. A daughter married a Pakistani and is settled in the US. I myself have married an American Jew. One of her sons decided to remain a bachelor and after some convincing from his side she accepted his choice to remain single. There was no force on him to get married.

With publishers like Thamizh Puthakalayam and writers like Ki. Rajanarayanan, Sundara Ramasamy and Thi. Janakiraman my mother Sitalakshmi and all of us maintained a close relationship even after the demise of my father Alagirisamy.

Sitalakshmi and Alagirisamy had exchanged several notes in diaries during their courtship. I am planning to bring out these diary notes as a book to celebrate their relationship and their love for each other.

Sarangarajan Alagirisamy



**SPARROW
BOOKLET**

Stone and Gold: Kanaka Murthy (2 December 1942-13 May 2021)



The news came that renowned sculptor Kanaka Murthy, known to be the first woman sculptor of the State, succumbed to COVID-19. They say when hearts are full words are few. That is how we in SPARROW have been feeling about the passing away of many women we cherish

and who have been a part of the growth of SPARROW as an archives. Kanaka Murthy is one such person whose passing away has cast a gloom over all of us. Memories of making the film on her, the workshop with her and visiting her house while in Bengaluru and seeing all her works in progress and her cheerful smile at all times came back and it was difficult to believe that there won't be Kanaka with a new work of hers or a new story to tell when we visit Bengaluru next.

Born in 1942 in T. Narasipura, Mysuru, the traditional rangolis done on cowdung smeared threshold and the sculptures at a temple near her place where they used to go for picnics fascinated her as a child and the sculptures she saw at a temple in Mysuru rekindled her passion for sculpting and that is how she took up sculpting. Sculpting in stone was not something women took up and a woman taking up traditional sculpting was unheard of. Traditional sculpting families never taught their daughters to sculpt ever. The legacy was passed on to sons of the family. Kanaka learnt music as it was something that was in the family but while she enjoyed listening to music it was not her mode of expression. Initially she learnt painting and drawing in Kalamandir after her graduation but the urge to sculpt remained dormant in her heart. Kanaka was fortunate that she got a guru like Devalakunda Vadiraj. Her gender did not matter to him at all. He taught her sculpture and he also taught her to live and view the world as a sculptor. With a husband like Narayna Murthy who admired and supported her, Kanaka pursued her passion for sculpting traditional images relentlessly. She also took up sculpting portraits of people she admired and tried to capture not just their features but also their expressions in her sculptures. The rest is history.

Kanaka's sculptures of deities, artists and poets are in temples, ashrams and institutions. When requested by an American woman, she once even carved a marble grave stone for her deceased husband. And it was a pleasant surprise when one met this lady in Chicago who spoke about Kanaka doing the grave stone for her husband. At the West Gate of Lal Bagh stands the bust of the renowned Kannada poet

Kuvempu sculpted by Kanaka. Some of her other notable works are the 11-foot tall Hanuman sculpture at a temple in Banaswadi, Ganesha sculpture at Sai Baba Hospital in Whitefield, the Wright Brothers' statue at the Visvesvaraya Industrial and Technological Museum (VITM) and busts of Hindustani classical vocalists such as Gangubai Hangal, Mallikarjun Mansur and Pandit Bhimsen Joshi at other public spaces. She has even sculpted images for public parks where children come to play.

She put down her experiences and details of her art in books. In 2008 Karnataka Shilpakala Akademi brought out her book *Namma Dani : Sampradaya Silpakalavidara Yasiogathe* (Traditional Sculpture of Karnataka). Later came her book on traditional line drawings in Karnataka entitled *Shilpa Rekha*. In 2014 Bharathiya Vidhyabhavana, M.P. Birla Institute of Management, Bangalore, published her memoirs *Howde? Idu Naane!* (Really? This is Me!).

Kanaka won a number of state awards for her work, including the Karnataka Jakanachari Award, State Shilpakala Academy Award (1999), the Rajyotsava Award (1996) and Suvarna Karnataka Award. She is the only woman to have received the Jakanachari Award.

Writing about her in *Deccan Herald* (22 May 2021) her daughter Sumati Murthy turned into her son Rumi Harish talks about how unconventional she was in everything that she did. She was a deep believer but did not believe in rituals. In her choice of sculptures anything could inspire her to carve. A girl child of a construction worker carrying water inspired her to carve her statue and call it Anbu (Love). That reminded me of the time she visited my home in the late nineties. My foster daughter Khintu who was three years old then, insisted on being carried by her and a few weeks after Kanaka left came a parcel with a bust of Khintu. It is still there along with so many other small things like a traditional swan as a paperweight that she once gave me.

Everything was acceptable to her so long as it was heartfelt. She encouraged everyone to do what they really wanted to do. Rumi Harish says, "When I changed from her daughter Sumati to son Rumi Harish, she became my best friend and instilled in me a sense of independence. She never dissuaded me from expressing myself in any manner..."

Kanaka's sculptures, big and small, would live on and one knows she is hidden somewhere in all of them. But one would still miss her for the person she was. Human beings like her are not born every day. Your ashes have been immersed in the Kaveri Kapila river in T Narsipura, but SPARROW will celebrate your life and the workshop with you will always remain fresh in our memory, Kanaka!

—C S Lakshmi

A Spiritual Seeker: Indu Jain (8 September 1936-13 May 2021)



She was the chairperson of India's largest media group known as The Times Group. But when one interacted with her she seemed like a quiet, unassuming person who never raised her voice when she spoke. Her book *Encyclopedia of Saints & Sages* in two volumes coauthored with N K Prasad published in 2012 and 2019 provided evidence of her rich knowledge of Indian culture and tradition and its inclusivity and diversity.

Born in the Bijnor district of Uttar Pradesh on September 8, 1936, Indu Jain took over the Times Group as its chair at the age of 63, following the death of her husband Ashok Kumar Jain in 1999. Maybe because of her spiritual inclination she took up the cause of sustainable development when she set up the Times Foundation in 2000. Sustainable development was one of the key goals of the Foundation which has taken up community service and as a part of its community service, it runs the Times Relief Fund to offer assistance in the event of natural disasters. Indu Jain was also the founder president of the ladies' wing of the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), known as FLO (FICCI Ladies Organisation). Ujjwala Singhania, the current president of FLO has probably reflected what Indu Jain deeply believed in when she has said that like Peter Drucker she also believes that 'Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results not attributes.'

Writers in Indian languages are familiar with Indu Jain's association with Bharatiya Jnanpith Trust, a literary organisation that honours authors in Indian languages with the Jnanpith award. It was founded by her father-in-law Sahu Shanti Prasad Jain in 1944. Indu Jain chaired the trust from 1999.

Indu Jain was awarded and honoured in many ways. She addressed the United Nations at the Millennium World Peace Summit in 2000. In January 2016, Indu Jain was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Indian government. In 2018, she was given an award for Lifetime Contribution to Media by the All India Management Association. In November 2019, she received the Lifetime Achievement award from the Institute of Company Secretaries of India "for translating excellence in corporate governance into reality."

Indu Jain was one of the many invaluable people COVID-19 has taken away from us.

C S Lakshmi

A Boat Down the Stream: Muthulakshmi Raghavan (27 September 1967-18 May 2021)



Muthulakshmi Raghavan was a popular writer who wrote nearly 200 pocket book Tamil novels and had considerable fan following on Facebook and outside. In fact, she says that she opened the Facebook page for her fans. She introduced herself thus on Facebook: "I am a novel writer..."

Basicaly I am a Tamil poet. I open this Facebook [page] for my fans. I have only one son R Bala Chandar. He is a Doctor. I love my son very much. My husband Raghavan is a businessman and now he has started Lakshmi Balaji Publication. In future my novels will published only by Lakshmi Balaji Publication."

When a new edition of her novel *Uzhavan Magal* (Farmer's Daughter) was published in 2020 she wrote an author's note about herself where she said that she began to write at the age of ten and that when her elder brother's death became an unbearable tragedy her husband encouraged her to write and she was 24 when she began to write. She also said that she had published novels written in several parts and that she was planning to write her 200th novel in twenty parts.

On January 22, 2021, she recalled a childhood memory of how she used to read books in which she said that when she was eight years old her father was posted as the Headmaster in the Sengurichi village in Dindigul District. At the border of the village was a huge banyan tree with a stone platform beneath it. The town bus normally came and stood there. The road to the left of the main road led to the school and also to the local Zamindar's palace. The road on the left led to the main village. The early morning bus that arrived used to bring the weekly and monthly magazines. A servant from the Zamindar's household would come to pick up the magazines and Muthulakshmi would follow him to the palace. She would go and stand before the Zamindar who would be sitting in the verandah when the magazines were handed over to him. He would give her the magazines with a smile. No one behaved with him with such familiarity in the village and everyone used to be surprised at her audacity.

It is interesting to know how Muthulakshmi came to write the great number pocket novels that she did. In 2018 she gave an interview to Sridevi Mohan for the Magazine *Kungumam Thozhi* which was published in its 1st January 2018 issue. It was generally believed that women who were homemakers who did not want to read literary works enjoyed reading family stories and pocket novels. The magazine referred to Muthulakshmi as one of the queens of the pocket novel world holding her flag aloft. Muthulakshmi

opens up about her life and her writing in the interview.

Muthulakshmi was born and brought up in Madurai. Her father was a Headmaster in a government school. Her mother was a homemaker. But she was well educated. Both her parents had the habit of reading. Her father enjoyed reading popular stories while her mother read literary stories. Her reading began with *Ambulimama* and then went on to more serious writing like that of Kalki and Thi. Janakiraman. At a certain age she began to do selective reading. Even before that after an unfortunate incident in the family she had begun to write poems at the age of ten. And her reading and writing continued. Even while she was a student in college she got married at the age of 20. She continued her education after marriage. She did her Master's also. After that she joined the postal department.

When she was 24 she was on leave due to ill health. Her husband knew that she wrote poems. He told her that her poems contained stories and that she must write fiction. The first novel she wrote was *Nila Veliyil* (In the Moon Light) and she wrote a few more too. In an attempt to publish, she sent one of her manuscripts to Asokan, the publishing king of pocket book novels and it got rejected. She was heartbroken and kept everything that she wrote with herself. For nearly 16 years she used to write novels and merely put them away.

She was also not keeping good health. She constantly fell sick but no diagnosis could be made. This went on for six years. At the age of 30 she vomited blood one day and went into a coma. It was only then that she was diagnosed with T.B. in her brain. After being bed ridden for a long time and undergoing different kinds of treatments she slowly recovered. But the side effects of that illness never really left her. Since she had been treated for TB and the treatment had been done through her spinal cord she was unable to walk normally after that. A lot of money had been spent for her treatment. She felt that she was being a burden and went back to work. Her colleagues were very kind and helpful. It helped her to cross that stage of her life. But what kept her going was her writing although she had not published anything.

The year was 2007. There was a library near her office. A young boy used to get her the books she wanted from there. In one of the books she got the address of Arunothayam Book Publishers. It was the publishing house of popular writer Ramani Chandran's husband Arunan. She sent him a detailed letter with her phone number saying that she had written many novels and that if he was interested in publishing them she could send him the manuscripts. He contacted her the very next day saying he had liked the way she had worded her letter and that he was interested in seeing one

or two of her manuscripts. She sent him a few manuscripts. He published her first novel *Nila Veliyil* and the one that had been rejected, as a combined publication. Her novels were well received and he continued to publish her. Then Arunan's son published her novels. At least two novels a month got published and sometimes even three. After she had published some 30 novels she wrote to Asokan who had earlier rejected her, saying that although he had rejected her novel now she had published 30 novels. He wrote back saying that she had presented a handwritten manuscript and if she could send a proper typed manuscript he would take a look. Then he published a series of her novels. Her career as a popular writer of family stories took off then and at the age of 40 she got the recognition she had yearned for.

Since she was impaired and could not walk properly she had not travelled much and the themes of her stories were taken from what happened around her. But writing a novel based on the life of a person in Kanchipuram without having ever visited Kanchipuram, she considered her great success. She had to read a lot to construct the story. At the time of the interview she had written 143 novels some of them in several parts but her themes were never repeated, according to her.

She wrote only novels with happy endings because women face so many problems in life and there was no need for tragedy in the stories they read for some relief. She felt her stories must contain positive energy. She was of the opinion that like the drop of honey that fell from a beehive into the mouth of a person who was hanging by a cliff holding on to the root of a tree, her stories like the drop of honey must be what women relish amidst all their life burdens. *Neerodu Selkindra Oadam* (A Boat Down the Stream) was probably the only sad novel she ever wrote.

After a while her husband gave up his fertilizer business and started a publishing house to publish her works. He also started one more publication company. As years went by she also became diabetic and had uterus problems. But she ended the interview saying that she was running towards her 200th novel to be written in twenty parts.

Unfortunately Muthulakshmi never got to write her 200th novel although she had started writing it and had written nine parts of the twenty parts. On May 4th 2021 she put up a post saying she had been admitted to the hospital. She had been diagnosed with COVID. She never returned to complete her novel.

Her doctor son keeps uploading her novels on to YouTube to keep her fans happy. And if one goes by their response it looks like they would never tire of them and that they need all the drops of honey that they can get.

**COVID Claims another Activist: Kanaka
(Demise 16 May 2021)**

Kanaka, was a much-loved person in the AIDWA circle. She had lost her husband Pichchai four days before her own death but that she herself would succumb to the virus was not expected. Everyone hoped that she would make it. She was one of the leading figures in AIDWA. She was the District Vice-President in Virudhunagar

and the member of the Central Committee in Virudhunager District CPM. Kanaka was the person the group depended on when women had to be gathered for any urgent meetings or discussions. Another loss for AIDWA.

—C S Lakshmi

**Kuch Bhi Aisa Nahin Jo Bas Mein Hai: Tarannum
Riyaz ((9 August 1960-20 May 2021)**

Dr Tarannum Riyaz was a well-known Urdu fiction writer, critic, poet, essayist and translator. She was born and educated in Srinagar and Jammu. Although she has worked on television and radio for several years as an Urdu news broadcaster and with All India Radio as a News Reader she was

known more for her poetry and fiction writing. She has organised literary and cultural programmes. The women's sections of some of the leading Urdu newspapers and journals in Kashmir have been edited by her.

Tarannum started writing in Urdu from Seventh Standard in school and was the editor of *Aftab* magazine's women's page under the maiden name of Fareeda Tarannum. She was then in her 10th Standard. Talking to Arundhathi Subramaniam for Poetry International on June 1, 2005, Tarannum talks of how she came into poetry and why. Arundhathi asks her why she turned to poetry late in her writing career and Tarannum says:

"Actually, the first poem I wrote was on failing a math exam in school. So poetry has always been a form I've enjoyed and practised. When I moved to Delhi from Srinagar in the early 90s, I was writing prose and poetry. But I decided to focus on the short story, on the advice of one of my seniors at All India Radio. It was sometime in 1996, I think, that I met a senior poet who said that the only writer he knew who could

do both prose and poetry effectively was Ahmed Nadeem Qasimi. To me this was an instant challenge. I wanted to prove that a woman writer could achieve the same degree of excellence in both genres. Now I do both, and I find both activities complement each other perfectly. Some moments work themselves into poems, others into fiction. The challenge in both is craft..." She also spoke about how her poetry views women: "But I do believe being a woman is related to many values that I cherish: compassion, peace, harmony, the need to resolve conflicts. This probably permeates my poetry."

Tarannum's poetry has been published in several Urdu and Hindi magazines in India and Pakistan, including *Shayer* (Mumbai), *Shiraza* (Srinagar), *Aiwan-e-Urdu* (Delhi), *Takhleeq* (Lahore), *Taster* (Karachi), *Panj Darya* (Jalandhar), to name a few. Tarannum has written more than twelve books of fiction, criticism, poetry and translation. She has a master's degree in Urdu and has done her MEd and PhD in Education from the University of Kashmir. Her works include: *Yeh Tang Zameen* (This Suffering Land, Short Stories, 1998), *Abbabeelain Laut Aaengi* (Abbabeelain Will Return, Short Stories, 2000), *Yemberzal* (Yemberzal Flower, Short Stories, 2002), *Moorti* (Idol, Novel, 2002), *Beeswi Sadi Mein Khawateen Ka Urdu Adab* (20th Century Urdu Literature of Women, Anthology, 2005) *Chashme Naqshe Kadam* (Footprints on Water, Critical Essays, 2005) *Purani Kitaabon Ki Khusbhu* (The Fragrance of Old Books, Poetry, 2005) *Fareb-e-Khitta-e-Gul* (Deceptive Land of Flowers, 4 Novellas, 2008), *Mera Rakht e Safar* (My Bag and Baggage, Short Stories, 2008) *Barf Aashna Parindey* (Birds of Snows, Novel, 2009).

Her translations published by Sahitya Akademi include *Houseboat Par Billi* (Urdu translation of *A Cat on a Houseboat* by Anita Desai, 1993), *Suno Kahani* (Listen to Stories, Urdu translation of Vishnu Prabhakar's work, 1993), *Gosain Baghka Bhoot* (The Ghost of Gosain Bagh, Urdu translation of Shishendu Mukhopadhyay's work, 1996). Her works have been included in several noteworthy anthologies including the one edited by Prof. Gopi Chand Narang and another edited by Prof. Sadiq and published by Penguin.

Tarannum Riyaz has been the recipient of the Delhi Urdu Academy Fiction Award for the year 2006 and best book award twice for two short story collections, *Yemberzal* and *Mera Rakht e Safar*. She has also received the Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy Fiction Award in 2004 and the Sahir Ludhyanvi Adeeb International Award for her contribution in Poetry and Prose in 2005, the Rasa Javedani Memorial Award and Jammu and the Kashmir Academy for Art, Culture and Languages for the Best Book Award 2008 for her substantial contribution towards Urdu Literature. She was

awarded the prestigious SAARC Literary Award 2014. The award was presented to her at The Diggi Palace Jaipur during SAARC Sufi Festival. The award, given every five years to an eminent writer from amongst the eight SAARC countries, was presented to Tarannum Riyaz by former Prime Minister of the Govt. of Tibet in Exile, Prof. Samdhong Rimpoche. She has been part of several national and international conferences including the World Urdu Conference in Pakistani capital Islamabad in 2005.

Her book of short stories translated in English by her *Across the Shores* (Notion Press, July 2020) and her novel *Birds of Snows* (Niyogi Books, 2021) translated from her Urdu novel *Barf Aashna Parindey* by her were recent releases. While *Across the Shores* is a collection of stories written on a vast canvas that includes urban life and also the world of Kashmir hills, *Birds of Snows* is a sensitive novel that depicts the changing lives of women in Kashmir. The blurb of the novel says that it is a novel on the changing times in Kashmir, from a rural to a more urban life, the impact of modern thinking, and that through its portrayal of its women characters the novel explores their compassion and resolve, as well as their search for self-fulfillment.

Tarannum was at the Gangtok Writers' Meet organised by Sahitya Akademi in 2011 and read her poems in the second day Poets Meet session. In between sessions when writers discussed among themselves she spoke about her short stories and translations. She was there in 2018 at the SIWE (South India Writers' Ensemble) Writers' Meet which normally happens at Chenganuru and the brochure carried her beautiful poem "An Autumn Tree". One was looking forward to interacting with her about her recent books released just months before her death. She had tested positive for COVID-19 and had spent the previous few days on a ventilator at the Medanta Hospital. Tragically, Tarannum Riyaz died five weeks after her husband Professor Riyaz Punjabi, former Vice-Chancellor of Kashmir University passed away on April 8th. Hers is another valuable life that COVID has taken away.

With two books just released Tarannum should have lived to see how much her readers have welcomed the books. But life during COVID times is unpredictable. Tarannum has written a ghazal which begins with the lines "kuch bhi aisa nahin jo bas mein hai/ab rihai miri qafas mein hai" (There is nothing that is under our control/Now my abode is in the cage). How prophetic those lines seem now!

—C S Lakshmi

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Shot Down By Mucormycosis: Monali Gorhe (1977-20 May 2021)



No one expected that Monali Gorhe, pistol shooter and coach, 44, would die due to complications from COVID-19. She had been hospitalised for a fortnight. After 15 days she was moved to the non-COVID ward, according to former international shooting champion, Ashok

Pandit, but succumbed to mucormycosis, the lethal fungal infection.

Monali started shooting in 1999 and represented India internationally. She started coaching women pistol shooters from 2006. She was the head coach of Excel Target Shooting Association, founder of Winners Shooting Club, founder and secretary of Nashik District Shooting Association. She mentored national-level shooters Shreya Gawande and Manisha Rathore. She received her coaching certification from Germany and served as a judge for competitions and was a member of Maharashtra State Shooting Association. She also served as the national coach of the Sri Lankan shooting team in 2016 South Asian Games, helping the men's team to win a bronze. Besides coaching and judging, she promoted the sport and was an excellent organiser and held many tournaments at the district level.

Monali's National core group coaching contract had been renewed just a month ago by Sports Authority of India (SAI) and Monali had been looking forward to resuming coaching at her Nashik coaching academy, Excel Centre. India was expected to bring home medals from Tokyo games and she had been excited about training pistol shooters for the Tokyo Games. But COVID struck her and as a young person she was expected to come out of it. It is a pity mucormycosis changed the entire story. And the tragedy was compounded by the fact that her father, Manohar Gorhe, had succumbed to COVID-19 just a few hours earlier than her. Monali survived by her mother and older sister.

When lives of young professionals are lost it is a national loss especially for sports like shooting where enthusiastic and committed coaches are needed.

—Priya D'Souza

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The Face of Chipko Movement and Husband of Vimla Bahuguna: Sunderlal Bahuguna (9 January 1927-21 May 2021)



Calling Sunderlal Bahuguna as the husband of Vimla Bahuguna when she has been known only as his wife, may seem strange to some people. But it was Vimla who steered him away from politics trained as she was as a Sarvodaya worker and as a participant in the Bhoodan Movement from 1953-55.

Based on an interview and excerpts from a talk given at Bija Vidyapeeth, December 2010, Lakshmi Sarah writes in her blog beautifully about this:

“After India’s independence, Vimalaji yearned for higher education. She joined the Lakshmi Ashram, started by a follower of Gandhi. At the time, the burning question for all, was: “How could Swaraj (self-rule) be shared by all?”

“Long before she protested Tehri Dam, Vimalaji, coming from a middle-class family was used to having people work for her. She was unaccustomed to cleaning and difficult labour in the ashram she joined. With her teacher as a role model, she says, “bit by bit we started to grow – love of labor (*shraamdaan*) became a central part.

“When her family wanted her to marry, instead she went to Vinoba Bhave’s ashram. She eventually returned to the mountains to assist with a campaign to end alcoholism, where she met Sunderlal Bahuguna. Before marrying, she wanted to think and was not yet ready, her father was angry and told her: “The doors of my house are closed to you. How will you ever find such a good match?”

“She wanted to work for civil society and he was a congressman. She asked for one year of contemplation time. Adhering to Gandhian philosophy, she believed that anything of value had to happen at the village level and that she needed to work there.

“Her future husband, Bahuganaji did not object, he was willing to be patient because his wife to be was independent; he was even willing to abandon the Congress Party. He went to work in the villages and eventually 24 rupees from each side were spent on their

wedding.”

Bharat Dogra also mentions in one of his articles (Bharat Dogra, “Vimla and Sunderlal Bahuguna—Seven Decades of Together Serving Forests, Rivers and People” *Countercurrents.org*, 26 May 2021) “Sunderlal Bahuguna at that time was a fast rising star in the political and social life of Uttarakhand. He had joined the Congress Party in 1948. Vimla led a more austere life of a social activist being groomed by Sarla Behn, a senior Gandhian activist and freedom fighter. When the first talk of marriage appeared, people invariably looked at the match from the perspective of the prospective groom. Oh, they said, his political career will be further advanced by marrying such a brilliant girl with experience of working among people.”

What was wonderful was that when Vimla told him to move away from the limelight of political life Sunderlal agreed with her and together they chartered their future life of commitment. That is how the couple found a place in a remote village Silyara near Ghanshali, close to the Balganga river, and “settled down to a rigorous life of serving people here in various ways. After a few years of this life the Silyara ashram was well-established and became a hub for creating and training more social activists. Together they also participated in anti-liquor and other movements.”

Hridayesh Joshi in his obituary in *Mongabay.com*, a web site that publishes news on environmental science, energy, and green design, explains how Sunderlal Bahuguna had the strength to accept Vimla’s condition to marriage by tracing his political background from childhood. (Hridayesh Joshi, “Sunderlal Bahuguna: End of an era for Indian environmentalism” *Mongabay.com*, 27 May 2021). He talks in detail about Sunderlal Bahuguna’s life quoting others who have written about his life and work:

“Bahuguna was then just three-year-old. Ten years later, he commenced his public life at the age of 13 by participating in the rebellion against the same principality of Tehri. He went to Lahore for his BA (Bachelors of Arts) and then to Varanasi for his post-graduation degree. He, however, stopped studies to join the freedom struggle during which he was jailed as well. It was the start of his journey of public movements.

“Sunderlal Bahuguna’s public life started very early at the age of 13 when he took part in the rebellion against the principality of Tehri.

“Most of the people know Bahuguna for Chipko (movement) which came much later in the

1970s. By then Sunderlalji had at least 25 years of social work and activism under his belt as his struggle commenced at a very young age. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, he fought against untouchability and to do so in true spirit he lived with Dalits (formerly untouchables) in the same house and ate with them,” journalist and writer Harsh Dobhal, who covered Bahuguna’s and his struggle closely for many years, told *Mongabay-India*. Chipko, a forest conservation movement against tree felling started in Chamoli district in the 1970s, where people led by women hugged trees to stop contractors from cutting them.

“Dobhal said Bahuguna also worked for women’s education. “This was all in his youth. He was also part of the anti-liquor movement in the 1960s and of course, you can’t forget the *sarvodayi* movement he actively participated in...” *Sarvodayi* movement is rooted in Gandhian philosophy of upliftment of all.

“Early in his life, Sunderlal Bahuguna met Gandhian Sridev Suman, who later died while on a long fast of 84 days against the atrocities of Tehri’s king, and that made a deep impression on Bahuguna. It moulded his political and social understanding. He vowed to work for the weak and powerless in a non-violent manner and practised what he preached.

“I do not eat rice as the crop of paddy consumes too much water which is bad for the environment. I do not know how much my abstention will help the cause but I want to live with nature in harmony,” he once said to this reporter during an interview.

“When he built an ashram in our ancestral village Silyara, he employed just one mason for construction. He toiled as labour during the building of the ashram and did all the work like carrying the stone, wood and building material himself,” Rajiv Nayan Bahuguna, son of Sunderlal Bahuguna, told *Mongabay-India*.”

Sunderlal Bahuguna was known as the one who began the Chipko movement but in the true Gandhian way, he himself never took the credit for it. “I am simply the messenger of the movement. It was the women who hugged the trees. I simply went with this message from one village to another...” he had said in an interview.

Sunderlal Bahuguna deeply believed that the entire Himalayan belt should be the concern when it came to evolving a conservation policy. It was this belief of his that

made him take up a 5,000-kilometre-long foot-march between 1981-83 from Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir in northern India to Kohima in Nagaland in eastern India.

Similarly in the 1990s when he organised the movement to save Himalayas against large hydropower projects like Tehri dam and went on a fast unto death, he did not think his life was more important than the life of the trees. In a much quoted letter written to his friends who worried for his life he wrote: “Himalaya is a land of penance. Nothing in the world can be achieved without penance. I am doing this on behalf of all who are striving to save our dying planet. Why should a river, a mountain and forest or the ocean be killed, while we cling to life?” The struggle was not fully successful but it did create awareness all over India and in the world about developmental issues that should be tackled in uniquely Indian ways.

Despite his tenacity and strength to fight against developmental projects that would destroy a life in harmony with nature and the firmness of mind to refuse a Padma Shri in 1981 for the same reason, Sunderlal Bahuguna was called a gentle warrior by everyone. The objects associated with his resistance have become valuable mementoes. Calling him a gentle warrior, Katherine Goldsmith, writing in the *Resurgence & Ecologist* March/April 1997 issue says: “There are three things I have in London that together are of special significance: a coloured cotton bolster, a half bottle of water and a graceful tree. The cushion is a gift from Sunderlal Bahuguna, the bottle he carried from the Himalayas and contains water from the sacred Bhagirathi River, beside which he fasted for seventy-four days in 1996 against the construction of the Tehri dam, and the tree is a towering ash [Mohin tree] under which he recited the prayers of the Chipko (hug the trees) movement...”

Sunderlal Bahuguna wrote articles all his life to earn an income and what made him go on with his struggle despite obstacles was his belief that he should do what he considers his duty. His granddaughter Haritima Bahuguna is quoted in an article (Felix Poon, *Outside/In*: “The Life and Legacy of Sunderlal Bahuguna and the Chipko Movement in India”, New Hampshire Public Radio, January 10, 2022) saying that he would often quote the *Bhagwat Gita* verse “*Karmanyevadhikaraste Ma Phaleshu Kadachana, Ma Karma Phala Hetur Bhur Ma Te Sango Stv Akarmani*” meaning one should do one’s duty without worrying about the results and one should also not remain inactive.

When Sunderlal and Vimla needed to attend to their health they moved to Dehradun to their daughter’s house. He spent his last days there with Vimla looking after her partner helped by Madhuri. When both Vimla and Sunderlal got affected by COVID-19 both of them were admitted to the AIIMS at Dehradun. *Hindustan* newspaper reported that Vimla had only a mild cough but Sunderlal’s oxygen levels began to go down and he had to be in the ICU and Vimla insisted on being with

him. Both of them were admitted on 8th of May. Two weeks later Sunderlal breathed his last at the age of 94. His final rites took place at the Purvanand Ghat in Hrishikesh. Much to everyone's surprise 89-year-old Vimla arrived there in a PPT kit in her wheel chair. She bid farewell to her companion with her eyes wet with tears. ("Antim sanskar mein ghat pahunchi patni Vimla Bahuguna" (Vimla Bahuguna reached the cremation ground for the final rites", 21 May 2021)

So ended a long saga of a partnership in love, in service to people and in teaching them to live in harmony with nature. But that is not the end of their movement. Sunderlal Bahuguna not only leaves behind his frail wife who would still continue to do what she can, daughter Madhuri, and two sons Rajiv and Pradeep but also thousands of others who worked with them and loved them and who would continue the fight for a life in harmony with nature.

—C S Lakshmi

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Succumbing to COVID: Shanti Pahadia (1 August 1936-23 May 2021)



Shanti Pahadia was a Member of Parliament and represented Rajasthan in the Rajya Sabha as a member of the Indian National Congress. Her husband, Jagannath Pahadia, too, was a politician and was the former Chief Minister of Rajasthan and former Governor of Haryana and Bihar.

Both husband and wife died from COVID-19 within a few days of each other.

Shanti Pahadia used to be in the news often for reasons other than politics. In 2011, when her husband was Governor in Haryana, she made an official request for a highly venomous Russel's Viper for ritual worship in the Raj Bhavan which angered netizens. Strangely a poisonous snake appeared near the golf cart when both of them went to offer worship at the Manasa Devi temple two years later, in 2013. The security killed the snake but the Governor was not happy about the killing. "Even snakes were created by god," he had remarked. But that the poisonous snake had not harmed them was what made the news.

They were in the news in 2014 also when Jagannath Pahadia was governor of Haryana. She and her husband had had a providential escape when the state government air craft that was carrying them and nine others caught fire and crash landed on the runway of the Chandigarh airport. It is a pity that seven years later, both of them were not fortunate enough to escape the clutches of COVID.

Just a few days before her death a twitter appeal had been made for a lifesaving drug for her. Despite best efforts made by everyone she followed her husband. She was 85 and had lived a long life but a COVID death is always a sad one especially when it comes when one is still coping with the death of one's husband.

—Priya D'Souza

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Death of an Activist: Comrade Brindha (Demise: 23 May 2021)



The demise of Brindha, an activist who worked in several fields was deeply mourned by others in AIDWA. On her Facebook post Mangai Arasu wrote that losing Brindha was losing a friend and Comrade who was with her in the years that shaped her. She remembered the two of them as being the "bratty, ever lively, argumentative,

inquisitive team." She was the State Vice-President of AIDWA. Brindha used to work at ESI (Employees' State Insurance) and had taken voluntary retirement. She had been one of the ESI Union organisers, its co-convenor and State treasurer in AIDWA. Apart from the time she had to spend on her job, the rest of her time she had devoted to AIDWA. She was the executive editor of AIDWA's magazine *Magalir Sinthanai* (Women's Thoughts). Whether it was designing and bringing out special issues or State level reports of conferences she used to work quietly from behind the scenes and never push herself forward. As someone who knew English, Tamil and Hindi she was also an excellent translator during meetings and conferences.

Brindha was also a theatre enthusiast who played an important role in the Shakti Kali Kuzhu (Shakti Art Group) of AIDWA. She also played roles in many plays advocating the rights of women. In 1979 when the Indo-Sweden research on agrarian relations was taken up Brindha was part of it and married Rajagopal who was one of the field-workers with her. She got married with Maithily Sivaraman presiding over her inter-caste wedding.

She was a cancer survivor who had fought cancer fifteen years ago and she never let that diminish her enthusiasm for doing her share of work for AIDWA. Her death is a great loss for her family and the organisation she was associated with.

—C S Lakshmi

A Woman and A Tambura: Tambura Vijayalakshmi (Demise: 23 May 2021)



Mylapore Times carried the news on 28th May of the passing away on 23rd May of Smt. Vijayalakshmi popularly known as Tambura Vijayalakshmi. It was a news report of just a few lines which stated that “Vijayalakshmi accompanied a large range of artistes on the concert stage. She was known for her simplicity and

self-respect. Always punctual at the concerts where she had to play the tambura, she would pleasantly greet the artistes for whom she was playing.” One wondered who this wonderful woman was who was associated with the instrument that accompanied all concerts. Some of the artistes for whom she had regularly played the tambura for the concerts wrote about her and their association with her which presented bits and pieces of her life. It was not a complete picture but a very interesting and intriguing one of a woman who was linked only with the tambura. On 27th May musician Varalakshmi Anandkumar wrote a note on her on her Facebook page which talked about how important the tambura was to a concert. With the invasion of electronic tambura the tambura artistes did feel threatened. Many felt that the term artiste was a euphemism for a tambura person who just “plucked strings”. but Varalakshmi Anandkumar says that every musician was aware how important a well-tuned tambura and a tambura person who plucked the strings just right were. Without a tambura artiste who knew how to pluck strings the concert may become either inaudible or there can be a mid-concert catastrophe of a ‘G Sharp’ turning into a ‘G’ !

Of Tambura Vijayalakshmi herself she says, “Mami’s life was certainly not a bed of roses but never did she grumble. As a professional, I found her always punctual, all ready to take charge of the instrument as soon as we arrived. She had a tremendous streak of self-respect too. Many a time, when we offered to drop her off on returning from a concert, she would brush it aside saying that bus number 12B was very frequent and took her close to home. Her pride in herself showed in her honesty. If we paid her and the Sabha had already given her, her remuneration, she would never hide the fact from us. If we asked her to keep the amount notwithstanding, she would thank us profusely.”

Musician Shubha Ganesan while paying her homage on 28th May reveals another side of Vijayalakshmi. She says Vijayalakshmi had hardships and setbacks in life but does not say what they were. But she does say that she had sung

chorus parts in many films for legendary Music Directors like Rajeshwar Rao, K V Mahadevan, Chalapathi Rao and many more. From the post on 27th May of musicians Mambalam Sisters one gets to know that she had a daughter and that Vijayalakshmi was a trained musician and had sung in a few Telugu films in the chorus in her young age...

How young is young one wonders. The photograph accompanying this homage is from the post of Mambalam Sisters where one cannot quite make out how old Vijayalakshmi was.

So disappears from our midst a woman known only by her tambura whose life story never really got told.

C S Lakshmi

The Queen of Tamasha: Kantabai Satarkar (1939-25 May 2021)



The veteran Tamasha and lavani artiste Kantabai Satarkar passed away at Sangamner.

Kantabai had an illustrious career as a Tamasha artiste but she had come up the hard way. She was born to poor stone mason parents, Sahebrao and Chandrabai in a small village called Timba in Gujarat’s Baroda district. Later the family had come to Satara.

She had no guru and the family did not have the legacy of being performing artistes but she enjoyed dancing before a few friends. That is when she got a chance at the Navjhanakar Mela and one can say, her artistic journey began then. She began to work with small troupes and this brought her to Mumbai. The troupes were small but her dreams were big. She became a tamsha artiste in Maharishi Tukaram Khedkar’s Tamasha in Mumbai. The real artist in her began to bloom and both Khedkar and Kantabai became a popular performing couple and later they became a couple in real life as well. They performed in many shows based on a variety of religious, mythological and social themes and as a performing couple they could reach every home in rural Maharashtra.

Along with his partner Kantabai Satarkar, Tukaram Khedkar started his own Tamasha *phad* (troupe) called Master Raghuvveer Khedkar Lok Natya Tamasha Mandal. Kantabai played multiple roles in the Tamasha *phad* they had started. Apart from acting, singing and dancing, she was also the manager. She was famous for singing the Powada, the ballad singing of Maharashtra. One has heard of men playing

women's roles in folk theatre but women rarely played men's roles. But Kantabai was able to play men's roles effortlessly. She played the roles of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Sambhaji Maharaj brilliantly and this won her much praise. Historical plays were her forte and her playing Jijamata in the play *Kondhanyavar Swari* (The Conquest of Kondhanya Fort) was something the audience loved. People felt that through her shows she also eradicated superstitions and raised awareness of the audience. It was said that while normally men rushed to see Tamasha shows with Kantabai came the women audience to watch Tamasha.

In 1964, Tukaram Khedkar passed away suddenly leaving Kantabai to face life as an artiste alone. With the fame she had earned she could have worked with other Tamasha troupes but after having worked in the *phad* established by her husband she was not interested in working with others. In 1970 she established her own *phad* along with her son. Her entire family including her daughters Alka, Anita and Manda and son Raghuv eer, was involved in Tamasha theatre. Until the age of 70 she was performing in the shows of her own troupe. She earned the sobriquet the Queen of Tamasha. Dr Santosh Khedlekar has written biography of her life entitled, *Vagsamradni Kantabai Satarkar* (Kantabai Satarkar, the Queen of Tamasha).

In the year 2005, the Government of Maharashtra honoured Kantabai with the first Vithabai Narayangaokar Lifetime Achievement Award for her contribution in the field of Tamasha. Kantabai and her son Raghuv eer were invited to perform at the Commonwealth Games in Delhi. Kantabai also had the honour of being asked to present a show for dignitaries in the field of cinema and drama in the premises of Mumbai University.

The Corona days were not kind to Tamasha artistes as villages had stopped having fairs and the troupes were struggling. Added to all this came the terrible tragedy for Kantabai's family of losing not only Kantabai but also her daughter Anita who was a Tamasha artiste and her grandson Abhijeet to COVID-19.

Speaking to *E-Sakal* Sambhaji Jadhav of Akhil Bharatiya Tamasha Parishad was not exaggerating when he said that Kantabai's death had left Tamasha an orphan. All-round artistes like Kantabai are rare in folk theatre and their deaths always create a void which takes a long time to be filled.

—Priya D'Souza



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Big C Means Not Just Cancer But Courage, Too: Ranjita Rane (28 October 1977-26 May 2021)



Those who keenly follow cricket would know Ranjita Rane, a cricketer who represented Mumbai. She was an all-rounder, a bowler who could bat, her favourite supposedly a lofted shot. She began her career at the Indian Gymkhana in Matunga and then started playing for Mumbai. She played 44 first-

class cricket matches representing Mumbai from 1995 to 2003. Diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2015, she died on 26 May 2021 at the young age of 43 after the cancer spread. A few months before her death she had spoken to Hemal Ashar of *Midday* newspaper and *Midday* had put up an appeal for her expensive treatment (*Midday*, 5 January 2021). This tribute is based on what she spoke to Hemal Ashar about what it meant to be diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

Ranjita Rane said that she felt as if she had been "hit with a sledgehammer when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer." The cancer had reached the third stage and she had to undergo six cycles of chemotherapy and her ovaries were removed surgically. Apart from the high cost of the treatment there was also the ominous information that there was no cure for ovarian cancer and that she would need chemotherapy periodically. She faced this with grit and determination. She used to work as an accountant but with continuous treatment she could not pursue a job.

She lived with her parents with her brother's family in Prabhadevi and she said her family was her rock. But even while she was dealing with cancer she lost her father and her mother was a heart patient herself. But her friends did not make her feel as if she was battling her disease alone. Many women cricketers came forward to help her and stood by her. MCA also offered her monetary help.

The removal of ovaries had led to hormonal imbalances and weight gain and Ranjita was doing regular yoga to cope with it. Payal Vaidya, her teammate and former Mumbai off-spinner, was quoted as saying, "The caring is mutual. Ranjita has also helped her friends during their crises. She is mentally strong and that is her forte in this fight against cancer. Even with all the financial help, if one does not have will, then, it is futile. Ranjita, though shocked earlier, was not crushed by the diagnosis. She has shown resilience and the same mental grit she displayed on the field, off the field too."

Ranjita had said to the newspaper that if she did get an opportunity, she would like to work as a scorer. It is a pity she did not get the opportunity. In this game it was cancer that scored.

—Priya D'Souza

Ehsaas, Leaving Behind a Sentiment: Alka Raghuvanshi (4 April 1961-26 May 2021)



Alka Raghuvanshi's Rajput journalist father hailed from partitioned Punjab and he married a Delhite whose family had lived in Delhi for seven generations. They say that Alka Raghuvanshi used to consider M S Subbulakshmi her metaphoric Guru.

There is a photograph on the web of a young Alka with M S Subbulakshmi. One does not know what exactly her Guru taught her or how Alka was inspired by her but one thing that makes Alka similar to M S Subbulakshmi is the dedication and love with which she approached her own art. Alka was a writer, an art critic, journalist, columnist and a painter. She was also India's first trained curator. She once said that she happily wears many hats and that designing and curating saris was her passion among others. Dr Alka Raghuvanshi trained at the Goldsmiths College, London, and the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. Her writing career spanned nearly 40 years. She has authored and edited over 32 books on the performing arts. A senior columnist and author, she has been on the Editorial Teams of the *Indian Express*, *The Times of India*, *Pioneer* and The BBC, where she wrote regularly to cover a wide range of arts. Being an excellent painter herself she was able to be both a participant and an observer in the many art shows she organised. Two of her books *A Moment in Time with Legends of Indian Arts* and *Pathfinders: Artistes of One World* document artists who have shaped the art tradition in India.

