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EDITOR'S NOTE

We promised in the last SNL that the next one will be on time. But the pandemic changed our lives and it became not only difficult to regain our physical energy to get back to routine work but also to shake ourselves out of the ennui that the pandemic period had pushed us into. So this SNL has been a year in the making and has become more of a journal. The matter to be included in the issue was so vast that we had to divide it into a main section with two supplements, one for book reviews and the other for homages.

In the main section we carry some interesting articles we enjoyed working on and which restored our mental stability. Our main section has Veena Poonacha's article on Poornima Pakvasa, Roshan Shahani's observations on Dosebai's autobiography published in 1911, S Theodore Baskaran's thoughts on how Devadasis contributed to early Tamil cinema, a heartwarming narration by R V Rajan of how he decided to draw his wife Prabha Rajan into writing and Uma Shankar and C S Lakshmi's analysis of the bhakti of Karaikkal Ammaiyar. The section also has warm and touching memories of mothers, grandmothers and fathers that many friends were willing to share with us. It also covers the Literary Awards given to writers in 2021 and the citations, acceptance notes and stories of the awardees Dr Suneetha Shetty, Lareena Abdul Haq, M Gopalakrishnan and Kalaiselvi.

The Book Review supplement has covered some interesting autobiographies and fiction from various parts of India and a book on the healing quality of poetry. There are many more books to be reviewed which we shall do in our next SNL. It is the homages supplement that we had to work hardest on. We feel that every woman's life has impacted the lives of others and that through our homages we acknowledge their contribution. But we were not prepared for the number of women we lost when COVID took its toll. There were also women, precious to all of us, who decided to leave this world during this period due to other reasons including natural causes but the loss weighed heavy on us. There were more than hundred homages to write to do justice to the women who had passed away. It not only took time but also drained us emotionally.

We have used some rangolis by Swarnalatha Kuppa. Swarnalatha Kuppa is an artist and a writer and an IT specialist who is self-employed. She lives in the US. She says this pandemic taught her so many lessons. She picked up her painting interests. Her friends motivated her to try new things and her kids and husband Vishvesh Obla encouraged and supported her. The results are these wonderful festival-oriented kolams and other designs that she draws at her threshold every morning from the spring to fall seasons getting up early. She draws them with rice flour as it is traditionally done in south of India and American sparrows and squirrels happily come to taste the rice flour!

Painter Rohini Mani has kindly given us her painting for the cover. The painting, as we see it, represents the hope all of us felt even while being confined to our houses, when we tried to stay in touch with our friends and family through constant communication. Her painting makes this hope the central theme of 2022. We hope this SNL too carries that hope.

Happy Reading!



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Poornima Arvind Pakvasa: A Journey Towards truth

—Veena Poonacha

“I ask you to love India and be Indian. I believe that love can bring about change in even the worst terrorist.”

Having lived a deeply fulfilling life of 93 years, Poornima Pakvasa, radiates strength, mental alertness, and fearlessness. The dignity of her bearing, her self-confidence and courage are all testimonies of her zest for life—a zest that would put younger women to shame. Remarkably alert and poised, she lives a life of Gandhian simplicity and discipline. She unfailingly wakes up each day at 5:00 a.m., meditates, does yoga, exercises before settling down to her job of managing the Ritambara Vishva Vidyapeeth for Dang girls. Deeply concerned with the all-round development of women, she insists that the girls participate in physical activities, and are taught self-defence along with their school curriculum.

Each day is a symbol of hope and joy to this extraordinary woman. She attributes her mental, emotional and physical strength to her deep spiritual realisation and dedication to the ultimate truth. When I met her, she was looking forward to celebrating her 93rd birthday a couple of days later. She said that there was no reason, why she should not live to be a 110. With an elfin charm she explained:

“In 1933, I went to prison with Kasturba Gandhi, for my participation in the freedom movement. During my prison term, Kasturba asked me to help her with her correspondence. Gandhiji noticed the improvement in her writing and remarked on it. When he came to know that I was responsible for it, he asked me to make teaching my life mission. During my prison sentence, I taught not only Kasturba and the other women freedom fighters, but also the women criminals. I taught them, not only reading and writing, but also physical exercises and self-defence. Gandhiji blessed me for my work and said,

‘May you live to be a hundred.’

Recently, two of my well-wishers have also blessed me. The first was President Abdul Kalam who visited this ashram on 15 October 2003 and the second was a dear friend. Both of them during their respective visits to this *ashram* in Saputara have appreciated my work of educating tribal girls and have said. ‘So that your work may continue, may you have five years of our lives.’ With such blessings, I am sure I will live to be a 110. There is no reason why I should not do so. I read in the paper the other day a report of a man who had lived to be a 110 and in perfect health. I too wish to live to be a 110, but, of course, in good health.”

The Land

To meet this dynamic woman, whose life spans the nine decades of the 20th century and has eagerly embraced the 21st century, you have to travel to the mystical heights of Saputara, into one of the most beautiful regions of Gujarat, known as the Dangs. Located high on the Saputara hills (which form part of the Sahyadhri range) the Dangs lie on borders of Maharashtra state. Comprising a total area of 1764 kms, the district has (as per the 2001 Census) a population of 1,86,729 people. The region, one of the most backward districts of Gujarat, is homeland to some of the ancient tribes of India (namely, the Kotwalia, Kathodi, Warli, Kunbi, Kolcha and Nayaka).