Alka organised the art event *Ehsaas* on 2nd September 2017 which was a confluence of art and artistes on one stage. 31 personalities including Alka transformed into mobile installations and walked the ramp wearing art designed by Alka. It was an unusual event where Birju Maharaj, instead of mesmerising the audience with his Kathak performance, walked the ramp wearing a stole with painting by Alka. This was another example of Alka's multi-disciplinary approach to art and expression. After designing saris and other wearable art on handwoven tussar fabric and creating jewellery out of her paintings strung with semi-precious stones, a curator could have asked models to walk the ramp but she chose classical dancers and musicians and artists to become mobile installations of the art.

It was not surprising that in 2018 along with Kathak legend Birju Maharaj, and Indian classical vocalist Ustad Iqbal Ahmed Khan, Dr Alka Raghuvanshi was awarded the Lalit Arpan Lifetime Achievement Award in the 17th edition of the Lalit Arpan Festival conceptualized by Kathak dancer Shovana Narayan. And just a year before she came down with

pneumonia and told one of her friends that she would live to tell the tale, Alka was the speaker of the day on 12th August 2020, at the international webinar on the theme "Dwindling Folk Performing Arts" organised by the The Department of Sociology, St Aloysius College (Autonomous), Mangalore, under the aegis of STRIDE (Scheme for Trans-Disciplinary Research for India's Developing Economy).

There was no one in the art world who did not love Alka. Even her ex-husband Manoj Raghuvanshi who paid her a tribute after her demise, said that she was his best friend. Writing for *Express News Service* on 8th June 2021, her close friend art critic Ashish Mohan Khokar, says that she is not really gone. He says that, in fact, a few days ago, she visited him in a dream and told him not to worry about her. "I am fine, don't be sad. Tell my sister Manisha to not be sad and depressed, no drama please," she said.

It is a pity Alka Raghuvanshi did not live to tell the tale of her illness and how she overcame it for had she lived she would have organised a different kind of *Ehsaas* or maybe a show named after one of her own paintings, *Dance of the Fireflies*, to tell her tale.

C S Lakshmi

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Scholar-Writer-Activist: Dr K Saradamoni (1928-26 May 2021)



Those of us who knew Professor K Saradamoni were in awe of her and also feared her. We knew that she had done her doctoral degree from Paris University during 1969-71 under the guidance of Dr Louis Dumont, the much revered anthropologist and Indologist. We also knew that it was Madeline Biardeau,

another noted Indologist, who was an expert in Indian philosophy and religion, who had come to Travancore to study Sanskrit, who had induced Saradamoni to go to Paris. We were all familiar with some of the path-breaking books she had written: *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala*, (1980), *Women's Work and Society* (1985), *Filling the Rice Bowl: Women in Paddy Cultivation* (1991), *Matriliney Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore* (1999). She was wife of the late N Gopinathan Nair, also known as Janayugom Gopi, founder editor of *Janayugam*, the first weekly and daily newspaper of the undivided Communist Party in erstwhile Travancore. Her book on him *The Scribe Remembered: N Gopinathan Nair — His Life and Times* had been published in 2013.

In a column for *The Hindu Metro Plus* (Thiruvananthapuram) to commemorate the platinum jubilee of the University of Kerala Athira M had spoken to eminent teachers and people from different walks of life and asked them to talk about their student days in various colleges under the University. K Saradamoni recalled her student life and life later in an inspiring interview in which she spoke about the idealism and hope of those student days, which was published in the paper on 10 February 2010.

During field work done for SPARROW's project on women scientists I had had occasion to interact with her daughter G Asha who is a neuro scientist who was in the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, at that time. She had even written a piece for our newsletter on BT Brinjal.

Despite knowing so much about Dr K Saradamoni one was hesitant to approach her for one also knew that she could tear into you in a seminar or a talk, if she did not agree with you and found your presentation wanting. I remember a talk I gave in Chennai on "Violence, Women and Tamil Culture" when I got a bit tongue-tied when I saw Dr Vina Mazumdar and Dr K Saradamoni sitting in the audience in the last row. After the talk I went up to them as I knew Dr Vina Mazumdar well and wished them. I hesitantly told Dr Saradamoni that I would very much like to come to her place and interview her and get her private papers for SPARROW. She made a dismissive gesture with her hand and moved away allowing Dr Vina Mazumdar to talk to me! That was the end of making any effort to contact her to record her life for our archives. But we do have a transcription of recording done by CWDS of Dr Vina Mazumdar, Dr Neera Desai, Dr Leela Dube and Dr K Saradamoni, the four stalwarts everyone in Women's Studies revered.

From the Facebook page of the Heritage Walk Trivandrum group one could see that Dr K Saradamoni was part of the Heritage Walk group and that she was a regular at Heritage Walk Trivandrum events till her health allowed her. She was the senior most member of the group and as in everything she did, had enthusiastically supported the initiative.

Somehow one feels that in future, whenever anyone in Women's Studies gets up to present a paper in a conference Dr K Saradamoni will be observing it from some other dimension. The knowledge that she might be would always act as a deterrent to any conceited scholar from making tall claims about her scholarship.

—C S Lakshmi

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A Son's Tribute to His Feminist Mother: Suryakantaben Thakorbbhai Shah (25 August 1934 - 27 May 2021)



Suryakantaben, founder trustee of Sahiyar Stree Sangathan, Vadodara, and mother of Dr Trupti Shah (the human rights activist who had written 4 volumes on Women's Movement in India in Gujarati published by ARTHAT and published by Centre for Social Studies, Surat, Gujarat, and who tragically died of lung cancer in 2016) and her husband Thakorbbhai Shah had trained the youth for social causes at Seva Dal camps and throughout her life Suryakantaben had been committed to the cause of children from marginalised sections. She lived a long life supporting many women and children and passed away on 27th May 2021 just three months short of her 88th year. On May 29th Dr Vibhuti Patel, Former Professor at Tata Institute of Social Sciences & SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, a one-woman archives as far as history of women's movement is concerned, posted on her Facebook page a moving tribute by her son Chirag Shah with some photographs courtesy Chirag Shah and Professor Deepali Ghelani, Sahiyar Stree Sangathan, Vadodara. Chirag Shah's tribute tells us the story of a woman who dedicated her entire life for the betterment of the lives of under-privileged children and for supporting women. His tribute is reproduced below:

"Suryakanta Ben took her last breath at her residence. She grew up in her maternal uncle's house, hence was known as Bhani Ben (niece). She started her career as a primary school teacher in Alembic Vidyalaya, Vadodara. Then she worked with Bharat Sevak Samaj for a brief time where she had taken up the fight for maternity leave for women employees. After that, for years, she worked for Juvenile Guidance Centre (Bal Marg Darshan Kendra) in the Salat Wada area of Vadodara.

"Before starting her employment with Bal Marg Darshan Kendra, she travelled extensively from Assam to Gujarat and Kanyakumari to Kashmir, with her Gandhian husband, Thakorbbhai for organising youth camps for Congress Seval. Even after dissociating from Indian National Congress, her faith in Gandhian values was intact. She continued to wear Khadi and also made us wear Khadi. She inculcated in me and Trupti the values of simple life and service to society. Her major role was in making my father work full-time for the society and the working class movement. It was the social norm

that a man has to be the breadwinner for his family, but she told my father not to worry regarding the economic responsibility of the home. She would say, “You do whatever you like to do, I am here to take care of the family by earning and managing everything.” She was that strong a woman.

“She worked in Salat Wada for many years with children in conflict with law, street children and school dropouts. When the need arose she moved her workplace to Vijay Nagar on Harni Road, outside the boundary of Vadodara city, where she first started a kindergarten and then a children’s library and later a primary school. She developed that school up to higher secondary level so that the children from the marginalised sections of society could get education. The name of that school was Surajba Prerna Vidhyalaya. This is how she worked for socially excluded children till the end of her life.

“She had two children, Trupti and Chirag who were mentored by their parents to be socially responsible citizens from early childhood. Her daughter Trupti Shah was one of the founder members of an organisation called Sahiyar Stree Sangthan. Till her last breath, Trupti worked to strengthen the organisation and developed it in such a way that Sahiyar is still working for the rights of girls and women Suryakantaben Shah also stayed connected with ‘Sahiyar’ till her last breath as ‘a sahiyar’ (friend in Gujarati). I am also connected with many social organisations since my student life. Even during my professional life, I was supporting the social causes and organisations working for social justice.”

They don’t make them like Suryakantaben anymore and when women of that generation die the loss for the generation that came after them is immense for there is never a time when we don’t need the advice of older women who have taken up the fights for social justice before us. One can only hope that the lessons we learnt from them would help us to proceed further.

—C S Lakshmi



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Legacies, Dreams and Lessons of a Comrade: Mythily Sivaraman (14 December 1939-30 May 2021)



Comrade Mythily chiselled me into shape. She had many a chisel—communism, feminism, humanity, universal love, reflective passion, and uncompromising equality in comradeship. Born in an uppercaste, middle-class Brahmin family, I had no exposure whatsoever to the public space or political life. However, I

crossed the Lakshman Rekha of my pre-destined life for the sake of romantic love. Nevertheless, my life, like that of many others who made the choice I did, might have ended in the tedious cycle of career, children and family. I am aware that in many ‘revolutionary’ relationships that remains the norm, even to this day. Had it not been for Mythily I would not have been convinced by the possibility of female political subjectivity. She showed us that it was possible and set an example herself.

The 1960’s saw many new waves of revolutions at the national and international levels. Mythily was a product of that era. She was an established trade union activist and leader in the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), when the CPM Party (Communist Party of India (Marxist) decided that she should move to the women’s movement. It must have felt restrictive to reduce her personality to that of a ‘woman’.

The ethos of ‘personal is political’ can be understood in multiple ways. While we question the polarisation of these two worlds, this principle made us see the subtle ways by which one world influenced the other. Mythily lived her life fully conscious and aware of the intersectionality—before it was the buzz word like it is today. Many women in public lives identified themselves as part of the class, caste, tribal, environment, anti-imperialist and civil rights struggles of the sixties that they belonged to. Their presence in those struggles brought about many qualitative changes. Women in the Telengana armed struggle provided us with models of a feminism which had assimilated Communism within it. Mythily too, understood Communism through the feminist lens and feminism through the Communist perspective.

Comrade Karunakaran remained an anchor in Mythily’s life. His political clarity, unassuming presence and intense depth helped re-define notions of family and coupledom. Mythily’s daughter Kalpana—a feminist scholar and activist in her own right—recalls how her household offered an open space to birds of many hues in her endearing memoir

Comrade Amma. Kalpana's personality is pushing us to re-define motherhood in new ways.

In the 70's and 80's, women were organising themselves into smaller or bigger groups. They came from different backgrounds and political ideologies. Tamil Nadu had many such women: Comrades Saraswathi, Geetha Ramakrishnan, Gabriel Dietrich, Lucy and many more. They were part of many different organisations. Mythily saw the need to form a broad alliance of many groups, while emphasising the fact that 'woman' can never be a singular identity.

Comrade Mythily insisted that the different Communist Parties should maintain at least a minimum level of dialogue. Those who are aware of the systems of Communist Parties would understand how difficult this demand would have been. But she persisted. In 1991, when the Soviet bloc collapsed, many of us young cadres nagged her with many doubts and apprehensions; the way she took our questions to the Party heads and facilitated discussions within the organisation was an excellent example of feminist dialogue. The best legacy of Comrade Mythily was to never close doors to conversations.

All the activities of All India Democratic Women's Association in the eighties like the Media Committee, Sakthi cultural group, publication of *Magalir Sindhanai*, the magazine of AIDWA, book reviews, translations of crucial news reports and studies were conducted at the behest of Mythily's leadership. As far as I know apart from the Chennai AIDWA's Sakthi group, there was only Buland, a Delhi based cultural group led by Kalindi Deshpande. Safdar Hashmi worked closely with Kalindi. But the space of women's groups was almost always filled with songs, dances, laughter and gossip! That was the response of women to the society's indifference towards their lives and emotions.

Mythily stepped down from her responsibilities at the Virudhunagar Conference in 2002 to pursue her research. Her meticulous study retrieved her grandmother Subbulakshmi's life from the fragments found in a blue tin trunk. That work gave new perspective to feminist historiography. She buried herself into the browning sheets of Subbulakshmi, who stayed aloof during Mythily's childhood, to understand her life and thoughts. Learning to spin the charka against the colonial rule; sending a donation to the Moplah struggle without the knowledge of her husband who was a Government servant; her friendship with Grace Samuel, the wife of a pastor at the hospital and the long letters they wrote to each other; her avid interest in Buddhist texts; her quest to understand psychology through the available books; her steadfastness in making sure her daughter Pankajam was educated; and many other fragmented details squarely brought Subbulakshmi into the feminist discourses. Of all the writings of Mythily—who was a writer

throughout her life—this text is distinctly unique in its tone, flow, themes and arguments. This work was not discussed seriously in the Tamil context. Perhaps it was because the study did not comply with our habitual feminist agenda and did not offer any conclusions while also raising complex questions.

Prof. Uma Chakravarti wrote the afterword for the *Fragments of a life: A Family Archive*. She then went onto make a documentary film *A Quiet Little Entry* on Mythily's writing of this book. Uma's second film was on Mythily Sivaraman after which she has continued her journey as a filmmaker. In 2007, V Geetha, a feminist historian, scholar and activist, wrote a play called *Kala Kanavu (A Dream of Time)*. That play began with Subbulakshmi's life as documented by Mythily. Geetha went on to write more plays. Mythily's two EPW articles on police violence during the Emergency became the basis of two other plays called *Sudalaiamma* and *Vakkumoolam. (Gravedigger and Testimony)*. Mythily brought to the attention of the nation the encounter murder of Seeralan, a young revolutionary. She was not bogged down by the Party differences in raising that issue. Her narrative of Nagamma who fought for justice, also eschews preferences based on strict political camps and begins with her description of Nagamma clad in saffron with a big bindhi on her forehead. I had directed these plays written by V Geetha. When Mythily saw the character of Nagamma on stage, her eyes widened in recognition. When the actor came down from the stage Mythily touched her sweaty cheeks and smiled. That image of Mythily is etched on my memory. It was Justice Chandru, also a friend of Mythily's, who helped Nagamma get her due compensation after two and a half decades.

This was Mythily for me and many like me. She had deep roots from which she grew to spread many a branch. Her roots never dried and neither did anyone touched by her remain stagnant.

—A Mangai (Translated by A Mangai from the tribute "Mythily Kaiyaliththuch Chendra Kanavugal" written by her in *The Hindu*, Tamil, 6 June 2021)

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

JUNE 2021

Mysore Dasara Bombe : Basappa Jaya (3 September 1944-3 June 2021)



Maybe because there was another Jayamma in Kannada theatre who was Gubbi Veeranna's wife, Basappa Jaya, although she is referred to as Jayamma when people speak about her now, was generally known as B Jaya and her film credits came in the name of B Jaya. B in her name stands for Basappa, her father, who was a stage artiste who went on to appear in over 100 films. Jaya was the fourth among seven children and her father Basappa and mother Mahadevamma were trying to make a living from Basappa's work on the stage. Among his children Jaya took after her father and began to act on the stage and later also acted in films.

Jaya's first film was *Bhakta Pahlada* which was released in 1958. She was 14 years old. Many more films followed. But she did not give up acting on the stage and continued to act in plays till 1992. While she did lead roles in plays, in films she was never cast as the heroine. She did comedy roles and character roles mostly. She also acted in T V serials. The films she is remembered for are *Bhakta Pahlada* (1958), *Veera Kesari* (1963), *Prathigne* (Oath, 1964), *Bettada Huli* (Mountain Tiger, 1965), *Belli Moda* (Silver Cloud, 1967) *Gandhada Gudi* (Sandalwood Temple, 1973), *Nyayave Devaru* (Is it fair, gods?, 1971), *Sampathige Savaal* (Challenge to Wealth, 1974), *Bangaarada Panjara* (Golden Cage, 1974) and *Gowdru* (2004). She was not averse to taking up any role given to her and in 2016, when she was in her seventies, she acted in a horror comedy film *Kalpana 2* directed by R Anantha Raju and *Cinema My Darling* directed by Gowrish Akki. She did one more film *Amma I Love You* in 2018 and before she had a stroke had attended shooting of a yet to be released film. She had chosen to remain single and had taken care of her family.

Jaya has won awards for the films *Prathigne*, *Bettada Huli* and *Nyayave Devaru*. For her performance in the movie *Gowdru*, Jaya won the Karnataka State Film Award for Best Supporting Actress in 2004-05. For her theatre work she received the Kannada Rajyotsava award in 2012. In March 2012 Karnataka Chalanachitra Academy organised the annual Belli Hejje (Silver Footprint) programme with focus on B Jaya. The exhibition gallery had all the photographs from her life and career. In her talk on the occasion Jaya

could easily remember her dialogues from the early plays she had acted in and delivered the dialogues just the way she had done so many years ago. Kannada Actor Dwarakish who also spoke on the occasion said that B Jaya was the Aishwarya Rai for his generation of actors and that he had admired her so much in the song sequence "*Mysore Dasara Bombe Neene Nanna Rambe*" (Mysore Dasara doll, you are my Ramba of heavens) in the film *Kanya Rathna* released in 1963, that he wanted to act at least in one film with her. Well-known Director Puttanna Kanagal gave him that chance in the film *Belli Moda*.

Jaya had a stroke and was treated for it for some time and later admitted in the hospital but passed away on 3 June 2021 three months before her 77th birthday. There was a lot of media anger about her body being kept near the garbage on the road outside the Chamrajpet crematorium. Her brother Mallesh who is a Director and his daughter later clarified that due to COVID lockdown rules they were not allowed to do the funeral rites inside the crematorium as strict timings were given and were asked to perform the rituals outside before sending the body inside and so they had to lay her body on the road and perform the rituals and that there was a garbage dump on the road.

The reasons given by them are very valid. The truth is that whatever one's life one can never predict where one's dead body would be placed. It is sad that for Jaya it was the road with an overflowing garbage dump.

C S Lakshmi

A Dancer of Repute: Surekha (1955-5 June 2021)



Surekha was a strained dancer. She was a trained Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi dancer. She also acted in Kannada films but never in lead roles. She played minor roles in Dr Rajkumar

..... *Operation Jackpot Nalli C.I.D 999* (C.I.D 999 in Operation Jackpot, 1969), *Kasturi Nivasa* (House of Fragrance, 1971), *Sakshatkara* (Epiphany, 1971), *Trimurthy* (Three, 1975) and *Olavu Gelavu* (Pendant to Victory, 1977). The other films she acted in which people remember are *Bhakta Siriyala* (1980), *Banker Margayya* (1983) and *Aleman*

housewives participate in PUNCHAM. She continued her social work even at 70. She was also on the committee of Paropkar, a religious organisation.

The PUNCHAM website says that within the first 33 years PUNCHAM built up 12 Cold Drinking Water Fountains (Pyaus) in the metropolis of Mumbai. During this tenure, Rani Poddar extended her helping hand to the Blind Association, F.P.H. Children Orthopedic Hospital, Mankhurd Children Home etc. Two Matador vans and an ambulance were also donated by her. She continued to work hard throughout her life and kept herself active especially in the education and medical sectors. Every year she used to hold an eye camp where free eye check-up was done and free spectacles were distributed. She did not think of any work as big or small. She also had always been on the forefront for the Beti Bachao Beti Phadao Abhiyan and also a strong believer in the clean Mumbai Green Mumbai initiative.

She has received more than twenty prestigious awards including the UDAAN award conferred by the *Nav Bharat Times* for the Woman of Substance received from Hon. Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Angel of the City honour from *Times of India* group in recognition of her social services in 2009 and the “World of Priyanka Award” for Lady Industrialist Lifetime Achievement Award instituted by *Rashtriya Masik Patrika* which she received from the hands of Smt. Radha Shankara Narayanan Hon. Lady Governor of Maharashtra, in June 2011.

PUNCHAM feels that her greatest reward and recognition has been the lakhs of poor people of Mumbai who quench their thirst daily from the cold drinking water fountains that she had made and has maintained at various places in the Mumbai metropolis, where she ensured regular supply of free drinking water. It is as a quencher of thirst that many remember her.

—Priya D’Souza



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The Best Trophy of Milkha Singh: Nirmal Kaur Saini (8 October 1938-13 June 2021)



Nirmal Kaur was a former athlete and Director of Sports for Women in Punjab. She was born in 1938, in Sheikhpura, Punjab (now part of Pakistan). She graduated from Panjab University with a master’s degree in Political Science in 1958. Nirmal Kaur was also a volleyball player and captained the national team and it was at this time that she had met the legendary player Milkha Singh. The couple had first met in Sri Lanka in 1956, where Milkha had gone to compete in an athletics competition and Nirmal was captaining the Indian women’s volleyball team. A student of College of Physical Education, Patiala, Nirmal would meet Singh again as a student. In 1960, Kaur had joined as Deputy Physical Education (DPE) Instructor at Lady Irwin College, Delhi, and it was this time in Delhi that Milkha Singh met Nirmal Kaur and it was also a time when an affluent Delhi family wanted to get their daughter married to Milkha. Punjab Chief Minister Partap Singh Kairon intervened and asked Milkha to marry Nirmal.

Partap Singh Kairon had to convince her Hindu parents who opposed an inter-caste marriage, to let her marry Milkha Singh. After the wedding, in 1963, they moved to Chandigarh and stayed active, working in the field of sports till the 1980s. In Chandigarh, she had worked as Director of Sports for Women and Joint Director Sports. Nirmal was also associated with the affairs of the Milkha Singh Charitable Trust and would often help needy players and children.

Nirmal and Milkha Singh valued each other a great deal. Speaking to *The Indian Express* (Chandigarh) in 2019, she had said that even after 55 years of marriage, ‘every day was Valentine’s Day’ for the two of them. (Nitin Sharma, “Nirmal Milkha Singh dies of Covid: ‘She has been the biggest trophy for me’”, *The Indian Express* (Chandigarh), January 14, 2021).

Nirmal, whom Milkha always called Nimmi, passed away in hospital due to COVID in June 2021. She was right about every day of their married life being a Valentine’s Day for a few days later, her husband Milkha Singh followed his Nimmi. They have a son and three daughters.

—Priya D’Souza



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The Actress Who Played Beethoven for Satyajit Ray: Swatilekha Sengupta (22 May 1950-16 June 2021)



Swatilekha Sengupta, the actress and dramatist who worked in Bengali theatre and films died at the age of 71 due to kidney disease. She had become famous as Bimala, in Satyajit Ray's *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World, 1984). After Shiboprasad Mukherjee and Nandita Roy's

blockbuster *Bela Seshe* (At the End of the Day, 2015) where she had acted again with Soumitra Chatterjee 30 years after *Ghare Baire*, she had reminisced about her life and her acting career to *E Times* which was published on January 12, 2017.

She was born in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, and did well in her graduate studies and Master's at Allahabad University, even working as a lecturer for three months. She then came to Kolkata and got involved with the theatre group Nandikar. She worked under the direction of Rudraprasad Sengupta, whom she went on to marry. Satyajit Ray saw her in a small role in Shambu Mitra's play *Galileo* and offered her a part in *Ghare Baire*. She recalled how she had gone walking to meet him on a day when everything was closed and how she played Beethoven for him on the piano in his room. She had enjoyed playing Bimala but was devastated after local reviewers criticised her but recovered when Satyajit Ray showed her international reviews which praised her acting. She was gratified when Ray himself said, 'She is my most intelligent actress.'

Her husband Rudraprasad was supportive of her film career, even for her kissing scenes in *Ghare Baire*, which had drawn a lot of flak. She did not act on screen too much again because she was offered only roles like the character Bimala. She acted in *City of Joy* (1992) and many years after that worked in the film *Chauranga* (Four Colours, 2014) produced by Onir, known for his film *My Brother Nikhil* (2005). *Bela Seshe* came after that and *Barof* (Snow, 2019) and *Dharmajuddha* (Crusade, 2020) were her more recent films. She was very involved with Bengali theatre and used to write screenplays too. Her daughter Sohini Sengupta is also an actor in films and a theatre director.

Swatilekha was honoured with Paschim Banga Natya Akademi Award and West Bengal Film Journalists' Association Award. In 2011, she received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for her contribution to Indian theatre as an actor.

Priya D'Souza

A Versatile Singer Silenced: Tapu Mishra (11 January 1985-19 June 2021)



Singer Tapu Mishra from Orissa, belonged to the Odia film fraternity. Born in Sambalpur, she had started taking lessons from Prabhudatta Pradhan and Gyan Ranjan Mohapatra at a very early age of 5. Tapu Mishra completed her

degree in music from Sambalpur University. She did her further studies at Gandharva Mahavidyalaya.

Her career as a playback singer began with Odia film *Kula Nandan* (Joy of Family, 1995) and later she sang in 150 films. Some of the films include *Mate Ta Love Helare* (I Love It, 2008), *Dream Girl*, and *Love Dot Com*. With more than 500 songs in her career including bhajans and albums Tapu was a versatile singer. Apart from Odia she also recorded songs in Hindi, Bengali and other regional languages. She got married to actor Deepak Pujahari in 2018. She had been honoured with four State film awards.

She was infected with the virus on 19th May 2021 and was under home quarantine. Her oxygen level dropped to 45 and she was shifted to a private hospital on 31st May. Her reports came negative but her lungs were infected and she had to be later put on a ventilator. After fighting for nearly a month she passed away in Bhubaneswar. Just ten days before her own demise she had lost her father to COVID.

C M Naveen Patnaik, Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, and OFDC Chairman Kuna Tripathy paid tribute to her online. Many Odia film industry members attended her last rites and some paid tribute through social platforms.

She was just 36 and her death at the prime of life when she still had a long and illustrious career ahead of her must have come as a shock to her family and friends. A voice like hers silenced is a big loss to the Odia film industry and to her many fans who enjoyed her music.

Pooja Pandey

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Tides of Life: Reshma (1978/1979-21 June 2021)



Reshma, for some strange reason, is a common name adopted by many actresses. There is a porn star in Malayalam in that name. There are other Reshmas too. Hence when Reshma's death news was announced she was referred to as actor Hamsavardhan's wife. She had changed her name to Shanthi after marriage but some say that she was born as Shanthi and that Reshma was her stage name. Actor Hamsavardhan is the son of the famous actor of yesteryears, Ravichandran. Hence news channels referred to her respectfully as Ravichandran's daughter-in-law.

Reshma alias Shanthi gained a lot of respect in the films she chose to act in also. She was not even twenty when she made her debut in the film *Kizhakku Mugam* (Eastward, 1996) opposite actor Karthik in the lead role, directed by M Annadurai. The film was a success and was followed by *Poomani* in the same year directed by Kalanjiam where she acted in an important role with Prakash Raj and Devyani in the lead roles. She began to shoot for the film *Nandha* featuring actor Ramki but the project was shelved.

In 1997, she began to work in the film *Aththai Ponnu* (Paternal Aunt's Daughter) alongside Vignesh but it was given up midway, during the shooting itself. In 1996, she had also been signed for the film *Vennila* to act with Vignesh, Ajith Kumar and Amar Siddique. But the film got into financial problems and was finally released only in 2003 with the title *Ennai Thalatta Varuvaayaa?* (Will You Come to Sing Lullabies for Me?) In 1999, she was cast in N S Madhavan's Tamil film, *Maravathe Kanmaniye* (Don't Forget, Dear), with Vineeth, Karan, and Ravali in the leading roles. Reshma was also part of R K Suresh's *Nee Enthan Vaanam* (You Are My Sky, 2000). The following year, she acted in V C Guhanathan's romantic drama film, *Vadugapatti Maapillai* (Groom from Vadugapatti), together with Hamsavardhan. Later she married Hamsavardhan.

She has also acted in Kannada films *Anna Andre Nammanna* (My Elder Brother is Great, 1997) *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1998) *Drona* (1999) *Jee Boomba* (2000) *Poli Bhava* (False Emotion, 2000) *Hagalu Vesha* (Daytime Disguise, 2000), in the Telugu film *Ulta Palta* (Straight and Reverse, 1998) and in the Malayalam films *Sravu* (Shark, 2001) and *Nagaravadhu* (Bride from the City, 2001). She also acted in the popular Tamil serial *Alaigal* (Tides) in 2001 on Sun TV.

She was hospitalised for COVID and brought back home after she was cured but later developed complications and

passed away at a young age, leaving behind her two sons and a daughter and her husband.

—Pooja Pandey

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Breaking Barriers with Music: Parassala B Ponnammal (29 November 1924-22 June 2021)



There were many things that Ponnammal, the doyenne of Carnatic music, did in her life which have gone down in the annals of not only music but also women's history. That music gave her strength to script history many times in her life makes her life an extraordinary one.

In 1924 when a daughter was born to Mahadeva Iyer and Bhagavathy Ammal in Parasala in Thiruvananthapuram district, they would not have imagined that this daughter of theirs would be the first woman to lay the road for many women to follow. She began to learn music as a child of seven which was not unusual for most girl children were taught music. But pursuit of music became her passion in life and she quietly broke many barriers to make that passion an enduring one. She was the first woman student to enter the Swathi Thirunal College of Music in the early forties when she was a teenager and she did the Guna Bushanam and Guna Praveena courses and graduated with a first rank.

Ponnammal took part in a music competition organised as part of the birthday celebrations of Sree Chithra Thirunal. She won the gold medal and she was only 16. She began to give public performances even at that young age. She also took up a job as a music teacher when she was just 18, at Cotton Hill School in 1942 and soon she was a top grade artiste of AIR. In later years she was also a senior artiste of Doordarshan.

There were many more firsts to come. She was the first woman member of the teaching faculty in the Swathi Thirunal College of Music in Thiruvananthapuram. She was also the first woman principal to head the RLV College of Music and Fine Arts at Tripunithura.

Her gurus were the legendary Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavata, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and Papanasam Sivan. These gurus may have been the reason why she followed and taught the pure Carnatic music tradition of singing where the attempt was to convey the essence of a ragam or a musical composition without any compromise or any effort or resort

to please the audience. And it was this honesty and purity of rendition that brought her concerts in Kerala and also Tamil Nadu. Her renditions that have won acclaim are Ulsava Prabhandam, Navarathri Kriti, Meenambika Sthothram, Guruvayur Puresa Suprabhatham and Trisivapuresa Suprabhatham. Her singing the compositions of Irayimman Thampi and K C Kesava Pillai was also considered outstanding.

In 2006, she quietly opened another door for women. The Navaratri Celebrations of the Padmanabhaswamy Temple had a centuries-old tradition that proscribed women from performing. Ponnammal sang at the Navaratri Mandapam and put an end to that tradition. And she performed there for ten consecutive years. How could anyone stop an eighty-two year old woman whom Goddess Saraswathi had blessed with a voice that could render the deeper nuances of music, from performing at the Navaratri Mandapam? Or for that matter stop her from performing there every year till she was 92?

Many awards came her way and as always in the case of awards to artistes, they came late in her life. In the year 2009, when she was 85, she got the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Swathi Sangeetha Puraskaram and Sree Guruvayurappan Chembai Puraskaram. Another three years went by before she got the Sangeetha Prabhakara Award in 2012. And in 2015, when she was 91, they remembered to give her the Lifetime Achievement Award instituted by Chennai Fine Arts. A year later, in 2016, when she was 92, came the M G Radhakrishnan Award. She was 93 when she was awarded the Padma Shri in 2017 for her contributions to Carnatic music.

Not that these late awards mattered to her. She continued to give concerts even in her 80s and continued to teach music till the end. Throughout her life despite losing her husband Devanayakam Iyer, son D Ramaswamy and daughter D Kamala, she held on to music as her solace and expression. Among her disciples are the well-known musicians N J Nandini, M G Radhakrishnan, Dr J Omanakutty, Neyyattinkara Vasudevan and Aparna Murthy.

When death came to her at the age of 96, at her residence in Valiyasala, where she had rested for several months due to age-related ailments, one is sure there was a song on her lips to welcome the messengers of Yama.

—C S Lakshmi

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Death of A Friend of Transgender Artistes: Sadullah (Demise: 23 June 2021)



Kadalur Sadullah was known as a dancer and a folk theatre artiste who excelled in doing the role of a goddess and performing Bharatanatyam. Sadullah generously taught many transgender artistes the art of dancing and remained till the end a performer. Transgenders have a big role in keeping the art alive in rural areas. Many artistes like Sadullah live in poverty and remain backward and unrecognised but continue to do what they can for the arts.

Sadullah was generally referred to as Sadullah Amma by the transgender artistes who worked with Sadullah and who were Sadullah's students. But the truth was that Sadullah belonged to a Muslim family and faced a lot of obstacles in coming out as a woman. So Sadullah had to live as a man at home and only in the company of the trans-community Sadullah was a woman. Sadullah also had two children from a marriage. No one was sure of Sadullah's age but the tragedy is that Sadullah finally died without being either a man or a woman. It is not a tragedy of just Sadullah but an entire group of people who don't belong to gender categories which are normally accepted by the society.

—C S Lakshmi

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From Group Dancer to Character Roles: Gemini Rajeswari (22 September 1927-28 June 2021)



Gemini Rajeswari belonged to Karaikudi. She began to act in plays at a very young age. In the year 1943 the production work for the popular film *Chandralekha* began and Rajeswari made her entry into films as a group dancer in this film directed by S S Vasam which was released in 1948. Since she worked with Gemini Studios she was known as Gemini Rajeswari. She was asked to leave Gemini Studios when she acted in a play and broke the Studio rules of not acting in outside productions.

Rajeswari has danced in more than 400 films and acted in more than 1000 dramas. When she was acting in a play *Kannum Imaiyum* (Eyes and Eyelids) Director Joseph Thaliath spotted her and gave her a chance in the film *Kathal Paduthum Padu* (The Travails of Love, 1966). She did character roles in

films after that. She has acted in more than fifty films. Director K Balaji gave her roles in many of his films. But it was Director Bharathiraja who brought prominence to her through his film *16 Vayathinile* (At the Age of 16, 1977) where the character Vellaiammal that she played was much appreciated. Bharathiraja also cast her in his film *Mann Vasani* (The Fragrance of Soil, 1983).

She continued to act in TV plays and never really said no to a role in films. In 2013 she was seen in the film *Ethir Neechal* (Swimming against the Current) where Siva Karthikeyan played the lead role.

She died of heart attack at her Chromepet residence in Chennai at the age of 94. Those who have only seen her in character roles cannot imagine her as a young dancer dancing in a group in a film. One is tempted to go back and watch *Chandralekha* again to identify her.

—C S Lakshmi

JULY 2021

Death of A Scientist: Dr Sanghamitra Mohanty (1 April 1953-1 July 2021)



C OVID-19 has taken away many valuable lives and one of them is Dr Sanghamitra Mohanty, the former Vice-chancellor from 2011-2014 of North Odisha University (NOU). Sanghamitra Mohanty had a dazzling array of areas of studies in her specialised field of

study and a number of research papers that spoke of how focussed she was as an academic. She was a computer scientist. She had a MSc. and PhD in physics. She was a lecturer, reader and professor in computer science at Utkal University from 1986 to 2011 before her vice-chancellorship.

Sanghamitra Mohanty's fields of research were artificial intelligence, speech processing, image processing, natural language processing, fractal geometry, weather prediction, and high energy physics. In the course of her career she visited a number of institutions in India and abroad for academic collaboration and research. She held thirty Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) on Indian Language Technology Solutions.

As a professor she guided many students for both Master's

and doctoral studies. Along with her work as a teacher and guide she managed to successfully complete many important research projects of UGC and the Department of Electronics and Information Technology. After her tenure in NOU when she joined as senior professor and Dean of Faculty of Science at Sri Sri University, Cuttack, she had three decades of academics and research work behind her.

Many awards and recognition came her way in appreciation of her untiring work in her field of study. She was the recipient of the Samanta Chandrashekhar Award of Odisha Bigyan Academy of Science and Technology Department, Government of Odisha, for her contribution to engineering and technology in 2012. She was a Fellow of the Women's Engineering Society of United Kingdom (FWES). She was the President of Odisha Bigyan Academy from January 2016. She was also bestowed with the Doctor of Science (Honoris Causa) by Rama Devi Women's University for her contribution to science and technology.

Dr Sanghamitra Mohanty still had many more years when she could have peacefully watched all her efforts bearing fruit. It is a pity her life was cut short.

—C S Lakshmi

Dr Phyllis Rodrigues (16 May 1923-1 July 2021)



M uthiah Natarajan who was born and brought up in Mayiladuthurai formerly known as Mayavaram, received a message from Australia saying that Dr Phyllis Rodrigues had passed away on the 1st of July. Just two months before she had celebrated her 98th birthday.

In 1953 the Dharmapuram Adheenam also known as Dharumai Adheenam, a Saivite monastic institution, started a charity hospital in Mayiladuthurai. Dr Phyllis Rodrigues was the first doctor who was appointed and children born from 1955-1990, when she worked there, were all children delivered safely by her. She was considered an expert doctor in gynecology and people affectionately referred to her as "Vellaikaramma" (The white woman) or "Sattaikaramma", an epithet used for Anglo-Indians as many of them wore a dress which is referred to as *sattai*. *Sattaikaramma* literally means the woman wearing a dress. Muthiah Natarajan who owns the publishing company Sandhya Pathippagam, has fond memories of her and has written about her in his book on Mayavaram entitled *Mayavaram: Sila Nikazhvakalum Sila Ninaivukalum* (Mayavaram: Some Events and Some

Memories) published in 2020. It is interesting that someone who died in Australia in 2021 has left behind memories of her in Mayiladuthurai. Muthiah Natarajan writes about her in the chapter on the only Anglo-Indian family in Mayavaram. Excerpts from the chapter are given below:

“The person who picked me up first in her hands was an Anglo-Indian doctor. When my mother delivered me it was Dr Phyllis Rodrigues, an Anglo-Indian doctor, who had attended to her. I was born in Mayiladuthurai. I was born in advocate Baskaran’s house in Periya Kannara Street. I was born on the day of Arudra Darisanam. [Arudra Darisanam is a day dedicated to Lord Shiva’s Nataraja form. It is observed in the month of Margazhi which falls between 20 November-19 December]. Normally the deity of the local Shiva temple is taken on procession on that day. Within a few minutes of my birth the deity on procession was brought before the house of my birth. When Dr Rodrigues came out of the delivery room she saw Lord Nataraja in all his glory in front of the house. She immediately said, “Lord Nataraja has come. Christen the child by his name.” Although she belonged to a community that never set eyes on any god other than Christ, she had said that the child she was cradling in her hands should be named after a Hindu god. Maybe she felt that Lord Nataraja himself had come to bless the child. I have seen this kind doctor in my growing up years too. She was the one who delivered all the children in my house.

“Dr Rodrigues was the doctor who was in the charity Municipal hospital supported by the Dharmapuram Adheenam. The hospital functioned from a very ordinary building. Dr Rodrigues belonged to the only Anglo-Indian family in Mayiladuthurai. Her house was in the Mayiladuthurai Town Station area near the railway station. They said her husband was a railway employee.

“Dr Rodrigues always wore dresses. She normally came in a horse drawn cart. Covered carts were available on rent. Those were days when autos and cycle rickshaws did not exist in Mayiladuthurai.

“The peace and compassion that one finds on the face of Jesus one could see on her face. She had a large, heavy face with deep eyes. She was a quiet person who did not speak much. But one could feel that she cared for you. Even after forty years, I can only recall her as a true Christian who served this town. This Anglo-Indian family is not in Mayiladuthurai now. I had heard that the family had shifted to Bengaluru. My efforts to trace her and at least get a photograph of hers [for my book]

have failed. I am eager to meet the next generation of her family.

“I have not even stood before her any time and spoken to her. I was a small boy then. I had not even thought about her, nor had I met her in later years. But maybe she was silently communicating with me.

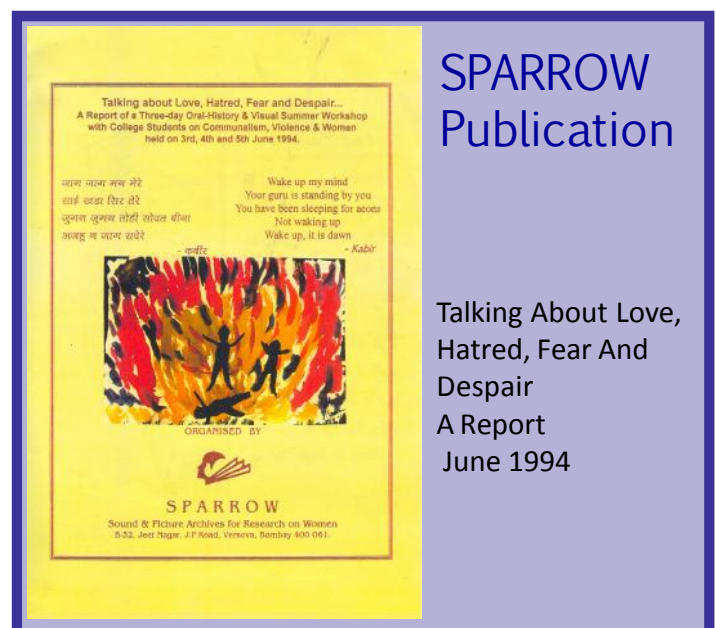
“The Anglo-Indian community was a community that did not mingle much with others and had its own cultural norms. The Indians did not respect them nor did the Britishers accept them. Dr Phyllis Rodrigues was a representative of this community who served as a doctor in Mayiladuthurai and she was much respected and admired for the services she rendered to all without any discrimination.”

It would make an interesting sociological study if we know how this Anglo-Indian family came to be in Mayiladuthurai, why Dr Phyllis Rodrigues chose to be a doctor, her memories of being a doctor in Mayiladuthurai and why they shifted to Bengaluru and eventually migrated to Australia.

What we do know is that a child delivered by her remembers her and maybe many more children delivered by her remember her too along with their mothers for Dr Phyllis Rodrigues was famous for always opting for normal deliveries and avoiding Caesarean deliveries.

C S Lakshmi

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A Unique Bionic Woman: Delia Narayan “Didi” Contractor (née Kinzinger) 1929-5 July 2021)



Anyone who has heard of sustainable buildings knows the name of Didi Contractor, the American self-taught architect who settled down in India and finally made Kangra Valley her home. Those who have read Kirin Narayan’s *My family and Other Saints* would know her for what she really

was: a spiritual seeker who was formally initiated as Ma Dayananda Saraswati in the Ganeshpuri Ashram in 1977 and who then had to leave the Ashram. In 1978, she settled down in Kangra valley, in a ramshackle mud house without running water in Sidhbari, a suburb of Dharamsala town, situated in the foothills of Dhauladhar mountains, in the Kangra district of the state of Himachal Pradesh. There was an artists’ colony in Andretta, nearby. It was here that she pursued “alternative energy projects and architecture using local materials, sending out astrological predictions, meeting more swamis and lamas... (Kirin Narayan, *My Family and Other Saints*, 2007, p.232). Here Didi even designed a solar cooker using wood, rice husk, old wool, blackened tin cans and a single sheet of glass. (Narayan, p.234) It was also here that Didi Contractor arranged a place near where she lived where her estranged husband Narayan Ramji Contractor could be taken care of and where he died in 2002.

Over the years, she built more than 15 homes and was associated with many public projects and came to be known for her low-waste buildings using natural local material. In many articles written on her she has spoken about how her association with social reformer and cultural connoisseur Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay inspired her to study traditional Indian crafts. Speaking just two years ago in 2020, to Siddharth Pandey for his article in *The Hindu* (“Our post-Independence cities are so ugly: Didi Contractor”, 8 July 2020) she had said that with the generous assistance of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, the then chairman of the Handicrafts Board, she had showcased textiles and crafts from all over India, “which helped turn the tide of elite Indian taste back towards Swadeshi.” She also had fond memories of designing the Juhu home and theatre of veteran actor and friend Prithviraj Kapoor which later became the Prithvi Theatre complex.

Speaking to Shiny Varghese for *The Indian Express* (“Unto the Earth: Didi Contractor’s oeuvre is a story of rare beauty”, January 14, 2018) she had said “One of the many things that’s wrong today is that people are not ready to accommodate their lives to the rhythm of the universe. We don’t see the

wisdom of nature. Technology should also be consistent with a humanistic agenda of making people comfortable with themselves, with one another and nature.” She had also spoken about Ananda Coomaraswamy. “I was hugely influenced by philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy’s ideas on art and swadeshi, and Gandhian ideas of appropriate technology. It gave me a vision of what India could be and what was fast disappearing,” Didi had said. She had also called herself a bionic woman in the course of her conversation as she had had both her knees and hip replaced, cataracts done, and been through radiation as well. But bionic also means someone with special powers and maybe Didi had the special powers to perceive nature and understand how to live with nature.

Didi was the subject of two feature films, *Earth Crusader* (2016), and *Didi Contractor: Marrying the Earth to the Building* (2017). She was the 2017 winner of the Women in Architecture, Design, Art and Engineering (WADE) Asia Life Time Achievement Award. In 2019 the President of India gave her the Nari Shakti Puraskar given in recognition of the achievements and contributions of women. It is here, in Sidhbari, that Didi breathed her last mingling her breath with the soil, bamboo and deodar trees she loved so much.

—C S Lakshmi

Pushpa’s Stories: Pushpa Trilokekar-Verma (1936-9 July 2021)



A skilled writer with a rare combination of multiple interests with deep knowledge in everything is how Pushpa Trilokekar can be described. As a journalist she started her career with Acharya Atre’s *Maratha*. She worked there for 20 years. After *Maratha*, during the period of Emergency, she joined *Pahaara*, an evening-daily as an editor, where she took a tough stand against the Emergency. Later, she got associated with several weeklies and dailies as a freelance journalist. She also worked in *Blitz* for some time. She wrote about arts and culture in weekly supplements of *Maharashtra Times*, *Weekly Shree*, *Lokprabha*, *Daily Krushival*, *Daily Lokmat* and *Daily Navshakti*.

She wrote a weekly column for *Daily Pratyaksha* for more than 12 years. Her articles received great responses from the readers. She travelled across India and studied Indian culture and folklore in great detail. She has written profusely

on Indian temples, popular culture, culinary culture, etc. Nature and its significance in social life were her favourite topics.

Pratimashastra (Iconography) was her subject of interest and research for which she travelled all over India. She travelled to Varanasi continuously for nine years and did research on the temples and culture there. She wrote for the documentary *Prakashnagari Kashi* (City of Lights–Kashi, 2017) based on her visits to Kashi. She was the first woman journalist who covered border area from Rajouri to Poonch. She and her husband, Pradeep Verma, started ‘Sanskriti Samvardhan Abhiyan’, through which they produced many documentaries like *Ganeshbhakti* and *Devishakti*. Her book *Devanchi Janmagatha* (Legends of God’s Birth, 2016) reveals her vast knowledge about Indian culture.

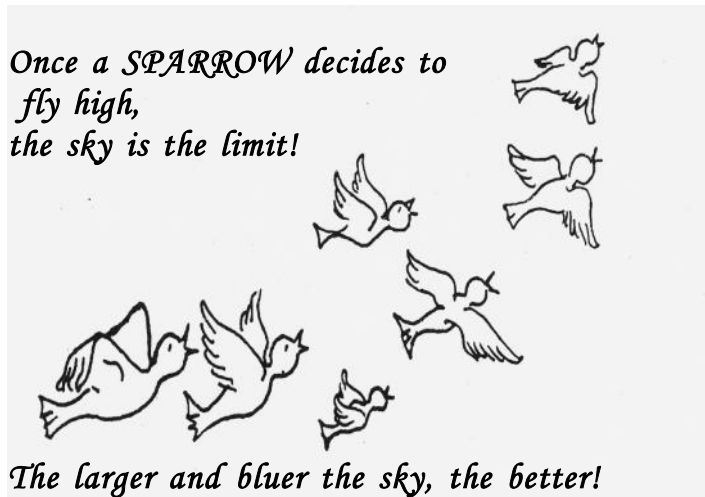
Apart from books on culture she also wrote books like *Gharbhar Dhoka* (Dangers at Home) giving tips on avoiding accidents at home. She also wrote a novel called *Kat* (*Conspiracy*), a poetry collection *Murkha Kavita* (Silly Poems), *Mission Antariksh* (Mission Space), a science fiction and *Gard Andhar* (Deep Darkness), a book on the underbelly of the narcotics world. Her book *Prithviche Marekari* (Killers of the Earth), focussed on environmental pollution. *Draupadi chi Thali* (Draupadi’s Plate), a recipe book penned by her, was a bestseller.

She passed away at the age of 85 due to old age. With her in-depth study of the subjects she undertook to write about she has made a vast contribution to the fields of journalism and literature. Hers is a lifetime spent in travelling, researching and writing.

—Sharmila Sontakke

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Woman with Red-Streaked Hair: Snehlata Pandey (1936-10 July 2021)



Snehalata Pandey was born in Pakistan with a rare heart defect and was not supposed to live beyond 10 or 15 but lived till the age of 85, when she had a heart attack.

She was married to Dr Sharad Pandey, one of India’s pre-eminent heart surgeons and they had two sons, including the popular actor Chunky Pandey. Snehalata herself was a physician and weight-loss consultant, with a number of Bollywood film stars and other socialites among her clients. She owned the weight-loss company Slimelle.

Her son Chunky said, “She was always happy; I never saw her sad in her life....She was a very positive person.” Her daughter-in-law Bhavana and granddaughter Ananya also said that she was a great inspiration to them. Ananya said, “She worked every day up until the age of 85, going to work at 7 a.m. in her block heels and red-streaked hair.”

—Priya D’Souza

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All Shall Live On in Words and Art: Pavithra Srinivasan (15 April 1981-16 July 2021)



There were many who admired Pavithra Srinivasan. Two friends who knew her closely speak about her and her demise. Sushila Ravindranath who calls Pavithra “a force of nature” is a senior journalist/columnist and Thirupurasundari Sevel or TS as she is called, is an Architect planner - Author - Storyteller - Traditional and native materials

& techniques researcher. For her Pavithra Srinivasan was the go-to person she always went to.

Pavithra Srinivasan was a force of nature. That is why it is very difficult to come to terms with her sudden passing away on 16 July. She was just 40. There is an orgy of grief from her friends and fans, all of whom she had touched one way or the other.

Her Facebook profile says she was a writer, artist, translator, historian, editor, journalist, farmer and not necessarily in that order. She belonged to the on line generation and was a popular blogger in her early days as a writer. She made many friends who remember her so fondly even though they had been out of touch for many years. Pavithra was also doing film reviews for Rediff.com. Her reviews were much appreciated and her love and knowledge of films brought her more friends.

I met her during my *New Sunday Express* days in the 2000s. Her first story was published the *New Indian Express* in 2013. I did not know then she was an artist as well. She wrote for children and young adults. She loved history which led her to write historical fiction titled 'Yester Tales' for young adults in *The Hindu's Young World*, the paper's supplement for children. Story telling for children is something she enjoyed doing. When she did a session for youngsters in the Madras Literary Society, the children would not let her stop.

It is amazing how many things she managed to do. She wrote for Chennai based entertainment and lifestyle magazines, she worked as fiction editor for Katha India, a publishing house devoted to translations, where she edited translations of writers such as Jayakanthan, Sundara Ramaswamy, Imayam and so on. She became well known for her translations that Westland, the publishing house, commissioned her to translate best sellers of Jeffry Archer and Amish Tripathi to name a few.

She loved Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* (Son of Ponni) from the time she first read it when she was around 12. Her passion for history was triggered by Kalki's masterpiece. She ended up starting to translate the multi-volume novel with her illustrations which was a labour of love. She took up Kalki's *Sivakamiyin Sabadham* (Sivakami's Oath) as well.

Pavithra then moved to a village near Tiruvannamalai with her mother to take up organic farming. She wrote about her farming adventures in *Daily City Express* calling her column, 'How I met my farm'. Their struggles were described with a lot of humour.

A few months after I met her I discovered she was an artist. She asked me for my address and sent me a set of micro mini cards and envelopes made in handmade paper designed and painted by her. All her friends were lucky recipients of these cards.

Pavithra was riveted and taken up by her city Chennai. She attended every event every lecture related to the city. She discovered North Chennai which till recently was not much explored. She had said in one her Instagram posts that she found the city she sought in the bustling streets of George Town, in the alleys skirting the Armenian Church, and edging Popham's Broadway .

Her miniatures captured the city heritage, concisely, precisely, but with a whole new perspective. She made buildings we see every day, people we deal with on the road side like the pot seller and the *paanwala* magical. The illustrations were done with a black Micron pen. A few were in colour.

Those who bought them are the fortunate ones. She priced them very reasonably and was never after money. She remained gentle and self effacing.

There were so many more books and illustrations bustling about in her young head.

You went away too soon Pavithra...

Sushila Ravindranath

In the year 2017, there was a message in Facebook from my favourite yester tales author and storyteller wishing me for my work about west Madras. That was who Pavithra Srinivasan was—so giving and always ready to appreciate and encourage someone abundantly. We planned to meet in Royapuram station (there are two miniatures based on the station), I was awestruck by the original miniatures which she had brought with her. I was so hesitant (since it would be the first exhibition of the miniatures) to ask for a exhibition of those in MLS (Madras Literary Society), but she graciously said yes and confirmed a date too. Amma (her mother) and her, with the support of MLS staff put together the exhibition and the staff still talk about both of them, how they were so kind and did a special tour of the exhibits for the staff too. During one of our calls, Akka mentioned about an idea for a heritage story-telling workshop which we could organise in MLS and the workshop happened later that month successfully with good participation. She had made handmade return gifts to all participants, a beautiful gesture of hers to anyone who touched her life—meticulously handmade miniature gifts and New Year cards. She came all the way to Annanagar for a talk by our friend, after that we visited the remains of the 1968 IITF (India International Trade Fair)—she took pictures of the entrance mural of the exhibition and this was added to her 'to-do' miniature list. Another unforgettable recent conversation with her was about the Madras mini diaries and the short stories on Madras, and how it could actually be a game for children; the next discussion which was planned next week with a prototype is something which can't happen now. More than a friend, she was a sister, my go-to person for anything whether it is Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan*, organic farming, miniatures, board games, anything about Madras art or anything I was working on for kids which needed a fresh perspective. I will treasure what she wrote for our travelling Madras logbook on why, when



and how #Madras inspired her, the last line so typical of her style of writing: “But all shall live on in words, and art. After all, this is history alive and well, isn’t it? “

It was always handmade gifts with specific poems/notes for each person that she sent. This is the

last set she sent me 3 days before her demise for the moving museum we have.

She said, keep it safe—use it for your story-telling-for-kids workshop.

—Thirupurasundari Sewel

And then we have Pavithra Srinivasan speaking for herself and her love for Madras.

October 9th 2020

Original Instagramposts:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CGIFJ9ODQEh/...>

When #madrasinpired you?

I was in my mid-twenties when I began to understand the magnitude of Madras’s history and awe-inspiring heritage. Yes, it took me that long. Partly, it was because I arrived in Chennai only when I was nine. This itself was due to a cataclysmic change in the family: my father had been diagnosed with a brain tumour, and treatment required that we stay in Madras for extended periods. This meant that my early associations with this city were not exactly congenial. The very idea of Chennai filled with me nervousness, tension and a nameless fear; my memories of Chennai involved hospital visits and mournful relatives, rather than parks and beaches.

Slowly, though, that changed. I grew acclimatised with my environs. This was Velachery in the late eighties and early nineties... and let me tell you, a more god-forsaken place in those times you could never have found. Velachery was the boondocks; tales of bandits ambushing unwary travellers abounded and our relatives were fearful of visiting us “all the way in some other country,” as they jokingly referred to our locality. Buses were few and far between; the walk from the bus-stand to our home was almost 2 kilometres (a distance I traversed every day), and auto-rickshaw drivers flatly refused to ferry us because “*Adhu enga irukko?*” (“Who knows where it is?”)

But to me, slowly getting used to this most unlikely suburb, life was acquiring a steady rhythm. I found comfort in the stiff, warm winds of May afternoons, the cricket matches and local competitions run by neighbours; the street, full of newly emerging houses with fresh foundations in the clayey soil, which afforded an amazing site for hide-and-seek... even the prickly *karuvela* bushes made me feel at home. When I dream, my subconscious brain pulls up images of those carefree days when holidays meant long walks, cycle-rides through the grounds of IIT (with the odd deer-sighting) and picnic lunches on the terrace.

My family’s migration from a simple neighbourhood to a far more complicated city took nearly twenty years—both literally and figuratively. Our fortunes shifted once again and this time, flung us from Pallikaranai to Nungambakkam... and my journey of exploration finally began.

How #madrasinpired you ?

It began quite slowly, I remember—almost without my knowledge. Sometime in the early 2000s, Madras, as a city began to be celebrated. August 22, declared as Madras Day, began to gain traction as a cultural event; lectures, heritage walks and events sprouted, here and there—organised by true lovers of the city, often without fanfare or much advertisement. And I owe a good deal of my knowledge of these delightful little gems to the Madras Book Club. As a member, I could not only go to fun-filled meetings about books, but also glean wonderful nuggets of a city I’d been living in for years... but knew almost nothing about. And one of the first things I did, once I began to attend these events, was to make sure others knew about it—by blogging and writing about them extensively. One of the first I covered, with much enthusiasm, was one of A R Venkatachalapathy’s first (and later much celebrated) lectures on “*Gujili Ilakkiyam*”, Chennai’s famous street literature. One became many and before I knew it, I was attending every event I could, from coin exhibitions, Chennai heritage walks, sampling Madras cuisine and watching street plays near Valluvar Kottam. And then, I discovered North Madras.

Until then, my explorations, conducted in solitary fashion, had mostly revolved around Central and Southern Chennai, out of necessity. I stuck to safe routes and even safer surroundings even as I tried to understand the city in which I lived. One evening, though, took me to a school in Royapuram.

The sky was overcast. The streets were narrow, houses and shops jostling for attention. Telephone lines fought with electricity lines for supremacy, while some buildings seemed to stand tall only by sheer obstinacy. Loud, vibrant voices filled my ears as I navigated narrow alleyways to my destination. There awaited one of Chennai’s renowned

chroniclers—Randor Guy—to take me and a handful of others on a journey through two of Madras's bloodiest murders: the Lakshmikanthan Murder, and the Aalavandhan Murder. It was one of the most thrilling evenings I'd ever spent.

As Randor Guy led us through the complicated cases, establishing background, pointing clues and setting the stage, nature was taking care of the ambience as well: outside. When Randor Guy described Lakshmikanthan travelling through gloomy streets, the atmosphere outside darkened; as he mentioned the attackers approach, lightning flashed and the lights went out; when Lakshmikanthan was stabbed... our ears were deafened with a crash of thunder.

It was in that instant that I fell in love with Madras.

And I decided to explore my city in earnest.

Why [#madrasinspired](#) you ?

Now that I knew that Madras was built on stories— and not macabre murders but others as well, my hunger grew. I was no longer satisfied with looking through glass and from outside buildings; I wanted to pierce the armour, so to speak. I needed to know more about Madras than what the books said, or lectures demonstrated. Beyond halls, rooms and theatres.

And I found the city I sought in the bustling streets of George Town. In the alleys skirting the Armenian Church and edging Popham's Broadway. In the narrow lanes of Chintadripet. In the airy halls of the Madras Literary Society. On the banks of the Cooum. Atop the Broken Bridge in Adyar. Inside the tiny rooms of the Srinivasa Ramanujan Museum. Amongst the divinely beautiful corridors of that architectural wonderland, the Chennai High Court. In the hoary, century-old railway station of Royapuram (which is said to be haunted, and I'm pretty sure I saw the ghost of some long-dead station master there) and so many more. Hey, I'm still not done.

And then, there came a point when, as awesome it was to explore, read, watch and listen... I wanted to do more. Why not share my joy with others? Why not tell them how I see this marvellous city? Why not show them my interpretation of it? And what better way than to write, draw and otherwise record these stories and experiences?

I began writing stories for children when I was 13, and published when I was 22— and my interest in history (especially Chozha history) pushed me towards writing historical fiction. When I started my column of historical stories for children in *The Hindu's* Young World, the way was paved for stories on Madras. I wrote about the birth of the city. Its French connection and how, but for an accident of history, we might all be speaking French. Clive's escape from the city. Srinivasa Ramanujan's sojourn here and others.

Soon writing led to art... and I began to record Madras's heritage sights—through miniatures.

Sometime in 2014, I began to draw the beautiful historical structures of Chennai, both prominent and otherwise, on palm-sized (and sometimes smaller) paper, measuring roughly 2.5" X 4.5". I loved, absolutely loved the process in which something I saw, in front of my eyes, could transform into miniature art. From random attempts, it soon grew to an obsession to record as much of Madras as I could, the results of which you see here. Some landmarks, like the Senate House and Victoria Memorial Hall still exist. Some, like the house Nethaji Subash Chandra Bose stayed in, in Thiruvallikkeni, have been demolished.

But all shall live on in words, and art.

After all, this is history alive and well, isn't it?



The Grand Dame of Ahmedabad: Gira Sarabhai (11 December 1923-15 July 2021)



I feel quite ashamed to say this but I have been to Ahmedabad only twice—once for some seminar and the second time to meet Saroop Dhruv, the well-known writer and a friend. No, I did not visit the Calico Museum of Textiles both times. I was told it was not easy to gain entry and one had to give a valid reason. What valid reason could I give except that I wanted to meet and interview Gira Sarabhai? I knew nothing about either architecture or textile designing but she was someone whose life and thoughts I wanted to archive in SPARROW. Also I secretly hoped that I could persuade her to design the Museum of Women's History and History of Women that was and still is, my dream. Sometimes an entire life goes by before you muster the courage to talk to someone who has contributed immensely not only to some specific subject but to women's history. And so the visit to Calico Museum of Textiles and the interview with Gira Sarabhai never happened. And now Gira Sarabhai is no more. She lived a long life and died just five months short of her 98th birthday.

Reading Laila Tyabji and Ritu Sharma's tributes (*Architecture and Design*, 18 July 2021 and *Indian Express*, 16 July 2021) to her one realises what a great loss it is for one as a person and for SPARROW that one could not document the life and work of a person whose name would figure every time someone spoke of either Ahmedabad or of Indian art heritage. Laila Tyabji speaks of her as someone who inspired all of them giving them vital information to work in their chosen sector, "collecting, documenting and conserving Indian textiles and their wealth of embroidered, printed, painted, patterned, and tie dye resist skills and motif traditions." Those in the design space in contemporary India Laila Tyabji says, "owe a huge debt of gratitude for her selfless, perfectionist single minded work."

The two major icons of Ahmedabad—National Institute of Design and the Calico Museum of Textiles—owe their creation to Gira Sarabhai. Gira Sarabhai was the youngest of the eight children of Ambalal and Sarla Devi Sarabhai. Gira Sarabhai trained under American architect Frank Lloyd Wright in Wisconsin. Maybe her architectural background gave her a different sense of space which helped her to design the two institutions in unique ways. Her training abroad, instead of taking her away from things Indian, made her an ardent admirer and archivist of Indian art and craft. And she

instilled this love for Indian craft in many young designers while working with them and mentoring them. The textile museum was housed in the former Sarabhai home aptly called The Retreat. When her father Ambalal founded the Calico Mills, the textile museum was named after it. And a retreat it is for all those who want to spend time to not only learn and know about the beauty and variety of Indian textiles but also understand how to preserve them.

When someone like Gira Sarabhai passes away after living a long meaningful life which has touched so many people, one tends to say that an era is over. But the Gira era will live on as long as the beauty and variety of Indian textiles exist and there would be those who care to not only preserve them in museums but also actively encourage them to grow and develop.

—C S Lakshmi

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The One Who Became Old Too Soon: Surekha Sikri (19 April 1945-16 July 2021)



Many remember Surekha Sikri only as 'Dadi Sa' of the T V serial *Balika Vadhu* which is a pity for those in Delhi and familiar with National School of Drama plays and those living around Yari Road, Mumbai, used to know her as a vivacious, spirited person. She got old in real life much later than in her films and T V shows. It is a pity she never got a lead role to show her real talent but life in films and T V is never what an artiste really wants.

Surekha Sikri made her debut in 1978, with the film *Kissa Kursi Ka* (Story of the Chair). She won the National Film Award for Best Supporting Actress thrice, for her roles in *Tamas* (Darkness, 1988), *Mammo* (1995), and *Badhaai Ho* (Congratulations, 2018). She had followed up her film career with Prakash Jha's *Parinati* (The Inevitable, 1986), Saeed Mirza's *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (*Don't Cry for Lame Salim*, 1989), Shyam Benegal's *Mammo* (1995) *Sardari Begum* (1996), Aamir Khan-starrer *Sarfarosh* (Fervour, 1999), *Hari-Bhari* (*Verdant*, 2000), *Zubeidaa* (2001) and Rituparna Ghosh's *Raincoat* (2004). But it was the prime time soap opera *Balika Vadhu* (*Child Bride*) that really made her a household name. After that it was only Ayushmann Khurrana-starrer *Badhai Ho* that brought her back to films. Her performance in the film brought her a lot of praise and the

third National Award and one was hoping it would mean many more such films although it was only a feel-good family film. But she had a brain stroke after the film and had to come to receive the award in a wheel chair.

In probably her last interview given to Seema Sinha in 2020 during the National Film Award function (republished in *First Post* on 16 July, 2021) she spoke about her film career that never really took off. She said, “But my work on the big screen has been sporadic. It was in bits and pieces, a small role here, and a small role there. I haven’t done many movies. I could have done something much better but it didn’t happen due to certain misunderstandings. Also, I am very bad at networking, and kind of stay away from people.”

In the interview she said she was yearning to do some meaty roles but that a couple that came her way she could not do because she was still in her wheel chair. It is a pity her dreams for doing roles that would challenge her remained unfulfilled and that during the lockdown period she had a cardiac arrest and died.

—C S Lakshmi



Marching for Women: Shashi Sail (20 November 1946-18 July 2021)



When the National Conference on “Perspective for Women’s Liberation Movement in India” was held at Khar West Dharmashala in Mumbai in December, 1980, the sessions always began with songs in many languages as Vibhuti Patel recorded in one of her posts on Facebook. Shashi Sail was there and

she, Ilna Sen and activists of the Chhattisgarh Mines Workers Union sang songs in Hindi.

Shashi Sail belonged to the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI). Her husband Rajendra Sail was the president of the Chhattisgarh chapter of People’s Union of Civil Liberties. Both of them worked in Raipur, Chhattisgarh. They were human rights activists who stood by the Chhattisgarh Mine Workers’ Union. Their fight was also for bonded labourers and the Adivasis fighting for their land rights. Shashi also took up the cause of the unorganised sector of workers in the several industries in Raipur which is known for its over two hundred steel mills, coal and aluminium industries and several factories. Shashi took up the task of organising them. Similarly she also took up the more difficult task of organising the domestic workers. But Shashi is known more for her work with rural and Adivasi women. Two years before she

came to the national conference in Mumbai, she had formed the Chhattisgarh Mahila Jagruti Sangathan. She held training sessions for Adivasi women and initiated discussions on issues that concerned them as women.

Working with rural women brought her closer to the problems faced by them when property issues came up in the family. The speech she gave at the Indian Law Institute, New Delhi, on 30 May 2013, in a meeting organised by the Human Rights Defense India (HRDI) on “Witch Hunting In India: A Scandalising Reality,” elaborated how witch hunting was practised against women and the cases her organisation took up.

The World March of Women is a feminist and anti-capitalist movement, organised in 58 countries and territories, coordinated by an International Committee and the International Secretariat, currently based in Mozambique. Shashi Sail was one of the founders of the World March of Women. Writing about her on its portal, Capire, a media tool created in 2021 to echo the voices of women in movement and an initiative coordinated by the World March of Women, said that she took up the challenge of organising the first International Meeting outside Montreal and that her contributions to the debate on violence against women in the South Asia region had marked the history of the movement.

Rajendra Sail passed away in 2020 and Shashi followed him in 2021, a year and a half later. Her contribution to the women’s movement and the fights she took up for rural women are part of the history of the movement.

—C S Lakshmi



SPARROW E-BOOKS

Ananya, the Incomparable: Anannayah Kumari Alex (1993-20 July 2021)



Anannayah Kumari Alex was unique in many ways. She was into professions not normally associated with transgender women. She was a 28-year-old radio jockey, make-up artiste and anchor who had been fighting for gender equality. Not only that. She thought she would enter politics to strengthen her

fight for gender equality.

From an interview she gave on March 22nd one can make out that Anannayah's story was not very different from that of many other transgender women. She came from Perumon in Kollam. Her family was like any other family in Kerala. When she told them about her need to be a woman they could not accept her gender identity. She said in the interview that the discrimination was so bad at home, in her town and even in her school that she had to drop out of Class 12 and run away.

One does not know why she decided to go to Bengaluru but that was where she went and spent some time. But she decided to return to Kerala and find a space for herself. Popular transgender make-up artist Renju Renjimar adopted her. Anannayah worked hard to make a different kind of space for herself in the public sphere. She became a radio jockey and a make-up artist and was popular enough to be chosen to anchor the 25th edition of the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) in Ernakulam and Thalassery which took place in February 2021.

The idea of entering politics came after all this. She thought that being in politics and representing transgender people would give her the opportunity to speak for them and fight for their causes and fight for policies where they would matter. She was very clear about where she would contest from and why she would contest. She chose not to contest from Kollam; instead she decided to contest from Vengara in Mallapuram. In the interview she said that since she was probably the first transperson to contest the Assembly elections in Kerala, she wanted to contest against a strong candidate and not a weak candidate she could easily defeat. She chose Vengara as Indian Union Muslim League (IUML)'s strongman PK Kunhalikutty was contesting from there for the United Democratic Front (UDF). She spoke confidently that she was giving him a chance to contest against her and not the other way around. She was happy that the Democratic Social Justice Party (DSJP) decided to choose her as one of the candidates. She was all set to fight the elections when she pulled out during the last week of the

campaigning following internal issues within DSJP.

Anannayah would still have been the transgender woman in Kerala who dared to enter politics. Unfortunately the sex reassignment surgery she had undergone in 2020 had not gone well. She had complained of serious health issues. Whatever the health issues were they must have been unbearable for Anannayah decided to hang herself in her home. Anannayah had been living with her partner Jiju for a while and she hanged herself when he had gone out on an errand. He came back to find her hanging. A few days later Jiju also hanged himself in Tiruvananthapuram.

Transgender women are fighting for so many things including the right to be married. Recently, on 27th November 2021, Kalki Subramaniam dressed up as a bride to emphasise the need for marriage for transgender women, when she spoke at the TEDx event at PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore. She said that for transgender women empowerment meant also the right to marry, right to adopt children and the right to create a family of their own. She said that like everyone else they too deserved to love and to be loved. Anannayah had everything going for her. She had found acceptance and got recognition and found love also. A pity her sex reassignment surgery went awry and her own body in a way betrayed her.

So came to an end the life of a transgender woman who dreamed of doing so many things, and that of her partner.

—C S Lakshmi

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Learning Never Stops: Bhageerathi Amma (1914-22 July 2021)



Bhageerathi Amma, hailing from Prakkulam in Kollam District, like the legendary Bhageerathan who never really gave up the effort to bring down the Ganges from the heavens, did not give up her dream of educating herself. As a child she had to give up her education after Class Three because she had to take care of her siblings after her mother passed away. But the yearning to study remained within her. How long can one keep a desire alive within oneself? Bhageerathi Amma kept it alive till the age of 105. At that ripe old age when people, especially women, are supposed to quietly await death and not aspire for anything worldly, Bhageerathi Amma felt the need to fulfill her childhood desire to study.

She made history by becoming the oldest student clearing the Fourth Standard equivalency examination conducted by

the State-run Kerala State Literacy Mission (KSLM) in 2019 at Kollam. It was difficult for her to write the exams because as she was old, her body had slowed down. But she came out with flying colours with 205 out of a total of 275 marks and got full marks in maths. She won the praise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and she was the recipient of the prestigious Nari Shakti Puraskar in 2020.

Bhageerathi Amma dreamed of passing the Tenth Standard equivalency exam but unfortunately death overtook her and she breathed her last at the age of 107. One is sure she would like to be remembered as a student and not as an old woman who lived up to the ripe old age of 107.

—C S Lakshmi

Life is Nothing without Mother Nature: Deepa Sharma (29 July 1986-25 July 2021)



“Life is nothing without Mother Nature” was the last tweet of Deepa Sharma. Coming from an Ayurvedic practitioner it is not something unusual to extol nature. But Deepa Sharma

was not saying this as a doctor but as the nature photographer who took a solo trip to Sanga Valley, Himachal Pradesh, to celebrate her 35th birthday. In one of her tweets she had said: “I am not an IAS / IPS, IIM, an Ivy League school pass-out, any celebrity or any politician, but I am confident. In a few years, people will know my name very well because of my good work and my professional attributes for our Nation and for #Women Empowerment.”

Her penultimate tweet was about Mother Nature. Minutes before she was killed along with others after her tempo was hit by falling rocks following multiple landslides in Himachal Pradesh’s Kinnaur district, she was posing before the Indo-Tibetan Border Police Force board and she tweeted that she was standing at the last point in India where civilians are allowed access. She added that beyond that point around 80 kms ahead was the border with Tibet which China had occupied illegally. It is a bright beautiful morning and the photographs are clear and Deepa is smiling in the photographs.

Friends and family have said that she was a lively person with helpful nature. She wrote poetry in Hindi and loved nature photography. She had bought a new SLR camera for this particular trip and was looking forward to her 35th birthday surrounded by nature.

Dying at such a young age and when one was least prepared for it is tragic but like her sister said, she was in the lap of nature, like she always wanted to be.

—C S Lakshmi

Abhinaya Sharadhe, A Mature Actress: Jayanthi (Kamala Kumari) (6 January 1945-26 July 2021)



Veteran actress Jayanthi as she was known in Kannada, Telugu and Tamil film industries passed away at the age of 76 at her residence in Bengaluru. She was born Kamala Kumari in Ballary. Her father Balasubramanyam was an English professor at St. Joseph’s College, Bengaluru. Her

mother’s name was Santhanalakshmi. Her parents separated and her mother brought her to Chennai and wanted to train her as a classical dancer. It is said that she was a great fan of N T Rama Rao as a child and that once she even visited a studio and he placed the child Jayanthi on his lap. A few films in which she did bit roles were not successful and she was even made fun of for being plump. Her actual film career, in fact, began at the age of eighteen. *Jenu Goodu* (Beehive) a Kannada film produced in 1963 directed by Y R Swamy in which Pandari Bai played the lead role was her debut film. In a career that spanned five decades, Jayanthi acted in more than 500 films. Immediately following her debut film came *Chandavalliya Thota* (The Garden of Chandravalli, 1964) based on the novel with the same name written by Talukina Ramaswamayya Subba Rao, popularly known as Ta Ra Su, who was considered the writer who brought the Navya (Modern) movement of Kannada Literature. Based on the Gandhian theme of rural villages and poverty, the film directed by T V Singh Thakur, won several awards. Jayanthi acted with Dr Rajkumar, the super star of Kannada films in this film and her career in films took deep roots after this film for she acted with Dr Rajkumar in over thirty films after this film. The Tamil film audiences remember her as the actress who worked as junior actress and as the heroine with legendary actors like Gemini Ganesan, M G Ramachandran, Muthuraman and Jaishankar in films like *Padagoti* (Boatman, 1964), *Muharaasi* (Face that Brings Luck, 1966), *Iru Kodugal* (Parallel Lines, 1969) *Nil, Gavani, Kadhali* (Stop, Observe, Love, 1969), *Punnagai* (Smile, 1971), *Kanna Nalama* (How Are You, Well, Dear?, 1972) and *Velli Vizha* (Silver Jubilee, 1972). Many of the films she did were with Director K Balachander. In later

years, she did many roles in Kannada films that required a matured actress. She was married to film director Peketi Sivaram but the marriage did not last long.

Jayanthi also believed in using her status as an actress to support causes. In 2009, she supported the non-profit organisation TeachAids and gave her voice to an HIV/AIDS education animated software tutorial created by them.

When the news of her demise came one was reminded of 2018 when a rumour that she was dead was floated and her family had to deny the rumours. But sadly, this time it was not a rumour. Jayanthi, the Abhinaya Sharadhe, had really left this world.

—C S Lakshmi

A Fighter Against Violence Against Women: Anima Guha (26 March 1932-29 July 2021)



Anima Guha known for her articles on domestic violence, rape, women's empowerment, witch-hunting, foeticide, women's education and women and politics breathed her last on 29 July 2021. She has also

Tritiyo Biswbasinir America Darshan

(A Third World Resident's American Journey) *Mon Mor Uronia Pokhi* (My Mind is a Flying Bird) *Tritiyo Biswbasinir Dristit Nari Aru Samaj* (Women and Society in the Eyes of a Third World Resident) *Manuhor Chitrasalat* (People's Art) *Amuthi Abhigyata* (A Fistful of Experiences) *Sotor Biporite* (Against the Current) *Nil Akashar Tolot* (Under the Blue Sky) *Bipanna* (Endangered) and *Prajati* (Species) to mention a few. *Jibanar Jowar Bhatar Majedi* (The Tides of My Life, 2009), *Bakisowa Jiban* (The Rest of My Life, 2012) are her most recent ones. Anima Guha was also the president of Nirjatan Birodhi Aikya Mancha (United Forum Against Violence), a human rights group. As a social activist, Anima Guha was instrumental in moulding public opinion and demanding justice for Bornali Deb who was raped and murdered in a gruesome manner in Guwahati in the year 2002.

Anima Guha was the wife of the well-known historian and economist Prof. Amelendu Guha, author of *Planter Raj to Swaraj—Freedom Struggle & Electoral Politics in Assam*, which was published in 1990 and reissued in 2020. Prof. Amelendu Guha passed away in 2015. It was after her marriage that Amina Guha completed her Master's degree and later she received a PhD in anthropology from Pune University. She

worked as a pool officer at the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research from 1980 to 1984 in addition to being a postdoctoral fellow at the Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta (1976-1989). From 1985 to 1990, she worked as Research Associate of the University Grants Commission at Calcutta University's department of anthropology, focussing on the genetics of birth abnormalities and indigenous health practices among Assamese tribal communities and other backward populations.

Her work as a committed human rights activist made her death a great loss to many. Her death was consoled by not only Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma but also Indian People's Theatre Association, All Assam Students' Union, All Guwahati Students' Union, Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti and Chatra Mukti Sangram Samiti, Assam. As per her wish, her body was donated to the Gauhati Medical College and Hospital and her cornea was donated to Sri Sankardeva Nethralaya.

—C S Lakshmi

A Quiet Translator: Prabha Katyal (21 April 1935-29 July 2021)



Prabha Katyal was a retired teacher who did translations from Hindi. She lived in Kolkata. Those who have worked with her and known her remember the work she has done all through these years but Prabha Katyal herself seems to have been a self-effacing person who gave no details about herself even on her

Facebook page.

From information gathered from Anjum Katyal, her daughter-in-law, Prabha Katyal came to translation via years of working on rendering text entries and submissions for the *The Statesman* rural reporting award from Hindi into English. She worked as co-translator with Anjum Katyal, on *The Living Tale of Hirma*, the English translation of Habib Tanvir's play *Hirmaki Amar Kahani*, published by Seagull Books in 2004, and she also contributed significantly to the translation of *Bahadur the Wine-seller* (*Bahadur Kalarin* by Habib Tanvir). "An innate subtlety and sensitivity with respect to language were characteristic of her working style," says Anjum Katyal who has written this warm and affectionate tribute to her on her timeline:

"We lost this lovely lady this morning. We have been part of each other's lives since I was a teenager. A friend to giggle

with, who treated me with respect despite being so much older, whose home was always open and welcoming, who gave me so much support and love which was returned in full measure. Prabha Katyal, thank you for being my family. Our memories will remain.”

—C S Lakshmi

A Human Rights Activist Whom Even the Police Respected: Jayasree Kakumani (15 April 1960-31 July 2021)



Jayasree Kakumani, although known as a human rights activist and an advocate, was a person who was closely associated with people’s movements, trade unions and student leaders.

It is true that Jayasree was mentioned in a remand report with charges of provoking people against the government projects and thereby recruiting youth into Maoism in the Rayalaseema region and she was booked under sections of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act or UAPA, besides as many as eight sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The fact is that Jayasree’s activities belonged to a larger canvas of enhancing the quality of life of people. She raised her voice against all activities that degraded human beings from oppression of dalits and tribals to violence against women at home and outside. Along with environmental issues she also spoke about political murders in the Kadappa area, which was her base. Her own inter-faith marriage was a statement against all kinds of repression.

Jayasree was one of the 33 founding members of the Human Rights Forum and her death due to heart attack at the young age of 61 has left everyone in great shock. Gutta Rohith, an HRF member, posted a touching tribute to her and excerpts from it are reproduced here with his permission.

In his homage Gutta Rohith says that everyone always addressed her as ‘Jayasree madam’ with affection and that she would always respond with something in Rayalaseema Telugu. He says she always described herself as “Annala Lawyer” (Lawyer for arrested radicals). She had a warm association with the leader K Balagopal first with Civil Liberties Committee (CLC) and later as founding member of HRF. In the past decade much of her energy had gone into initially building a mass movement for opposing the Uranium

Mining in Thummalapalle in Kadapa district and later constantly struggling to open the eyes of the authorities to the havoc that it was creating. Gutta Rohith says that in a way everyone in Kadappa thought she was their own person. They approached her for any issue that concerned them whether it was domestic violence, liquor vends, displacement, environmental pollution or anything else that affected their life. They were sure that she would be able to set it right. He says her work won her admirers even among the most notorious of people and even the police so much so that that the police would invite her regularly to take classes for the police force.

Jayasree had an atrial septal defect (ASD) which is a hole in the wall (septum) between the two upper chambers of heart (atria) and it is a congenital defect. She had undergone heart surgeries twice but she had been so active for three decades that everyone had forgotten about her heart defect except her body. Jayasree was on her way to Delhi to take up the issue of mine workers’ employment when she had a cardiac arrest and passed away.

They say Jayasree had the habit of talking about her experiences as an activist in a humorous way not ever referring to the painful part of those experiences. Had she survived the cardiac arrest she would have probably joked about it. But those who worked with her and her family can only swallow their tears and continue her work for people. That is what Jayasree would expect of them.

—C S Lakshmi

“Jab tak zindagi hai daudhangi aur medals jeetungi”: Man Kaur (1 March 1916-31 July 2021)



Man Kaur followed her dreams even at the age of 93 and after that too! Man Kaur was a track-and-field athlete. Her coach was none other than her son Gurdev Singh.

She had said at one time, “Jab tak zindagi hai daudhangi aur medals jeetungi,” (So long as i am alive, I will run and win medals) Man Kaur had told *The Indian Express* in 2018.

Born in Patiala in 1916 Man Kaur was a caretaker in the Royal Patiala House of then Maharaja Bhupinder Singh and after that in Maharaja Yadavindra Singh, father of Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh. Her Husband Ranjeet Singh was one of the Khansamas (cook) of the royal house.

Man Kaur shifted to Chandigarh in 1960s. When her son insisted she get trained in running Man took her training very seriously and started getting training along with her son. She

never used to miss her training routine. After getting trained she participated along with her son in many competitions all over the world. She won her first medal in Chandigarh Masters Athletics Meet in 2007 and there was no looking back for Man Kaur after that.

In 2011, she won the gold in the 100 metre as well 200 metre race in the National Masters Athletics Meet, and in 2016 the American Master's Games became the fastest centenarian and also became the best athlete. Later in 2017 at the World Masters Athletics Championships in Auckland, she became the champion in the 100 metre in the 100+ category. In 2018, at World Masters Championship in Spain, she bagged the title in the 200 metre race and shot put event in the 100-104 year category, and in the same year, she also won four gold medals in the 60 metre shot put, javelin throw and 200 metre race event in the next edition of the games in Poland. Her last gold medal was at the age of 103 in Asian Masters Championship in Malaysia in 2019. She was very hopeful of competing in the 2020s World Masters Championship in Canada which got cancelled due to the pandemic.