Saputara, the small hill station, where Poornima has built her ashram, is about 3560 feet above sea level. This picturesque landscape, known as the abode of serpents, is located about 250 kms from Mumbai. With its silvery-blue mountains, forests, lakes and mountain streams, the region overflows with nature’s bounty. The journey to Saputara,

along the dense, deciduous forests of the districts of Dharampur and Dangs in Gujarat, is equally breath-taking. The stillness of the mountain peaks kissing the azure skies and the silence of the forests (comprising teak, bamboo and a variety of jungle woods), broken by the plaintive song of the birds, has an indescribable timeless beauty. It is a moment that recedes back in time to when the earth was young and untouched by human civilization. Legend has it that Ram spent 11 years of his 14 years of exile in these thickly wooded forests of Saputara. (1) These forests (particularly the Vansda National Park, and the Purna Sanctuary) (2) are the habitat of a variety of wild animals (such as, tigers, leopards, civetcats, giant squirrel, four horned antelopes, wild boars, deer and bears) birds (such as water pied kingfisher, spotted owl, weaver birds, the bay-backed shrike, the little bluekingfisher, the pond heron, the common teal, the red wattle lapwing, the yellow wattle lap wing and the white breasted kingfisher) and snakes (such as cobras and pythons).

The People

Inhabited by the ancient tribes of the Kotwaliya, Kathodi, Warli, Kunbi, Kolcha and Nayaka (3) the region is today politically sensitive because of the fierce Hindutva resistance to Christian evangelism.(4) Caught in the vortex of the struggles between these dominant religious ideologies, the tribal communities have experienced an erosion of their cultural identities—a process that has been hastened by their socio-economic and political powerlessness. Classified within the Indo-Aryan/Scytho-Dravidian groups of tribes,(5) these communities (with the exception of Kolchas, who speak Konkani) speak dialects that are an admixture of Gujarati/Marathi. They are mainly agriculturists, although there are tribes like the Kotwaliya (also known as Vitolia) who work with bamboos and the Kolchas, who tan animal hide, weave basket and gather honey. Despite differences and distinct identities, there are certain shared cultural traits among the Dang tribes. They have an egalitarian social organisation with in-built notions of gender equality. Daughters are not discriminated and have equal inheritance rights with sons. The work force participation of tribal women is higher than that of the non-tribal women. Marriages are usually monogamous and married couples have the option of divorce and remarriage. The tribal communities are divided into exogamous clans. The community elders mediate internal dissension and resolve intra-tribal/intra-family conflicts. Living in harmony with nature, their economy was not based on the over-utilisation of natural resources. Their traditional outfit was minimalist. The men wore langotis (loin cloth drawn between the legs) and the women wore saris (similarly drawn

between the legs). Nowadays, men wear dhoti, waist coats and turbans. Women wear saris, blouses and silver ornaments. Their houses are made of wood and tiles. The walls are made from bamboo and plastered with mud.(6)

Her Mission

Since 1962, Poornima's work has focussed on the empowerment and education of tribal women. This work finally culminated in 1975 with the establishment of the Ritambara Visva Vidyapeeth in Saputara on a ten-acre land donated by the Gujarat Government. This institution is the fulfilment of her life-long mission to educate Indian women. The education that she sought to impart to them was aimed at their physical, moral, spiritual and intellectual development. It was aimed at making them economically self-reliant and at the same time acquiring the courage and self-confidence to struggle for their rights. The story behind this life-long dedicated service goes back to the nationalist movement, in the 1930s, when along with the struggle for political freedom of the country, there were discussions about the creation of an utopian society. Inspired by Gandhiji's vision of free India, Poornima Pakvasa (like some of the other Gandhian followers) decided to work for the education of the community. Gandhiji believed in gender equality and therefore Poornima Pakvasa (who revered Gandhiji as her spiritual teacher) decided to make education and the all-round development of women, her life mission. This nebulous idea germinated when she was incarcerated in Sabarmati jail. Her experiences of teaching women prisoners, gave her the necessary confidence to initiate such programmes. One of the first attempts to crystallise such ideas was to support Mithuben Patil's efforts to start the Kasturba Gandhi Seva Ashram under the leadership of Kasturba.

After Independence, Poornima developed her ideas into a full-fledged training programme, called Shakti Dal aimed at instilling courage, strength and self-confidence in women. Poornima, a teacher par excellence, has also focussed on self-development. She has learnt music, swimming, martial arts, horse riding and even flying light aircrafts. Ever fond of trekking and exploring new regions, she has trekked in the sub-Himalayan region and also reared two tiger cubs as if they were her own children. Underneath this quest for excellence is a deeper and more meaningful search for spiritual truths. The essence of this quest for truth is encapsulated in the name she chose in 1969 for her institution, the Ritambara Visva Vidyapeeth; for the name Ritambara means enlightenment leading to a harmonious and integrated life. She has also had a rich and varied career as the Commissioner

of Bharat Scouts and Guides, member of the Physical Cultural Association and the supervisory committee of the National Cadet Corp. She has also held several honorary positions as a member of the screening committee of All India Radio and Bapnu Ghar, a shelter home for women. (7)

Her Life Story

Poornima Pakvasa (née Pushpa) was born at a time when the world was convulsed in grave economic and political uncertainties. In the course of her life, she witnessed not only the ravages of the two World Wars, but also the Depression and the stirrings of the nationalist movement. (8) She has participated in the nationalist struggles, witnessed the birth of free India, and had a ringside view of the shaping of the Indian democracy after Independence. This was because her father-in-law, Mangaldas Pakvasa, a freedom fighter, held various important political offices. He was, in the course of his career, President of Bombay Legislative Council, Governor of Central Provinces and Berar, Mysore and Bombay State. The close view she had of the shaping of Indian polity makes her keenly aware of the strengths and shortcomings of Indian Democracy. Nevertheless, she is optimistic and continues to abide by her idealism of securing social justice in the country.