Her diet also played a very important role in her training. Both Man Kaur and Gurudev Singh were invited to different universities to speak about their achievements and also their training and diet. As per those speeches, their diet included nuts and pulses, milk from homegrown soya, kefir, a fermented, probiotic-rich beverage, wheatgrass juice and chapatis made from sprouted wheat.

She was given the Nari Shakti Puraskar award on 8 March (International Women's Day) in 2020 by the President Ram Nath Kovind at Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi.

In March 2021 she celebrated her 105th birthday at her daughter's residence in Chandigarh.

In one of her interviews given in March 2021 in *The Indian Express*, she said "While I used to prepare for marathons and other walk events and my schedule consisted of visiting multiple cities before the lockdown, I missed all such competitions and meeting young athletes and fans during the lockdown. Inspiring young children and athletes also works as a tonic for me and missing all these things made me feel like a fatigued person. So I would spend more time reciting Sukhmani Sahib Path and meditate listening to religious scriptures, which helped us pass the months in lockdown,"

The oldest athlete passed away on 31st July 2021 after a month long battle due to gallbladder cancer. Her life should be celebrated and remembered not only by the world of sports but also others.

—Pooja Pandey

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AUGUST 2021

Red Sky and Golden Clouds: Kalyani Menon (23 June 1941-2 August 2021)



One knew Kalyani Menon as the singer who had done extensive work with music director A R Rahman. She had featured in A R Rahman's famed *Vande Mataram* album in 1997. And it had been a pleasant surprise to find her singing *Eppo Varuvaaro* with P Unnikrishnan in the Tamil Pop album *Ussele Ussele* of Srinivas (Srinivasan Doraiswamy) in 2001 where the popular classical

song of Gopalakrishna Bharati had been set to a pop-beat. It was a song in Jonpuri ragam that Madurai Mani Iyer had made his own years ago. Hearing it in Kalyani's and P Unnikrishnan's voice in a pop-beat was an entirely different experience. Kalyani was a 60 year-old singing a pop song! And in 2012 she was still working with A R Rahman and she surprised everyone with the *Phoolon Jaisi Ladki* (Flower-like girl) song in *Ek Deewana Tha* (There Was A Crazy One) singing the intervening Malayalam lines. And much later in 2018, just three years before her demise, she was working with the young composer Govind Vasantha for the *Kathale Kathale* (My Love, my love) song in the film "96". It was only when she passed away that one realised she was 80 years old and that she had lasted as a singer mostly in Tamil and Malayalam films and occasionally in Hindi and Telugu films for nearly four decades and that she was cinematographer and filmmaker Rajiv Menon's mother.

A graduate from Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, Kalyani's filmsinging career began in the seventies. She was a classical singer who had later got into singing for films. From the homage written in *The Hindu* dated 2 August 2021, one got to know that she had learnt music from Cherthala Sivaraman Nair, a disciple of none other than Tiger Varadachari. Classical musicians like V Dakshinamoorthy, S Ramanathan, and Pudhucodu Krishnamurthi who composed excellent music for films taught her music in later years. Her classical singing continued as can be seen in the devotional recordings of hers like *Sri Guruvayurappan Suprabatham* made in 1982, *Narayaneyam*, *Mukundamala*, *Mookambika Stotram* and several other devotional songs.

Her singing career in films began after she was left a widow at the age of 37. Her husband K K Menon, a Naval commander

with whom she had come to Chennai in 1975, died of a heart attack in 1978. In 1979 Kalyani was singing *Sevvaname Ponmegame* (Red sky, golden clouds) song written by Kannadasan and composed by Ilaiyaraja. She worked with all the three master composers Ilaiyaraja, M S Viswanathan and A R Rehman but with A R Rehman the most. Kalyani was a recipient of the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi Award for the year 2008 and was also honoured with the Kalimamani award of the Tamil Nadu Government in 2010.

One remembers her face by the brief appearance she made in Rajiv Menon's film *Kandukondain Kandukondain* (I Have Understood, I have Understood, 2000) as Aishwarya Rai's music teacher. From classical to pop-beat Kalyani covered a wide range of music in her life. With a life made richer with music and the life experiences that came with it, one can visualise her mingling into the red sky with golden clouds, like the *sevvaname ponmegame* sky described in the line that Kannadasan wrote in the song that she first sang in 1979.

—C S Lakshmi

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Her Poems and Her Songs: Padma Sachdev (17 April 1940-4 August 2021)



Padma Sachdev was known more as a poet. The image of her as a poet is etched on one's mind not only because she was the first modern woman poet in Dogri language but also because of the way others have seen her as a poet. That Hindi poet Ramdhari Singh Dinkar said, "After reading Padma's poems I felt I

should throw my pen away—for what Padma writes is true poetry" in his preface to her anthology of poems *Meri Kavita Mere Geet* (My Poems, My Songs) published in 1969, is often mentioned when Padma Sachdev is the subject of a conversation. For those who are more familiar with Hindi films also she was more of a poet for she wrote lyrics of songs like "*Mera chhota sa ghar baar*" (My small household) for the Hindi film *Prem Parbhat* (Mountain of Love, 1973) directed by Ved Rahi with music by Jaidev. She also wrote lyrics of two songs including the famous duet "*Sona re, tujhe kaise miloo*" (How will I meet you, golden one) sung by Mohammad Rafi and Sulakshana Pandit in the Hindi film

Aankhin Dekhi (Through the Eyes, 1978) directed by Rajinder Singh Bedi with music by J P Kaushik and wrote along with Yogesh Gaud the lyrics for songs which became very popular like *Neela Sajila Sa Yeh Aasmaan* (The sky is like a blue plaque) for the unreleased film *Saahas* (Bravery, 1979) directed by Bharat Dholakia with music by Ameen Sangeet. But Padma Sachdev was also a writer who has written some wonderful short stories.

Reviewing her book of translated stories *Where Has My Gulla Gone* (Ocean Books Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2003) in *Indian Literature* (Vol. 48, No. 2 (220) (March-April 2004), pp. 185-186) writer and translator Manohar Bandopadhyay says: "Numerous authors have drawn their themes from the tragic consequences of India's Partition. Padma Sachdev touches the chord of essential humanism bringing home the sufferance of people which is perilously alike on both sides of the border. The eight absorbing stories in the collection under review provide a revealing portrait of the repercussions of wars and Partition as also the women's predicament in the male-dominated society. The author also writes on the obnoxious phenomenon of terrorism which has played havoc on the lives of innocent youths."

Her taking up the theme of Partition is understandable for she was born in Purmandal, Jammu. Her father Professor Jai Dev Badu was a Sanskrit scholar and was killed during Partition when Padma was just seven years old. Padma Sachdev was also someone who was sensitive to how women lived their lives in various situations which can be seen in her story "*Caretaker*" where a woman longs for a home she can call her own. Her best Hindi stories are in the book *In Bin* (Without Them) which deals with the plight of maids who work in our households.

Padma Sachdev was a colourful figure in the literary scene whether she lived in Delhi or Mumbai. Several awards were bestowed on her. Beginning with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1971 for her poetry anthology *Mere Kavita Mere Geet* followed by Padma Shri in 2001, Kabir Sanman for poetry for the year 2007-8 given by the Madhya Pradesh Government, Saraswati Sanman in 2015 and the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 2019, she got the recognition she richly deserved.

The 81 years that Padma Sachdev lived were filled with valuable experiences which she shared with others in the form of insightful poetry and fiction. Hers was a life lived to its fullest.

—C S Lakshmi

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A Tragic Life: Saranya Sasi (1986-9 August 2021)



Saranya Sasi did not really have the opportunity to prove herself as an actor when death took her away. She did a few Malayalam and Tamil films initially like *Chacko Randaman* (2006) *Chhota Mumbai*, (2007), *Thalappavu* (*Headgear*, 2008) and *Bombay March 12* (2011). She hardly had any role in any of them and even the detailed cast and crew do not mention her. In *Ann Mariya Kalippilanu* (*Ann Mariya Is Angry*, 2016) she had practically no role and is not even mentioned. She acted in a Tamil film *Pachai Engira Kaathu* (*The Breeze that Was Pachai*, 2012) where again she did not have a role that can be mentioned. She probably survived through popular Malayalam T V serials like *Karuthamuthu* (*Black Pearl*), *Avakashikal* (*The Inheritors*) *Harichandanam*, *Seetha*, *Kootukari* (*Friend*) and *Rahasyam* (*Secret*).

She was an educated girl with a degree in literature from Calicut University. But it looks like life had been singularly unkind to her for her career was nothing to write home about. Her marriage in 2014 with one Binu Xavier, two years after she was diagnosed with brain tumour did not work out. She had to undergo eleven surgeries for her tumour and could not continue with acting. And after all that she had gone through she was hospitalised for COVID-19 and passed away at a private hospital in Thiruvananthapuram. She was only 35. Her life seems like a scripted tragedy over which she had no control. It is possible death came to her as a relief.

—C S Lakshmi

Listening to Jagjit Kaur to One's Heart's Content: Jagjit Kaur (November 1, 1931-15 August 2021)



Jagjit Kaur, who sang some memorable songs in Hindi films, passed away at the age of 89 in Juhu.

She was born into an aristocratic family in Kangmai, Punjab. She was encouraged to sing by her family and sang regularly at Lahore radio station and after Partition for Jalandhar and Delhi radio. The highlight of her youth was singing for Pandit Nehru who listened for an hour and a half to her.

Jagjit Kaur started her film career in 1953 with music director Ghulam Mohammed in *Dil-e-Nadaan* (*Innocent*

Heart). She married Mohammed Zahur Khayyam, a music composer, in 1954. Theirs was one of the first inter-faith marriages in the Indian film industry.

She sang many famous songs composed by her husband including “*Tum apnaranj-O-gham*” (Give me all your sorrow and grief) in *Shagoon* (*An Augury*,1964) and the beautiful, haunting “*Dekh lo aaj hum ko jee bharke*” (Look at me today to your heart's content) from *Bazaar* (*Market*, 1982). Her voice had a beautiful, melancholic quality said Muzzaffar Ali who also used her for the song “*Kaaheko byahi bides*”(Why did you send me in marriage to an alien land?) in *Umrao Jaan* (1981).

Jagjit Kaur and her husband set up the Khayyam Jagjit Kaur Charitable trust to support budding artists and technicians. She was pre-deceased by her husband in 2019 and their son Pradeep in 2012. The melodious songs she sang composed by her famous husband Khayyam will continue to haunt those who keep going back to unforgettable songs of Hindi films.

—Priya D'Souza

Fighting for Justice for A Sister: Sabrina Lall (1968-15 August 2021)



We all know Sabrina Lall as Jessica Lall's sister who fought for justice for her sister. Jessica Laal was a model in New Delhi who was shot dead in April 1999 when she was working as a celebrity barmaid at a crowded socialite party in an upscale Delhi bar. Sabrina fought a relentless

legal battle to get the accused Manu Sharma punished for his crime and did not rest till December 2006 when Delhi High Court had sentenced Sharma to life imprisonment in Tihar jail. The Supreme Court had upheld the verdict in April 2010. Sharma did walk out of Tihar jail in 2020 after the Delhi Sentence Review Board recommended his early release. By then Sabrina had reconciled to forgiving and moving on with her life. It is not that she did not have any more fight left in her, but the major part of her life had been spent in fighting for justice for her sister. She had also been generous with her help to make the film *No One Killed Jessica* (2011) and where she was concerned maybe a long chapter had come to a close and she had proved that one could fight for justice with no support from bigwigs and win the fight.

Writing about her in TNN on August 17, 2021 the film's director Raj Kumar Gupta, called her a brave heart, fighter and a real-life hero. He said, “In a city like Delhi, that had

more power than it could handle, she made us believe that courage is not something that can be bought by power and money—that courage is to stand up, face it and fight, no matter how strong the headwinds are. I also want to remember her as a gentle, beautiful, introvert soul—full of understanding and compassion for fellow human beings.” That is the way she would like to be remembered definitely.

Unfortunately when she was just 53, Sabrina died of cirrhosis of liver, where the pain is stabbing and throbbing. One wishes life had been kinder to her after all that she had gone through.

—C S Lakshmi

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Gingelly Oil As A Sobriquet: Chithra (21 May 1965-21 August 2021)



Chithra acted in a commercial for Idhayam Gingelly oil. Ever since the word Nallennai meaning gingelly oil, became a sobriquet added to her name and she came to be known as Nallennai Chithra. Not a very endearing one but she had to live with it and even announcements of her death were made mentioning her name as Nallennai Chithra. Wonder if she ever regretted doing that commercial!

Chithra acted in more than hundred films and she was only 56 at the time of her demise and her death has come as a shock to many. She was introduced as a child artist by the legendary director K Balachandar in his film *Apoorva Ragangal* (Rare Tunes) released in 1975. In 1978 she again acted as a child artist in the film *Aval Appadithan* (That is the Way She is) directed by C Rudraiah which was considered an *avant-garde* film. Later she acted in many Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada films. She shared screen space with famous actors Prem Nazir and Mohanlal in her first Malayalam film *Attakalasham* (The Concluding Act) in 1983. She has even acted in two Hindi films *Razia*(1982) and *Ek Nai Paheli* (A New Riddle, 1984).

In 1990 she got married to Vijayaraghavan and they have a daughter. She continued to act in films after her marriage but did not keep herself busy in films in many languages. She also started appearing in T V serials like *Kaiyalavu Manasu* (A Fist-sized Mind). In 2020, she did a mother’s role in the film *En Sangathu Aalai Adichavan Evan Da* (Who Beat Up My Union Person?) directed by Naveen Manikandan and was paired with the eminent actor Delhi Ganesh. It was her last

film released in her lifetime. She also has a role in the Tamil remake of Kannada hit film *Bell Bottom* to be released in November 2022. One was hoping she would again become busy in many language films when she had a sudden heart attack and passed away. Since she was a much-loved actor in all the languages she acted in, condolence messages have come from celebrities from all over the film industry.

—C S Lakshmi

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The One Who Wrote About Women Smashing Prisons: Gail Omvedt (2 August 1941-25 August 2021)



All those associated with the women’s movement, especially those in Maharashtra, knew Gail Omvedt for she was an integral part of it. She was both a sociologist and a human rights activist. Although she was an American and had a PhD from the University of Berkeley, she came to India for her area of study was the non-Brahman movement in western India. She lived in

rural India in a town in Maharashtra called Kasegaon with her husband, Bharat Patankar and her mother-in-law, Indumati Patankar, whom she greatly admired. She was an Indian citizen since 1983.

She was involved in Dalit and anti-caste movements but was also very much a part of environmental, farmers’ and women’s movements. As a sociologist and a person actively involved in everyday problems of people, she wrote numerous books on class, caste and gender. *We Will Smash This Prison* which was published in 1979 was the first book that introduced her to those in the women’s movement in Maharashtra. Many other books on caste and on Dr Ambedkar followed and *Understanding Caste: From Buddha To Ambedkar And Beyond* (2011) brought all her thoughts on the subject together in a concise manner.

She stood by Dalit activists when they took the stand that caste discrimination is similar to racism and endorsed their view. She was associated with many women’s organisations like Shramik Mukti Dal, Stri Mukti Sangarsh Chalval and the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi which dealt with several economic, social and political issues of women. Despite her activism she kept her academic life alive. She was a professor of sociology at the University of Pune, a senior fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Trust and a Research Director

at the Krantivir Trust. She was also an Asian guest professor at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen.

Many awards were conferred on her: Savitribai Phule Puraskar, Padmashri Kavivarya Narayan Surve Sarvajanik Vacanalay, Nashik, 2002, Dr. Ambedkar Chetna Award, Manavwadi Rachna Manch Punjab, 2003, ABP Majha Sanman Puskar, 2012, Matoshree Bhimabai Ambedkar Award, 2012, Vithal Ramji Shinde Award, 2015 and Lifetime Achievement Award from the Indian Sociological Society.

Dr Vibhuti Patel, who had worked with her closely, wrote a heartfelt tribute to her on her Facebook page on August 25, 2021, which puts in a few lines what Gail Omvedt meant to the women's movement:

"Dr Gail Omvedt, committed and courageous, prolific writer and powerful social scientist who brought to the fore Phule-Ambedkar legacy in the context of rising social movements in the post emergency period, is no more. Gail's close association with grass-roots movements of rural women-farmers, forest dwellers and women headed households and her involvement in the newly formed women's rights movement during late 1970s were captured in her engaging and inspiring first person account, *We Will Smash This Prison*.

"During 1970s, 1980s and 1990s we worked together in several padyatras, rallies, national conferences, gatherings in rural and tribal areas, travelled together to attend conference in Nandurbar, preparatory meetings for National Conference on Perspective for Women's Liberation Movement in India at Patna in 1988, shared rooms in seminars, study circles, and conferences which gave us opportunity to engage in lively discussions on political economy of caste-class-ethnic issues determining women's predicaments, property rights of tribal and rural women, need for rural-urban solidarity and support. She attended and spoke in (her own style of) Marathi at all the meetings of the united front of women's liberation movement in Maharashtra along with her mother-in-law, veteran feminist Indutai Patankar. She had a caring mother-in-law, renowned feminist in her own right, Comrade Indutai Patankar. Our heartfelt condolences to Gail's loving companion Comrade Dr Bharat Patankar and affectionate daughter, Prachi Patankar.

"Dear Gail, you are with us through your writings and fond memories. Salute to your revolutionary spirit."

—C S Lakshmi



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SEPTEMBER 2021

Death of a Legend: Suraiya Hasan Bose / Suraiya Aapa(1928-3 September 2021)



When it comes to conservation, development and promotion of Indian textiles and cottage industries the names most associated with this activity are Pupul Jayakar, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Marthand Singh and Lakshmi Jain. Suraiya Hasan Bose was someone who had worked with all of them. She studied textiles at Cambridge University. On her return she joined the Indian Cottage Industries Emporium, a government body where traditional Indian handicrafts were exhibited and sold. From the fifties onwards she managed the Handloom and Handicraft Export Corporation in Delhi and directed their export unit. She worked along with Pupul Jayakar who was known as the Indian czarina of culture. Her work to revive traditional Indian handicrafts brought her close to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Marthand Singh and Lakshmi Jain with whom she collaborated.

Suraiya Aapa as she came to be known belonged to Etawah, Uttar Pradesh. In the late 19th century her family moved to Hyderabad and Suraiya Aapa grew up in Telengana. Her father, Hasan Bose's business was selling books. Along with a bookstore he had also established a handicraft manufacturing unit in Hyderabad where traditional Indian metal work objects known as *bidri* were made. Abid Hasan Safrani, the freedom fighter who was in the INA with Subash Chandra Bose, was her uncle. Her family was deeply involved in the Swadeshi movement. She later married Aurobindo Bose, the nephew of Subash Chandra Bose.

It is to Hyderabad that Suraiya Aapa returned after the demise of her husband. Just beside Safitani Memorial High School established by her uncle in 1972, Suraiya Aapa set up her workshop-cum-showroom. It became a centre for training artisans in the years to come. In the eighties there was a big demand from abroad for Indian handlooms because of the efforts by the Indian government and dedicated promoters. Suraiya Aapa set up Deccan Textiles in 1982 to utilise this big demand in foreign markets. Underprivileged women like divorcees and widows were recruited by her to work on the looms so that they can do work that gave them both dignity and a livelihood.

Techniques that had become almost extinct were revived by Suraiya Aapa. The credit for taking up the monumental task of reviving the Nizami-Persian techniques for Himroo,

Paithani, Jamawar and Mashroo fabrics goes entirely to her. The village where she had done a lot of her work was the village of Kanchanpally, near Warangal.

Suraiya Aapa's designs are exhibited in Victoria and Albert Museum. In addition to manufacturing textiles, she built an archive of traditional motifs for textile patterns in India. She also set up a school to provide free education to the families of weavers and handloom artists. She was the recipient of the 14th Godfrey Philips Bravery awards, in recognition of an exceptional act of social courage. The trustees of the Yudhvir Foundation acknowledged the dedication, self-less service and humility of Suraiya Aapa and felt greatly honoured to confer the 23rd annual Yudhvir Memorial Award on her in 2014. In June 2015, she was honoured with the Devi Award that awards women for dynamism and innovation.

Radhika Singh who discovered Suraiya Aapa while she was doing the history of Fabindia, has written a beautiful and thought-provoking biography of Suraiya Aapa entitled *Suraiya Hasan Bose: Weaving A Legend* which was funded by Dr. Reddy's Foundation, and supported by Fabindia. She has written a moving tribute to Suraiya Aapa in *Vogue* ("The Story of Suraiya Hasan Bose (1928-2021), 13 September 2021) where she rightly asks: "What does one say when the world loses a legend? That she lived a great life contributing to making the world a better place for craftspeople and weavers, for just anybody who met her? That she created and curated objects of beauty? Does reviving a heritage make her immortal? Do legends never die? What of history that only propels narratives of war, of nation-building and demise? What happens to stories of people who constitute and craft the face of our consciousness, who find the infinite in the indivisible spaces between the creator and the created?"

And Radhika Singh answers her own questions saying Suraiya Aapa was one of those legends she loved and respected deeply. Suraiya Aapa lived a life that made meaning to her and to many craftspeople and weavers around her and at 93 she has passed away like all living beings who are mortal. But immortal is her labour of love, the textile art and the life around crafts and weaving that she has revived.

—C S Lakshmi



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The Rock Anyone Could Lean On: Sonal Shukla (1941-9th September 2021)



A rock—that is what Sonal Shukla whom all of us called Sonalben was. A Gandhian feminist all her life, her name has become synonymous with Vacha, the feminist group that works with adolescent girls from Mumbai's slums and turns them into confident citizens who know their

rights. But many of us in the women's movement know Sonal from before the Vacha times; from when the Forum Against Rape (later known as Forum Against Women's Oppression) was formed with her as one of the founders and when she opened a room in her house to set up the Women's Centre for battered women, for two years. And despite all this work she had time for others. She was there whenever we invited her to talk in a workshop or when we consulted her regarding a Gujarati book or even when we pestered her to write homage in our SPARROW Newsletter. She was there when we inaugurated the Dr Neera Desai Memorial Library in 2009. In March this year, when she was recognised as a feminist icon by Freidrich Evert Stiftung India, a non-profit German foundation, and a graphic book was brought out on her life all of us were thrilled.

Just two months ago before her demise she rang up and said all of us old timers must meet at her place after the lockdown and chat and laugh like we used to before. It is a pity that meeting never happened for Sonal passed away at 1 a.m. on 9th September 2021 due to cardiac arrest. We will miss you Sonal, whenever there is an occasion, and yes, we will chat, laugh and sing for that is what you would like us to do.

—C S Lakshmi



Sonal Shukla at Inauguration function of Dr. Neera Desai Memorial Library, SPARROW 2009.

The One Who Was Gharkul to Many: Indumati Barve (1922-11 Sep 2021)



Indumati Vishnu Barve was a school teacher who was instrumental in shaping millions of Vasai students. During the freedom struggle students who participated in the 1942 agitation were expelled from RP Wagh School. The Barve family provided a place to two teachers

to establish The New English School for the education of those expelled students. People say that at that time, Barve Bai would sometimes prepare meals with her own hands, for the students who came from faraway places while some of the students would be accommodated in her house.

This inspired her to start Shramik Mahila Vikas Sangh with three other women. They were initially only into papad-making but expanded into a full-fledged restaurant in Vasai which she started in 1991, and which now has 7 branches with around 200 women employees. She later started the women's cooperative called Maitriya Mahila Sahakari Patpedhi. She has given financial independence to many women, even providing for the education of their children. She helped women from underprivileged families with mentally retarded children by starting crèches for their children. These children did not have any special skills and some of them were speech-impaired. With great sensitivity she called these crèches Gharkul, meaning a home. Her efforts created a dignified world for working women including widows, abandoned and divorced women.

For the last 31 years, she has been providing snacks and meals to the players and artists of Vasai Taluka Kala Krida Mahotsava. Indumati chose to stay alone in Mumbai far away from her daughter in the US to supervise the work in her organisation. Even at 99 she would go to visit the restaurants daily. She has received many awards and accolades for her work including the Vasai Bhushan award given by the Vasai Brahman Sabha.

She died at the ripe old age of 99 due to Alpha disease, a rare genetic disorder which affects the lungs and liver. The women into whose lives she brought dignity and financial independence have lost a mentor and a mother in her death.

—Priya D'Souza

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A Life Cut Short: Kalpana Kumari Dayala (4 April 1977-19 September 2021)



The handloom workers' union lost an important partner when Kalpana Kumari Dayala succumbed to cancer. In 2018 she had undergone surgery for cancer but that did not deter her from continuing to take up the causes she believed in. On 19th September she breathed her last. In her blog Kalpana has said that she wanted to get into politics to pursue

her fight for causes and that she wanted to do it through the Congress Party in response to its campaign seeking support from young activists. She stated in her blog that while working with artisanal communities in Bhongir assembly constituency of Telangana, she had come across the hardships of people. Having represented several platforms apart from Action Aid in several capacities made her think about real socio-political issues. She felt that being a woman from the backward weaving community herself she could truly represent the people of Bhongir assembly constituency. Kalpana to the OBC Padmashali weaving community. Her reason for choosing the Bhongir constituency was because the entire Bhongir Lok Sabha Constituency was predominantly populated by the Padmashali weaving community. Her work in the field of rural development drew her to work with her own community and the fact that for the last five decades her family was associated with the Congress Party (her father was the Secretary for Ranga Reddy District), made Congress Party her obvious choice for entry into politics. She was already the Secretary of Telangana Pradesh Congress Committee.

Apart from being an activist Kalpana Kumari was doing her PhD from Osmania University on "Rural Artisans and Handloom Women Weavers in AP". Like she has mentioned in her blog she had worked in several capacities. From 2002-2005 she had been a Young Professional in CAPART (Council for the Advanced of Peoples Action and Rural Technology), an organisation under the Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. of India. From 2006-2007 she was a Researcher at the Centre for Education and Communication (CEC), Delhi, a resource centre for labour, in particular, of those from the unorganised and informal sectors. From 2007-2009 she was a Programme Officer at WASSAN (Watershed Support Services and Activities Network) which was working towards bringing about a qualitative change in the watershed based development programmes in India, providing capacity building and support services for development initiatives in

natural resources management with a focus on promoting livelihoods of poor and promoting economic and gender equity. From 2009 to 2016 she was a Programme Officer with Action Aid, an international anti-poverty agency.

Kalpana Kumari had achieved a lot at a young age. She undertook the campaign regarding declining child sex ratio and closely worked with different Government Departments to enforce the PCPDNT Act (Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act) and relevant schemes. As a result the Government announced “Bangaru Talli Scheme” for girls to encourage them to avail education and employment. She made strong advocacy efforts to ensure and mobilise people to access MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) of the AP Government. In response to efforts of activists like her, for the first time in India, the Government of Andhra Pradesh gave unemployment allowance to wage seekers. She also closely associated with and participated in the Jana Satyagrah Samwad Yatra initiated by Ekta Parishad to demand a new integrated Land Reforms Policy. She was able to motivate thousands of youth to avail the Chief Minister’s Employment for Youth programme for their self-employment through entrepreneurship.

Apart from involving herself in activities for rights and justice for the underprivileged, Kalpana did not let anyone get away with insulting women either. In 2017 Tollywood actor Chalapathi Rao made some unsavoury comments on women and Kalpana filed a complaint against him at the Saroornagar Police Station. Following her complaint, a case was booked against Chalapathi Rao under IPC Section 509 (word, gesture or act intended to outrage the modesty of a woman) and an investigation was started. At the launch of a Telugu film Chalapathi Rao had made an insulting comment. ... Ra Randoi *Veduka Chudham*, (Come, Let’s Watch the Spectacle) produced by Nagarjuna which starred his son Naga Chaitanya. The tagline of the film was *Ammayilu manashantike hanikaram*, which means ‘Women are injurious to mental peace.’ During the audio release event, the woman anchor asked actor Chalapathi Rao, “Are women injurious to mental peace?” To this the actor replied, “Women are not injurious to mental peace, they’re fit for sleeping with men.” Many famous actors and activists had criticised Rao’s comment. But Kalpana went ahead and filed a complaint.

Jameela Nishat, founder, Shaheen, a Women’s Resource and Welfare Association, was familiar with the work of Kalpana Kumari and in her note on her sent to SPARROW, she says that Kalpana got married at the age of 16 and became a mother at the age of 17. Her husband Yadagiri was a well-known social activist working for the rights of the weavers. Kalpana joined her husband working for the welfare and

development of weavers. She continued her education and completed post-graduation and joined the NGO sector. Jameela remembers Kalpana leading the most significant campaign ‘Beti Zindabad’ against female infanticide and against the atrocities inflicted on girl-children. Jameela says that Kalpana joined politics because she wanted to contribute to the larger social change and that within the Congress Party she was recognised as one of the well-respected activists who could contribute to the think-tanks of the Party. Among the progressive women’s rights groups in Telangana and Andhra, Kalpana was considered as one of the prominent personalities. Kalpana has two daughters one of whom has done her PG in social sciences from JNU and the other daughter has done her Hotel Management course.

In her short life Kalpana had done a lot of work in the public sphere, had taken up education seriously and had also nurtured two daughters. The stage was all set for her to play a more prominent role in politics which is what she wanted, but her life was cut short. Hopefully the work she has already done will continue to bear fruit.

—C S Lakshmi with inputs from Jameela Nishat

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Making Her Exit: Rati Bartholomew (4 January 1927-23 September 2021)



Those who were in Delhi in the seventies knew Rati Bartholomew as a street theatre activist. In Tamil Nadu also her name was a familiar one among theatre

enthusiasts and she was an inspiration to many who were active theatre practitioners. Theatre activists like Mangai Arasu remember her warmly as the person who did the first workshop for *Pacha Mannu*, a play on female infanticide. In Kulavai-96, a theatre festival in which many writers, playwrights and theatre groups participated, Rati Bartholomew was a prominent presence. Many sessions were filled with her laughter and talks and translations from Bengali.

One also remembers her as the mother of Pablo Bartholomew, the famed photographer who is known for

his stunning images of Bhopal Gas tragedy among other things, and the wife of Richard Bartholomew an art critic, painter, poet, and photographer and the curator of the Tibet house in Delhi. That there were other interesting historical connections she had linking her to Indian history in a very fascinating way one came to know when Pablo Bartholomew made an Instagram post on September 25, 2021 with a black and white photograph of a woman holding a child. Pablo Bartholomew wrote that this photograph was of his mother in her first year of birth, being held up by his Nani (maternal grandmother), Kumari Supriti Narayan Batra.

Supriti's love marriage to Barrister Attar Chand Batra, who practised then at the Calcutta High Court was some kind of a scandal. Pablo Bartholomew explained that in those days, this kind of mixed marriage outside one's own community was unheard of. For this reason, she was de-recognised from the Brahmo Samaj. He added that ironically, she was one of the grandchildren of Brahmananda Keshab Chandra Sen, the controversial religious Brahmo leader in Bengal. One had known Rati Bartholomew as a Punjabi-Bengali Partition refugee married to a Burmese refugee but this information of her connection to Keshab Chandra Sen family that the Instagram provided placed her in a very important historical narrative.

In her warm homage bidding farewell to Rati Bartholomew, in Indian Cultural Forum on September 23, 2021, Anuradha Kapoor says that not only did Rati Bartholomew teach English at Indraprastha College, Delhi, but she was also one of the earliest members of Yatrik and the vice-president of Dishantar—two of the most active theatre groups in Delhi in the 1960s. She also says that Rati was “remembered by generations of students of the National School of Drama (NSD), where she was often invited as examiner by the Director of the School, Ebrahim Alkazi” and that “she looked keenly at the work of the NSD students and supported their work and opened up opportunities for them when they stepped out of their studentship.”

It is difficult to spend a life time passionately committed to theatre and spending one's energy in promoting theatre not just in one city but across cities. Only a person who keeps her house and heart open to all can achieve this feat. Rati Bartholomew was that kind of a person.

—C S Lakshmi

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A Fighter All Her Life: R Susheela (1958-23 September 2021)



On the morning of 23rd September R Susheela gave up her fight against bone cancer. She had recovered from COVID infection but cancer defeated her. She was the ex-President of National Federation of Indian Women, Tamil Nadu. Susheela grew up in the Mylapore area of Chennai. She joined as a worker in the London Rubber Company in Pallavaram. TTK became a partner of this company. When LRC changed its name to London International Group, the company came to be known as TTK-LIG. Susheela took a leading role in uniting the workers and forming a workers' union. She linked this union to AITUC of the Communist Party of India and took up the fight for the rights of workers in other areas also. It was through her work for workers that she joined the CPI and took up activities in the public sphere. She took a leading role in all the organisations of the Party including the NFIW, Tamil Nadu, of which she remained the President for many years. She tirelessly travelled all around Tamil Nadu to take up women's issues. She also took up the issues of non-formal workers like domestic workers, auto drivers and construction workers and fought with governmental institutions for their rights. She was a great favourite of older CPI members like Era. Nallakannu. Her husband P Shanmugam, also a member of the Party, and her eldest son Murali passed away a few years ago. She lived with her second son Hari and his family. She was a happy grandmother continuing to fight for what she believed in when death overtook her at 7:30 in the morning in her house at West Saidapet in Chennai.

—C S Lakshmi

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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.

Friend of the Farmers: Professor Sheila Bhalla (1933-25 September 2021)



Professor Sheila Bhalla was a Canadian-Indian labour economist and trade union activist. She was professor emerita at the School of Social Sciences in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She had also taught at Panjab University, Chandigarh. Her work focussed on

agricultural and labour economics in Haryana. Sheila Bhalla was a Canadian married to the Indian economist G S Bhalla. Both of them taught at the Panjab University and later moved to Jawaharlal Nehru University. At Jawaharlal Nehru University, she headed the then newly-established Centre for Economic Studies and Planning. She also taught at the Institute of Human Development. She retired in 1992.

Sheila Bhalla's specialisation was agricultural economics with a special focus on Haryana. The Institute of Human Development published her book *India's Rural Economy: Issues and Evidence* in 2005 which is considered an authoritative book on India's rural economy. Her research papers on Indian agricultural and labour economics with meticulously collected field study details placed her in a position where even the Indian government departments consulted her for her expert views. Her research papers on labour diversification in agrarian fields were sought by many departments in the Indian Government. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector found her research on informal labour valuable. Her research papers were published in many journals like *Economic and Political Weekly*, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Social Scientist* and the *Indian Journal of Labor Economics*.

Sheila Bhalla was also closely involved with agricultural labour movements and unionisation. She researched and documented the work of early trade union movements and she was also an active participant in their many activities. Sheila had joined many other scholars in 2019 to write to the government regarding the weaknesses in the functioning of the MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005). She also gave her support to the Farmers' Protest in 2020-2021.

Sheila Bhalla, a friend of farmers, died in Puducherry and in its Red Salute tribute to her All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) refers to her as the dear comrade of peasants and workers warmly acknowledging the work she had done for them in her lifetime.

Aayee Thi Hamari Zindagi Mein Tum Bahar Banke: Kamla Bhasin (24 April 1946-25 September 2021)



Those who were in Delhi and were interested in the issues of women would be aware of the street plays like *Om Swaha* on dowry and violence that were staged in Delhi from 1979 onwards. Kamla Bhasin was one of the participants in these plays. People spoke of her as a developmental activist

who was associated with Seva Mandir, a grassroots NGO in Udaipur which worked towards the promotion of sustainable development. Children Education and Literacy was one of its major areas of activities.

Kamla networked and reached out to many feminists when she worked in the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation from 1975 to 2002. In 1984, she co-founded Jagori, a feminist group in Delhi, engaged with training and cultural activities. Much later, in 1998, when she formed Sangat, a feminist network, many feminists all over who already knew about the work of Jagori, felt they were part of Sangat too. Sangat was a network working for gender justice, equality and peace regionally and globally. It worked with underprivileged women from rural and tribal communities. Sangat used non-literary tools such as plays, songs and art in its work. Some of Sangat's songs like *Mandir masjid girijaghar ne baantdiya bhagwaan ko/Dharti baanti, saagar baantaa, mutbaanto insaan ko* (The temple, mosque and church have divided God/The earth and its oceans have been partitioned, do not divide humans) were songs that were part of the many feminist marches fighting for justice and human rights.

Kamla Bhasin's early Hindi nursery rhymes for the girl child which introduced a mother playing cricket and reading newspaper through fun rhymes and images for the child were loved by both the kids and their mothers who must have started looking for bats to play cricket with their girl children. And her powerful song "*Kyunki main ladki hoon mujhe padna hai*" (Because I am a girl, I must study) was also on the lips of every girl child who became aware of her right to education and her mother too. Kamla's song "With clarity and character we feminists are marching hand in hand" was a feminist anthem set to the Sri Lankan tune "*Surangini*". The version produced by Aditya Bhasin, Rajasthan Roots and sung by Komal Panwar was produced as a video by Sangat with pictures of women marching on the road.

Kamla wrote several simple booklets on gender theory, feminism and understanding patriarchy, many of which have been translated into more than 30 languages. They were

written in a way that they could be understood by elderly women and students who were not familiar with English. Kamla was also an integral part of the One Billion Rising, a global campaign to end rape and sexual violence against women.

If all this is Kamla in the public sphere there was Kamla, the person, who everybody felt was their good friend. She brought fun and laughter to many women's conferences even when some of the participants did not quite agree with everything she said. She could laugh at herself more than anything else. Her life was an open book and she did not keep anything a secret. When her marriage broke up she spoke about it openly so others can understand how relationships have to be handled. When her life partner passed away on 18th February, 2017, she remembered him kindly with no bitterness. "Normally he wore the turban, but sometimes I did too. My life partner for 37 years, from 1972 to 2009 (when we had a very bitter and painful divorce) Baljit (Malik) passed away on 18th February, 2017. We are all, including our son Jeet or Chhotu, are grieving. What an amazing human being Baljit was/is. So much of who and what I am today was/is contributed by Baljit, Chhotu and our daughter Meeto who left her body in 2006 and shifted to my heart, where she will remain till I leave my body. Baljit has also shifted to the same heart. My heart feels heavy... LOVE and PEACE... Look at the names we, Baljit Malik and Kamla Bhasin, gave to our children—Kamaljeet Bhasin-Malik, Jeet Kamal Bhasin-Malik!!!!" The note came with some photos of themselves when they were young and as she wrote, "quite crazy."

She never hid her son Chhotu, whom she called Chhotu Singh or HH (His Happiness) Jeet Kamal Bhasin Malik, who had become severely challenged as an infant when he was just seven months old, when a vaccination went wrong. She wrote poems for him too. She considered Meeto (Kamaljeet Bhasin Malik), her daughter, the love of her life, her daughter and her Guru. When Meeto, a wonderful dancer and student of Leela Samson committed suicide due to clinical depression when she was in her twenties everyone saw a shattered Kamla but sure enough she rose again.

In June, 2020, she wrote on her Face Book page:

"My daughter Meeto left her body when she was 27, in 2006. She was doing her PhD at Oxford, performing brilliantly, was in a lovely relationship. And she had Clinical Depression.... she committed suicide....

"I feel, most people don't want to accept that depression is also an illness....People question the person who does it or they want to hold others responsible....I don't know....

"Anyway, I just wanted to say that I don't know why.... but this beautiful Punjabi poem by Shailender Sohdi reminds me

of Meeto...

*Toon paak Khuda de naa varga
Saahde pind noo jaundey raah varga
Tannu bhuliye vee te kinj Sajna
Toon aande jaande saa varga....*

A rough English translation would be:

*You are Pure like the name of Khuda
Like that path which goes to our village...
How do I manage to forget you My Love
You are like the breath which goes in and out....
Every breath every moment....Literally..."*

And on October 6, Meeto's birthday, she always wrote that on that day she was also born as a mother. On October 6, 2020 also she wrote about Meeto and herself:

"On my last day in the UN office, where I had worked for 27 years, my daughter Meeto arrived with Brinda Singh Masi, just before the office closed. I was totally surprised to see them. They said they had come to take me home....

"They took me to Gurudwara Damdama Sahib, near Humayun's Tomb. They made my transition from one life to another memorable. On that trip to the Gurudwara we hardly spoke. I just pondered over my 27 years with the UN, on the sensitivity and love shown by Meeto and Brinda and wondered what the coming years would be like.

"After Meeto left her body, I go to this Gurudwara every time I wish to spend time with Meeto.

"Today is Meeto's birthday."

When she was afflicted with liver cancer she battled with it but when she was brought home her Jagori team surrounded her with love. They sang many songs including her favourite song, *Aayee ho meri zindagi mein tum bahaar banke/Mere dil mein yuhi rahna tum pyar-pyar banke* (You have come as spring in my life; Remain in my heart as love and more love) with a frail Kamla happily joining them. Jagori put it up on 6 September 2021 on the Face Book with this note:

"As many of you know Kamla is dealing with cancer at this moment. Those 45 minutes were a master class with her on life, love, passion for work, feminist solidarity and yes, in her unique way she talked about her approach towards death too. She was cracking jokes and coming up with impromptu couplets. And her signature smile and energy...Together we sang many songs.

"She urged us to carry forward the Jagori spirit. Peace and Love should be the values that we should always base our actions on... And we couldn't agree more.

"That emotion filled morning is etched in our minds and hearts Kamla... Keep inspiring and motivating us..."

She had told her friends that she knew the summons had come for her and she was ready to go undefeated. And yet, she did not want to die. That is what she told thirty-six hours before her death holding her dear friend and founder of Women Unlimited, Ritu Menon's hand. It is not that she was afraid of death but she had so much to live for: her Chhotu, her feminist friends and so many plans to do so much work. As she said once, she belonged to the generation of "midnight's children" who grew up in the post-Independence India. And this hardy generation never gives up making projects and plans.

Kamla, you were there for every individual, every organisation. SPARROW will remember the number of ways in which you cheered us up and supported us. You not only rewrote nursery rhymes but also many other things. You flew away singing. How can one bid good bye to a bird whose songs still remain?

—C S Lakshmi

The Giver of Food and Nourishment: Kausalya Paatti (1920-27 September 2021)



Kausalya Paatti helped her daughter run a roadside food stall in Chennai. Many who came to eat there addressed as Paatti, grandma. El. Murugaraj wrote a touching homage for her in Dinamalar.com on September 27th. What follows is an English translation of the homage. He has given the title "A Long Rest for One Who Excelled in Working" for his homage.

Kausalya Patti who was engaged in preparing food for the common people even at the age of 101 took leave of the people and the soil today. She was running a roadside pushcart food stall called Parasakthi Tiffin Centre in Nanganallur, Chennai, at the corner of the 45th Road. It was a morning time food stall. Her food items like idli, poori, pongal, kichdi and vadai were of very high standard but the price was affordable.

She knew many of her clients by name. She would call them by their name and say, "Eat well" and also urge them to eat more saying, "Have an idli", "Have some more kichdi", "Have one more vadai. It will not harm you. It is home cooked food" and so on. Even if one ate all that she offered the bill would not go beyond thirty or forty rupees.

Her daughter Kamala and son Krishnamurthy would take care of the shop and attend to the clients and ask her to sit

quietly. But Paatti could not sit for more than five minutes. She would get up and begin chatting with the clients and start helping around.

She could see clearly till the end. She never wore glasses. She could hear well and had a wonderful memory. She would wake up at 3 in the morning and start preparing the morning food items and finish preparing them in three hours. Then she would come along with her daughter and son to the food stall. By ten in the morning the food items would get over. Then she would close the shop and leave. Once they reached home, the daughter and son would rest a bit. But Kausalya Paatti would not rest. She would prepare the lunch for them which would be mostly a tamarind kuzhambu and some roasted papads. Then she would get busy with the next day's menu.

Kausalya Paatti belonged to Mayavaram and everyone in her family was an expert cook. Kausalya Paatti and her daughter had inherited that talent for preparing perfectly measured tasty food. This stall was opened by the two of them when they came to Chennai. The income was not great but she had the satisfaction that she had taken up a profession in which she could keep many people happy. Last year she had said that she wished to prepare traditional sweets with all the skill that was at her disposal and give them to people. But her wish has remained unfulfilled.

Her Nanganallur food stall had no holidays. Due to the pandemic when the stall had to be closed for twenty days she worried more about where her clients would find food than herself. One could truly say that death has given the needed long rest to Kausalya Paatti who has worked all her life.

—El. Murugaraj

Dying Young: Sreelakshmi (1983-28 September 2021)



The Malayalam film and T V world awoke to the sad news of the death of Sreelakshmi, popular Malayalam actor, on the 28th of September 2021. She had been hospitalised and was undergoing treatment for pneumonia. She was only 38.

Sreelakshmi was a dancer initially and had taken to acting later. Her dancing career had earned her laurels. She had performed in various ballets at Aravindaksha Menon's Jayakerala Dance College, Thripunithura, Kerala. All Kerala Dance College's State Award

2020 was awarded to her for her performance in the ballet *Ardhangana* by Pathanamthitta Mudra Nrithavedi.

Her acting career made her popular. She was known for her notable roles in many TV serials. She had also acted in films and short movies. People remember her as the one who played the role of the goddess in *Elankavilamma*, the music album directed by Arun Thampi.

Dying at an age when one begins to understand and appreciate life is a tragedy especially when pneumonia is a curable disease. There was still so much to look forward to in her life with her dance, acting and her two young sons.

C S Lakshmi

OCTOBER 2021

A Skylark That Flew High: Thanksy Francis Thekkekara (10 November 1953-1 October 2021)



Republishing one of her stories from her short story collection *Mehub Gulley: Short Stories from India* published by Patridge in 2014, which she published in her pen name Elizabeth Kottarem (second edition published by Notion Press in her own name) *Fundamentals*, a publication of the IIT Bombay Alumni Association, mentioned

in the short note on her that she had retired in 2013 from the Indian Administrative Service as Additional Chief Secretary, Maharashtra after 36 years of experience in public administration. It also mentioned that she did her PhD in microfinance from IIT Bombay and that apart from her venture into fiction, she had written several books and articles on microfinance and gender. In 2016 she was the State Information Commissioner Maharashtra (Konkan). Those lines that try to capture her work tell us the wide range of areas in which she was active. Apart from these official posts she was also the Senior Consulting Editor of *Harmony*, the IAS newsletter of Maharashtra cadre.

Thanksy was a much admired IAS officer and also a highly accomplished person. Before acquiring a doctorate degree from IIT she had done her BSc, LLB and MBA. Her books and articles are still quoted by those writing on microfinance. Writing about the book she wrote along with Dr Veena Poonacha and D Parthasarathy, (D Parthasarathy, Thanksy Francis Thekkekara and Veena Poonacha (ed.s) *Women's Self*

Help Groups: Restructuring Socio-Economic Development, Delhi: Dominant Publications, 2011), the S N D T E-Newsletter Volume 1/ Issue 3/ September-October 2011, spoke about what the book attempts to do: "Praiseworthy Government Initiative Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal (MAVIM) established by Government of Maharashtra in 1975 has played a strategic role to foster ethos of entrepreneurship among women. The recently published book... provides glimpses into challenges faced by women in developing enterprises. Set in the villages of Maharashtra, the case studies document the changes happening in the lives of poor women when they undergo a process of training and capacity building through the Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal (MAVIM) to form SHGs. Initially they focus on transcending starvation and attain subsistence, then comes the phase of needs of education and health and finally many of them develop enterprise. A Case study by Dr. Veena Devasthali in this volume brings to the fore dynamics of starting an ice-cream parlour by an enterprising woman of the SHG that made a modest beginning with animal husbandry aided by government scheme facilitating bank loan for poor women." Earlier in 2005 itself she had written about MAVIM in the research journal of Nirmala Niketan *Perspectives in Social Work* in the article entitled "Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal's (MAVIM) experience in woman empowerment: training and capacity building for women" in its Vol. XX, (No. 3), September-December (2005) issue.

In all her posts she brought her knowledge and the values she held as important to help her to take decisions and positive action. In 2013 when the Traditional Road to Mount Mary Church was blocked the devotees had planned to organise a Satyagraha March but Thanksy as Addl. Chief Secretary, Minorities Development Dept. of the Maharashtra Government took the issue with the Chief Minister's Office, Chief Secretary, Government of Maharashtra, Municipal Commissioner, Police Authorities and intervened to allow access to this road for the devotees. When they came for the Satyagraha March they found the road had already been opened by the police and municipality for access to the Mount Mary church. Educational opportunities for Muslim women also deeply concerned her. She had associated with Professor Abdul Shaban at TISS, and was in constant discussion with him about empowering Muslim women.

Volume 75, Issue 3 July, 2014 of *The Indian Journal of Social Work* of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) published a discussion note based on the annual Prof. P D Kulkarni Memorial Lecture delivered by Thanksy in 2014 at TISS. The discussion note entitled "Social Justice and Democracy: The Way Forward" dealt with the nature and structure of poverty in India and the challenge of poverty and how policy makers

have to first understand it before making policies. It began with the meaningful question: QUO VADIS BHARAT?

In strong powerful language Thanksy followed the question explaining what lay before us at that time, which stands valid even today: “As we stand as it were at the cross roads of development,” Thanksy began, we can ask ourselves Quo Vadis? Wither Goes Thou? 67 years have passed since that first Tryst with Destiny. What have we done well and what have we done badly? Social Justice is that most fundamental concept in Democracy—that which enables equal opportunities to all, as well as imbuing them with equal status. I will dwell on some of the most compelling issues that confront us today in bringing about social justice through our democracy—the problem of poverty, the issue of equality, and equal protection of the laws and present day trends in the withdrawal of the Welfare State with the rise of Neoliberal philosophy.” She went on to give an example from her own administrative experience while talking about the challenge of poverty. “In 1988 when I was Chief Executive Officer of the Ratnagiri Zilla Parishad,” she began, “I saw the face of unendurable poverty in the face of a poor deaf and dumb Scheduled Caste woman in a village in Sangameshwar taluka, who was the victim of the IRDP—the Integrated Rural Development Programme. She had been given a loan for the purchase of a cow and it had died. She had no insurance and she was left crippled by the loan. She and her family members, for future generations, were for ever recorded as defaulters in the records of the bank and so disentitled for any further loans and benefits....”

When Shailaja Chandra, an independent policy analyst, who had been in the IAS for 38 years herself, wrote in her blog over 2 shailaja.wordpress.com a note “A Better Bureaucrat” on April 24, 2012, and spoke about how the bureaucracy had to deal with politicians and how promotions occur, an ex-bureaucrat wrote about how Thanksy Francis Thekkekara, the most capable woman officer, had been sidelined and overlooked for appointment to the post of Chief Secretary to Government. He wrote, “The Glass Ceiling prevented many skylarks from flying high. Thanksy is one such skylark.” Replying to that Shailaja Chandra said: “I understand how you feel and feel so bad for a woman officer being overlooked. Politicians do not feel comfortable with women (generally) as they (women) are too direct, rule bound and less likely to understand political compulsions.”

It is amidst such prejudices and political compulsions that Thanksy functioned and was much admired as a capable and efficient administrator. Thanksy was diagnosed with thymic cancer but remained active till the end. She co-hosted an annual conference of TISS, Diversity and Development, the latest edition of which was held in August 2021. Even a month

before her death she was one of the 15 sitting and retired RTI information commissioners who had sent a letter dated September 9, 2021, addressed to the Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana, urging action against courts staying orders of information commissioners.

Thanksy leaves behind her two daughters and what is sadder is that she also leaves behind her 101-year-old mother whom she took care of. Her husband Francis Thekkekara passed away a year and a half before and she had taken care of him too. Losing Thanksy is not just losing an efficient and well-informed and knowledgeable person with administrative and field experience but losing a human being who really cared for the welfare of the underprivileged and who wanted to change the course of the nation.

—C S Lakshmi

The Begum: Farrukh Jaffar (1933-15 October 2021)



Farrukh Jaffar is remembered by most only by the feisty role that she did of an old woman Fatima Begum who was the wife of the character Amitabh Bachchan played, in the film *Gulabo Sitabo* (2020). At 88, she won the Best Supporting Actress Filmfare Award for this film directed by Shoojit Sircar becoming the oldest winner in the acting category. But Farrukh Jaffar has acted in many other films too. Farrukh Jaffar’s first film was with Muzzafar Ali in his *Umrao Jaan* (1981) where she played Umrao Jaan’s mother. She also acted in a series of films made by Muzaffar Ali for television like *Shawl*. Her second film *Swades* (2004) came after 23 years, followed by *Peepli Live* (2010).

Peepli Live was followed by *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011) by Anand L Rai and Prakash Jha’s *Chakravayuh* (A Circular Military Formation, 2012), *Anwar Ka Ajab Qissa* (The Strange Story of Anwar, 2013) by eminent poet, essayist, novelist and filmmaker Buddhadeb Dasgupta and *Sultan* (2016) by Ali Abbas came after that. She also played the role of a widowed mother of five grown up children in Narayan Chauhan’s *Ammaa ki Boli* (Mother’s Words) which has release dates ranging from 2013 to 2019 and even 2021! *Barefoot to Goa* (2013) directed and produced by Praveen Morchchale was another film in which she had a meaty role.

Strangely, when we look up the cast and crew details of some of these films they don't even mention Farrukh Jaffar as she played only character roles as grandmother.

She was born in 1933 in Jaunpur in a zamindar family. At the age of 16, she got married to journalist and freedom fighter Syed Muhammad Jaffer. After the marriage she moved to Lucknow. Her husband encouraged her to study and also stood by her when she got interested in theatre and films. Farrukh Jaffer did her graduation from Lucknow University and took up a job at the All India Radio. She was the first woman whose voice was heard over AIR, Lucknow. The *Lucknow Society* portal did an interview with her after the film *Peepli Live* and their page has some interesting stories about Farrukh Jaffer. "Aap ab suniye All India Radio ka panchrangi programme akashvani..." (Listen to All India Radio's variety Pancharangi programme on air...) These were the opening words in 1963 by the first announcer Farrukh Jaffer when Akashvani went on air in Lucknow! At AIR Lucknow, she wrote plays for the radio and enacted roles on air in popular narrations called *Geeton Bhari Kahani* that were a combination of fiction and film songs.

Her career took a break in 1966, when she had to go back to her maternal home in Jaunpur to be with her widowed mother to help her to manage the household and its agricultural property. When her husband got posted to Delhi as India correspondent of the *Chicago Daily News* and *The Washington Post*, she moved to Delhi and resumed her career in AIR. Farrukh joined the Vividh Bharti at Delhi's All India Radio and later moved to the Urdu Services of the same broadcasting house. Delhi provided her the opportunity to attend acting workshops conducted by the eminent theatre director Ebrahim Alkazi of the National School of Drama. Under Alkazi's direction, Farrukh played the role of the mother in the Urdu translation of Luigi Pirandello's Italian play called *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in 1968.

It was when they returned to Lucknow that she made her entry into films through Muzzafar Ali's *Umrao Jaan*. The *Lucknow Society* post writes about how she felt after *Peepli Live*: "Amma, is what she is better known as now. Most of the dialogues of her were extempore in the movie! Today, Farrukh Jaffer, is over the moon as she watches her character in the film become a household name. She is on such a high that she no longer rebukes clerks at the bank who make her walk from pillar to post without explaining why her widow's pension is not transferred to her account for more than half a year."

Lucknow Society portal says that her life was not certainly a bed of roses. She saw many highs and lows and faced them with fortitude. "She is remembered within the family as a restless soul from a feudal background. Obviously attracted

to creative activities like theatre and films from very early in life, she also had to battle Victorian values which dictated that this entertainment was not for people from respectable families. Caught between the sorrow of watching her lifestyle as the daughter of affluent landlords collapse before her and the joy of coming of age in a modern post-independent India, being wife and mother was never the cup of tea for this housewife. The kitchen could not confine her. She was always on the move, always on the go. Sometimes she was at the university, other times at the National School of Drama (NSD) and most of the time at the All India Radio (AIR). Even when she was at home, she did things that would never occur to other women of the family."

An article, "Granny Award Goes to..." written by Debesh Banerjee in *The Indian Express* (16 February, 2011) after *Tanu Weds Manu*, captures her nature and her wit and humour so well. Debesh Banerjee says that if there was a Granny award Farrukh Jaffer would be a strong contender. He says, "The bed-ridden, foul-mouthed mother of *Peepli Live* has graduated to being a bed-ridden, wisdom-espousing grandmother of *Tanu Weds Manu*." The article details the character in the film and what Farrukh Jaffer was in real life. In real life she was someone who did not want to age "gracefully or otherwise"! She had complained, "Directors are offering me only senior citizens roles. That is unfortunate since I feel much younger and would like to portray a much younger, more pro-active character."

According to the article Farrukh's pastime was knitting, gardening and needle-work. She was forthright in her comments and she did not quite approve of Kangana Ranaut's brash and irreverent granddaughter's character in the film *Tanu Weds Manu* either. "I object to Kangana Ranaut's character's flippant attitude towards relationships and her obsession with experimenting with looks," she had said in her interview. She obviously enjoyed acting for she had also said, "I will continue acting as long as I can shoot in Lucknow. I don't like travelling far from home especially to Mumbai, *kyunki woh ek paagal khana hai*, (that is a mad house)."

There are more films and short films in which she has acted which would be released posthumously according to some newspapers. *Gulabo Sitabo* and its success probably reassured her that her life as an actor would not end and that acting in films and being with people who make films would continue to be the solace of her life. She has two daughters and a grandson who are proud of her. Farrukh Jaffer has died as a woman who has lived her life to the fullest.

—C S Lakshmi



“Don’t Call Me a *Mathari*”: Dr Jessie / Josephine Benedict Tellis-Nayak (21 March 1925- 15 October 2021)



We all know Jessie Tellis-Nayak as the founder and Coordinator of Women’s Institute for New Awakening (WINA) India, from 1982-1991 and Founder President of a family trust, Justin Maundy Tellis Memorial Trust (1999) to promote primary education for the poor, helping a few families and aged with basic needs and also encouraging

pioneer efforts of women’s groups. But the college in Mangalore where she studied and worked remembers her warmly for her many activities

St. Agnes College, Mangalore, will remain very proud of its student Jessie Tellis-Nayak. Writing about its alumni in 2004, the College wrote about all its famous students and Jessie Tellis-Nayak was certainly one of them. The college listed all her work and her achievements and reproducing that note here would put all that she was in a single note:

“Another brilliant Agnesian is Dr Jessie Tellis-Nayak. Born on 21st of March 1925 at Mangalore, she was a student of St. Agnes College right from her class I to the intermediate. She completed her BA degree in 1948 from Holy Cross College, Trichy and obtained her BT degree from St. Ann’s College, Mangalore. In 1957 she did her Diploma in Social Work from St. Agnes College and then her Masters in Social work (1959) and Doctorate (1964) both from Catholic University of America, Washington. She returned to St. Agnes College as a Lecturer in Biology (1949-56)...

“Dr Tellis is also a scholar of great repute and has written and published many books. To name a few: *The Grihini Training Programme in Raanchi Archdiocese*, *The Grihin Training in India*, *Non Formal Education for women*, *Education and Income Generation for Women*, *Indian Womanhood then and now*, *The Decade for Women*. Besides she has published many articles and newsletters on Socio economic development, women’s development, religion or other current topics...

“She is a widely travelled person. As a member of the Pontifical Commission ‘COR UNUN’ at the Vatican for 7 years (1970’s) she travelled extensively within India in relation to developmental work, on consultancy

services, and organising talks and seminars.

“She was a resource person at several Conferences in India and abroad. With her vision, boundless love for the underprivileged, generosity of heart, Dr Tellis fights the battle against poverty, disease and hunger in the land of her birth even now at the age of 79, and St. Agnes College is proud of her.”

Daijiworld Media is an Indian company, headquartered in Mangalore, that provides news services, including the web portal, www.daijiworld.com. It was founded by Walter Nandalike, as www.daijidubai.com on 14 January 2001, primarily with the objective of relaying news from the Coastal Konkan region of India to the rest of the world. Sr Jeswina wrote a touching tribute to Jessie Tellis-Nayak in [daiji world.com](http://daijiworld.com) on 19 October 2021. The title of the tribute was: *Dr Jessie Benedict Tellis-Nayak: Woman of Substance*. Sr Jeswina called Jessie Tellis Nayak an international social worker with a mission and a vision and “a woman of deep faith and fidelity, a woman of substance and simplicity, a woman of courage and conviction.” The tribute also spoke about the qualities of Jessie Tellis-Nayak and the nature of the work that she did in her lifetime. “Dr Jessie had the grit,” Sr Jeswina wrote, “and determination to stand up for women, put the fight in them to be educated, liberated and set free, free from the clutches of subjugation. This great woman activist worked to bring about a transformation in society by taking severe risks in helping women to make important decisions and face the outcome.”

The tribute went on to narrate in great detail facts that the St. Agnes College had listed painting a beautiful picture of the life of this dedicated woman. Some excerpts from the tribute are given below:

“A woman of simple living and noble thinking, she was motivated by a humanitarian philosophy to rescue women from domination and defeat. She respected the lowliest and helped build relationship and rapport with different sections of society for a genuine cause. Dr Jessie developed community leaders and inspired them to keep their own personal ambitions at bay, while helping them identify their strength and calling. She empowered them to unionise themselves to obtain justice. Thus Dr Jessie found fulfillment in her life of struggle for the sake of others.

“After her education at St. Agnes College and at Holy Cross College, Trichinopoly, Jessie did her Bachelor’s of Teaching at St Ann’s College, Mangaluru. She started

her career at St Agnes College in the department of Biology in 1954 working her way up through the posts of Demonstrator, Lecturer and the Head of the Department. For eight years, she enriched the lives of students with her teaching of Botany, Zoology and Human Physiology and her directorship of the Student Social Service League. The aim was to give students an exposure to the life of the poor in slums and rural areas. She also worked with the Muslim community leaders to establish the Crescent Welfare Centre at Bunder, Mangaluru.

“She furthered her education and acquired a Master’s in Social Work in 1959 from the Catholic University of America, School of Social Work, Washington DC with community organisation as her specialisation. Jessie then went on to do her doctoral studies from the same university. The fieldwork placements and jobs in a wide variety of setting made her gain the much needed professional experiences. Dr Jessie worked as group worker, community organiser, research consultant and finally, assistant director in various community development projects in Washington DC and thereafter, worked as senior counsellor in New York for several years. During those years she visited Paris, Netherlands, England, Japan and Philippines to garner knowledge in social work.

“Jessie had pursued professional education in the USA to work in India which had tremendous social, economic, health problems and challenges. The USA offered her lucrative jobs but her heart was set on her India. Back in India in 1965, Dr Jessie Tellis -Nayak took up lectureship at the School of Social Work, Roshni Nilaya, Mangaluru. She encouraged the staff and students to contribute towards Roshni Samaj, a social work journal which she edited and published. After six months she quit the job to get work experience in Indian settings because she felt she could not do justice to her students.

“From May 1965 to April 1981, she served the Indian Social Institute (ISI), New Delhi, a pioneer national institution of the Jesuits. Thereafter she worked as Assistant Director of the Chotanagpur Project and from there her service extended to Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and the North East. Her considerable initiative and leadership skills led her to found ‘Vikas Maitri’, an organisation composed of tribal and other leaders from different churches. Vikas Maitri was deeply involved in

various types of developmental programmes by an all-tribal team of professionals due to the foundation laid by her. She found very few women active in development bodies, especially at the planning and decision-making levels. The importance of enabling women to discover their potential, provide them with opportunities, moral support and the skills needed for development work dawned on her. Thus emerged her decision to concentrate her efforts on the development of women.

“In 1975, she was appointed the first Director of the ISI Project for Women’s Development. Training, consultancy, and publications were the three planks of the strategy she adopted. The Grihini Training Programme became known throughout India through her articles and three different books on the subject. When an interesting new programme or ideas came her way, she shared the information with others through letters, articles, and publication. Thus, she translated into action the feminist slogan, ‘Information is power’. Her service in the area of community organisation and girl and women’s welfare was accompanied by the writing, editing and publishing of 16 books besides several research articles. The significant among these include: ‘An Analysis of Community Organisation Practice’ in 1966; ‘Action Research’, a research study on the Chotanagpur project, and “Community Organisation in India” which featured in the Encyclopaedia of Social Work in India. In 1982 Dr Jessie resigned from the ISI and returned to her home state Karnataka with the intention of continuing her work. Her search ultimately led her to form a core-team of active committed women who aim at networking with other women. The focus was to be on education for awareness on the women’s situation. While in Mangalore she provided field work opportunities and supervised M.S.W. students from School of Social Work, Roshni Nilaya for six years.

“Dr Jessie Tellis helped to create the family trust: Justin Maundy Tellis Memorial Trust which provided educational and financial aid to private and Government primary schools.

“Dr Tellis’s venture, WINA (Women’s Institute for New Awakening) impacted the cities of Bengaluru, Mangaluru and Mumbai. Its primary goal was to increase the awareness of women and girls to their situation and to improve it. WINA offered consultation on women’s

issues, promoted Feminist Theology, networked with Women's groups, established libraries for women in particular and brought out *WINA Vani*, a newsletter to disseminate ideas related to women and girls....

"As member of the Advisory committee of the magazine, "In God's Image" (since its inception) in 1982, edited by Rev. Sun Ai Park, Jessie devoted much time for reading on feminist theology. As a group WINA pioneered in producing articles in this field. This was affiliated to AWRC—Asian Women's Resource Centre for Theology and Culture. Her articles on the role of women in the Church and society show her questioning the very structure and teachings of the patriarchal, hierarchical Church and demands justice for women. To her faith in Christ and service to humanity are two sides of the same coin. Thus Dr Jessie Tellis-Nayak, as pioneer professional Christian woman, writer and publisher became more visible on the national and international scene.

"In recognition of her work, she was selected as a delegate to the Asian Conference on 'The Church and the Development' in Tokyo in 1970. She participated in meetings at Rome, at a Colloquium in Belgium, in a Women's Conference at Nairobi, was a resource person at a workshop for rural women at Manila, Philippines, at Bali, Indonesia and in Thailand.

"Her influence spread far and wide. A woman of diverse achievements, Dr Jessie Tellis-Nayak has received several awards, honors, and forms of recognition for her work and yeoman service.

"The first was her appointment as member of the Pontifical Council, *Cor Unum*, by Pope Paul VI himself. In this capacity she attended its Annual Plenary Assembly in the Vatican City in November 1977, June 1978, November 1978 and October 1979 and each time she presented a new book that she herself had authored. She was privileged of having special audience with Pope Paul IV, Pope John Paul II and Pope John XXIII. She was even received by Robert Kennedy at the White House. She was granted an Honorary Degree, Doctor of Law, by the St. Frances Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada, on 3 December 1984, for "championing the cause of women in her country". She was pleased to receive an Honorary Degree—Doctor of Divinity—at the seventh convocation of the Academy of Ecumenical Indian Theology and Church

Administration on 24 July 1993 in Madras, India. Further, the Alumni Association of the Catholic University of America presented her with 'The Alumni Achievement Award for Social Services', on 27 October 2001 in Washington DC. St Agnes College and the Agnesian Alumnae Association honoured her for being an outstanding Educationist, Writer and Social Worker in 2003 and again conferred on her the title "Agnesian Lifetime Achiever" on 23 July 2017. All these recognitions came to her for championing the cause of women in India and abroad.

"We place on record Dr Jessie Tellis-Nayak's commitment, service, leadership, and devotion to the cause of social development, in India and abroad; her dedication to the upliftment of girls and women, a field of endeavour close to her heart; her erudition and experience painstakingly acquired and selflessly employed in the service of others; her effective penmanship; her devotion to the Church.

"The words from Proverbs apply readily to the life and work of Dr Jessie Tellis-Nayak. "She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy. She opens her mouth with wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue." (Proverbs 31: 20, 26)

"Dr Jessie was a simple, humble, humane and magnanimous person. She has endeared herself to people of all walks of life, of every caste, creed, race, religion and nationality. She continues to live in the hearts of all the poor, downtrodden, less privileged people specially the women and girl children for whom she spent all her life with selfless love and service.

"A life well lived and work done with enthusiasm and selfless service lives on...."

Hailing from the city of Mangalore, make-up artist and photographer Heidi Loren, enjoys not just documenting people through photographs, but she wants to find meaning in their stories. Heidi had always been enamoured by her friend's great aunt, Dr Jesse Tellis-Nayak. She did a fascinating photo series on her and the series contain beautiful portraits of Jessie exuding peace, love and joy. Heidi gave the photo series the title '*Don't call me a Mathari*', (*Mathari* in Konkani means an old woman), for that is what Jessie told her when she had asked her if she could photograph her.

Towards the end Jessie developed age related dementia but her niece, a nurse by profession, whom she had brought

up, took care of her till the end. Many live long lives but whether they can live as meaningful lives as Jessie questioning patriarchy in religion and in all spheres of activity is doubtful. There are not so many Jessies in this world.

—C S Lakshmi

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A Much-loved Albeli: Aparajita Sharma (20 September 1980-15 October 2021)



Aparajita Sharma, a Hindi professor at Delhi University, was also a painter and enjoyed presenting visual texts. She felt that there were not enough emoticons to describe what Indians really want to express and in 2016 decided to create an app called Himoji to fill the gap. The

Himojis were chat stickers/ emoticons in Hindi. She also created and sketched the characters Chinia in *Chinia ki Dunia* (Chinia's World) and the popular zestful Albeli character. In the pandemic she drew illustrations with songs with unnamed women characters.

Hindi writer Neelima Chauhan has written a tribute for her in Hindi which Pooja Priyamvada has translated into English. But Pooja Priyamvada felt that all that Aparajita was cannot be caught in words and wrote a note of despair saying: How can words ever define the vibrancy, vivacity and creativity we all associated with her? Even a prolific writer like Neelima seems to be struggling. It is a loss deeply personal and forever for all of us.

What follows is Neelima Chauhan's tribute.

The past month was extremely tragic for those who know Hindi, those who communicate in the language of sketches and those who affiliate closely with the language of love and colours. A shining star of the Hindi virtual world Aparajita Sharma left this worldly abode for some unknown other world, and what remained was the immense wealth of her incredible art.

Aparajita was a professor in Miranda House, Delhi University, but this was just a small segment of her professional introduction. She had expanded a large part of her introduction by creating the gift of "Himoji" by the power of her brush for the virtual world in 2016.

Whatever space she was in, she would tend to mark it with her impressive signature. This tendency of hers literally compelled her to inspire the virtual Hindi world to laugh-cry and express all emotions through her Himojis. A project that might have involved huge funds, Aparajita handed over the same to the Hindi virtual world as a gift. Her perpetual urge [to do something] and her passionate creativity did not allow her brush to pause even for a minute. Every year she would add a new character, a new stance, a new story line to her Himojis. This was like resurrecting her own creation with new meaning.

The next destination for her art was creating character illustrations for the book *Patansheel Patniyonke Notes* (Notes of Fallible Wives and *Officially Patansheel* (Officially Fallible) the books written in the new lexicon of Hindi. The collaboration of the tone of these books and her own imagination of a free and new woman at ease came to life in her illustrations of these books. Aparajita attempted another experiment—the new woman, that is, Madam *Patansheel* and *Albeli* both the characters were also incorporated into calendars by her. These calendars were a point of discussion among Hindi readers for long. Her character *Albeli* is the unique conversation between the woman inside her and the world. This strange (*Albeli*) woman is a rebel, self-aware and firm. To see the world improve she constantly works at it with love, care and diligence. This was a desire to change the world in her own unique way.

Aparajita was an artist whose inner world was amazing and diverse. It would never be satisfied by just one creation. At just the beginning of her creative career she touched extreme heights of popularity due to her work, her talent and her distinct style. She had many plans for the future but she never expected any material return for any work, project or outcome of a plan. She wanted just love and more love. Winning hearts, finding a place in hearts, speaking from the heart, listening to the heart, taking away hearts, giving away her heart and putting her heart out. It is tragic that such an artist left us all at the age of just 40 by succumbing to a sudden heart attack. Salutes to this shining star of Hindi and art!

—Neelima Chauhan in Hindi
Translated by Pooja Priyamvada

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Viji of *Metti Oli*: Uma Maheshwari (1981-17 October 2021)



Uma Maheshwari, who was famous for her role as Viji in the very popular T V serial *Metti Oli* (Sound of the Toe Rings) passed away on October 17th 2021 much to the shock of everyone. She was only 40. She is survived by her husband Murugan, a veterinary doctor.

News reports have said that Uma was detected with jaundice a few months ago. However, she had recovered after taking treatment. But she had a relapse and was under treatment. On the day she passed away she had complained of exhaustion and had fainted.

Although she had acted in other serials like *Manjal Magimai* (The Greatness of Auspicious Turmeric) and *Oru Kadhayin Kadhai* (Story of a Story), everyone knew her only as Viji. With 800 plus episodes *Metti Oli* had brought her a lot of attention and her character Viji had become a household name.

Uma also acted in Tamil and Malayalam movies like *Vetri Kodi Kattu* (Raise the Flag of Victory, 2000), *Ee Bhargavi Nilayam* (This Bhargavi Nilayam, 2002), *Alli Arjuna* (2002) and *Unnai Ninaithu* (In Your Memory, 2002), to name a few.

Uma had got married to Murugan, a few years ago and she had quit acting soon after her marriage. Such a pity jaundice has taken her away. Many of her co-stars have offered their condolences on the social media.

C S Lakshmi

A Girl Meena Kumari Christened: Minoo Mumtaz (12 June 1963-23 October 2021)



Minoo Mumtaz, Hindi film dancer and actress, died in Canada at the age of 79 after being diagnosed with cancer.

Born Malikunnisa Ali in 1963, she was christened Minoo by Meena Kumari. Her father was Mumtaz Ali, a film dancer and character actor, and mother, Latifunnisa Begum. She was one of four daughters and four sons, one of them becoming the famous comedian Mehmood. Minoo was one of the first women in her family to go out and work to support the family

and had acted in many Hindi films in the 1950s. She started acting even before Mehmood did.

She made her debut in *Sakhi Hateem* (Generous Hatim, 1955) and she went on to play the lead opposite Balraj Sahni in *Black Cat* (1959). She has appeared in films like as *C.I.D.* (1956) *Howrah Bridge* (1958), *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (Paper Flower, 1959), *Insan Jaag Utha* (Human Beings Rose in Awareness, 1959), *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* (Full Moon, 1960), *Ghoonghat* (Headcovering, 1960) *Dharmaputra* (1961), *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* (Master, Wife and Servant, 1962), *Taj Mahal* (1963), *Ghar Basake Dekho* (Start a Family, 1963), *Gazal* (1964), *Jahanaara* (1964), *Sindbad*, *Alibaba and Aladin* (1965), and many others. She was mostly a dancer and character actor and worked in over 50 films.

She lived in Canada with her husband Sayyed Ali Akbar and had a son, Ajaz and three daughters, Shahnaz, Gulnaz and Mehnaz. Wherever she lived or died, Minoo Mumtaz will always remain a part of the Hindi film history.

Priya D'Souza

NOVEMBER 2021

Days and Nights in Translation: Professor Rani Ray (1929-6 November 2021)



A short note on Dr Rani Ray by Left Word Books says: Rani Ray has taught English at the University of Delhi, University of California at Santa Barbara, and Institute of English Studies at Lodz (Poland). She has translated many short stories from Bengali to English, including those by Ritwik Ghatak, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay,

Sunil Gangopadhyay, Joy Goswami and Anita Agnihotri. Just five lines. Then one does what can be called archival digging annoyed and frustrated with oneself that one has not read or heard of this woman who seems to have shunned publicity and led a quiet life like Greta Garbo producing one book after the other without much fanfare. The number of books she has written is stunning. From 1999 onwards she has been bringing out books which are treasures of translation.

Some of the books she has translated are: *A Treasury of Bangla Stories* by Mridula Nath Chakraborty (1999), *Ritwik Ghatak Stories* (2001), *Shanjhati's Dreams* by Joy Goswami

(2002), *Shodh: Getting Even* by Taslima Nasrin (2003), *Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyaya Stories* (2002), *Days and Nights in the Forest* by Sunil Gangopadhyay (2010), *Colonialism and Children's Literature in Bengal* by Sibaji Bandhopadhyay translated by her along with Nivedita Sen (2015), *A Day in the Life of Mangal Taram* by Anita Agnihotri (2020) and *Nagarik-Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Quartet: The Screenplays I* Edited by Ira Bhaskar (2021).

Swara Bhasker, in her tribute to her in *The Week* (November 14, 2021) has painted an endearing image of Dr Rani Ray as "a striking personality but with a petite frame, a stylish top knot, sleeveless blouses with beautiful cotton and silk saris, bright eyes behind oversized spectacles, rosy cheeks on high cheekbones" often with a cigarette dangling "in elegant long fingers and an accent that reflected her western education and Bengali roots..." She was Swara Bhasker's mother's teacher at the Delhi University.

From what Swara Bhasker writes Dr Rani Ray took some tough decisions in her life. Born into an aristocratic family she was married off at an early age but the marriage did not work. She separated and focussed on her education. She was a single mother and when she went to England for further studies she took her daughter along. She later did her PhD from the University of California, Santa Barbara. After her retirement she came back from Poland and she turned to translation and remained active till the end even though she was diagnosed with cancer.

Her daughter had died a few years ago and Dr Rani Ray lived alone with a caregiver who had been a caretaker in her house for several years. She seems to have kept her cheer even when she was in the ICU. Obviously she had been a mentor to many and many students admired her for Swara Bhasker reports that many students who were into their sixties were at her cremation.

When so many remember a teacher for so many years one can say she has truly been not just a teacher but a great human being.

—C S Lakshmi

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**SPARROW
LIBRARY**

In the Name of Mannu Di: Mannu Bhandari (13 April 1931-15 November 2021)



Mannu di, you must be very happy that you beat me in this race and left me behind to go on your journey.

How afraid you were of death!

"Where do we go?"

"What happens to us?"

"I don't want to die till I am done with my work..."

Mannu di, five years ago, on this very day, your brother and Bhabhi had come from Indore and you told them, "I am not like Bai Sa (mother) to say that I don't want to die in my daughter's house. Firstly, I am very, very scared of dying, but I want to take my last breath in my daughter's house, not on a hospital bed. Never!"

And just this morning Ratna told me that you had looked at her with such love yesterday, as if saying, *don't leave me*. I didn't want to leave her, Sudha masi, she said, but they don't let people into the ICU...

..... And the news came just two hours later!

You always used to say, Tinku's father never did anything for her, but she takes such good care of him. I don't think you have any more cause for complaint with her now, do you? She looked after you with so much more devotion than what she did for her Papa: Reiki, Ayurveda, Homeopathy, she tried everything. She became an eight-armed goddess and handled every responsibility.

So many thoughts keep coming rushing back to me...

I had lost my mother in 1999 and I was sunk in depression. You held my hand and said, "This is your mother's house now, these doors are open for you always." And truly, your doors were open for me all these years. Delhi, for me, was just your Hauz Khas house. I visited at least a couple of times a year. Even if I stayed a good one full month, while leaving, you used to say, "Not enough. Just stay here with me."

I can't forget the days when during my stay with you, if I felt even a little cold or feverish, you would go crazy with anxiety. On the phone, if my voice ever betrayed my sunken spirits, you would get worried and say, "Listen Sudha, better not leave me before I leave, I'll be an orphan if you go first." I would laugh, "If I leave, who would give you her shoulder to shoot off from?" And we would both burst out laughing. When I wrote about this conversation somewhere you said, "You must also write about how we have both defeated death and stand strongly in our arenas, digging in our heels!"

You were very humble yet brave, self-respecting, steadfast,

and oh so daring! But sometimes, no, quite often, your courage failed you. And when it did, the exertion of hiding it from the world went straight to your nerves and strained them in such a way that it was scary to see you suffering with neuralgia. Only those very close to you have seen the tug of war between mind and body that resulted from your effort to sustain your soul.

Outsiders did not bother to understand you, or make concessions for you; instead, you only met with criticism and condemnation for your actions. But why did you only notice those? Why couldn't you see the love and adoration of your readers—that I had to demonstrate to you time and again by reading those treasure of letters in your stock over and over again ?

In 2009 when Harinarayan of *Katha Desh* decided that he would dedicate an issue to you, you said, “When writers stop writing, they are as good as dead.” I had to remind you that you might not have been satisfied with how much you had written, but whatever you have written is unique and priceless. What matters is the quality of the writing, not the quantity; writing cannot be judged by the weight of the paper. Writers whose writing has to be weighed in quantity might as well not be there.

The truth of the matter is that somewhere deep inside you believed you would pick up the pen again. And of course, you did! You wrote a beautiful memoir of your mother, then an exquisite one on Kamleshwar. You even wrote a play with great enthusiasm – *Ujali Nagari Chatur Raja!* There was a novel you were trying to finish ... and many more stories. But the neuralgia that stress had caused eventually progressed to dementia and ended those dreams.

I find myself in the same place today. When my pen and my brain don't work in sync, I can understand how cruel a mental block can be for a writer. Your readers shelve you in the “has-been” bin and you are left sobbing, cradling your past in your heart. You can't lean on your golden reputation as a writer and you are all alone because your companion, your pen, has deserted you and has gone far, far, away.

Neither of us could fight alone the demands of this patriarchal society, Mannu di. When you decided to leave Rajenderji, most of your friends, took his side and left you alone with your neuralgia. Not just male friends but also women. This is the game of power. You knew it; you knew this would happen, but it still hurt you over and over. Despite all the accolades for your work, you also bore the cruelty and the taunts of many.

The heart aches to remember this; though one should really smile thinking that when one of us stood next to the other one we did not become two but we became eleven. Even when attacked from all sides you did not allow those

black shadows to overwhelm you. Nor did you allow me ever to sink in my sorrow. Your one finger extended towards me meant so much to me. Some of your close friends tried to turn you against me, but your faith in me was a rock. We were each other's armour.

Mannu di, you may have left me and moved on, but I hope you are keeping the seat next to you reserved for me....But I have a request. Don't call for me too soon. The world knows the beauty of your writing but very few know the tragedy of your life, your loneliness, your fortitude, your disillusion and your struggles. They may not want to know, but I intend to tell them, so please wait a little, dear Mannu di. And place your hand on my head and bless me that my dry pen is filled with ink again and I am able to repay your debt.

You will give me that much grace period, isn't it, Mannu di?

Your Sudha offers her final salutations to you.

16th November 2021

—Sudha Arora

Translated from Hindi by Vidya Pradhan

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DECEMBER 2021

The Smiling Psychiatrist: Dr Sarada Menon (5 April 1923-5 December 2021)



If one were to look at various sources and write a “short” bio-note of the life and career of the first woman psychiatrist, Dr Sarada Menon, it would read somewhat like this:

Mambalikalathil Sarada Menon was born in a Malayali family on 5 April 1923 as the youngest of eight children of her parents in Mangalore, Karnataka. Her father was a judge and when he was transferred to Chennai, young Sarada moved with him for her early schooling at Good Shepherd School and later at Christ Church Anglo-Indian Higher Secondary School after which she graduated from Women's Christian College. She graduated in medicine from Madras Medical College in 1951. She did her residency at Irwin Hospital, New Delhi (which is now Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan Hospital) before joining Madras Medical Service in 1951 to

start her career at Pittapuram Mission Hospital, Andhra Pradesh. She simultaneously studied for the post-graduate degree of MD which she obtained in 1957. Subsequently, she successfully completed the Diploma in Psychiatric Medicine, at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), thus becoming the first woman psychiatrist in India.

She joined Institute of Mental Health (then known as Government Mental Hospital) in 1959 and became its first woman superintendent in 1961. She retired as its head in 1978. During her period (1961-1978), several special clinics were started. Child Guidance Clinic started functioning under Dr O Somasundaram who got training in child psychiatry at the UK. Other special clinics which were started were neuropsychiatric clinic, geriatric clinic, epilepsy clinic, adolescent clinic, and neurosis clinic. It was during her tenure, the institution started the department of psychiatry, opened an out-patient facility and established regional psychiatric centres at all the district hospitals in the state. She was instrumental in the creation of the family model of care for people with mental health issues in India. AASHA/Atma Nirbhar was the outcome of that. It is a community-based organisation assisting the families of mentally-ill people based in Chennai. She did not stop at that. She converted one of the rooms in her residence into a shelter and later influenced the local chapter of YMCA to open palliative care centres; the organisation eventually opened three such centres, at Thiruverkadu, Mahabalipuram and Anna Nagar.