Poornima was born into a large joint family in the princely state of Limbdi, Gujarat, where her uncle, Amrithlal Sheth was a judge. His unquestionable integrity, however, brought him into conflict with oppressive Zamindari (9) system. On one occasion, a powerful zamindar tried to cheat a poor weaver of his payment. Amrithlal's indictment of the zamindar in his judgement incurred the royal displeasure. The king summoned Amrithlal and asked him to alter his judgement. The king said, "This zamindar is my right hand man, how can you fine him a thousand rupees?" Amrithlal replied, "Sir, you have appointed me as a judge to uphold justice. How can you now ask me to commit an injustice?" Knowing that he had displeased his royal master and yet unwilling to compromise on his integrity, Amrithlal, escaped from the kingdom with his family to Ranpur in Saurashtra and sought the protection of the British Agent there. He decided to spend the rest of his life exposing the injustice and lawlessness that existed within the various princely states. In order to fulfil his life's mission, he started a Gujarati news paper called *Saurashtra*; and subsequently started other equally powerful newspapers called, *Phulchhab* and *Janmabhomi*. His courage and steadfastness to his mission, earned him the title of the Lion of Saurashtra. Poornima's father, Vrajlal Sheth, a scoutmaster and a physical instructor, joined his brother in

his struggle. Sharing his brother's political ideals, he helped his brother in the publication of these newspapers. It is indeed a tribute to Amrithlal Sheth's vision and hard work that the newspapers he founded are in circulation even today and are known for fearless journalism.

Inspired by Gandhiji's call for the political freedom of the country as well as social justice, the entire family participated in the non-cooperation movement and were jailed for their efforts. Vrajlal Sheth and his brother Amrithlal, for instance, were imprisoned for two and a half years for their role in the nationalist cause. Despite these upheavals, the family (and even the children) cooperated to ensure that the printing press worked and the newspapers were out on schedule. Poornima's mother Chanchalben was an equally forthright and committed woman who unfortunately died young. Poornima says that she was in school in Bhavnagar when her mother became critically ill. Hastily called to her deathbed, Poornima remembers those poignant last moments. Her dying mother could not speak; she therefore communicated her love and concern for her children with her eyes. It was Poornima's love for her mother that made her carry a dagger with her to guard her virtue. "You will," her mother had said, "in the course of your work move into an unfamiliar world. This is fine, but guard your virtue like a *Kshatriya* (10) woman. In order to defend your virtue, you must carry a dagger."

This caused considerable comments from the other freedom fighters, who argued, that the non-violence preached by Gandhiji did not have a place for the possession of a dagger. The ethical dilemma was: could the satyagrahis (who had foresworn violence) use violence in self-defence? As Gandhiji was the only one who could answer this question, Poornima posed the question to him. Gandhiji endorsed her views and held that women had a right to protect their virtue. He said, that when faced with molestation, women should defend their virtue. They could kill in self-defence or be prepared to die rather than submit to molestation or rape. With this endorsement of her views, Poornima always carried a dagger with her. It was only many years later that she gave the dagger to another woman with the same blessings that her mother had given her. In its place she carried with her a symbolic *trishul* (11) given to her by a swamiji she met during her trek to the Himalayas.

The political environment of the family drew Poornima into the freedom struggle. She took part in the *satyagrahas* organised at Limbdi and Rajkot and also in the youth conference held at Ahmedabad. (12) She was (as mentioned earlier)

sentenced to Sabarmati jail where she taught Kasturba Gandhi as well as other women political prisoners reading and writing. She also imparted training in self-defence to the women prisoners. Vividly describing her participation in the Congress activities, she says that she was a captain of the volunteers during the Haripur Congress. At the Congress, she met Shubas Chandra Bose who was the Congress President at that time. This meeting left an indelible mark on her and she was impressed by his fiery oration. Shubas Chandra Bose, she recalls, was not well and she was entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of his needs.

The Haripur Congress also changed her life in other ways. It so happened, that one of the delegates, Mangaldas Pakvasa, a Solicitor from Bombay, was impressed with her leadership qualities and felt that she would make a suitable wife for his son, Arvind Pakvasa. The incident she narrated was as follows:

“When Mangaldas Pakvasa reached the conference hall, he realised that he had forgotten his badge identifying him as a delegate. I was the captain of the volunteers. As I was responsible for the security of the conference, I refused to let him enter the hall without his identification badge. I politely and firmly told him that he could not enter the conference hall. However, to solve the problem, I sent another volunteer to his tent to fetch his badge. Pleased with my firmness, Mangaldas Pakvasa, felt that I would be a suitable bride for his son. My family accepted the proposal and I was married to Arvind Pakvasa on 3 August 1938.”

Those were indeed troubled times, marked by the Salt Satyagraha (which began on 12 March 1930) and civil unrest. There were protest marches everywhere followed by the boycott of foreign goods and picketing of liquor shops. She participated in the movement and was jailed. By 1935, the British gave the Indians limited autonomy. Following it, provincial elections were held in 1937 in the eleven provinces—Madras, Central Provinces, Bihar, Orissa, United Provinces, Bombay Presidency, Assam, North West Frontier Provinces, Bengal, Punjab and Sindh. The final results were declared in February 1937. The Indian National Congress emerged in power in eight provinces with the exceptions being Punjab and Sindh. Congress Ministers were elected. One of them was her father-in-law who was part of the Bombay Legislative Council (1937). (13)

Education

Poornima's participation in the freedom struggle caused discontinuities in her education. She, nevertheless, wanted to study and was particularly interested in music—an interest she had acquired in jail. In jail, the freedom fighters would sing together to pass time. One of the freedom fighters, a music teacher called Saraswatibai, decided to conduct music classes. As she did not have musical instruments to facilitate the teaching, she fashioned a crudely-made *tambura* (14) (made from a couple of coconut shells and a few strings of wires) and used brass tumblers/plates to keep time. Many years later, when Poornima decided to graduate, she decided to major in music from the SNTD College in Bhavnagar. When she joined college, she did not have a foundation in classical music. Her music teacher, Lakshman Rao Pattan Kudikar, took this as a challenge and forced her to practise for long hours even during the Diwali vacations. She finally graduated, in 1945, with a university first in classical music and distinction in Sociology and Psychology. She subsequently, passed the Rashtrabasha Visharad examination of the Allahabad Sahitya Sammelan and took military training in Panchmarhi (MP) Military College as well as at the military and physical training camp in Amreli under the leadership of Shri Bhagwanji Mehta, Smt. Bhagwanji Mehta and Shantaben Yodh. She also trained to fly a trainer aircraft at the Nagpur Airport and learnt to ride horses in the Bhonsle Military School in Nashik.