Under her supervision the Industrial Therapy Centre in IMH was set up in 1970. It was set up with government permission and with the help of philanthropists whom Dr Sarada Menon persuaded to contribute. Dr M Peter Fernandez was made as medical officer in charge. This was a non-profitable and therapy-oriented centre. Its primary focus was on psychosocial rehabilitation. Eventually, the centre expanded and it now has a soft toys manufacturing unit, wire bag unit, incense sticks unit, paper cover-making unit, chalk piece making unit, soap preparing section, a flour mill for grinding the essential day to day of the kitchen of IMH, and a candle-making section. There is also a bakery unit that caters to the daily requirement of bread for the Mental Hospital, which also supplies biscuits, cakes, and other confectionaries to the hospital canteen.

People like Dr Sarada Menon don't really retire. Her colleague and student Dr R Thara says in her tribute to her in *The Hindu* dated December 11, 2021, that "after her retirement, she became restless realising that there was much more to be done to fulfill her ambitions in integrating rehabilitation with mainstream mental health care." Thus was founded in 1984, the NGO Schizophrenia Research

Foundation (SCARF) along with Dr Sadanand Rajkumar with Dr Sarada Menon as founder and chairman and Dr R Thara as co-founder and vice chairman. The SCARF team was made up of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, rehabilitation personnel, administrative and supportive staff. It is one of the few Indian institutions recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a Collaborating Centre for Mental Health Research and Training. She was also elected regional vice-president and secretary general of the World Association for Psychosocial Rehabilitation (WAPR), and founded their Indian Chapter.

Dr Sarada Menon's activities spread in many other directions too. She served as the vice-president of the Chennai chapter of the Red Cross Society and was a member of the state government panel set up for proposing prison reforms. She was also associated with the World Fellowship for Schizophrenia and Allied Disorders (WFSAD). Many honours and awards came her way. She was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1992 when she was 69. There were several awards that followed: Best Doctor Award from the Government of Tamil Nadu; Best Employer Award from the Government of India; Special Award of the International Association of Psycho-Social Rehabilitation in Boston University and the *For the Sake of Honour Award* from the Rotary Club Chennai; Lifetime Achievement Award of Madras Neuro Trust in 2013 and finally in 2016 when she was 93 and still active, the Government of Tamil Nadu honoured her again this time with the *Avvaiyyar Award*, an award given to people excelling in their fields.

One wonders how many volumes her memoirs would have run to had she written one which unfortunately she did not. Till the end she continued to be active and Nivedita Louis, a journalist, met her in January 2021 and this is what she has written about her in her tribute to her published in *Indhu Thamizh Thisai* on 12 December 2021:

There is No End for Sarada, No Death Either

It was not possible to read the one-line news that the nation's first woman psychiatrist had passed away and pass on to the next news. Life is strange. So are people we encounter. We may become bitter with people we have known for years; and some may become etched on your mind after just one meeting. In January this year I wanted to interview Sarada Amma for my *First Women* series. When I got her number after a search and called her, her assistant picked up the phone. "Please send a mail to Madam's Email ID. She would get back to you," she said and gave me her Email ID.

A doctor who checks her emails and gets back to you at the age of 97! I could not believe it. I sent her an email saying I would like to interview her. I got a reply the very next day saying the interview could be done through Skype and to call her on her private number at ten in the morning and her private phone number was also given. First the request to be contacted on email and then the interview to be conducted on Skype! I spoke to her assistant and got the date and time for the interview. Since I had to go to Tirunelveli on field work for a week I could not interview her on the appointed day. Before I could inform her she had already sent me a long mail giving instructions on how to download Skype, her user ID, how to call her on her user ID and so on. I called her assistant and asked her if the interview could be done the following week and with her permission postponed the interview.

On the day of the interview exactly at ten she came online. "You look young; I expected an older person," she said and asked me if my Tirunelveli trip had gone well. I felt a bit ashamed being someone who brings the house down looking for spectacles pushed up on the forehead. "How do you remember?" I asked her. And she smiled in reply. When I began the interview for the first ten minutes she was interviewing me! I could make out that she really was interested in knowing about the person before her. She spoke effortlessly in English with no pauses, without any haste, her thoughts running in an easy flow like a clear stream.

She had wanted to join medicine but she did not get the science stream in college but got admission to study history. She got permission from the college principal to study science along with history. "History was for my father; science was for me. There was no objection to women studying those days," she said. She studied in both the groups and passed her exams. She had the determination to carry out whatever she wanted to do. After completing her degree in medicine, when she got on to the train to go to Pittapuram in Andhra Pradesh to work in the general hospital there she did not know a word of Telugu. It was no wonder that at the age of 97 she was adept at using the internet and the Skype!

I asked her what her worst experience in life had been and she said, "The workers' strike." "The

workers in the kitchen of Kilpauk Mental Hospital went on a strike for a day. You and I can live without food for a day. Can the mentally afflicted bear to do that? Would they be able to fathom why there was no food, you tell me. The next minute I was in the kitchen and I began to prepare whatever was needed for that day's menu. The others also joined me," she added. It was this real caring that has raised the status of Kilpauk Mental Hospital to what it is today.

I looked for her younger day photographs on the web but could not find any. I sent her a mail asking her if I could photograph her at her place. I told her if there were some photographs of her younger days I could scan them also. Half an hour later she called me.

"The younger day photographs are in a trunk in the attic. Come home after two days at 10 in the morning. I will keep them ready," she told me. I can't ever forget the day I met her in real person. Since it was lockdown days due to Corona she was very careful. The sanitiser dispenser was kept at the entrance. She was sitting before the computer in her room. She was dressed in simple white Kerala mundum-neriyathum attire with a grey blouse with her smile reaching her eyes. "Look I have kept some photographs in the drive. Should I send them to you?" she asked and sent them to me. She showed me the photographs of the homes she founded and managed. She had many dreams. "These kinds of structures won't do. Much more needs to be done," she said. When I told her I wanted to photograph her she came to the hall walking with the help of her walking stick. "I am an old woman. How are you going to photograph me?" she laughed. But the moment I took out the camera, "Should I stand here? Should I sit here?" she asked enthusiastically like a child cooperating with me to get the photographs taken. Her young age photographs were spread on the table. "The photographs you asked for are on the table. Take whatever you want," she said. "Take care of yourself. Don't keep roaming about. We will meet soon," she said and went into her room. When I was ready to leave I asked the helper at home if I could take leave of her. "She is busy on the Skype attending to a patient," she told me. I could hear her talking to someone and laughing. I enjoyed that laughter and left.

When the interview was published I sent her the link on email. “Despite my limitations, you have done a good job. Thank you,” came her reply. That reply reminded me that however high we rise our feet must firmly remain on the ground.

I have kept Sarada Amma carefully in my mind with that laughter of hers that I last heard. She would remain alive laughing, in the memory of thousands whose lives she has touched, somewhere, sometime. She cannot die.

One wishes one had met her and asked her what she thought about Freud, Breuer, Carl Jung and her views on R D Laing, Aaron Esterson and David Cooper of the anti-psychiatry movement. The tragedy of archiving women’s history and life is that it can never completely cover the life and work of so many women who do brilliant work quietly in their own fields not caring for either recognition or monetary benefits. By the time we come to know about them they are gone.

—C S Lakshmi & Nivedita Louis

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Going With and Beyond Words: Alaknanda Samarth (27 May 1941-6 December 2021)



Sometime in 2010 Alaknanda contacted me because she wanted to do an experiment with the *Ramayana* character Shabari. The correspondence began with Shabari and then it went on to two of my stories she had liked: “Once Again” and “Yellow Fish”. She asked me if I could write something that would last for fifteen minutes; something like a

play but need not be a play, which Veena Pani would direct with Rustom Bharucha who had introduced us, as part of the team which will form the basic text for the Shabari experiment. We had a very interesting correspondence when I realised that I needed to know much more than theatre and go beyond my own stories. It was the most intriguing and bizarre correspondence a writer could have had with a theatre person. Some of the things Alaknanda said in that correspondence have remained with me although the project never took off. Some of what she said in that correspondence about how she conceived the live performance is below:

—Fragments, images, aural images—words with sound values are what we could explore in those 15 mins.

—Character, cause and effect, story are not pertinent in this experiment. Motivation is totally irrelevant.

—Shabari is therefore not the be all and end all... or indeed the container.

It’s a trampoline for a small team of us to find methodologies...

Your text will form the basis of the experiment. As I said childbirth and child mortality in visceral terms is what I would explore. Then I’ll take the next step with Rustom and Veena.

—Don’t worry at all about ‘theatrical coherence’ or how character and motivation and climax work in theatre. We are not interested in that at all in this experiment.

—Just go ahead when you feel ready and give us a draft—one A4 page—of fragment, image and word. I will then be able to see where to take it in live performance. Veena will coordinate rehearsals.

—This is just to say please don’t feel you need to rush things. It’s a tough exercise...a short text where every word contains multiple worlds and stands for something other than itself... Disparate, decentered, de-theatricalised images.

We were corresponding in June and monsoons were about to start in Mumbai. And she asked if rain could be included in the sound track

—we should do a soundtrack of tropical rainfall... let the sound do the work without mentioning rain in words...

Along with all this she also wanted to know about how certain words would resonate in Tamil.

So I am not surprised when Rustom Bharucha in his wonderful tribute to her in *The Hindu* dated 10 December 2021, says that her conviction was that “if we had not reached a point of breakdown in our attempt to push the limits of the voice and the body, we were simply wasting our time doing theatre.” Rustom says that in retrospect he realises that “this is an Artaudian perspective—extreme, rigorous, but always open to the dark forces of the unconscious driving one’s sensibility into the void.” He adds, “Tellingly, Alak recently recorded Antonin Artaud’s metaphysical essay on ‘The Theatre and the Plague’, which she read with a kind of breathlessness in one sustained continuum. This feat becomes all the more memorable when one realises that Alak had recorded this long text during the pandemic on the telephone in what appears to be a single take.” Rustom also tells us that while she was coming to terms with her imminent death in the last two months, she spent much of her time reading and recording Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in counterpoint with the *Upanishads*.

Alaknanda’s parents were Manohar Balkrishna Samarth and Nirmala Samarth. Alaknanda lived in London, was married to Francois Duriand, the well-known former Reuters editor

for France. Her daughter Aline Duriand, is a jewellery designer and a volunteer working in community organisations and her son Laurent Duriand is an award winning florist and they live in London. But with her deep Maharashtrian connections (her mother was sister of Kumarsen Samarth, the legendary film director who was married to actor Shobana Samarth and was father of actors Nutan and Tanuja) and her work in India, Alaknanda was very much steeped in what can be called Indian sensibilities. It will be interesting to know how she viewed her life in theatre. In 2012 her niece Aadya Shah interviewed her for *PT Notes*. It appeared in the March 2012 issue of *PT Notes* and later in *The Eclectist* on June 22, 2012. The interview captures the history of theatre in India and London and reveals how Alaknanda's life was entwined with theatre.

Aadya: Satyadev Dubey has passed away. You acted in his first and biggest hit, *Band Darwaze [Closed Doors]*. How did working with him contribute to your growth?

Alaknanda Samarth: Dubey in 1964-'65 had a corrosive laugh, a savage impatience with existing systems and with himself. He commanded a chaste, muscular Hindi. He offered me a role in Sartre's French play 'No Exit'(1944)- in Urdu. I'd just returned from spending 5 years in the West and I'd never acted in Urdu. First, he cast me as the lesbian Post Office clerk and then changed it to the socialite murderess. So Sulabha Deshpande and I switched roles. He played the army deserter. All three are dead. In Hell. Amrish Puri played the Valet/Death. Every language is a map with bleeding, porous borders. It's not bandaged. *Band Darwaze* helped my growth at the deepest level of language as consciousness. He paid meticulous attention to syntax and the substrata of text analysis. 'She's India's only properly trained actress,' he always said of me to my embarrassment! We didn't take ourselves seriously. To this day people who've NEVER SEEN THE PRODUCTION DESCRIBE IT TO ME IN DETAIL. Why did it sweep everyone off their feet? Because it was the moment that language shifted palpably and visibly on the Bombay stage and so gave rise to a new, inclusive audience. THE AUDIENCE CHANGED. That's a revolutionary act in theatre. It doesn't happen twice. It happened in *BAND DARWAZE*.

Aadya: Why did you go to train in the West? Were there Indian influences at RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts)? Can you compare the Indian and British theatre scenes in the '60's?

AS : In 1959, I played Strindberg's 'Miss Julie' opposite Mr. Alkazi in English. I didn't know that there was a professor, from an American university, in the audience. They offered me a round air trip and the Wien International Scholarship in Theatre Arts to Brandeis University in the U.S. I hadn't even heard of Brandeis! It was random, quite by chance! On the way back with my air ticket I stopped in London, auditioned for RADA and got a scholarship.

At RADA, India was not in the consciousness. I was one of the very first few Indians there. No one mentioned India. I was given leading roles in European classics. The peer group was wildly talented and generous with me. They are lifelong friends. I went with the flow. Voice training was the big discovery. That led me to study Indian vachika traditions. Neela Bhagwat worked on pre-expressive sound systems with me. Comparisons are corrosive. Contexts are specific. In the '60's, Indian theatre had to reclaim its narrative and reconfigure. The FTII and NSD began to evolve training programmes for the modern Indian actor. Hugely painful, ongoing tasks. You know that struggle and history. Since 1993, I've known the great Voice Teacher Patsy Rodenburg. Her work on the actor's Circles of Energy and Presence is profound. Her lived understanding of Shakespeare is a revelation. Britain saw an explosion of popular culture and a sexual revolution. Censorship was abolished in 1968. Nudity, sex and drugs shockingly appeared on stage in the musical *Hair*. In Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) an upper class protagonist was seen ironing for the first time! In Wesker's play *The Kitchen* (1953), cooks, cleaners, waitresses and immigrants sweated it out over the kitchen sink.

On TV, Asians and Blacks became visible. The British Film Institute (BFI) did a book, *Black and White in Colour* (ed. Jim Pines, 1992), on 45 years of Black and Asian representation. One of my portrayals was chosen as the three most radical. In *Z Cars*, a hit police series, I play an Indian woman with 2 kids married to a Black man who murders a white policeman with an axe. *A Place of Safety* deals with Institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police. Even today, that would be explosive.

In 1975, I was the first Indian actress in a classical lead at the National Theatre at the Old Vic—the shrine where Olivier, Gielgud, Richard Burton had acted. There was no political correctness, no emerging Indian market,

no flavour of the month Bollywood. One had to be on the ball on stage in a star studded cast of superb verse speakers.

Today's second generation British Asian actors speak English as their mother tongue. In the last decade, there are many more roles for them. British Asian dance has an international superstar in Akram Khan. But the theatre movement has been absorbed. The Bollywood imaginary has taken over.

I've never been part of the Asian scene. There has been some interaction with Black Theatre and Film collectives. Played famous Arab texts like *Tewfik Al-Hakim*. Worked over the years with little known avant-garde groups like The Address, Puzzle Club, Muzikansky, Hawksmoor Music Project. Maverick radicals, in studio theatres, no publicity or funds but freedom to culturally catalyse great texts in my own voice and defy categorisation.

Aadya: You taught acting at the NSD. Could you speak about that?

AS: BV Karanth invited me. I lived in India (1979-82). Acting classes were in Hindi. Some students didn't speak it fluently. I changed it so they did exercises in their mother tongues to unleash internal rhythms. Teaching has led me to a methodology but I'm not an academic or systematic, rarely write things down. It's in the moment for the actor in front of me, their fears, time, place, reality. Every actor gets to the role in his own way. Later I worked in Trichur, directed 2 open air productions of Shakespeare and Edward Bond in Malayalam, learnt the texts by heart! Working with Tomba, I found Manipur's electrifying vachika rituals. In London, actors are from everywhere. Many cadences, histories of Civil War, Communism, the Holocaust, Palestine. We've been exploring Cultural Memory, Sound Memory...

Aadya: You've done landmark solo shows. Tell us about 'KUNTI AND THE HUMAN VOICE' and 'MEDEA MATERIAL' both in Bombay. What are the modes of rehearsal in collaborations since you live far from India?

AS: I don't think in terms of 'far and near'. There are 'Other Indias', diasporic energies, wheels within cultural wheels. It's a question of unravelling them. 'KUNTI

AND THE HUMAN VOICE' in Hindi and English, directed by Kumar Shahani was the first solo in 1987. It examined the female impulse in two distinct contexts. Kumar's sensibility and unique vision of cinema actually transformed my acting. Gave it transparency. We went on to do 5 major pieces of work together, including 2 feature films, one unfinished feature and 2 short films in London.

Solos have been a constant, in music theatre, texts by Pakistani, Arab, European writers in London. In 1992, I began an ongoing collaboration with visual artist Nalini Malani. We did Heiner Muller's *Medea Trilogy*. Nalini's work is so layered. The body becomes a magical image. It's glamorous. The ground rules are not those of theatre. It's freeing. Our latest in Switzerland in 2010 was 'Medea Revisited'.

'Texts' of this complexity are 2-3 years in the making. With shifting modes of exchange but always with constant trust. On the phone, interactive, in person and in the last lap 4-6 weeks in situ. That's the mode of rehearsal.

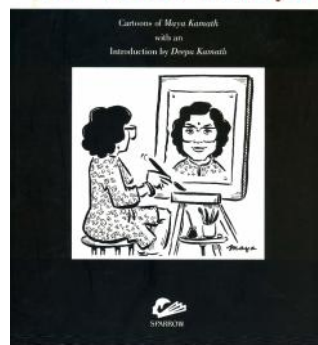
Aadya : Have you got any future projects?

AS: A couple of ideas, one in India. What they have in common is to test the limits of performance, acting itself and thus question the role of the audience/spectator/listener. Such work has no cultural marketability. It's working on and in process and as such on the cutting edge of vulnerability and even failure. That gives it energy.

C S Lakshmi

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The World of Maya



**SPARROW
PUBLICATION**

JANUARY 2022

A Writer from Pakistan: Afra Bukhari (14 March 1938-2 January 2022)



Afra Bukhari was born in Amritsar and moved to Lahore in Pakistan only during the Partition, when she was 9 years old. She began to write short stories for her children in her early twenties. There was a gap in her writing when her husband passed away in 1978. She devoted all her time

to bringing up her children and resumed writing only in the 1990s. Writing about her on December 29, 2021 in *Daily Times*, Pakistan's English newspaper, while introducing her fifth collection of short stories *Sang-e-Siyah (Black Stone)* Dr Amjad Parvez says, "Afra Bukhari is neither a socialite nor part of any literary groupings. Despite that, she has acquired ample experience of life as a housewife and later as a widow who raised her children, to create masterpieces in short story format. There was a gap of fifteen years in her writings and she started writing again after 1993. During this gap she raised her children singlehandedly and gave them top class education."

The fifth collection brought out in 2021 happened just before her death as if she had an intuition that she needed to bring out one last publication. *Minute Mirror*, Pakistan's independent newspaper, says that it was "a coincidence that the collection carried both her old and new writings, thus incorporating her journey from her initial days as a creative writer to her experiences to date..." but maybe it was not that much of a coincidence.

Before *Sang-e-Siyah* she had written four short story collections beginning with her first collection in 1964. She published *Faasle (Distances, 1964)*, *Nijaat (Salvation, 1998)*, *Ret Mein Paoon (Feet in the Sand, 2003)* and *Aank aur Andhera (The Eye and the Darkness, 2009)*. Her works have received much praise from writers like Premchand. Asif Farrukhi, a critic and a translator, even compared her to Virginia Woolf.

Afra Bukhari is supposed to have been working on writing down her memoirs in the form of short stories entitled *Us Ki Zindagi*. It is a pity this work has been left incomplete. It would have thrown a lot of light on her own life and her emotional journey. Maybe her son, Amir Faraz, who is also a writer and her daughter, Fatima Ali, who is a journalist will be able to retrieve the manuscript and publish it.

Goa's Daughter: Dr Maria Aurora Couto (22 August 1937-14 January 2022)



It was a year after she had published *Goa: A Daughter's Story* (2004) that I met Maria Aurora Couto. I had gone to Goa to interview two Konkani writers Jayanthi Naik and Hema Naik and while planning the trip I had also hesitantly written to Maria Aurora if I could come

and meet her. I was hesitant because I had not read her book and had only heard of her and read the review of her book by Ranjit Hoskote in *The Hindu*. I did not quite see Goans the way Hindi cinema had stereotyped them but it was true that I did not know so much about Goa except what I had read in the Tamil writer Rajam Krishnan's fiction. She had lived in Goa and had written many stories centred around Goa and her novel *Valaikkaram* was on the liberation of Goa which was serialised in the magazine *Swadesamitran* and then published as a book in 1969. It had won the Soviet Land Nehru award in 1975. I was a bit nervous if I could approach a writer of her stature without having read her. But Maria Aurora was a gracious woman. She agreed to meet me and talk to me. I took a bus from Panaji to Aldona and met her in her beautiful heritage house.

That day she spoke about her life in Goa and how they went to live in Dharwad when she was still eight years old and how she was brought up to think of herself as Indian, Goan and Christian. She knew Konkani and what she kept stressing while we shared food was that she grew up in a very inclusive household. Having read her book since, I understand how important it was for her to constantly stress her identity, the complex elements that went into it and the need to see cultural heritage also as a complex mixture of many things. Even in the interview given to Frederick Noronha for *Literally Goa* on April 27, 2021, she keeps talking about inclusivity and how being Indian, Goan and Catholic was what she was. In February 2008, the Directorate of Art and Culture Government of Goa and the D D Kosambi Birth Centenary Celebration Committee organised a four-day lecture series on D D Kosambi a historian, mathematician and a polymath who held the view that peace was a prerequisite for development and that true peace required true democracy where all men are truly equal and no one claims any superiority. It was not surprising that Maria Aurora Couto was chairperson of the D D Kosambi Birth Centenary Celebration Committee.

In the obituaries that have appeared after her death and in the comments on some Facebook pages, many have spoken

—C S Lakshmi

about how she wrote favourably about what was being written in English in India, while she was in London and how she was the champion of Indian writing in British publications. She has now, at the age of 84, left the Goa she grew up in and the Goa she returned to and the Goa she lived in till the end, for another dimension.

I never got to meet her again after that first meeting. Maybe it is time now to read her second book *Filomena's Journeys: A Portrait of a Marriage, a Family & a Culture* (2013) and reread her *Goa: A Daughter's Story*.

—C S Lakshmi

***Naathvati Anaathbat* : Shaoli Mitra (1948-16 January 2022)**



The theatre world of Bengal will remember Shaoli Mitra, the gifted actor, director and playwright for her solo performance as Draupadi in *Naathvati Anaathbat* (Five husbands, Yet An Orphan), which she wrote and directed, and her performance as Sita on *Sitakatha*. She also wrote, directed and acted in the very

popular *Katha Amritsamman* (Words that are like Nectar) another adaptation of the Mahabharata. Saoli Mitra had been ill for a while but had not made it public nor had she got hospitalised.

Her illustrious career as a theatre actor had begun with Bahuroopi, the theatre group founded by her parents, the legendary Sambhu Mitra and Tripti Mitra. It was while she was with Bahuroopi that she had played the role of Amal in Tagore's *Dakghar* and immortalised it. Later she founded the theatre group Pancham Baidik and many of the plays produced under its banner were on women's emancipation.

She was also a part of *avant-garde* films. She was cast as Bangabala in Ritwik Ghatak's film *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (Reason, Debate and a Story).

Shaoli Mitra was the recipient of Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 2003, Padma Shri in 2009, and Banga Bibhusan in 2012. In her last wish to her near friends she had said that she wanted to be cremated without any fanfare and her friends fulfilled her wish.

A much loved theatre actor wrote her final script as carefully as she wrote her famous plays, and she made her exit a quiet one in the script.

—C S Lakshmi

The One Who Sang the Mango Orchard Song: Rathna/Panna C Shah: 19 August 1947-19 January 2022)



Rathna whose real name is Nagarathna was veteran actor G Varalakshmi's niece. She was G Varalakshmi's sister's daughter. Some news reports refer to

her as Panna C Shah. One does not know if her mother married a Gujarati but she is remembered as Rathna in Tamil films. Many references to her including Wikipedia mention that she came into films at the age of 15 and that her first film was with the legendary MGR in the film *Thozhilali* (Worker). It is true that she entered films at the age of 15 but she first appeared in the film *Gulebakavali Katha* in 1962 as one of the heroines of another legendary Telugu actor N T RamaRao. She played the role of Bakavali in the screen name Nagarathna. Incidentally, the film had been produced in Tamil as *Gulebakavali* in 1955 in which her aunt G Varalakshmi had acted as Bakavali.

In a clipping of an interview given to *Cinema Express* (date not available) posted by a blogger (mgrroop.blogspot) she says that she was in a studio when a person came to her and told her that MGR wanted to see her. She told him she would finish her shooting and come and meet him. Sowkar Janaki, another veteran actor who was there, was shocked by her casual reply and told her to immediately go and meet MGR if he has asked her to. Rathna went and met him and he asked her if she would like to work with him in a film. Rathna told him that she would not like to do the roles of a sister or a second heroine. He appreciated her frankness and later offered her a role in *Thozhilali* produced in 1964. She must have been a rather plucky girl to have spoken to MGR in that manner when there were people dying to be just seen with him on the screen.

She did many more films in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada. But she is remembered for acting as one of the two heroines of MGR in the film *Enga Veettu Pillai* (The Son of Our Family, 1965) in which MGR played double roles and in which she sang the famous duet song "*Naan Manthoppil Nindirunthaen*" (I Was in the Mango Orchard). The lyrics of the song written by Vaali, of course, were full of double entendres. Beginning with the first line where the heroine sings that she was standing in a mango orchard and a man asked her for a mango

and when she offered him a mango, he refused and wanted her cheek, the song was a titillating one. Rathna is remembered only in association with this song. Later in life she withdrew from public life and hardly ever appeared in shows related to Tamil films. She made an exception only for the function that was organised by MGR fans in 2015, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the film *Thirudathe* (Don't Steal, 1961) and *Enga Veettu Pillai* although actually it was the fiftieth anniversary of the latter film. Rathna made her appearance in a white sari and a walking stick much to the shock of all MGR fans. In their minds must have been the heroine who sang the titillating mango song.

No one knew anything about her personal life or who she was married to. She was residing at Palavakkam, a suburb of Chennai, with her three sons and a daughter. She took ill and was admitted to a private hospital and breathed her last at the age of 74. It would be interesting to know why she did not act in many films although she was much appreciated and why she decided to withdraw from public life. It may tell us a lot about the world of Tamil cinema and the history of Tamil cinema, a lot of which is still shrouded in mystery.

—C S Lakshmi

Swarsamradhini: Keerti Shiledar (1952-22 January 2022)



The Sangeet Natak tradition has lost a precious artiste. Keerti Shiledar's family kept the tradition of Sangeet Natak alive by running the Marathi Rangabhoomi Sanstha. Keerti was the daughter of the famous singing couple Jayaram and Jaimala Shiledar. Later she was trained in classical

Hindustani music by actor and musician Nilkanth Abhyankar.

Keerti's first appearance on the stage was at the age of 12. She had a resonant and clear voice even at that age and her way of singing mesmerised the audience. However, reminiscing about her life to Anjali Jhangiani for *Indian Express*, which came out as an article "50 Not Out" on August 27, 2012, she had said her debut performance was when she was in her mother's womb! She had said, "My parents were dedicated to Marathi theatre. During their time, they would visit different villages, in the same manner as a circus troupe, and perform shows for a month or two. During one such visit, while my mother was pregnant, the villagers had requested her to perform at one of their shows because

they wanted to hear her sing. I call that my first stage performance." She also recalled in 2012, that she tagged along with her parents for all the theatre rehearsals and performances ever since she was a baby. When she was around ten her parents realised how much she had imbibed of what she had seen. Those were the days of one-man shows and she had accompanied her parents to watch one such show. Referring to that incident in the interview, she had said, "When I came back, I acted out all the melodrama and the mistakes that the artiste had made during the show. Soon, my elder sister and brother joined me in a performance of *Saubhadra*. I would change costumes and switch between the role of Krishna and his dasi in 20 seconds."

At the age of 12, she officially joined the Marathi Rangbhumi Natak Company that was founded by her illustrious parents and her career in Sangeet Natak began from then. Her rendition of "Khara to Prema na dhari lobh mani" (Mind, don't be egoistic when you are truly in love), the famous song of Bal Gandharva with lyrics written by Khadilkar and music composed by Govindrao Tembe, brought back memories of the natyapad from Kirloskar company's epoch making year 1911 play *Maanapman (Insult)*, with which play started golden era of Marathi Sangeet Natak and era of Bal Gandharva. Her rendition became very popular.

She has acted in many plays. *Sangeet Swarsamradhini*, *Yayati Aani Devyani*, *Sanshay Kallol*, *Sangeet Kanhopatra*, *Sangeet Saubhadra*, *Swaymvar*, *Mrutchha Katik* and *Mandodari* are some of the well-known plays she has acted in. The play she was known for was *Swarsamradhini*, which was based on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, and her role of Naina was based on Eliza Doolittle. The play was about the journey of a girl who performs lavani and how she was trained to learn classical music. Keerti recalled that the writer, Vidyadhar Gokhale, had sketched the character of Naina based on her. She felt as if she was playing herself for she actually began to learn sastriya sangeet from Abhyankar during the rehearsals of the play.

The programme *Sangeet Sabhadra* which was telecast in Doordarshan on January 14, 2022 just eight days before her demise, was directed by Keerti in September 2021. She directed the shooting for the programme in September 2021.

Keerti had been undergoing dialysis treatment and had complained of breathing problems in the morning and was admitted in the Dinanath Mangeshkar Hospital in Pune. She passed away in the hospital. She is survived by her elder sister Deepti Bhogle. The songs she has sung in her golden voice will also remain to tell her story.

—C S Lakshmi

A Gallery of Memories: Lakshmi Venkatraman (12 October 1945-24 January 2022)



We meet large hearted people often who want to help many voluntary organisations with donations and even voluntary work. But those who give away an entire apartment to a NGO are rare. Lakshmi Venkatraman is that rare person. In January 2021 just a year before her demise she gifted to

Sevalaya, a non-profit organisation, her flat on the first floor of Pushkarni Apartments at 12, Ananda Road in Alwarpet. The flat was a 3 BHK flat that was worth Rs. 2 crores. Reporting it on January 16, 2021, *The Hindu* newspaper called it a “transaction of the heart”. She herself moved to a flat in Royappettah to continue to function from there.

Lakshmi Venkatraman was an art critic, a freelance writer in art, music and an art curator. She was also a very good translator of technical write-ups in German and French. She was a trained painter and a musician. She learnt veenai from the famous Rajeswari Padmanabhan. She was a registered tour guide for ITDC and TNSTDC. She wrote art, music and dance reviews for *The Hindu* and other papers/magazines. She was a familiar and well-known face in art circles.

This was not the first time that Lakshmi Venkatraman had taken unusual decisions. Her grandfather, Justice P R Sundaram Iyer was an eminent judge of the Madras High Court, He resided with his family in a sprawling bungalow called Sri Baugh near Nageswara Rao Park in Luz. In 1930, it changed hands and was sold to the family of Nageswara Rao who started the Amrutanjan balm business. P S Venkatraman, Lakshmi’s father, a builder, established his home in the 4½ grounds of 33 (now 28/160), Eldams Road in 1935. He built an art deco house there and called it Sri Parvati. Talking about the heritage house, *Madras Musings*, a fortnightly news magazine, in its Vol. XVIII No. 10, September 1-15, 2008 issue said: “It was a typical old-fashioned home, a screen dividing the big hall into two sections. Rajammal, Venkatraman’s wife, would tend the banana and mango trees and feed the cows in the cowshed. This was where their daughter Lakshmi grew up and spent the first 40 years of her life.”

When the home became hers she took a decision that surprised many. In an interview given to Gauthaman for www.andhimazhai.com in 2010, she said that after her brother’s death when the heritage house became hers the idea of an art gallery occurred to her. Many told her that it

was a property situated in a prime locality and ideal site and that bringing it down and building a multiplex would be very profitable. But Lakshmi wanted to put the heritage house to better use. She refurbished it to accommodate an art gallery and turned it into a cultural centre. Gallery Sri Parvati was started in December 2005 at the heritage house ‘Sri Parvati’ on Eldams Road, Alwarpet, and Lakshmi has managed the gallery and its activities since then. In its web page Gallery Sri Parvati has this to say about how it came into being and how it functions:

Gallery Sri Parvati—the gallery does not only adopt the name of the house itself, it is so very apt to the old world ambience of the nearly 80 years old heritage building. The gallery on the first floor of this old house is owned and managed by an experienced art critic and art historian of over twenty years’ experience.

When the building came into her hands, not wanting to spoil the green environment and the ancient well and in order to conserve the heritage of Madras terrace building, she decided to start an art gallery on the first floor and use the ground floor for cultural activities like lectures, seminars, concerts etc. Thus came into being Gallery Sri Parvati in 2005.

Gallery Sri Parvati hosts art exhibitions by well-known senior artists periodically and also encourages young talented aspirants. The space is also given on rent for art shows. It has modern lighting and air conditioning. The size is quite suitable for solo exhibitions and also group shows of not more than 4/5 artists.

The greenery besides the building offers space to relax and interact with friends while enjoying good food in the garden restaurant.

Lakshmi Venkatraman was not just the owner of large properties. She was an artist with a large heart who knew how to give away what she owned for causes she believed in. Her passing away is a great loss to the art world and to Sevalaya which now functions from her Alwarpet residence. Lakshmi has left behind many memories to cherish in Gallery Sri Parvati.

—C S Lakshmi



Making Women's Rights Her Lifetime Commitment: Prof. Aparna (Dutta) Mahanta (20 August 1946-26 January 2022)



The faculty members, staff, students and alumni of the UGC Centre for Women's Studies, Dibrugarh University, gathered together virtually on 27 January 2022 to condole the untimely demise of Prof. Aparna Mahanta on 26 January

2022. She had retired as a Professor and Head of the Dept. at the Department of English, Dibrugarh University.

In their condolence message the Centre for Women's Studies said that Prof. Aparna Mahanta was instrumental in the establishment of the UGC Centre for Women's Studies at Dibrugarh University and that she was the Founder Director of the Centre. Prof. Aparna Mahanta was involved with the women's movement as an academic and as a grassroots activist since the 1980s.

Aparna Mahanta was one of the poster women of Zubaan and had given a long interview to Monisha Behal for Zubaan on 17 November 2011 in which she spoke about her childhood, education and later her activities with regard to the women's movement and women's rights issues.

She did her schooling from St Mary's in Shillong and graduated from St Mary's College. Aparna Mahanta did her Master's in English Literature from Guwahati University as well as the University of Leeds under a British Council scholarship programme. The noted activist did her PhD in 1982 from Dibrugarh University and became the first woman in Assam to have a doctorate degree in English. She spent her professional life as a professor in the English Department of Dibrugarh University and was the founding director of the Women's Studies Centre in the varsity.

Aparna Mahanta was one of the pioneers of modern feminist movement in Assam. She was a life member of the Indian Association of Women's Studies and a member of IAWS National Executive Committee and Coordinator of North Eastern region during 2005-08. In its condolence message IAWS referred to her as a veteran women's rights activist who kept in touch with Women's Studies Centres and women's organisations all over India. The message mentioned how she was "highly respected throughout India and represented the Northeast Region in the national gatherings."

Aparna Mahanta wrote both in Assamese and English and her book *Nareebad- Part 1 and Part 2* detailing the history of

the feminist movement was a much acclaimed book. Her *Journey of Assamese Women (1836-1937)* that dealt with issues of Assamese women during colonial times was also a book that was considered a foundational book to study to understand the history and predicaments of Assamese women.

In her interview to Zubaan, Aparna Mahanta speaks about how she set up the organisation Nari Sanstha after returning from England and became active in women's rights issues. She mentions that she and some of her women colleagues used to meet and discuss and they decided to do a survey on working women's issues. They decided to publish it and they managed to publish it in 1983. That was the period when Assam was going through a lot of turmoil. However, on the 8th of March, they were able to publish a small magazine, *Aidor Jonaki Baat*. She says in the interview that while bringing out the magazine itself was a great success she was very angry with the printers because they had ornamented the magazine with designs of some flowers because it was a women's magazine. The first issue came out on 8th March 1983 and the next year they organised a big meeting on the same day and that is how her organisation Nari Sanstha now called (Pragathishil Nari Sanstha) was started and it continues to publish the magazine now calling it *Jonaki Baat*.

Throughout her life Aparna Mahanta did not allow anything to come in the way of whatever her pursuit was. She got married to a person of her choice despite the fact that they belonged to different communities. She had applied for a British Council Scholarship to study in the University of Leeds and the interview call came twenty days after she had delivered her daughter. Her husband encouraged her to go for the interview and she left her child with her mother and sisters and went to Delhi with her husband to face the interview. And when she finally left for her studies abroad her daughter was an eight-month-old baby. Her family took care of her child and Aparna Mahanta went abroad to pursue her studies. And this courage and determination characterised her life all through. Those active in IAWS remember her as a feminist who was actively involved in all the debates in the meetings and who led rallies and addressed public meetings.

She was a member of Mahila Samakhya Project of Government of Assam. In the interview she talks about how one should educate people and create awareness regarding superstitious practices like witch hunting. She was actively involved in issues such as witch hunting till the end. The IAWS condolence message refers to the seminar organised on 25 February, 2020, on "Prevention and Abolition of the Practice of Witch Hunting" at Dibrugarh University, and says that in the seminar, she had "urged the audience not to look at witch

hunting as an isolated issue but within a larger web of women-related crimes as well as the property rights of women” and that she had also pointed out “how women in matrilineal societies too become victims of witch hunting.”

Prof. Aparna Mahanta’s was a life well lived with dedication and commitment. She was 75, and is survived by her husband, noted scientist Dr Paramananda Mahanta, a son and a daughter. Her demise while she was still active is a great loss for the entire academia and particularly for the fraternity of Women’s Studies in North East India.

C S Lakshmi

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India’s First Woman Veterinarian: Dr Sakkubai P Ramachandran (12 January 1931-27 January 2022)



It is so strange (or is it some kind of a premonition?) that an article is written in January 2022 on women veterinarians and in the same month the first woman veterinarian mentioned in the article breathes her last. In the ACTA Scientific Veterinary Sciences (ISSN: 2582-3183)

Volume 4 Issue 1 January 2022 issue, Subhalakshmi Gogoi, 1st Year student of College of Veterinary Science, AAU, Khanapara, Guwahati, writes an article entitled “The Prominence of Women in the Veterinary Profession” and she mentions Dr Sakkubai.

She writes: “It was the first time in 1948 in India that Madras Veterinary College at Vepery, Chennai, served as a gateway for girls to take admission in the Bachelor of Veterinary Science course. The first woman Vet of India who graduated in 1952 was Dr. Sakkubai Ramachandran and later she gained many esteemed posts and finally retired in the year 1971 as Scientist from IVRI, Bangalore. Taking a leaf out of Dr. Sakkubai’s book, Dr. Pushpa Ranaparkhe, Dr. Amritha Patel and many a determined lady vets inspired many women to take up this profession as a full time career option.”

Subhalakshmi Gogoi quotes Dr T P Sethumadhavan in her article. Talking of the impact of women veterinarians in India Dr T P Sethumadhavan, in his article “Veterinary Science: Better Prospects Ahead” (2020) says that 70% of the total students enrolled in veterinary colleges and universities in India is estimated to be comprising of women students and

that many of them are considering veterinary profession as a career. He adds that many girl students from mainly Karnataka, Puducherry and Tamil Nadu go for veterinary science as their first option for graduation and that women veterinarians are more prevalent in developing countries.

As if to prove what Dr T P Sethumadhavan was saying, in 1985, on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti, 2nd October, at Veterinary College, Thrissur and Kerala, Subhalakshmi writes, an Association called “Indian Association of Lady Veterinarians” was formed by the women veterinarians of India. At that point in time, Dr. Annamma Jacob was the first woman veterinarian who was appointed as the Dean of Kerala Veterinary College. To think that a woman called Dr Sakkubai started it all!

While going through the pages of Indian Association of Veterinary Pathologists (IAVP) and its award history and sponsorship, one chanced upon the name of Dr Sakkubai once again. The Award was Prof. S Ramachandran Memorial Best Molecular Oncologist Presentation Award instituted in the memory of Prof. S Ramachandran, an eminent Veterinary Pathologist and Molecular Pathologist. The details state that the award was instituted in the year 2005, by Dr (Mrs.) Sakkubai P. Ramachandran, wife of late Prof. (Dr) S. Ramachandran, Former Visiting Scientist, Centre for Tropical Veterinary Medicine, Royal (Dick) College of Veterinary Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK.

Who was this Dr Sakkubai, one wondered, who had quietly brought about a major change in the career preference of women? That was when the book of Nivedita Louis, a journalist and an independent researcher, *Mudhal Pengal* (The First Women) came to one’s mind. Sure enough she had an article on Dr Sakkubai in the book published in 2019, and drawing from that she had written a homage to Dr Sakkubai too in her blog www.herstories.xyz. She says in the homage, “The news came that Dr Sakkubai, the first woman veterinary doctor, passed away this morning at 5 a.m. in Eluru in Andhra Pradesh. She was 91. It is sad that similar to all her achievements her death also happened quietly without anyone coming to know about it. The mainstream media has not spoken much about either Dr Sakkubai or about the field of veterinary medicine for that matter.”

Her book has a detailed note on Dr Sakkubai which needs to be reproduced here in honour of Dr Sakkubai, the first woman veterinarian. What follows has been put together with excerpts from the homage and the article of Nivedita Louis in the book *Mudhal Pengal*.

The Annual Special Issue brought out by the Madras Veterinary College in 1952 had this foreword: “We are proud to announce that two girls, Miss N Kalyani and Miss P Sakku Bai, have completed this year’s degree course successfully.

They are India's first women veterinarians. We congratulate them." When we turn a few pages there is the photograph in black and white of two sober looking girls softly smiling. One is Kumari N Kalyani who has got the Panikkar gold Medal and the other is P Sakku Bai. The photo detail mentions their names and says they are the first women veterinarians of India. (Sakku Bai's name got written later everywhere as Sakkubai.)

Two women. Both of them pass out of the veterinary college the same year. But one of them never came into the public sphere after that. The gold medallist Kalyani did not take up veterinary profession as a career. Her life got linked with that of her



husband in the army....

The life of Sakkubai, however, went on a fast track after that. Sakkubai was born in Gopavaram village near Eluru, in Andhra Pradesh on 12 January in 1931. When she was around 11 her education was almost stopped. She was a child who was hardly interested in cleaning the house, taking care of the cows or helping her mother in the kitchen. Her greatest joy was going to the school that was in the small village. When the question of marriage came up she got terribly upset. Luckily for her Gandhiji began the 1942 Quit India Movement. Her elder sister's husband who supported the family gave up his profession as a lawyer and leaped into the freedom movement.

Since her elder sister's husband was not there to financially help with the marriage expenses the young girl happily returned to school. Politics also interested her and she joined the Mahila Congress and got into the freedom movement herself. Science and maths interested her a great deal as subjects. She finished her school education and also successfully completed her Intermediate course. In 1948 there were two choices before her for further studies: One was to study engineering in the Guindy Engineering College and the other was to study in the Madras Veterinary College in Vepery. In 1948 the government had given women the opportunity to study veterinary science. No women had stepped into the Veterinary College before that. Sakkubai was a bit confused but finally she chose to study veterinary

science much against the advice of her relatives. One of the reasons for choosing to study veterinary science was also her friend N Kalyani who was thinking in terms of giving up her studies if Sakkubai did not join her in the Madras Veterinary College. So both the friends entered the college supporting each other. There was another reason too. And it was the persuasive ways of SV Mudaliar, who was the college principal then. He managed to convince Sakkubai that a woman in the Mahila Congress and the freedom movement becoming the first veterinarian would be a great help and pride to the nation. In 1952 both women completed their studies successfully.

As mentioned above, Kalyani did not pursue the career of a veterinarian. But Sakkubai accepted a job in the same year, as a researcher in the Indian Veterinary Research Institute at Mukteshwar in the Kumaon mountain region in the UP State. At that time although Mukteshwar was far away it had a well-established Veterinary Research Institute functioning from late nineteenth century. But in 1952 to travel to Mukteshwar one had to inform the police. It was safe to travel only if accompanied by the police. Sakkubai boldly got ready to travel from Chennai to a place whose language she did not know. She started her work there. But she was also eager to study further and so she did her Master's from Madras University in 1961. She was also continuing her work in IVRI. She took up research in virology and presented several papers in international forums. She got a fellowship from Swedish Developmental Agency and was invited to do research at Stockholm on cell culture.

Sakkubai went to Sweden in 1966 and stayed there for a year and did her research and returned to India. It was by sheer accident that she met the well-known veterinarian and researcher Dr S Ramachandran. Both of them fell in love and although they belonged to different communities they got married on 16 March, 1969. Sakkubai began to do research along with her husband, Dr Ramachandran, who encouraged her to do her doctorate and Sakkubai did her doctoral research in veterinary virology in the University of Edinburgh and got a doctorate degree in 1971. Both of them worked for a while at the Indian Veterinary Research Institute located at Izatnagar, Bareilly, in Uttar Pradesh.

It was the UN after that. As a part of its Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) when Dr Ramachandran travelled to Indonesia, Bali Islands and Sudan Dr Sakkubai accompanied him. In his research in veterinary pathology and molecular pathology Dr Sakkubai was of great assistance to him. Both of them together found a remedy for the Rinderpest (known as cattle plague) that was affecting the Third World then. Together they wrote and presented several research papers at research institutes in India and in universities abroad.

In 1991 Dr Ramachandran became ill with cancer. Dr Sakkubai gave up her work at the IVRI. Dr Ramachandran survived cancer and lived for ten more years after that. He worked in Edinburgh till 1999 and they continued to spend time between Bengaluru and Edinburgh. They were generous about sharing research information with colleagues and other researchers and were enthusiastic about guiding students. In 2000 they returned from Edinburgh to Bengaluru. Unfortunately in the same year, in the month of May, Dr Ramachandran passed away.

Dr Sakkubai lived in Frazer Town, Bengaluru after her husband's demise. She established a charitable trust Ramachandran and Sakkubai Endowment Trust in her husband's memory. She put together their research papers on Rinderpest and canine distemper diseases and Ramachandran and Sakkubai Endowment Trust brought out the book *Letters by Thousands* (A Festschrift Honouring Sivaramakrishnier Ramachandran) edited by G R Scott. It was published on 1 January 2002 one and a half years after Dr Ramachandran's death. The book documented their life together illustrated with photographs with colleagues and students. Unfortunately the book is not available for sale. It is in the library of Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Sciences University (TANUVAS). It would be a treasure trove of rare experiences of the first woman veterinarian and her husband if the book is made available to the public.

TANUVAS has instituted a gold medal in the name of Dr Sakkubai and Dr Ramachandran for the best postgraduate student. There is also the award instituted in 2005, in her husband's name by Dr Sakkubai mentioned above, at the IAVP.

"I often get very angry with our society that has so much of inequality. But if we have to continue with our work no matter what, we have to somehow find a way of doing it. We cannot change ourselves according to the image people have of us. It is enough if we feel that today is a better day than yesterday. Then the mind remains peaceful." (Dr Sakkubai, from her speech at the Veterinarian Alumni Association Meeting, 2006)

—C S Lakshmi & Nivedita Louis



FEBRUARY 2022

A Lifetime Spent in the Theosophical Society: G Sundari (1929-3 February 2022)



G Sundari born in 1929, has had a lifelong association with both the Theosophical Society and Kalakshetra. She worked at Kalakshetra for 33 years, first as the Superintendent of Studies, and later as the Assistant Secretary of Performances for over two decades. She was a member of Kalakshetra's Executive

Committee for a number of years and also assistant editor of the *Kalakshetra Quarterly*. Sundari retired in 1989 but lived at the Theosophical Society and worked as its publicity officer. Recalling his memories of her to *The Hindu* correspondent (*The Hindu*, 4 February, 2022) renowned Bharatanatyam Guru V P Dhananjayan, himself a product of Kalkshetra, said that she had joined as Superintendent of Studies at Kalakshetra after completing her MA in Political Science with distinction in 1950. "She did not marry as she chose to serve the TS and Kalakshetra where she taught English, History and Geography. She was born in the TS and did her schooling at the Besant Theosophical High School. She was associated with George Arundale, Annie Besant, Rukmini Devi Arundale and Sankara Menon." G Sundari or Sundari Teacher, as she was affectionately referred to, loved animals and used to take care of several cats and dogs in the house that her parents had lived in at the Theosophical Society. For the past three years, she had been ill and had nobody to take care of her. Her students looked after her for a while but when she needed special medical care, Preetha Reddy of Apollo Hospitals made the efforts to place her at the Little Sisters of the Poor Home in Chetpet in Chennai where she passed away at 3 a.m. on the 3rd of February. She was 93.

That, in a nutshell, is G Sundari's life to those who don't know her. But there are other documents that tell us about the extraordinary life of Sundari Teacher and how she has been witness to so much history of her times. One is the book *The Montessori in India: The First Seventy Years*, published by the Indian Montessori Foundation in 2009, the first two chapters of which were published as special papers for a conference in Hyderabad held in 2016, where G Sundari talks about her childhood days spent in Theosophical Society and about Maria Montessori and her adopted son Mario Montessori. In the book, G Sundari remembered Maria

Montessori from her own days in the Besant Memorial School. She was an energetic 78-year-old when she spoke for the book but she had lucid memories of her childhood days, growing up at the Theosophical Society:

“We came here [to Madras and to the Theosophical Society] in 1934,” she said recalling her childhood days. “We hailed from Tanjore and my father was an active participant of the Home Rule Movement started by Dr Annie Besant. Later under her invitation, we came here to the Theosophical Society. At that time we were also growing up and Besant Memorial School had just been set up. I have heard that Madam Montessori knew English, but she would never lecture in English. She would only lecture in Italian and her Italian was musical and beautiful. I still remember one word that she used to say very often, “bambino”, which is Italian for children. The word used to sound so musical to us, and she used to say it with such love for children that it sounded so beautiful. She used to live with Mario on the first floor in the Olcott Bungalow. We used to see her walking up and down most of the time in the open balcony of the Bungalow. The Montessori section of the school was transferred to the ground floor of the Bungalow for their convenience. Of what little I remember of Dr Montessori, I think she was a majestic personality. Her eyes used to twinkle and she was so full of grace. Although she was big built, one would never think of it at all as she carried herself like that, with very loose-fitting full-length gowns most of the time...”

Speaking to Divya Kumar for Metroplus section of *The Hindu* on 21 June, 2011, she had reminisced about her memories of Madras surrounding the Theosophical Society:

“My father came to Madras at the request of Annie Besant to work in the Theosophical Publishing House, and the rest of us followed when the Besant Theosophical School opened in 1934. I joined the school in Class I, and studied there till I completed my SSLC,” began her narration and went on to cover the extraordinary people she met in her life.

One of her earliest memories was of seeing Rabindranath Tagore during his visit to Madras in 1934. She said that he was very impressive, “with his ochre robes and his long beard. He had come with his students as part of his South India tour to raise funds for Shantiniketan.” The president of the Theosophical Society, George Arundale, did not want Gurudev to go around collecting funds at his age and told him that they would do the fund raising. So Tagore had stayed on at the Society for about 10 days, and was well taken care of at the Blavatsky Bungalow near the big banyan tree.

Sundari remembered that as children they used to run in and out of the bungalow and there were no restrictions on their movements. “Tagore would be reclining in an easy chair

in the hall,” she said, “and when a child went up to him, his arm would go gently around him or her. But what fascinated us most was the sight of his students combing out his long beard! The Theosophical Society was in general a very child-friendly place. Dr. Arundale wouldn’t pass by a child without a smile and a wave.”

Talking about the Besant Theosophical School, as it came to be known later, she said that at the school, the emphasis was on instilling simplicity. She fondly remembered Papanasam Sivan, their music teacher, from whom they had learnt many nationalist songs. She remembered that he had composed a song for Annie Besant, and called it “Devi Vasanthe”. She gave the additional interesting information for him using Vasanthe for Dr Annie Besant. The pandits of Benaras had given her the Indian name ‘Vasantha’ during the years she lived there. A lot of people born in the 1920s and 1930s, according to Sundari, were named ‘Vasantha’ after her. When Panasam Sivan first taught them the song, he gave them its meaning and said, “The director didn’t ask me to compose this song. I have written it out of admiration for Dr Besant. You might think I don’t know much English, but when she spoke, I understood every word.”

In this interview also Sundari remembered to mention Maria Montessori and Mario Montessori. She said that during World War II, Maria was allowed to live in the Society grounds, because of Dr Arundale’s influence. But Mario was interned as prisoner of war at Pallavaram. In 1975, when she went along with ‘Periya’ Sarada, another doyenne from Kalkshetra, to visit Mario in The Netherlands, Mario had not forgotten all those he had met during his years in Madras, and enquired about them. He was so happy to see them both.

Great people came to the Theosophical Society and children growing up there got to see them all. Sundari recalled one such occasion of meeting Sarojini Naidu, in the interview. When Sundari was about 12 years old, she was playing near the banyan tree, and a Baby Austin drew up and stopped there. A woman got out, and she immediately recognised her as Sarojini Naidu. She went and greeted her, and she asked her where the Cousins (James and Margaret) lived (she had worked with them in the Congress). She felt very important and took her to their house, and Sarojini Naidu talked to her all the way, telling her how she had started her political work because of Annie Besant’s influence.

Sundari also remembered watching as a six-year-old, Rukmini Devi giving her first performance in 1935, at the Adyar Theatre near Headquarters Hall. Many years later she carried a letter for her to sign when she was teaching a class and talking about that incident Sundari said, “She was demonstrating to her students a dance item, and had forgotten the next gesture. I immediately remembered seeing

the piece as a child, and reminded her of what would follow.” It shows how much of tradition and art the children growing up there imbibed.

To those of us who remember the Theosophical Society as it is now, Sundari’s story of it as grounds filled with wild animals before her times, would come as a great surprise. But in the interview, she talked about an elderly gentleman who used to be in charge of clearing the two post-boxes at the Theosophical Society, and every day, they would see him jogging through the grounds from one box to the other. When they asked him why he jogged, he explained that the grounds used to be full of wild animals, such as polecats and jackals in the old days, and he had to run carrying metal noisemakers strung from his shoulders to scare them away. The running had become such a habit that he couldn’t stop!

Everyone who knew Sundari Teacher knew that her home and heart were open to all. In a homage written to ‘Periya’ Sarada in *The Hindu* on 27 August 2015, Anita Ratnam, who has written a book on Sarada, said that in 1985, Sarada teacher was cruelly dismissed from service during the Government of India takeover of Kalakshetra. She was without pension, retirement income or any means of existence. But she had G Sundari, fourteen years her junior, her faithful companion and her friend since 1939, who nurtured her in her own home, until her last days. At Sundari Teacher’s funeral Dancer P T Narendran remembered her as a very kind person who opened her home to him when as a 12-year-old he joined Kalkashetra and had no place to stay.

So ended the long life of a woman, who had lived to tell us so many stories from the past of so many people and so many events. All such lives leave behind stories we need to know not only to understand life but also the art and culture of our country.

—C S Lakshmi



Teaching Cultural Values Through Dance: Menaka Bhanuchandra Thakkar (3 March 1942-5 February 2022)



When a dance teacher passes away there is so much of her that she leaves behind in all her students and in those who admired her dance because along with her dance comes all that she received from her gurus—the dance tradition of all her gurus, the cultural values they instilled in her and the ways in which they shaped her as a person.

In the tribute to her *Narthaki.com* in its Facebook page on 6th February, mentions how Menaka trained in dance. The tribute says, “Menaka’s training in Bharatanatyam began at the age of four with older sister Sudha Thakkar Khandwani in the Kalakshetra style. She then continued advanced training more generally in the Pandanallur style with Guru Nana Kasar. During the tenure of a three-year Fellowship Award by Bharat Sangeet Sabha of Bombay, she studied with Guru Tanjavur Kadhivelu Pillai; and later, on intensive visits to Madras every year she studied abhinaya with Guru Kalanidhi Narayanan and a wide variety of rare works of the Tanjore repertoire with Guru Kitappa Pillai, who was the last surviving descendant of the celebrated “Tanjore Quartet” of the 18th century. Menaka studied classical Odissi, first in Bombay with Guru Ramaniranjan Jena, and then in Cuttak, Orissa with Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. She continued training with him during periodic visits. She studied Kuchipudi initially with Guru C R Acharyalu of Ahmedabad, and later with Guru Vempatti Chinna Satyam.”

Her sister Pragna (Philips) Enros and brother Nidhi (Viloo) Thakkar posted an obituary for her which was posted by one of the members of her dance company Shanthini Kangesan on February 6th on her wall on Facebook. It tells the life story of Menaka Thakkar, the dancer who took Indian dance abroad.

Excerpts from the obituary:

“Menaka’s life was devoted to dance. Born in Bombay, she started learning at a young age, training in the Indian classical dance styles of Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kuchipudi. She was an established dancer and dance teacher when she moved to Canada in 1972. Soon after arriving in Toronto, she started a school, Nrtyakala Academy of Dance, which would train generations of young Indo-Canadians. Its graduates formed the core of her professional Menaka Thakkar Dance Company. Performing all over Canada,

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Menaka helped introduce classical Indian dance to the Canadian arts scene. She also choreographed a large number of original works. Many of these productions, often in collaboration with some of Canada's finest dancers, provided opportunities for the cross-pollination of Indian and Western dance.

"Menaka's accomplishments were recognised by many honours over the years, including an honorary DLitt from York University, the Canada Council's Walter Carsen Prize, the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for lifetime achievement in dance, and induction in the DCD Dance Hall of Fame.

"Menaka will be missed by her family. She was predeceased by her parents Bhanuchandra and Manorama (Mehta) Thakkar, by her sister Sudha (Abdullah) Khandwani, and by her brothers Rasesh Thakkar and Rashmi (Sudha) Thakkar. She is survived by her sister Pragna (Philip) Enros, brother Nidhi (Villoo) Thakkar, and nephews and nieces: Madhava (Kate) Enros, Sonali (Zach) Thakkar, Shivani (Rushabh) Thakkar and Zubin (Tushara) Thakkar. She was also loved by her students and will be fondly remembered by them and by her dance colleagues.

"Menaka died in Toronto after complications from Alzheimer's. Her ashes will be scattered at a later date."

It is not easy for a dancer from India to begin a school to teach dance in a western country. Menaka's dance school was one of the oldest in Toronto. One of her students Amita Arc while recalling her years with her guru, says how difficult a task it was for her to teach students who had no idea about Indian culture:

"My first classical dance teacher, who began teaching me at the tender age of 8, saw me through to my arangetram at 17 years old. Teaching first generation Indo-Canadians girls in Winnipeg, Manitoba, was no small task. We were Canadian-born western girls, and our knowledge of Indian culture existed through movies (ergo, Wear a bright sari and run slow motion in the flower fields). She imparted not only dance but core values of respect and honour of the Art to expressing divine love in dance—whether it be a childlike curiosity of Lord Krishna (*Maiya mori mein nahin makhan khayo*) to romantic love in Todi varnam (Shree Parvati cosmic love of Lord Shiva). Her classes began by teaching us the meaning of "guru", the respect of the knowledge they impart, along with the theory and technique unique to Bharatanatyam classical dance style...."

There is a large family of students who would not only remember their guru but also be like their guru and impart to others what they got from her.

C S Lakshmi

Nightingale that Sang from 1942: Lata (Hema) Mangeshkar (28 September 1929-6 February 2022)



Her life is so very well known. Her songs are on every one's lips. When she sang in 1962, "Aye Mere Watan Ke Logo" the patriotic song written by Kavi Pradeep and composed by C Ramchandra, to remember the soldiers who died in the Indo-China war 1962, they say Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had tears in his eyes. The song still brings tears to the eyes and so do many other songs. There are songs which also bring immense joy and peace. People like Lata may die physically for that is how nature works but they never really die and live on in some form or the other. In some corner or the other of the world Lata's resonant voice will keep singing songs of love, songs of joy and songs of sorrow. Like writer Vishwajyoti Ghosh said in his post: There's a little bit of Lata in everyone's life.

C S Lakshmi

Dancing Her Way to Death: Bhanumathi Rao (4 December 1923-12 February 2022)



Bhanumathi Rao was born in Kozhikode in 1923. An article in *The Hindu* (22 September, 2016) gives a few snippets about her life. She is supposed to have told her father at the age of 22 that she wanted to go to London to study. At 22, she boarded a ship to the U.K. where she studied library science and became a member of choreographer-and-dancer Ram Gopal's prestigious troupe that performed a fusion of classical Indian dance and ballet. Recalling her mother's dancing career and her life Maya Krishna Rao, her second daughter, told *The Hindu* reporter: "Awestruck by my mother's dance, my father Krishna Rao, an international law expert, is said to have chased her happily into marriage. He later received an offer at the UN and they settled down in New York."

Bhanumathi had learnt dance from many teachers. She had learnt from Kittappa Pillai when she was one of his

students along with Yamini Krishnamurthy. In New York, Bhanumathi performed solo and taught Americans Indian classical dance forms. In 1959, then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru offered Krishna Rao a position at the Legal and Treaties Division, Ministry of External Affairs. She got into Malayalam theatre and was a popular personality during the 1960s, according to Maya Rao.

Two days after the demise of Bhanumathi Maya Krishna Rao posted on her Face Book page saying: “Bhanumati Rao, dancer | actor | mother, 98, went peacefully in her sleep on Feb. 12, every fibre in her body in place, trouble-free, though her mind still dancing. Till the end she was ever ready, in a zoom call, to either escape into a bizarre role play improvisation or explain with simple clarity the finer difference between joy, happiness and contentment. Cheers, Bhanu Rao, so much love!”

The post and the news of her death brought back to mind the hilarious impromptu acting she used to do for us during many different women’s meets. All of us knew her as a dancer but came to know her as an actor much later during these women’s meets. The one that kept us in splits was the one where she is a single Malayali woman looking for a place to rent in the city of Delhi where she spoke in her Malayalm-accented Hindi. The post also reminded one of the visual history workshop we had with Maya Rao on 25 October 1998, where she had spoken about her mother.

“...It is very difficult to separate where the mother ends and the artiste begins,” she had said. “Everything is very mixed up and I think there is nothing more complex than the mother and daughter relationship. I know it even better now. Because I am a mother, and I am playing, replaying my mother’s roles in many ways with my own daughter. From as far back as I can remember my mother was my first dance teacher. In fact, she had a little dance class at home, which was really an excuse for me to dance. She knew very well that if she called me into her room and said, “Okay, let’s start dancing,” I’d have probably run out from the room and said, “I don’t want to do it,” and go away. So she went through this whole drama of setting up the dance class. And she invited applications. So there was this bunch of six-seven-year-olds. All my playmates. So I couldn’t play with them because they were all coming to the dance class. In the evening there would be this class. My mother was extremely strict as a teacher.... So, from a very early age there is this... it’s a strange mixture of, ‘Oh, I enjoy this but my god, I am going to get scolded, for something is not going to go right.’ Then better get all serious but in that seriousness also, [the excitement] ‘Oh! We are going to do something...’ So, it is a very nice mixture.”

“.... The interesting thing is I don’t know my mother as

a dancer because by the time she stopped dancing, I was very tiny. Before I was born my mother did a lot of Bharatanatyam, did several shows, performed a lot in America, then Europe. She was part of a dance troupe. It used to be called ballet then. I don’t know if you heard the name of Ram Gopal.... He is considered the father of what is called modern Indian dance. We called it ballet, but it’s not like the western ballet, and she was part of one of the first troupes that was put together—modern Indian ballet—and they toured all over Europe. So she saw a large part of the world through being a dancer, and I envy that a lot, because she saw a lot of the world. I have pictures of my mother dancing in the streets in Hungary, in Berlin, and these are wonderful years, sort of, around the war. So, they were full of a passion. So I get a lot of the sense of my mother as a dancer from her photographs. My mother doesn’t talk much about it, but I look at those pictures. There were no videos those days. So I can’t look at videos, but when you look at the photographs, it actually leaves a lot to the imagination.”

Maya said she knew about her mother more as an actress: “I really only knew my mother as an actress. Somewhere our paths have been a little similar and I wonder whether my mother had in some way choreographed my life as well. She too started as a dancer and then at some stage went into the acting and that seems to be somewhere the pattern of my life as well. I started with Kathakali. She started with Bharatanatyam, though she also trained a bit in Kathakali. At a very early age she did with me what she had gone through. So every other day I was taken perforce to the Kathakali class.... Then sometimes you are wondering why do you have to do this, ‘I’d rather go and play.’ So I started with dance. She too started her early life with dance. At some point she went into theatre, and that’s the mother I know—my mother was a very fine comic actress. In fact, we have a Kerala Club in Delhi, and she was a very active member. There is a very large Malayali community in Delhi, and they would look forward to Mrs. Rao, Mrs. Bhanumati Rao, on stage because always there would be a sense of surprise, wondering what role she would come up with this time. So when my mother was about sixty plus, she would put two braids, wear a little *pavada* (skirt) and a blouse, come and be a silly little girl on stage and do any kind of thing, to simply give a little surprise to the audience. So people would turn up just to watch, to see what Mrs. Rao had up her sleeve this time. So that’s the artiste I know. I really don’t remember her as a dancer. I only know that from pictures.”

On what she got from being her daughter Maya said on that day: “I think, I know that what I have got from my mother as an artiste is via various ways. For instance, I will give an example in the sixties. We were all very [much] gone

on the Beatles. We knew every song of the Beatles.... For us there was the Hindi music [like] *Ramayya Vastavaiya* also we were listening to, but on the other hand it was the Beatles. Now, my mother was the kind of person who would say, 'Oh you want to learn the Beatles? Okay then stop the song, take the words down.' Then after you have taken the words down, 'Get the accent right. No, no, no it's not the American accent, these boys belong to England; that too they have a special English accent. Understand the accent. They don't talk like Americans. They have different sort of [accent]. Catch that accent.' So the whole fun of learning the Beatles song is gone because again it is a Kathakali class. So, I remember this—putting down the words, [and] then getting the accent right. So life was drama.... So where one ended and the other one began you didn't know, and then you get into full-fledged dancing and that's a bore but the dance happened when art happened in life. So you know it is all the time like this. When my mother actually got really angry, I didn't know sometimes whether she was acting or it was actual anger. And she is also like me. All the anger is at home and the moment she went on stage she was all so comical. So you will wonder: who is this person? Who is this? Who am I? Am I her daughter? You know, all the same questions my daughter is asking me. So that is my mother...."

Yet it is again as a dancer that Bhanumathi Rao resurfaced when SPARROW made a film on Maya Rao based on the visual history workshop, directed by Chandita Mukherjee, and again later, at the age of 92. A day after she turned 92, on 5th December 2015, Bhanumathi Rao danced for the Abhinaya Group at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Bengaluru. She did abhinaya for the *padam* "*Krishna Nee Begane Baro.*" When it was put up on YouTube the next year it got over 6 lakh views. She was staying with her daughter Tara Rao at that time and



she spoke to a reporter from *The Hindu* (22 September, 2016) : "Dance is a wonderful form of artistic expression where the body and song are in sync. I have always been passionate about sharing my art with others," she had said. "I live and breathe through my dance and my life is expressed through this wonderful art," she had emphasised.

Though she had become forgetful and had become hard of hearing it is this graceful dancer and the witty actress that R V Ramani has tried to capture in his evocative film "Oh, That is Bhanu" produced in 2019 where in bits and pieces, she recalls her life asking Ramani every now and then how he makes a living making such films. In Tamil when someone dies at the grand old age of 98 we call it a *kalyanasaavu* (a grand death). It is a grand death that Bhanumathi Rao has had, dancing and laughing all the way.

C S Lakshmi

The Swan that Circed the Sky Looking for A Lotus Pond: Pa Visalam(5 November 1932-14 February 2020)



One can say that the spirit of humanism and a concern for women's liberation, were two core causes that Pa Visalam believed in. The first gift her father who taught her how to love was a book of Bharathiyar's poems. He told her to learn all the poems in the book. The first song she learnt

from her music teacher Lakshmanam Pillai was also about love:

*To love is the sole benefit of life
This is the conclusion of the learned
To forego violence and to give joy to
Even those who harm is our duty — Even those who are evil
(To Love) the song used to go.*

When I say Visalam the person in my mind is the nameless protagonist of the novel *Mellak Kanavaay, Pazhang Kadhaiyaay...!* (Fading Dreams, Old Tales). There is absolutely no doubt that the character is Visalam herself because this unique novel that is written like the history of the Communist Party until its break into two is in a way, Visalam's own life story. The novel is from the point of view of a woman who is looking at a male-dominated Party. The ideals and dreams of a woman who is part of the Communist Party are woven along with the history of the Communist Party in the novel.

Her parents taught her love and honesty. Her elder brother introduced her to communism. Vislam joined the communist Party in 1952. It opened a wide world to her. Her first story "Noay" (Disease) appeared in *Saraswathi*

magazine. Her marriage with another Party member, Raju, the split in the Communist Party, and her disillusionment with Party politics, all of them happened more or less at the same time. Though Visalam wrote very little after that first short story, she soaked in all the experiences that new locales and new people provided her with in Pondicherry and did not give up the desire to write. She got drawn into social service. For six years, Visalam was general secretary of the Guild of Service, Pondicherry. She represented India in 1973 at the Sri Lankan Women's Congress held in Colombo, and in 1975, the World Congress for Women in East Berlin. Her interest in and contribution to the world of modern Tamil theatre is impressive. She has worked with the theatre group "Thalaikkol", as its vice chairman and chairman, enriching the troupe's activities.

When heart and orthopaedic ailments kept her confined to bed, all the stories stored in her mind emerged wanting to be written. She wrote short stories and long stories. In 1994, Arthi Publications published her first novel *Mellak Kanavaay, Pazhang Kadhaiyaay...!* In 2000 Parisal Publications brought out her second novel *Unmai Olirgavenru Paadavo* (Shall I sing, 'May Truth Glow?') and it proved once again that she was not a run-of-the-mill writer.

In the novel, Visalam has traced the history of the advent and growth of Christianity in the South West region of Tamil Nadu. This book is both a peep into some unwritten areas of history and an expression of her disillusionment with the peripherals of all religions. Maybe because her partner Raju was a Christian, Visalam takes up a deep study of Christianity and presents a history of its many facets in the functional everyday life. While recreating incidents and memories of a religion which took root in the region, Pa. Visalam creates a history which is not linear and direct but a history which has many streams flowing into it: streams of doubt about the caste divisions which refuse to die; about brass glasses which are heated in the fire to remove the pollution of the lips of a Nadar touching it; of a wall separating the upper caste converts and the lower caste converts in a church; of women whose status does not improve in any significant way after the conversion; of girls and boys who want to know about Christianity but are also eager to question it; of young people beginning to read about Marxism and trying to see Jesus Christ as the saviour of the poor. The details Pa. Visalam draws are rich and varied.

I have known Visalam from the nineties. I was the one who suggested that for her second novel she should ask the eminent writer Rajam Krishnan to write an introduction. She has shared many aspects of her life with me. We came much closer when I spoke to her for the SPARROW archives. With great difficulty I was able to sort out some of her articles,

manuscripts of stories and photographs for the archives. But there are more of her private papers that lie bundled up in her house. The arguments she used to have with Raju used to happen before me often. Like a mother complaining to her daughter about the father she used to tell me about Raju. Since in his old age Raju had practically gone deaf she used to complain to me about him right in front of him. I used to take SPARROW Newsletters for them whenever I visited them. Once when I had taken the Newsletters, when Vislam had gone inside for something, Raju called me to come closer and gave me some money and said he had liked the Newsletters a lot and to keep the money as his contribution to SPARROW. He told me Visalam need not know about it. After a while Vislam called me in and gave me the same amount as donation to SPARROW. I told her Raju had already given me a donation. She said, "This is from me. No need to tell Raju." I was lucky enough to be loved by both of them.

In the novel *Fading Dreams, Old Tales*, the mother would talk to her daughter about the future and marriage. The daughter would tell her that she was the swan that circled the sky. However thirsty it was it would keep flying till it could spot a lotus pond. It would never land in an ordinary pond. She would say that until she could see a lotus pond she would keep flying. I feel that Visalm was one such swan. I always thought that the lotus pond she searched for was not just a life partner but the large lotus pond of Tamil literature. I also feel that even though this swan had reached the lotus pond it felt it had not maybe because her second novel had not been translated and her memoirs were not yet written. While her first novel had been translated by Meera Rajagopalan and published by OUP in 2012 and it got good notices, Visalam was so thrilled. She was sure that her second novel would also be published. Her other dream was to write her autobiography. Since her fingers were stiff and she could not write she could have dictated to some young person but young people who could set aside time for such an effort could not be found. It was a deep grievance that was in her heart. She called me over the phone a month before her passing away and asked when I would come to see her. She sounded like her old enthusiastic self. "We can talk a lot," she said. It is a big loss that that meeting never happened. Even as I write this, in my mind is the image of Visalam waiting for me at the first floor window whenever I had informed that I was coming to visit her.

One does not know which publishing house would take up the responsibility of publishing all her works in these times when publishing houses are running on loss. Is it possible that this swan has flown off before reaching the lotus pond?

—C S Lakshmi

Singing for Mukti Bahini: Sandhya Mukherjee: (4 October 1931-15 February 2022)



Sandhya Mukherjee's name was in the papers recently for refusing to accept the Padma Shri award. When one gets to know some details about her life and career one can

understand why she had to refuse the Padma Shri.

Sandhya was born in Dhakuria, Kolkata, famous for its Rabindra Sarobar Lake. She was one among six children. She had many gurus from whom she learnt music. She began with Pandit Santosh Kumar Basu and Professor Chinmoy Lahiri. She also learnt from Professor A T Kanan (Arkut Kannabhiran, a South Indian from Chennai, who was known as A Kanan or A T Kanan in music circles in Kolkata, who sang two songs in Raga Hamsadhwani in Ritwik Ghatak's 1960 film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Cloud Covered Star) and was married to the singer Malabika Kanan and who in the 1950s, along with other musicians, founded the Calcutta Music Circle where many students learnt. He was also a professor at the ITC Sangeet Research Academy). Later she learnt from the renowned guru Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and his son Ustad Munavvar Ali Khan.

Sandhya Mukherjee began with playback singing. Her first playback singing effort, at the age of 17, was for Bimal Roy's film *Anjagarh* (Kingdom of Anjagarh, 1948) for music composer R C Boral. The song was "Ab Nahi Dharat Dheer Dheer" (No more patience to hold on). It was followed by two songs ("Aayee Mere Jeevan Ki Saanjh Suhani" (Here comes my life's pleasant twilight) and "Dil Bhi Udaas Udaas Chaman Bhi Udaas") (The heart is sad and so is the flowery garden) the same year for music composer Robin Chatterjee, for the film *Sabyasachi* (1948). In 1950 she again sang for R C Boral and this time four songs for the film *Pehla Aadmi* (The First Person, 1950). She got to sing two songs in the film *Saza* (Punishment, 1951) for which S D Burman composed music and of the two songs "Aaa Ghupchup Ghupchup Pyar Karen" (Come, let us be in love secretly) and "Yeh Baat Koi Samjaye Re" (Someone explain this), the first one was soon on everyone's lips. The "Bol Papiha Bol Kaun Hai Tera Chitchor" (Tell me cuckoo bird, who has stolen your heart) duet she sang with Lata Mangeshkar in *Tarana* film (1951) under composer Anil Biswas brought her much attention. The film with Dilip Kumar as the hero and Madhubala as Tarana, the heroine, was also well received by the critics.

She has worked with the best of the music composers

like Salil Chowdhury. Her first film song with him "Maine Jo Li Angdayi, Dhire Se Muskai, Teri Mahfil se Sada Ye Aayi" (I twist my body, smile a little, I am always in your assembly) was for the film *Jagte Raho* in 1956 but she sang many non-filmi Bengali songs for him later. She did one film song for music composer Roshan in the film *Mamta* (1966) and the song "Tose Naina Laage Re Saanwariya" (My eyes meet yours, my lover) was much appreciated but she also sang many songs for him later. She worked the most with Hemanta Kumar after the film *Saptapadi* (Seven Steps, 1961) in which in a duet with Hemanta Kumar she sang for Suchitra Sen. She sang many duets with Hemanta Kumar and came to be known as the singing voice of Suchitra Sen.

What Sandhya Mukherjee is really remembered for is how she assisted the Bangladeshi musician Samar Das, when he set up the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (Free Bengal Radio Centre), an underground radio station, during the Bangladesh Liberation War. This radio station was broadcasting to Bangladesh and Sandhya recorded many patriotic songs for him. Not only was the Mukti Bahini motivated by her songs but they also reached out to the common people instilling patriotic fervour in them. In 1972 on the occasion of the release of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman the leader who had been imprisoned and whom everyone referred to as Bangabandhu fondly, he was greeted by Sandhya Mukherjee's song "Bangabandhu Tumi Phire Ele Tomar Shwadhin Banglay..." (Bangabandhu, you have returned to your independent Bengal), written by Abidur Rahaman and composed by Sudhin Dasgupta, which was transmitted by Bangladesh Betar (Bangladesh Radio),

She was one of the first foreign artists who was invited to Dhaka to perform at an open-air concert in Paltan Maidan in Dhaka to celebrate the Ekushey February (21st February) after Bangladesh independence in 1971. On 21st February 1952 the Pakistani police force had opened fire on protesting Bengali students campaigning for the recognition of their mother tongue, Bangla. This date became an important date in history and the sentiments regarding mother tongue reached across the globe and it led to the creation of International Mother Tongue Day by the UN in 2000. For an artiste to be invited by a newly independent nation to celebrate its first Ekushey February is an honour not easily bestowed on any artiste. Sandhya Mukherjee was the one chosen for this honour. To have offered her a Padma Shri in her old age is indeed "too little, too late" as she said. It was indeed too little for someone who had won the National Film award for Best Female Playback Singer for her songs in the films *Jay Jayanti* and *Nishi Padma* in the year 1970 and who had received Banga Bibhushan Samman in 2011, the highest civilian honour given by West Bengal.

It is a pity that two days after the refusal she was infected with COVID and despite being admitted in the hospital passed away. She was 90. Her final rites were performed with full state honours and the Chief Minister of West Bengal was not wrong when she said, "To me, Sandhya Mukhopadhyay was Bharat Ratna. With her death we have lost the brightest star in the sky of Bengali music."

C S Lakshmi

One Who Tried to Build a Nest in the Wind: KPAC Lalitha (25 February 1947-22 February 2022)



In 2010 KPAC Lalitha wrote her autobiography *Katha Thodarum* (Story to be Continued). It is said that it is a dispassionate account of her life where she does not indulge in self-pity nor does she reproach anyone for the travails of her life. She said her story would

continue when she wrote it in 2010, but now that her story has ended, one could say that stories such as hers will always continue so long as the kind of people who were in her life continue to exist. Reading some translated extracts of her life can give anyone sleepless nights.

Let us just see how the world viewed her life.

Lalitha was born at Ramapuram near Kayamkulam in the Alappuzha district. Story goes that K Ananthan Nair who was a photographer and his wife Bhargavi Amma got a child after a wait of five years. They had made fervent prayers to the goddess Maheswari Amman for a child and were blessed with a daughter. Relatives from her mother's side felt that she should be named after the goddess. So she was named Maheshwari Amma. Her father liked the name Lalitha better and changed her name later and this became her name when she became an actor. Both were names of goddesses, in any case. She was the eldest of five children.

Her father was a Communist and ran a photo studio away from home. She began to learn dance and her schooling was disrupted in the Seventh Standard when she joined the Indian Dance Academy led by Kalamandalam Ramachandran. Even before that she had acted in plays while being part of a dance troupe of Gangadharan Master in Kollam. But Lalitha soon lost interest in dance classes and went to live with her father, whose studio was in Changanassery. The Geetha Arts Club in Changanassery used to conduct rehearsals on the floor above the studio where her father worked. Geetha Arts Club

wanted her to act in their play *Geethayude Bali* (Geetha's Sacrifice). However her parents were not too keen. But she did perform two dance numbers. And it was as a dancer that she acted in P J Antony's drama *Mathrubhumi* (Motherland). Finally Geetha Arts Club got her to sign a one-year contract with them for Rs. 2000. But she had other dreams. When she used to travel in a bus and go past KPAC (Kerala People's Arts Club), a pro-Communist theatre group, she used to wish she could be part of it. She still wanted that dream to happen.

She was much sought after as an actor. In fact, the theatre group Pratibha in Karunagapally which had just been started wanted her to act in their plays. But she was bound by her contract with Geetha Arts Club. After some negotiation Lalitha acted as the heroine in their drama *Kakkaponnu* (Tinsel). Lalitha got very good notices as the drama was performed at around 60 venues. The theatre troupe of actor Bahadur at Kodungallur also heard about Lalitha and invited her to join their five dramas. Even though she was reluctant, Lalitha went to Kodungallur. But things did not work out and she left the very next day. A telegram awaited Lalitha on her return and it was an invitation for an interview at KPAC.

At KPAC, the interview panel included Thoppil Bhasi, KPAC Sulochana, K P Ummer, K S George and Chellappan Pillai. On asked if she could sing she sang, "*Ambiliyammava*". She also spoke some dialogues when she was tested for dialogue delivery. Sulochana who travelled with her in the bus when she went back home told her she may have to act with Ummer who was quite fat and that maybe she could put on some weight. Lalitha was so keen to act that she tried to eat everything that would make her fat and even consulted a doctor. Her efforts paid off for she became a part of KPAC for the next eight years, the happiest years of her life. KPAC became her sobriquet for the rest of her life. Initially, she was a singer at KPAC and sang for the plays *Mooladhanam* (Capital) and *Ningal Enne Communistaakki* (You Made Me a Communist). Then she acted in plays like *Swayamvaram* (Marriage by Choice), *Anubhavgal Paalichakal* (Shattered Experience), *Koottukudumbam* (Joint family), *Sharashayya* (A Bed of Nails), *Thulabharam* (Weighing Scale), *Aswamedham* (Horse Sacrifice) *Mudiyanyaya Puthran* (Prodigal son) and *Puthiya Akasam Puthiya Bhoomi* (New Sky, New Earth). Some say that it was then that she got the name 'Lalitha' given by Thoppil Bhasi.

Then came the entry into films. Lalitha's first movie *Koottukudumbam* (1969) was an adaptation of the drama she had acted in. The play was staged before the film director K S Sethumadhavan and Kunchacko (Chackochan), the owner of Udaya Studio, at the studio. At the end of the performance Lalitha was signed for the film. *Koottukudumbam* was a

blockbuster and Udaya Studio took Lalitha in every film they made since then.

In 1978, Lalitha married the famous film director Bharathan and became a homemaker. Their marriage also had a lot of drama to it. Since there was family opposition they eloped and had a register marriage. In 1983, Lalitha made a comeback with Bharathan's *Kattathe Kilikoodu* (A Nest in the Wind). This was followed by many films like *Sanmanassu Ilavarku Samadhanam* (Peace for Those Good Graced, 1986) and *Ponmuttayidunna Tharavu* (The Goose that Lays Golden Eggs, 1988), to mention a few. There was also Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Mathilukal* (Walls, 1990) where he used KPAC's Lalitha's voice for Narayani, the character who did not appear in the film.

In 1998, Bharathan passed away. Lalitha took another break from films. But the very next year, persuaded by her children and the director himself, she acted in Sathyan Anthikkad's 1999 movie *Veendum Chila Veettu Karyangal* (Aggain Some Family Matters).