The Early Days of India's Freedom

After Independence, she lived in Nagpur with her father-in-law who was the Governor of the Central Provinces and Berar. During her stay there, she started socio-cultural programmes for women and a Kanya Chatralaya at Saputara. In keeping with the ideals propagated by Gandhiji, she sought to impart physical, moral and vocational education to women. One of the happy interludes she remembers of her stay in Nagpur was her adoption of two tiger cubs, after the death of their mother. Poornima named the cubs Rupali and Rakha and bottle-fed them, till they were able to eat food independently. Brought up on vegetarian food, the cubs grew up to be gentle, overgrown kittens. They were subsequently sent to the Nagpur Zoo. She and her children would frequently visit them in the zoo. These visits only petered out after they left Nagpur.

Some of the anecdotes that Poornima narrated give us an insight into her interesting life and unexpectedly reveals the human side of some great names in history. Once during Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Nagpur, *en route* to Rajkot,

she suddenly found that (in confusion of people jostling to welcome Panditji), her three-year-old daughter Sonal was missing. It was only later that she was informed that Sonal had gone off to Rajkot with Panditji. What had happened was that in the melee, Sonal had somehow reached Panditji. Panditji, who loved children, had carried the child with him to Rajkot, after leaving a message for Poornima with the security officer. The child had happily stayed with Panditji and her grandfather, the governor of the Central Provinces.

Poornima also narrated a touching story about Helen Keller's visit to Bombay in the 1950s, when Mangaldas was the Governor. Seeing Helen's beauty and courage, Poornima was filled with compassion and wanted to make her stay in India memorable. After a great deal of thought, Poornima felt that as Helen would perhaps never have the pleasure of being a bride, it would be a beautiful experience for her to be dressed as an Indian bride. Poornima therefore bought Helen a sari and all the necessary bridal jewels and on the last day of her stay in Bombay, dressed her like a bride. Helen was deeply touched by this thoughtful gesture.

Her Work

By 1953, the various training camps for women, which Poornima conducted soon crystallised into the *Shaktidal* programme to give women training in self-defence/martial arts and physical exercises during summer vacations. More than 26,000 women have been trained through these camps organised in Bombay and Saputara. She also served as a camp commandant at the Bhonsale Military School in Nashik, where she taught physical and military training to the students. In the course of her career, she has visited many foreign countries to study educational institutions and women and child development programmes.(15)

Finding New Directions

By 1962, Poornima was increasingly haunted by the plight of tribal women and she decided to devote her time to their development. Her initiative, which materialised into the Ritambara Visva Vidyapeeth by 1969, took concrete shape in 1975, when the Gujarat government gave her 10 acres of land to found the boarding school.(16) Poornima's great services to tribal education can only be appreciated when we realise that prior to her efforts the district was almost entirely illiterate. They had very little contact with mainstream society and were ignorant of any of the modern amenities that were taken for granted in other parts of the country.

Getting the tribal communities to accept and value education was not easy. Poornima still remembers her early struggles to encourage tribal communities to send their daughters to schools. She would visit each village and wait there to talk to them about the Gandhi ideals, until the parents were convinced of her sincerity and agreed to send their daughters to her boarding school. She started the school with only 15 students. Today the school provides education to more than 750 students. Out of this total student strength only 280 girls get government grant, the others are educated with the aid of private donations.

Based on the Gandhian ideals of the education of the head, the heart and the hands, she has developed a unique model of education. The school curriculum is based on the syllabus prescribed by the Gujarat government. At the same time, girls are taught dancing, singing, painting, physical exercises, sports, cottage industry, first aid, dairy farming, plant nursery, yoga, cooking, lezim and self-defence. The girls are also expected to wash their own clothes, assist in the preparation of food and in maintaining the herbal garden that she has started on the campus.

This enabled them to learn about the local environment and to appreciate nature. When the tribal girls pass out of school and return to their villages, they are able to have kitchen gardens and plant nurseries in their backyards. Deeply mindful of Poornima's instructions that women must have economic independence, these women start micro-enterprises to market their handicrafts and forest products. They also carry forward the task of educating their community by organising adult literacy classes or working as balwadi (pre-school) teachers and community health workers. Some of her more ambitious students have moved to the city, sought higher education and are employed. They have joined the government service, the police force, the armed forces or work as teachers, lecturers, professors and nurses.

Her compassion and love for her students makes her see each of them as an individual. She takes pains to see that the health and well being of each child is taken care of. Poornima narrates the story of a young, physically handicapped, tribal girl who could only crawl. Seeing her being neglected during one of her visits to the village, Poornima brought her to the school and started educating her. It so happened that during a health camp that she organised, one of the doctors was an orthopedic surgeon, who examined this child and said that he could operate on her to enable her to walk. Poornima

convinced the girl's parents of the need for the operation. She brought the girl to her house in Bombay and saw to it that the girl had the operations. The girl was subsequently able to walk.

The institution also runs a dairy farm and undertakes research of medicinal herbs. In 1979, she initiated the dairy-farming programme with 7 cows with calves. Today 45 cows supply milk to the institution and manure for the garden. She has also installed the gobar gas plant to supply cooking gas for the institution. Cow's milk with its rich vitamin and high calcium has helped in reducing night blindness, which is very common in these areas.

Tribal Development

Her work however is not limited to education of children. She has also sought to initiate holistic development in the village community through the Ritambhara Gramin Vikas Trust. Called the 'Panchmukhi Yojana', this five-point programme undertakes adult literacy classes, initiates income generation programmes in the village, provides health facilities, prevents alcoholism and domestic violence. To achieve these targets she has built Hanuman temples/ community halls with the free labour provided by the villagers in 22 villages.(17) Through the development of cottage industries, she has provided employment to 3000 people and sought to preserve/promote indigenous culture. She has undertaken environmentally friendly programmes and has planted more than two thousand trees. To provide better health facilities, she has started a 5-bed hospital in the area. She has initiated vocational courses to train nurses and midwives to serve the tribal community. To propagate her philosophy she writes extensively in Gujarati and Hindi.(18)

Future Plans

For her lifetime achievements, Poornima Pakvasa has received the Padma Bushan Award from the Government of India. This however is only a culmination of the many awards she has won for services to the country. (19) Poornima however is not happy to rest on her laurels. She is tired of the bureaucratic delays that prevent her from fulfilling her mission. She has recently announced that she would go on a hunger strike if the Government of Gujarat does not give her the land that she was promised. The Government had promised to give her 25 acres of land in Saputara for her various tribal development projects, but retracting from their commitments has given her only 10 acres. She needs the additional land to enable her to fulfil her many schemes for

tribal development. She would like to start an Ayurvedic and Nature Cure Research Centre and develop herbal gardens. Additionally, she would like to start a physical education college as well as centres to preserve, promote and develop tribal cultures, arts and crafts. She would like to start an academy of fine arts and also develop vocational courses for women. Her idea is to link these courses with self-employment schemes and she hopes that in the next three years she will be able to provide employment to at least, 10,000 people. She is undoubtedly a woman with a vision. She has the capacity to realise her dreams. In this she is ably assisted by a group of dedicated staff. Among them mention must be made of Mr. Desai and his wife who do honorary work at the institute. They have managed to streamline the administration and expand the work of the institution.

Reviewing Poornima Pakvasa's work and contribution to society, one can only say that she is a woman in a million—a woman who lived by her ideals and reached out to others, in a spirit of love and service. She firmly believes that with love and compassion it is possible to change the heart of the most hardened criminal or terrorist.



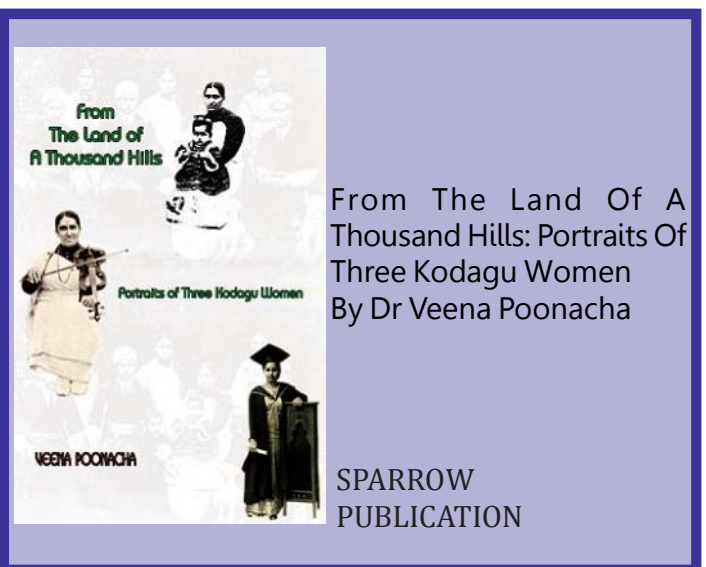
An essay based on a recorded dialogue with Poornima Pakvasa parts of which were used in a comparative study of Poornima Pakvasa and Vibha Gupta entitled "Interpreting Gandhi Differently: Portraying the Lives and Works of Two Gandhian Women" published in *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 15: 1 (2008), pp. 51-80.

Endnotes

1. Information Bulletin available at the Tribal Museum in Saputara
2. The Vansda National Park (comprising sq. 24 kms.) was originally a private forest of the Maharaja of Vansda; the Purna Sanctuary (comprising 160 sq.kms.) are crossed by the Purna and Gira rivers. These sanctuaries are habitats to a variety of wild animals.
3. Singh K.S., *The Schedule Tribes: The People of India* (National Series. Vol. 111, Anthropological Survey of India: (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Mandal, Hrishikesh, Mukherjee, Mukherjee and Dutta, Archana, *Indian: An Illustrated Atlas of Tribal World* (Kolkata: Anthropological Survey of India, 2002) pp. 55-56.
www.indiantravelportal.com/Gujarat/dangs
5. Risley, Hubert, *The People of India* (Second Edition, edited by William Crooke, reprinted from 1915 edition) (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1991), pp.33.