Her first national award had come her role in Bharathan's *Amaram* (Stern) in 1991. The second national award for best supporting role came for her performance in Jayaraj's *Shantham* (Peaceful, 2001) where strangely, her character is again named Narayani. The first State award she had got in 1975 itself for *Neelaponman* (Kingfisher) and then came awards for *Aaravam* (Noise, 1978), *Kadinjool Kalyanam* (Maiden wedding 1991), *Godfather* (1991) and *Sandesham* (Letter, 1991). She played notable roles in *Life Is Beautiful* (2000) and *Valkannadi* (Mirror with a Handle, 2002). Her film career never really stopped. In a career spanning half a century Lalitha did over 550 films. In later years, she also became active in television serials. To say that she became a household name will be an understatement for she was much more than that. She as a person and in the roles she played was someone everyone related to.

Her autobiography won the Cherukad Award in 2013. She also served as the chairperson of Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi. Lalitha died in Thiripunithura on 22 February 2022, just three days short of her 75th birthday. She has a daughter Sreekutty and a son Sidharth who has taken up film direction.

That reads like a happy, fulfilling life lived by an artiste except that Lalitha's life was anything but that. In childhood with four other siblings, there was immense poverty and punishments meted out by a mother who was left to fend for herself as her husband never came home much because the police was on the lookout for him. The mother even delivered children with the help of a friendly neighbour. There was an incident when a child in the family died and the police expected the father to come. A neighbour advised them to burn all the books in the house. A pit was dug and two sacks

of books were burnt in the pit where the child was also buried. There was no time when there were no debts to pay. As a child Lalitha consumed pesticide once to die but survived. Debts and struggle for money were a part of her life. Added to this was often public humiliation from a famous husband who was a drunkard and a womaniser. At one point on the way to an award function in a drunken foul mood Bharathan abandoned her on the road and she took a cab and followed him and told him he should have given her poison instead. Bharathan told her that she could have used the cab fare to buy poison.

Lalitha, the Malayalam reviews say, wrote it all in her autobiography maybe with tears sometimes, but never seeking sympathy but giving the details in a matter-of-fact way as if she was narrating someone else's story; as if her life was a film or play script in which she was only playing an assigned role.

C S Lakshmi

A Dancer with a Singaporean Soul: Santha Bhaskar (6 October 1939-26 February 2022)



Santha was sixteen when she came to Singapore with her dancer husband K P Bhaskar. Hailing from Kerala, she had been trained in Mohiniyattam, Kathakali and Bharatanatyam by masters such as Ramunni Panicker, Guru Kunchu Kurup,

Kutralam Ganesam Pillai and also the legendary Mylapore Gowri Ammal who belonged to the Devadasi tradition. Guru Bhaskar was fourteen years older than her and he had already established the first dance academy in Singapore known as Bhaskar's Academy of Dance (known as Bhaskar's Arts Academy since 1993). Santha came into her own in Singapore. She opened herself to the multiculturalism of Singapore and embraced its many different art forms and always claimed that her soul was Singaporean. She was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame in 2021. The Singapore Hall of Fame lists many of her achievements:

"In 1995, Santha studied Thai dance and music at Chulalongkorn University on an ASEAN exchange programme. This provided inspiration for another cultural-fusion work—*Manohara*, which was staged by the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society in June 1996 and brought together Indian



and Thai dance styles and Thai music. In her late 70s, Santha returned to her childhood passion for science—she worked with researchers at NUS' Centre for Quantum Technologies to investigate the connections between Bharatanatyam and Quantum Physics. This culminated in the performances of *Sambhavna 1.0* and *Sambhavna 2.0*, presented by NUS Indian Dance at NUS' 2016 and 2017 Arts Festivals. The dances were

meticulously choreographed by her to mimic the behaviour of particles through fine, precise movements. In 2016, Santha was awarded the Public Service Star. In July 2019, aged 80, she headed the Singapore delegation at the ASEAN Contemporary Dance Festival held in Indonesia."

Neeraja Ramani, Dancer | Chorographer | Teacher—Toronto, Canada, who was a company dancer in Bhaskar's Arts academy in 2003, remembers Santha Bhaskar and her way of being a dance teacher and an artist:

"Guru Santha Bhaskar was a teacher who made her students love dance. She made everyone feel that they are special to her. Every student felt a personal connection with her and that she is more than a dance teacher to them. She embraced every dancer who came to her, whether it was her student or not. It is this personal connection and love that made many of her students and dancers create long years of affection and friendship that inspired them not only to create but also to bring the next generation of their family members to Aunty B, as she is lovingly called by her students, to experience art under her guidance and love.

"When I worked as a company dancer at Bhaskar's Arts Academy and taught at Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, she showed so much generosity when it came to my artist practice. She encouraged me to be in my own teaching space without expecting me to change the way I work. The adavus, her movement scores, choreographic ideas are very different from my own dance training and yet, when I performed in her major dance productions and her choreographies, she knew when to mentor me and when to artistically allow me to openly hold my creative space. I believe her creative enthusiasm

positively impacts everyone around her. I would spend hours watching her create and train her students for Arangetram. She would choreograph for months, create all new pieces for each student and would have one notebook for each student with her handwritten notes. She would work for months, sometimes almost a year when it comes to major full-length dance productions. She would be so gentle in her approach when it comes to making dancers work on their bodies that the dancers would be more focussed on working towards finding their ways into her choreographies without spending their energy on the demand the choreography is expecting them to work on. I worked there for only 5 years, but those years influenced me in the many ways how I approach dance and teach dance. She encouraged me in all my artistic creations and experiments here in Toronto. The fluidity in her choreographies continues to amaze me."

On the first day of the 70th anniversary celebrations of Bhaskar's Arts academy, she was given a spontaneous standing ovation when she took a bow. On the second day, while still present for the second day of the function she complained of pain in the chest at the back stage and later passed away in the hospital. A dancer and performer till the last.

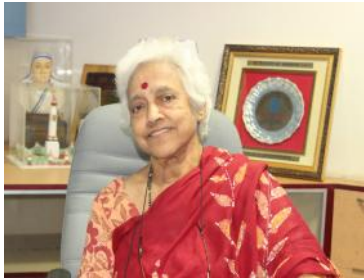
We hope to publish a long interview with her and her husband K P Bhaskar done by Tamil writer Krishangini in the next SNL.

—C S Lakshmi



MARCH 2022

A Mentor Who Cared for Everyone: Mina Swaminathan (29 March 1933-14 March 2022)



Mina was born in March; she left in March too. I guess, her whole life has been to 'march on'. She breezed into my life in 1990. She had just moved to Chennai from Delhi. Our paths crossed—in Women's

Movement meetings; theatre shows and workshops, film screenings... And of course, one could not miss her cotton saris, black tea, wooden bangles, Yoga, koothu...just name it!

We were 27 years apart in age; but it never came into our conversations. Mina and I worked together in the first version of the play, *Manalur Maniamma*. We did it with delegates of AIDWA who were attending the state conference at Nagappattinam. Rehearsals took place at Perambur DC office. The artists would walk in exhausted after domestic chores, campaign, fund raising, and other meetings. Mina would be patient, kind, but strict with them. I would be impatient, irritated, and edgy. We were quite a pair! The rides back and forth to rehearsals resulted in our dream project Voicing Silence.

If not for Mina, Voicing Silence would not have been born. It seems crazy that we managed to produce over 10 plays, conduct many workshops, organise five Kulavai(s) (literally meaning "ululation" but a symbolic name for theatre workshops) for women/feminists' practitioners of theatres to meet, share, and consolidate. Simultaneously, her work with different people in different areas of work opened up many new areas for active involvement. Work with P Rajagopal and Hanne M de Bruin of the Kattaikuttu Sangam, shaped many new ventures in Koothu form and education which involved work with Gnani and A S Padmavathy on media-based projects. She made us work collectively; taught us to work together without compromise. She insisted on the process of working.

I feel fortunate to have worked with her. Together we had explored possibilities of working with the trans-community. She welcomed Rajya Sabha member Tiruchi Siva's proposed Transgender Bill. (On 24 April 2015, Siva did something unusual. He introduced a private member's bill known as the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill, 2014.

After much discussion the Bill was put on a voice vote and was unanimously passed by the Rajya Sabha. It was the first Private Member's Bill to be passed by any house in 36 years and by the Upper House in 45 years. The Bill was passed with the intent to help transgender people get benefits akin to those in scheduled castes and tribes, and in taking steps to see that they are not denied enrolment in schools or denied jobs in government as well as working to ensure they are protected from sexual harassment.) It was a first Bill of its kind. Of course, the whole issue is still skewed but Mina Swaminathan was there to stand by the Bill in 2014. To the women she worked with in Pondy and other places, the artists she cared for, the trans-community members she adopted... Mina meant a great deal.

And there were many organisations that got the support they needed because Mina Swaminathan was there to help them process their applications for grants. Vepathangudi Ramachandrarao Devika whom we all know as just VR Devika, remembers on her Facebook page on 14th March, one such instance of Mina's support to her organisation:

"I am going to ask my husband to take you out for dinner," said Mina Swaminathan one day. "I have been asking him to advice you on a grant proposal and he won't be able to get time at home or in the office without being disturbed." "I will take him out to dinner," I said, and the very next day prepared my grant proposal, went to their house, picked him up and took him out to dinner. "Don't allow others to distract you if they come and speak to you," she admonished him as we left. He patiently looked at the papers and approved of it. I asked him if I could use his name as reference. He said, "Give it to me; I will put a covering letter and send it." That is how my Aseema Trust got the Sir Dorabjee Tata Trust grant first time."

She was a mentor to many and also a stalwart who fought for maternity benefits and for integrated child care, gender equality and for transgender rights among other issues. Her studies on early childhood brought refreshingly new perspectives to understanding education for children. She was the author of several books on the subject of drama and child development and her contributions to *Economic and Political Weekly* and many other journals on the subject of child care and gender equality always drew great appreciation. As early as 1968, she had written a book on drama in schools published by the NCERT. Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) in New Delhi brought out in 1985, her book entitled, *Who Cares? A Study of Child Care Facilities for Low-Income Working Women in India*. The Monograph Series in 8 volumes by Mina Swaminathan published two times in 1995, *SURAKSHA: Early Childhood Care and Education in India. Volumes 1-8* discussed in the most comprehensive manner,

innovative early childhood care and education programmes in India, especially those which address the converging needs of women, young children, and girls. In 1998 Sage published her book *The First Five Years: A Critical Perspective on Early Childhood Care and Education in India*. The National Book Trust brought out in 2009 *Play Activities for Child Development* which she co-authored with Prema Daniel.

She was the Chair of the Advisory Board of Education (CABE) Committee on the Pre-School Child and the Report on the Preschool Child (1972) brought out by the committee led to the setting up of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). She was one of the founders of the mobile crèches and an international consultant with UNESCO and UNICEF on early childhood care and education.

To me, personally, she was a mentor without being hierarchic; made me learn without preaching; I could share with her almost everything—my frustrations, fear, anxieties, pains, excitements, and dreams! She would never be judgmental of the people; but was critical of their actions. The past few years have been difficult for her; it was because she knew what was happening to her. She had seen her mother, the novelist Krithika, go through a similar crisis. And probably, saw it coming.

When I met Krithika, Mina was Krithika's daughter—a daughter who was proud of her mother. In one of my recent visits, I took over from Jenitta, her caretaker, the role of reading aloud one of Krithika's children's stories to her. Mina listened intently—connecting to her mother through writing. I regret not meeting her when I went to give a copy of the English translation of *Avvai* play to her.

The love Prof. M S Swaminathan and Mina shared always moved me. To be strong, intelligent, and share space with equality and loving kindness is not easy. They could do it. And their family was unique too. The planned care the family provided, the three daughters and their families taking turns to take care of both of them—knowing what each of them needed—is an ideal to be emulated. It's truly a lineage of daughters!

Though I am almost her daughters' age, I see her as a dear, dear friend, a co-traveller, a fellow dreamer—who expanded my universe of theatre to another level. Despite many hurdles, we never lost the affective solidarity that feminism gifted us.

Love you Mina—for being who you were to so many of us! We will cherish your many passions.

Her Words Are Bullets: Mallu Swarajyam (1931-19 March 2022)



Mallu Swarajyam, who passed away at the age of 91 was a revolutionary leader and a freedom fighter who fearlessly challenged the private armies of the ruthless landlords and

mercenary militia of the tyrant Nizam of Hyderabad—the 'Razakars'—in Telangana's armed struggle from 1946 to 1951. She was born in 1931 and the name Swarajyam, literally meaning Independence, was suggested for her by many of her relatives who had taken part in the satyagraha when Gandhiji gave the call for it.

Her life story has become something like a legend in Andhra Pradesh and there is no one who does not know the details: That she read Maxim Gorky's *Mother* at the age of 10; that at the age of 11 she responded to the call of Andhra Mahasabha to stop bonded labour by offering rice to bonded labourers from many castes and communities; that Mallu Swarajyam became the commander of a *dalam* (an armed squad) fighting against Zamindars and that there was a price of Rs.10,000 for her head; that she went from village to village where women were used to putting their children in cradles and singing Vuyyala songs with stories from Puranas and turned those Vuyyala songs into revolutionary ones changing their content telling the women about what the reality of their situation was; that her husband, Mallu Venkata Narasimha Reddy, and her brother, Bhimreddy Narasimha Reddy, who were members of the Communist Movement, influenced her a great deal; that she was later a major leader in the Communist Party of India (Marxist); that she was elected from Thungathurthi Assembly constituency in 1978 and 1983 as a member of Communist Party of India (Marxist); that her memoirs *Na Maate Tupaki Toota*, (*My Words Are Bullets*) was published in 2019 by the Hyderabad Book trust; that she died from multiple organ failure in Hyderabad on 19 March 2022 at the age of 91.

In 2019, at the age of 89, she gave an interview to Paturi Rajasekhar for *Times of India* ("The 'bullet lady' of Telengana," 18 September, 2019). Her voice was shaky but she was eager to speak about the revolution. It would be worthwhile reproducing parts of the interview here:

"Today's generation doesn't know much about the peasants of Telangana who were forced to trade



Extreme left is Mallu Swarajyam in the group of revolutionaries

Swarajyam (extreme left) and other members of an armed squad (Dalam) being inspected during the Telangana armed struggle. (Photograph by Sunil Janah/Prajasakti Publishing House)



their ploughs for guns. It is not taught in schools; there are not many films on it; it's almost a forgotten story. But we made history nonetheless. It was in 1946 that we, ordinary farmers and farm hands, first took up arms against the Nizam's rule. We had to because he turned us into slaves in our own land. This was the time when the freedom struggle against the British was going on all over India. But here in Hyderabad State, it's the feudal lords we were fighting. These '*doras*' had forcibly seized lands from the peasants. The people were made to toil on their own lands for the landlords, without any pay.

"The Nizam taxed everything. The peasants had to pay *nazarana* to the *dora* for every birth, marriage and even death in the family. Every craftsman, artisan, merchant had to pay a portion of his earnings as tax. Mothers were forced to work in the fields barely three days after childbirth. So many babies died of starvation since their mothers couldn't feed them. When a *dora* walked by, you were not allowed to walk with your *rumaalu* [cloth cover for the head] on the head; you had to place it at his feet and say '*banchan...*' (I am your slave, my master) in reverence. If you angered the *dora*, he could burn down a whole village, kill the men, rape the women... Such was the tyranny of the *dora*. It came to a point where we thought, if we are dying anyway, might as well die fighting them.

"I was born in a 'semi feudal' family at a time when the peasant struggle was at its peak. My father [Bheemireddy Ramireddy], who was in favour of the British Empire, wanted to name me 'Samrajyam'. But my mother, Chokamma, chose to name me 'Swarajyam', after the freedom struggle. She has been the driving force in my life. At a time when reading for most women was restricted to mythology and religious texts, my mother made me read Maxim Gorky's *Mother*. She was very influenced by the character of the mother in that novel... Later on in life, she would go on to support us in our revolution against the system.

"My brother, Bhimreddy Narasimha Reddy, and Raavi Narayana Reddy [politician who was member of the Lok Sabha 1962-67, a founding member of the Communist Party of India and a peasant leader], who were students when I was growing up were deeply influenced by the ideas of Communism. Through stories and speeches, they instilled ideas in me which opened my eyes to the atrocities that people in our society suffered. Most leaders of the peasant movement were children of feudal lords who had taken it upon themselves to right the wrongs their fathers had committed. My own family gave up 600 acres of land. I had such a burning desire to not let the poor suffer that at the age of 13, I started going from village to village singing songs of revolution

A Life Filled With Music: Ambujam Vedantham (1938-22 March 2022)



When people like Ambujam Vedantham pass away we at SPARROW realise how much we have lost in terms of personal and social history by not talking to legends like her. Luckily for us, Venkata Raman G, a music enthusiast, guided us to a 2015 piece in *The*

Hindu where she had given an interview to Nahla Nainar. ("Pitch and Rhythm," *The Hindu*, 13 February, 2015) In the course of an hour-long conversation at her Krishnamoorthy Nagar residence in Tiruchi, she had shared with Nahla Nainar, "her views on why a classical art needs not just dedication, but also certain selflessness on the part of the exponent in order to survive." It is a good interview where she talks about music and her life but for some strange reason, the author keeps referring to her as Ambujam Vendantham! So much for the history we leave behind.

However, Nahla Nainar has brought out the musical personality of Ambujam Vedantham, in very apt and clear words. What is given below are details culled out from the interview given to Nahla Nainar.

Ambujam, born in 1938, the youngest of three children born to K Padmanabhan and Ranganayaki, started learning singing at the age of 7 from her mother, and went on to train under stalwarts K T Srinivasan (founder of Nungambakkam Sangita Vidyalaya), Muthu Natesa Ayyar, Kallidaikurichi Ramalinga Bhagavathar, Dr S Ramanathan and P P Govindan. Her debut performance was in 1953 in Madras, at the Nungambakkam Sangita Vidyalaya, on August 14, 1953, at the age of 15.

In a life driven by what Mrs. Ambujam delicately terms as 'family circumstances', Carnatic music has been perhaps the only constant. In 1952, the young Ambujam stopped schooling after Form 10 at Seva Sadan School, Madras, to look after her mother who had become bed-ridden after getting afflicted by tuberculosis of the spine. She tried to complete her matriculation studies from home, but was too young for the Madras Board, so opted for the Andhra Board as Telugu was more commonly spoken in the Madras Presidency in the early 1950s. But shortly before

she was to attempt the final exams under her father's tutelage, she was disqualified, because she lacked the minimum one week's attendance at an Andhra school. So she decided to carry on with her music studies, with home tuition from K T Srinivasan.

The teenaged Ambujam made a confident debut because of the earlier exposure to a variety of performances. There was no notation in those days, all this knowledge was gleaned from one-on-one oral instruction, and watching the guru perform.

As was the norm in those days, Ambujam's marriage was fixed with her first cousin, from a land-owning family based in Tirunelveli, in childhood. Here, too, music played a role. Booked for ten concerts in All India Radio Madras when she was selected as a B-Grade artiste in 1953, her maiden performance was scheduled four days before the wedding ceremony. "We didn't want to cancel the concert even though it was so close to the wedding as it was meant to be my debut, so I gave my acceptance in writing," says Ambujam in the interview.

It so happened that her in-laws arrived in Madras four days before the wedding, as it was an auspicious date. In the hurry to receive them at the railway station, her family members forgot to take her to the radio station. The debut concert never happened, and as the newlyweds got preoccupied with familial duties in Tirunelveli, Carnatic music receded into the background.

Ambujam could not develop her interest in music after marriage, but was an eager listener of the radio, and used to strum the tanpura in the evenings.

She resumed her musical education in 1963, by which time she had become a mother of two daughters. Participation in local festival and temple gatherings followed. Her mother had settled down with her after her father's demise in 1962, and it was she who insisted that Ambujam should practise every day. She had a small group of musical friends, and they would learn from whoever was willing to teach.

She was encouraged by programme executive Palakkad Krishnamoorthy, who had studied under Musiri Subramania Iyer, to audition for All India Radio again. She had been with AIR since 1970 till the time of the interview, and had presented several audio features for the station. She had also conducted lecture-demonstrations at Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai and Kalai Kaviri College of Fine Arts, Tiruchi. The Vendhathams shifted permanently to Tiruchi in 1990 to be close to their daughters and their families.

Ambujam concentrated on creating a tradition of her music and they were many who learnt from her. She became a teacher, a performer and a choreographer. She has left behind many works which speak for her. She choreographed the dance drama *Ayan Yasodai Maindan, Kamban Kavya Navarasam*. In 1991 she founded the Sri Rama Gana Sabha, in Tiruchi. She brought out many audio compact discs: *Rare Krithis of Trinity* (2000); *Varnams of 18 personal compositions with book* (2009); *Five compositions of Sri Shyama Sastri on Sri Kamakshi Swarajathi* (2015) and *Nine krithis on Goddess Saraswathy composed by Muthuswami Dikshitar* (2015)

Many titles and honours came her way and they were richly deserved: 'Isai Vani' by the legendary musician Maharajapuram Viswanatha Ayyar; 'Ezhillsai Arasi' by Sri Tyaga Brahma Sahba, Palayamkottai; 'Sangeetha Sastra Acharya' by Sri Guruguha Gana Saba, Srirangam, and 'Sangeetha Samarpana Shri' by Ponni Kala Kendra in 2015. In 2016, at the fourth annual one-day congregation of Tiruchy Carnatic Musicians (TCM) Vaibhav 2016, she was given a Lifetime Achievement Award.

She seems to have remained active till the end and immersed in music and musical memories. On the Sound Cloud we find a musical meeting she was part of called *Sangeetha Santhippu*. It is announced as 'Sangeetha Santhippu' Carnatic Music Talk Show by Dr R Kashyap Mahesh with Veteran Vocalist & Composer 'Isai Vani' Smt. Ambujam Vedantham taking place on 10 April 2020.

If there are clouds in the other dimension she is in, Ambujam Vedantham would still be singing.

C S Lakshmi

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SPARROW as an archive will always be open for consultation by scholars and others. It will also take its archives out as part of its commitment to bringing about change in the society.

Seeing Problems as Solutions: Prema Goplan (1 February 1956-29 March 2022)



Prema Goplan's name has become synonymous with Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP). Spread across seven States in India, SSP has helped nearly 300,000 rural women become farmers, community leaders and entrepreneurs. The rural women leaders of SSP are called Sakhis. It has helped them acquire new identities and new goals in life. People refer to Prema as a social entrepreneur but she really was a crusader for the cause of the rural women; a crusade she took up to make them self-reliant leaders. The SSP model was made up of four important components: a network that combined 5,000 Self Help Groups (SHGs), a core fund for women-led businesses, a rural school of entrepreneurship and leadership for women, and a market aggregator that provided warehousing, branding, marketing and distribution services for the final leg of the journey of women-led businesses to complete their enterprise. SSP has mentored several women who have won national awards for their work. One of them, Godavari, had not even completed her school studies. But she spoke at the United Nations General Assembly. A young widow from Osmanabad, Priyanka, has resolved to empower at least 100 widows in her area.

Before founding the SSP, with a degree in social work, Prema had started working with an organisation that worked with the urban poor. She got involved in the work of organising housing in Dharavi, helping pavement dwellers and those in railway settlements. SSP itself was founded in 1998 by Prema Goplan and activist-academic Sheela Patel. What inspired her to take up this mammoth task? In an interview given to India CSR Netwrk in 2018, she says, "When a massive earthquake hit Latur, I took a leap of faith along with a bunch of motivated professionals. By 1998, the rehabilitation project was completed. Ordinary women in 1300 villages were empowered to lead from the front as Samwad Sahayaks. We thought our work was complete but as we decided to leave, these women said, "We are not going back home, you may have helped us in building our houses, but we don't want to sit in those houses anymore, now let's begin a new chapter to involve thousands of women to lead their communities." These women were my inspiration and interestingly that earthquake laid our foundation and with the resolve of my team and our powerful women leaders, Swayam Shikshan Prayog was born."

No crisis was without solutions for SSS. When Prema Gopalan presented the case of how women farmers are bringing food and income security while shifting to water efficient agriculture and sustainable action in the Opening Plenary on Bridging the Gender Gap in Science, Disaster Risk in Resilience Dialogue in the UR: Understanding Risk, in Venice, May 19, 2016 by World Bank, her main stand was “Where others see problems, women see solutions.”

In the panel discussion on Migrant Crisis with Women Farmers and Leaders from Marathwada on 5th June 2020, Priya Rakhunde, woman leader, Osmanabad, said, “Women have to demonstrate new practices, then get support from Panchayats, so we built extra water tank and soak pits to increase and recharge water sources.” Over the years, UNICEF Maharashtra has been consistently working with Swayam Shikshan Prayog to ensure water conservation in Marathwada. “On this day, we reimagine our relationship with nature. We have women leaders who have become ecosystem managers and need to listen to them.” said Sarbjit Singh Sahota, DRR Specialist, UNICEF, who convened the panel discussion on MIGRANT CRISIS: Exploring Nexus Between Land-Water-Food-Livelihood Security with Women Farmers and Leaders. “The women have done exceptional work in water conservation and as a result the problems have reduced compared to 2015-2017” said Naseem Shaikh, from Swayam Shikshan Prayog, emphasising on how water conservation efforts over the years had helped the women cope better during the time of COVID-19.



HOPE MARCH: Prema Gopalan, founder and executive director, Swayam Shikshan Prayog, (in blue sari) with the women of Ranasinghe village in Pune, Maharashtra.

(Photo: Mandar Deodhar)

Prema Gopalan saw to it that the work of SSS did not slacken during the COVID times. In 2020, with support from UNICEF India, SSP was working with Gram Panchayats, to address the Covid-19 crisis by ensuring food security, community quarantine for the villagers and the migrant crisis in Marathwada. SSS’s Sakhi Task force was helping rural communities to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. On 16 March 2021, SSS organised an online workshop on building COVID-19 Resilient Communities where National, State and District officials and community leaders spoke about the challenges faced and initiatives taken.

Prema Gopalan’s work in Swayam Shikshan Prayog was given due recognition. In October 2018, she was honoured ‘Social Entrepreneur of the Year’ award by the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship—the sister organisation of the World Economic Forum and the Jubilant Bhartia Foundation. As Executive Director of SSP, she received the Award of Outstanding Social Entrepreneur of the Year 2019 from Prof. Klaus Martin Schwab, the Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum at the SEOY 2019 Award Ceremony held at Delhi on October 3 2019, awarded by the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship and Jubilant Bhartia Foundation. She was also one of the 40 awardees who have received the award for Social Innovation Driving Change and Transforming Society at the World Economic Forum’s Sustainable Development Impact Summit (SDI) held in New York on Sept 23, 2019. SSP became part of the Schwab community with this award.

When Prema Gopalan received the “Adarsha Mata Puraskar”, the Motherhood Felicitation Programme of the Parakhe Foundation, held at Pune on March 27, 2021, for indomitable courage in adverse situations and to have raised women in her community to become successful leaders, the citation paid her and her organisation rich tributes for their work:

“Swayam Shikshan Parayog (SSP) for the last two decades, has facilitated sustainable community development by building capacities of grassroots women’s collectives to lead social and economic transformation in climate threatened regions of India. Building on their capacities, Ms. Gopalan has steered them through a broad-based development strategy of economic and social empowerment. “Women leaders are no longer beneficiaries. Women in grassroots communities do not look at themselves as recipients. They look at themselves as farmers, entrepreneurs, leaders, resource persons, and even partners to the governments and the corporates,” [says] Prema Gopalan.

“Working in areas affected by climate change and natural disasters, SSP believes that resilient women can build resilient communities. SSP has supported grassroots women from

underserved regions, to act as community task forces after disasters, pioneer food secure organic farming, set up enterprises, become entrepreneurs by providing them technical training in agriculture and entrepreneurship and leadership skills.”

As someone who continued to make plans for the future she had spoken about them in the India CSR Netwrk 2018 interview when she was asked what her plans were for the future. She had elaborated that the SSP’s target for 2023 involved 1) Reaching 8 million people from climate affected communities by building capacities of women from these communities to address pressing issues 2) Catapulting additional 50,000 women as entrepreneurs and farmers 3) The women entrepreneurs and farmers addressing the needs and leading the development of more and more rural pockets in the climate change affected communities across India and 4) Nurturing 2,000 women leaders to develop a higher level of women leadership shouldering the responsibility of facilitating agency building of women in every leader’s village/block to address their needs and that of community.

SSP, with its energetic and visionary rural women she has trained, will definitely reach the target stated by her in 2023, but it is a pity she won’t be physically there to be part of it. However, all the programmes of SSS will always throb with the life she has breathed into them.

—C S Lakshmi

Postpartum Haemorrhage and Two Deaths: Asha Bairwa and Dr Archana Sharma: (Demise 28 March 2022 and 29 March 2022)



Asha Bairwa died during childbirth at Anand Hospital run by Dr Archana Sharma at Lalsot in Dausa on 28 March 2022. This was her fourth delivery. She already had three daughters. Dr Archana Sharma and her husband Dr Suneet Upadhyaya were much respected doctors in the area and had a very good reputation. Dr Archana

Sharma, in her career, had saved hundreds of lives both in government and private hospitals. She decided on a Caesarean section for Asha Bairwa but unfortunately Postpartum haemorrhage or PPH complication occurred later and the patient breathed her last while the child, a baby boy, survived.

As fellow gynaecologist Dr Amrinder Bajaj explains in *Times of India* (“Doctors Can Fail Even After Doing Their Best,”

p.12), excessive bleeding during Caesarean surgery, which is also known as Postpartum haemorrhage or PPH, is the leading cause of maternal mortality in India and it is also unpredictable. However, events took a very serious turn in this case. Dr Archana Sharma was charged with murder and police slapped IPC section 302 on her with an angry mob as witness.

After facing threats and murder charges and an angry mob, Dr Archana Sharma hanged herself in a room in her hospital. Her suicide note said: “I love my husband and children a lot. Please don’t trouble them after my death. I have done nothing wrong and not killed anyone. PPH [Postpartum haemorrhage] is a known complication and so stop harassing doctors so much over it.”

No doctor really wants to kill her pregnant patient nor can doctors be negligent when Caesarean sections are done. According to newspaper reports, Laluram Bairwa, Asha’s husband, and relatives had gone back to the village with the body but returned to the hospital along with some alleged local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders. They protested in front of the hospital carrying Asha Bairwa’s body. Local police had to come as the protest intensified, to calm down rising tempers. Later, based on a complaint by Laluram, the local police booked Dr Archana and her husband Dr Suneet Upadhyaya under Indian Penal Code (IPC) section 302 (murder).

Laluram Bairwa admitted that that he was angry at the hospital for handing the newborn baby to him along with the body of his deceased wife, but that he had not filed any complaint and had taken the body home. He was not a highly literate person and could barely read and write. He was tense and someone had thrust a paper in his hands and made him sign it. Laluram had had a boy child after three daughters and his wife had died giving him a son and the child was precious to him. He had felt that the child must have been kept under observation for 48 hours so that nothing untoward could happen to him. He must have been tense and must have signed the paper given to him without knowing what it was all about. But his signature was enough to drive a doctor to suicide.

So ended the lives of two women who were both life-givers.

—C S Lakshmi

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APRIL 2022

**Thorn That Became A Rose: Maya Govind
(17 January 1940-7 April 2022)**

The morning papers brought the sad news of the death of Maya Govind, who was a lyricist in the male-dominated Hindi film world where song lyrics are written only by men. Maya not only wrote lyrics but also did playback singing. Many

tributes have referred to her as a Hindi film lyricist who also sang a few songs. But Maya was much more than just a lyricist. A YouTube programme was made on her life in 2018 where she spoke about her life and others spoke about her. From this YouTube presentation emerged a very different Maya Govind.

Maya was born in Lucknow in 1940. She had two younger sisters. When she was just five her father passed away. Her mother wanted to educate her daughters and fortunately Maya's maternal uncle supported them and they were able to study. Maya's mother taught her eldest daughter music and also dance. When Maya was studying in the Intermediate course itself her mother got her married. When she went to her marital home Maya realised that what they wanted as a daughter-in-law was someone who would cook and take care of the house. Singing or reading was not allowed. Within three months Maya came back to her mother and told her, "You can send me back if you want. But I really want to study." Her mother did not send her back. Maya did her graduation and her BEd and became a teacher in a school.

Even while she was doing her graduation she took on the responsibilities of the family and got her younger sisters married. Deep within her was the feeling of loneliness and abandonment and from that sprang her poems. She took part in Kavi Sammelans where her poetry was appreciated. Her poet friend Arvind Rahi while wishing her on her 81st birthday recalled her life and said that Maya Govind is the name of that lone traveller who had turned the bitter and sweet memories of life into a ladder and with help of creativity crossed over all the highs and lows of life to achieve fulfilment. He also said that circumstances in her life were such that they could have turned her into someone desired by men, a Radha of Krishna but Maya took the path of renunciation and became a Meera, who knew her mind. In 1965, at the age of 25, in her first Kavi Sammelan at Lal Quila people expected

her to recite poems of love but Maya began reciting: "Jeevan ke saudagar bol, mitti ka kya hoga mol" (Tell me, trader of life, what will be the value of mud?) and Ramdhari Singh Dinkar who was 57, responded by saying, "If you are going to write about renunciation, then I have to write about love."

It was not that love did not come her way. In the YouTube programme she said that love did happen but it did not work out. So she decided to stick to writing poems, attending Kavi Sammelans and taking to the stage. In 1970, Maya performed as Venare Bai in a famous stage play entitled *Khamosh! Adalat Jari Hai* (Silence! The Court is in Session) written by Vijay Tendulkar. Many critics found her role a memorable one. She won the Best Actress award of Sangeet Natak Academy in Lucknow for the role. And later in Nataraj Natya Kala Parishad she met Ram Govind, her future husband. He gave her the heroine's role in a play and later asked her to be his heroine in life. She agreed because she had always wanted to marry an artist and they got married on the stage itself.

In the early seventies she came with her husband to Mumbai. Rajashri Films had arranged for a Kavi Sammelan and she went and recited some of her poems there. Ramanand Sagar who heard her there invited her to a party in his house to celebrate the release of a film. When she arrived there with her husband, Ramanand Sagar announced that a poetess was among them and asked her to recite some poems. Maya saw that people were standing with drinks in different corners chatting. She told Ramanand Sagar, "I am a poet alright, but not a singer who will sing when people are standing and chatting all around. Ask them to sit in front of me as audience and then I can recite my poems." People were a little taken aback but they did bring chairs and sit in front of her. She began to recite: "Aaj kitne bhi Kishen banke phirte; Koi bhi saathi nahi hota; In deewano ko kaun samjaye" (There are many who roam around as if they are Krishna; None of them can be a companion; Who can make these crazy people understand?). Ramanand Sagar had tears in his eyes and he said that in his next film she would write the lyrics. She did and the film was *Jalte Badan* (1973). The music composers were the composer duo Laxmikant-Pyarelalji and Maya's lyrics gave hit songs like "Vaada Bhoor Na Jana" (Don't forget your promise) and "Gaon Gaon Ghumi" (I roamed from village to village). This was immediately followed by Guru Dutt's brother, Producer-Director Atma-Ram's *Aarop* (Blame, 1983) for which she wrote songs like "Naino Me Darpan Hai" (Eyes are mirrors) which became famous and for which Bhupen Hazarika composed the music.

Apart from film song lyrics she wrote and published poems. She also wrote lyrics for many serials and also released her own albums. She wrote songs, couplets and verses for the serial *Mahabharat*. She was also associated

with serials like *Vishnu Puran*, *Draupadi*, *Aap Beeti*, *Kismat* etc. Maya wrote songs for the serials *Maayka* and *Phulwa*. She even wrote Indie-pop songs like *Maine Payal Hai Chhankai* (As I jiggled my anklets) for Falguni Pathak which became a hit song. She has also sung some soft numbers like the one “*Mandirmein Bhagwan rehte hain; ghar mein hamari ma*” (In temple it is god; at home it is our mother) she sang for the film *Mere Baad* (After Me, 1988) for which Usha Khanna composed the music.

She has published more than ten books of ghazals, couplets, nazms, songs written for gods and goddesses, and many songs. She has also written dance ballets one of which was on *Meera* which Hema Malini has praised. Those who associated with her had only good words for her. Music director Khayyam spoke about composing music for her song “*Shubh Ghadi Aayi Re*” (Auspicious time has come) for the film *Razia Sultan* (1983) directed by Kamal Amrohi. She had shared a great bond with composers late Bappi Lahiri and Khayyam as well. Maya was also good friends with the iconic music composer duo of Dilip Sen-Sameer Sen. Those who know her as a poet say that she never compromised with regard to the literary quality of her work even when she wrote for films.

Her son Ajay Govind has written a short note on his mother’s life which captures her life in all its facets which those who see her as a lyricist do not know. He writes:

“Maya Govind is an ardent Hindi poetess and song lyricist born in Lucknow in 1940. She is known for her “Shringar and Vairag” flavours in her poetry as well as charismatic Braj Bhasha Chhands. She has participated in thousands of Kavi Sammelans all over the world for the last 6 decades. She has written around 11 books which are published and exhibit her poems, chhands, bhajans and ghazals, including her efforts in writing *Bhagvat Geeta*, in a simplified poetry form. Along with her lyrical skill, she is also a good dancer and a stage artist. She also worked as a teacher. She has a mastery over Hindi language, which she taught in school as a teacher. Maya was also an active participant of a theatre group Darpan, but later she left it due to personal reasons. She has a degree in education. Later she also got a degree from Bhatkande Music University.

...her work has been recognised, appreciated, nominated and received many accolades, including Best song and Best Lyricist awarded by the media. She has received many other reputed awards

some of them being: Rashtriya Kavi Pradeep Samman, Nirala Puruskar, Mahadevi Verma Puruskar, Chatrapati Shivaji Rashtriya Ekta Puruskar, Hindi Seva Samman, and many others, including Best Poet of the Decade and Viewer Choice Award, presented globally. Currently, some students from Mumbai and Pune Universities are doing PhD on her poetry and her work. Lastly, as a President of a Charity Trust named “Jivanti Foundation”, she has been involved in promoting Hindi Sahitya and organising many cultural, literary and social activities and events.”

In the last few years Maya was not very active due to health reasons but she loved reciting poems while visiting relatives and friends. Ved Ratna, a poet and her brother-in-law, while speaking about her said that she could bring out all her inner agony in her poems and show how she rose from her pain and quoted her poem “*Tukde mere kiya toh main ek se bani gyarah.*” The poem in simple translation says:

*They cut me and I became eleven pieces from one
So many sparks of fire I bore that I’ve become the star in the sky
So hard I’ve been made that it’s become my innate quality
So much was I tortured that I’ve become the Taj Mahal
Bowing down so much I’ve become respect symbolised
Perpetually bearing thorns I’ve become a rose.*

—C S Lakshmi

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“Didi” to All: Manju Singh (1948–14 April 2022)



Manju Singh was known for the quality programmes she produced for the TV. Her programmes were authentic and no one could question the sincerity with which they were produced. Her career had begun with *Showtheme* in 1983 to be followed by *Ek Kahani*. Producing short TV films in Hindi based on short stories from various Indian languages was a unique attempt that she made in *Ek Kahani* which was later taken up by other TV producers in Indian languages. The docu-drama series on legal rights of women called *Adhikar* was a sensitively produced series which was socially relevant. Manju Singh had a wide range of ideas which she thought were relevant to understand

a modern nation. *Samyaktva: True Insight*, a film on the relevance of spirituality and ancient Indian wisdom in the 21st century, was an outcome of that belief.

To commemorate fifty years of Independence she again came out with a unique historical serial in 1998 based on the lives of Bhagat Singh and his comrades. She also anchored the children's programme *Khel Khilone* for seven years and began to be referred to as "Didi". And she ventured into the film world too with Hrishikesh Mukherjee's 1979 classic film *Gol Maal* (Chaos), playing the role of Ratna, the sister of Amol Palekar's Ramprasad Dashrathprasad Sharma.

Her conviction that what was needed to be produced must have national, social and cultural relevance in due course led to the founding of World Kids Foundation in 2007 with its expanded activities of organising international film festivals and reaching out to children and young adults in the classrooms through a programme called *Lessons in the Dark* done in collaboration with the National School of Drama. The programme did what the students most needed to think in terms of life and career. A successful pilot project programme in life skills, attitudes and values emerged in 2014, done in association with the CBSE, which reached some 5000 students across 40 schools. It was a pilot project on Co-Scholastic Assessment in Life skills, Attitudes and Values. It was carefully developed in collaboration with sociologists, counsellors and experienced educators and what is more, it was successfully implemented and was welcomed by the schools as a relevant module. Her contribution to creative arts and education was recognised in 2015, and she was nominated as a member to the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) of the Indian Government.

In a life well lived, she was able to do as much as she could towards propagating values she believed in and bringing awareness to the younger generation. She had a stroke and suddenly passed away with many more creative ideas still unfulfilled leaving her three daughters, friends and admirers feeling lost.

C S Lakshmi

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Bhargavi Narayan
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Bhargavi Narayan an actress from the Kannada film industry, and also a theatre artist from Karnataka.

Shakuntala Choudhary
(25 June 1920-20 February 2022),

Also known as Shaktunthala Baideo was a social worker from Assam.

Radhika Khanna
(March 23 1974-28 February 2022)

Radhika Khanna, an author of *Yoga: From the Ganges to Wall Street* and also a fashion designer and entrepreneur.

Vatsala Deshmukh
(1930-12 March 2022)

Vatsala Deshmukh was a Marathi and Hindi Actress

Kumudben Manishankar Joshi
(31 January 1934-14 March 2022)

Kumudben Joshi was a politician and a second woman Governor from Andhra Pradesh from 26 November 1985 to 7 February 1990.

And more...

Their life and work will be covered in the next SNL.

■■■■■

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COVER DESIGN: Bharti Kapadia
'PAINTING XI' Year: 1991,

241/2 " x 221/2" Acrylic on Canvas

ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: SPARROW ARCHIVES

EDITOR: Dr C S Lakshmi

DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Pooja Pandey

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SNL 41 supplement 2
Publication Number 96
Published by: Sound & Picture Archives for
Research on Women
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