6. Ibid.
7. Some of the positions that she has held are as follows: 1) State Commissioner (Guides) Bharat Scout & Guides for three consecutive terms (i.e., 9 years in Maharashtra; 2) State Chief Commissioner for Bharat Scout & Guides for one term (i.e., 3 years); 3) State Commissioner (Guides) for Bharat Scout & Guides, MP (from 1948-52); 4) Member of Physical Cultural Association; 5) Member of the Supervisory Committee for the National Cadet Corp in Maharashtra; 6) Senate Member of the SNDT Women's University for 10 years; 7) Central Board of Film Censor; 8) Member of the Screening Committee of All India Radio, Bombay; 9) Member of the National Discipline scheme initiated by General Jaganathrao Bhonsale; 10) Secretary of the Bapnu Ghar, shelter homes for women; Founder Chairperson of the Ritambhara Visva Vidyapeeth; 11) Secretary of Nutan Balkishan Sangha founded by S T Taraben Modak; 12) Secretary of the Balkan-jibari; President of the ballet group of Sachin Shankar; 13) Justice of Peace and Honorary Magistrate at Mumbai, 1965-75.
8. Nehru, Jawaharlal. *Glimpses of World History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1935-36) Reprint 2002.
9. During the British period, the Zamindari system grew out of the Permanent Land Settlement that the British introduced to collect agricultural revenue. In this case, however, it refers to the feudal privileges that continued to exist in the various princely states.
10. The term Kshatriya refers to the warrior class in India. The allusion is to the daughters and wives of the warriors who chose death over dishonour.
11. A trident is Trishul, a symbolic weapon carried by Lord Shiva.
12. These satyagrahas took place at around 1939 and were directed against the misrule in the various princely states. Kasturba Gandhi participated in these satyagraha and was imprisoned in Rajkot. Gandhi, Arun. *Kasturba: A life* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 271-273
13. Nehru, Jawaharlal. *The Discovery of India*, op. cit., n.8.
14. Tambura or tanpura is a stringed drone instrument.
15. As a member of Indian women's delegation (under the leadership of Smt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay), she has visited Russia, Tashkent and Samarkand in Uzbekistan in 1953; visited London, Paris, Florence, Venice, Rome and Egypt to study educational institutions and issues related to the development of women and children in 1957; visited Berlin as a representative of the Government of India for the Film Festival in 1957; travelled in Germany as a guest of Federal Republic of Germany.
16. This school, like its counterparts the R.N. Shah High School, Malini Kishore Sanghvi Junior College and College of Commerce and Economics in Mumbai, is run by a trust. The current trustees of this institute are Dipchand S Gardi (President), Poornima Pakvasa (Founder-Chairperson), Kishor B Sanghvi (Managing Trustee), J N Jani (General Secretary), Ashwin M Mehta, Jayantilal S Shah, Umesh K Sanghvi, Hiten P Shah, Narendra M Mehta, Anuj A Pakvasa and Girish M Dresswala.
17. Her explanation for the construction of Hanuman Temples is that the tribal communities are worshipers of Hanuman and that the temples enable them to focus their energies in the right directions.
18. A versatile writer in Gujarati and Hindi, she writes a column entitled *Didi ni Chitti* for the monthly magazine brought out by the RVV called *Shaktidal*. She also contributes regularly to a number of Hindi and Gujarati magazines and dailies. Her books include:
1) *Jay Shri Badrikendar* (1953); 2) *Ritambhara Zalak* (1955);
3) *Bed of Roses* (1975); 4) *Call for Rising Generation* (1958);
4) *Sinhnad* (translation, 1962), 5) *Ritambhara Sangeetam* (1992);
6) *Jeevan Shilpio* (1995); 7) *Amrut Ni Kheti* (1999);
8) *Dosti to Parmni* (1999);
9) *Sarita Shreni*; 10) *Bhav Sarita*; 11) *Mangal Sarita* (No. 1 & 2);
12) *Jail Sarita*; 12) *Ritambhara Nu Nandanvan*; and
13) *Bapu Amar Gher Padharya Ane Gram Swaraj*.
19. Poornima Pakvasa has received the following awards for her work: 1) Freedom Fighter's Award in 1983 by Rashtriya Shala, Ghatkopar, Mumbai; 2) Amrut Puraskar in 1984 for services rendered to the adivasis; 3) Sanakar Kedre, Vadodara for services rendered to adivasis; 4) Award from Abhavadan Trust, Mumbai in 1985 for services rendered to adivasis; 5) Young Rotarian Awards for freedom fighters in 1993; Young Men's Gandhian Association and Champaben Gondhiya Award of Rajkot in 1995 for services rendered to women; Patrakar Foundation Award for freedom fighters in 1996; Smt. Laxmi Menon literacy awards in 1997 by the All India Committee for Eradication of Illiteracy among Women; Ba Purskar from Puja Ba Bapu Satkottar Rajat Jayanti, Pune, on 2nd October 2000; Padma Bhushan by Government of India on 26th January 2004; Shri Kanubhai Desai Gujarat Pratibha Awards by Vishva Gujarati Samaj on 26 March 2004.

Prof Veena Poonacha retired as a Director from Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT, Juhu.



When A Faceless Portrait Acquires A Face

—Prabha Rajan and R V Rajan



Prabha Rajan was a Tamil writer who began to write rather late in life. At one point in her life when her children were grown up and not dependent on her, she felt that her entire life had been spent in keeping her mother-in-law happy and coping with the emptiness she felt as a person who had no face and whose life seemed to hold no special meaning. She poured her heart out in a letter to her

husband.

Her husband, R V Rajan was an extremely busy person. He was someone who had had a successful career in the advertising industry in Mumbai and Chennai and who had later founded Anugrah Madison Advertising and Anugrah Rural Marketing Academy. The letter shook him up, to say the least. He took the letter to the editor of a women's magazine who decided to publish it as a real letter written by a woman to her husband and published it in the pen name "Arasi". This may not have been what Prabha expected but it changed her life. We give Prabha's letter translated into English below followed by R V Rajan's note on how he, as a husband, dealt with the letter.

"My dear...", Mangayar Malar, July 1988.

Mangayar Malar Editor's note: This is a real letter written by a woman to her husband. The letter has poured out the feelings of today's women. Confronting these wounds of the heart makes one feel as if a raw wound is being opened.

Oh, women of this country.....

My dear,

I can understand your feelings. You consider your mother and your wife as equal. It is my helpless inner agony that

drives me to make you also suffer. I love everyone. But your family, for some reason, is not willing to love me. The contradictions in their conversations and attitude make me angry. I don't really want to hurt anyone. When I get hurt I crawl into my shell like a snail. My everyday chores get affected because of this. Worry starts eating into my mind. To escape from this I decided to open up and say what is on my mind.

In our society it is considered wrong for young people to find fault with the elders. Whatever I say the immediate response is: Are you saying that we should go away because it is wrong for us to even exist? In order to solve some very ordinary minor complaints one might have, should one wait for them to leave the world altogether? What kind of madness is that?

However, whatever their faults one must bear with them. One must keep on "adjusting". You also say that I keep complaining unnecessarily. You hesitate to even consider for a moment if what I am saying is right or wrong. You are afraid that such considerations might lead to your saying something to your parents and so you keep your eyes and ears closed; you close your mouth too. I don't want you to quarrel with them for this. I know that you won't be able to bear it if they get hurt. But I am unable to put on a smile and talk, covering up the pain in my heart.

Your mother is very clever. She knows when to speak what to be appreciated by people and she does that and gets a good name. She makes others do things and makes it appear as if she has done it all. But a woman who has entered the house with all due rights cannot put up with this. She is also a part of whatever good or bad events that take place in a household. She also works hard physically. Your mother is not even willing to accept whole heartedly that if all the work is done well, the other person also has played an equally important role in that effort.

I have myself heard her say many times, 'I did it on my own; there was no one to help me.' And my mind would be on fire knowing that I had also worked hard. All these are minor matters. These may not seem like big issues to others.

But to me who has worked the whole day... I am not expecting anyone to shower me with praises and read out a citation of appreciation. I am aware that family is not an institution where you work one day and get a certificate for it the next day. But I can't make you understand how hurtful it is for a woman who is there all along, when the other person whines that she is doing all the work by herself. It is easy for others to say that all this must be ignored. But they don't know that this is a poison that would kill a woman slowly when she is tolerating it confined in the house twenty-four hours a day.

Since the family has been a joint family from the beginning, from one's young age, there has been no opportunity to understand what is right and what is wrong and conduct the family life according to that. Everyday chores have been programmed by the elders. I don't think I left any room for complaint even in those routine chores. Even when I felt something was wrong, my mind was controlled to the extent that I was unable to express it.

It was hell, especially when guests arrived. The relationship with the daughter-in-law would become a distant one then. In the daily chores she would take the liberty to join hands with the guests continuing with the usual whining and the daughter-in-law would be kept at a distance. I would be in a dilemma then: should I keep away or come forward to do the work? I don't know really. In this struggle there will also be the usual sarcastic comment, 'She does not like it when our relatives come.' I withdrew further into my mind when this happened.

I had always avoided claiming something exclusively for myself and projecting myself as I knew it would hurt others. But hearing mother-in-law constantly utter the words of entitlement, "my, mine, my son" I felt something akin to jealousy. A longing arose to have something of my own. When she is all soft and gentle with you it creates a kind of fury in me. In those moments I struggle to put my feelings into words. My situation is that of a child that would leave its toys if it was sure that no one was going to touch them but when there would be competition it would struggle till the end to possess the toys. I know such an attitude to compete with another is wrong. So I am unable to pour myself out and have earned the sobriquet of being a sourpuss.

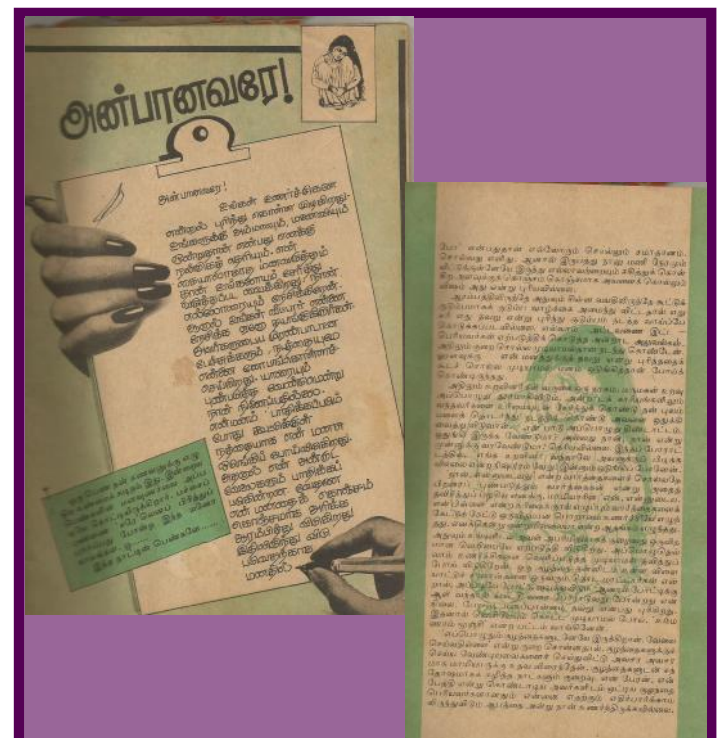
Since she complained that I was always with the children and did not work I used to do everything for the children and hurry to help mother-in-law. So the days I spent happily with my children were not too many. I did not realise the danger of the children not needing me at all later in life because they became attached to the grandmother who indulged them and claimed them as her grandchildren. A woman's goal in life is to be needed by others. Isn't it a fact that since

I ignored the needs of my husband and my children to satisfy the elders in the family, no one really needs me now?

I realise this now when my responsibilities have reduced and I can look around. I have nothing that is my own. Everyone is busy in their own ways. I am the curry leaf that is used as an add on in food. Sometimes the house seems like a prison. It is my fault that I am not like the asafoetida that spreads its aroma everywhere when it is used. I can't blame anyone for that.

No one knows my sorrow. They always comment that I seem okay for two days and then I am back to my usual odd behaviour. Since I am ignored by everyone, the pain in my heart increases every day. I try to console myself and go about. Since everyone is busy with their own work the need to pay heed to my agonised mind does not arise at all.

Expressing my present feelings may break the family that I have nurtured all these days. I will learn to live with the sobriquet 'curmudgeon' that I have earned. It will suffice if you alone understand the reasons for my grumpiness. There is no need for anyone else to know.



Prabha's letter in Mangayar Malar, July 1988.



Cartoon image of RV Rajan by RK Laxman

“Arasi”

*R V Rajan has many achievements to his credit including four books: *Courage My Companion*, *Don't Flirt With Rural Marketing*, *Durga Niwas: Biography of A Building and This & That... Then & Now*. He is a regular speaker at m a n a g e m e n t institutes, workshops and seminars. He also talks at book clubs and other places about his incarnation as a writer after retirement and there is always a full*

house to hear him talk about his journey from a chawl in Mumbai to the advertising world and later to winning great appreciation for his rural marketing campaigns and then becoming a writer. Given below is his note on reading the letter and the aftermath.

A Turning Point **R V Rajan**

It was in 1986 that my parents who were staying in Mumbai with my younger brother, decided to move to Chennai to stay with my family. As the eldest son in the family I was committed to looking after them in their old age and I was happy that I was going to fulfill my commitment.

While I was cruising along steadily on the business front and thought I was doing well on the home front too, I was in for a shock. Two years after my parents came to stay with me, my wife Prabha became strangely unsettled. Often she would be lost in thoughts, irritable and at loggerheads with our three teenage children. Sensing her unhappiness I took her on a short holiday to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

But even after we returned her mood fluctuations continued. One night I returned home from a Rotary meeting to find an envelope on the pillow in our bedroom. It contained a 10 page letter to me written by my wife. She had poured her heart out in the letter in which she complained about my mother, accusing me of being a mama's-boy, listening to my mother more often than I was listening to her. The letter

talked about her lack of importance in the family because of her dominating mother-in-law.

This well-written letter in Tamil was representative of the typical problems an Indian housewife faces in a joint family system. Though it was very interesting to read, I was shocked. The letter opened my eyes to the realities of my family life and particularly it helped me see my wife in a different light.

I realised that Prabha was suffering from an identity crisis, in spite of the fact that she had everything going for her; a good family, three lovely children, decent living conditions...or so I thought! But she was obviously missing an emotional connect with me.

As an advertising man frequently dealing with creative people, I immediately recognised her immense talent for writing in Tamil. I decided to use this knowledge to provide a turning point in her life!

After mulling over the letter for a couple of days, I took it to the Editor of *Mangayar Malar*, a leading Tamil monthly for women. She was initially reluctant to read the letter as it was a personal letter to me. After some persuasion, she went through it and wondered why I was showing it to her. I asked her if she would like to publish it in her magazine as I believed the letter represented the feelings of thousands of Indian housewives in a joint family system. She agreed that it was hot stuff but insisted on meeting my wife and talking to her before initiating any action.

Later I told my wife what I had done. Though surprised and shocked, she agreed to come with me to see the Editor. After the informal meeting, she agreed to have the letter published as the cover story in the July '88 issue of the magazine, but under a pen name. Since my mother was also an avid reader of the magazine, my wife did not want any trouble at home because of the article.

As a part of my strategy to bring her out of her shell, I took her on a 5-week holiday to USA and Canada carrying a few copies of the magazine, straight out of the press. I could see that the experience of visiting new places and meeting new people was beginning to transform her. In a carefree atmosphere and eating the rich food (loaded with ice-creams!) she even put on some weight!

On our return journey, she penned another article describing her problems with her teenage daughter, which also got published in the same magazine! This led her to try her hand in writing short stories some of which got published in some popular Tamil magazines.

Some friends persuaded her to join the neighbourhood Ladies Club and the Inner Wheel Club of Madras South (the Ladies wing of the Rotary Club of which I was a Past President). She took to these organisations like the proverbial

'Duck to Water'. She even became the President of the Inner Wheel Club of Madras South within a couple of years. She started learning Carnatic music and joined a few more classes to learn Bhajans and devotional music.

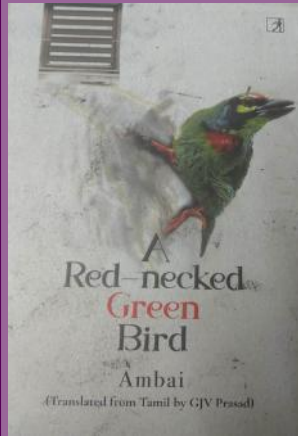
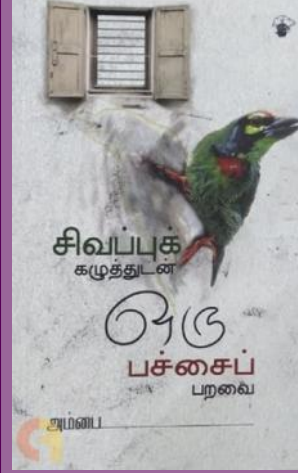
While this helped improve her self-esteem and develop an identity of her own as a singer and a dependable social activist (apart from being a great homemaker), she stopped writing because of her pre-occupation with other activities. This made me unhappy. All my persuasive powers to make her continue her writing proved futile. I devised a strategy to revive her interest in writing.

Much against her wishes, I got a collection of her short stories published as a book and launched it on her 59th birthday at a function attended by a few relatives and her friends. My strategy worked. Encomiums and praise for her style of writing started pouring in. Motivated by the wonderful response to her book, she started writing again resulting in two novellas and a few more short stories within 18 months. These were included in her second book published and released on 27th July, 2012 (her 61st birthday). By this time, we had already discovered that she was suffering from cancer. I must record my sincere thanks to Shri. Ravi Tamilvanan of Manimekalai Prasuram, a leading publishing house in Chennai, for going out of his way to have the book published in record time. The fabulous response to her second book in the form of telephone calls and letters from readers of the book provided a good diversion to Prabha from the pain that she was suffering.

I have been known as a "Projects Man" all my life. Helping Prabha come out of her shell and blossom into a multi-talented person that she eventually became turned out to be an ongoing project in my life. Though I provided the turning points, on her part she grabbed all the opportunities that came her way and tried to do well in every role she was asked to play. In the process she endeared herself to many members in the several organisations that she was associated with. The large number of her friends, who turned up to witness her last journey on 5th January 2013, was a testimony to her success as a lovable human being. Prabha had come a long way in life and I was really very proud of her. And I still am. I am happy I helped her to find her face, a face that remains with me.

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website <http://www.sparrowonline.org/>
FB: <https://www.facebook.com/sparrowngo/>

FROM SPARROW TEAM



SPARROW TEAM congratulates Dr C S Lakshmi (Ambai) for winning the Sahitya Akademi Award 2021 for her book *Civappuk Kazuttudan Oru Paccaip Paravai* in Tamil.

All of us at SPARROW are thrilled!



Dr C S Lakshmi (Ambai) receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award. March 2022, New Delhi.

Devadasi Tradition and Early South Indian Cinema

—S. Theodore Baskaran

The silent era in South Indian cinema lasted sixteen years during which period more than a hundred and twenty feature films were made in Madras and a few more made in other centres like Mysore, Nagercoil and Vellore. Quite a few shorts were made before the first feature film *Annihilation of Keechaka/Keechakavatham*, an episode from *Mahabharata* was made, with Tamil subtitles, by Nataraja Mudaliar in 1916 in Madras. Only one film from that era has survived. Even photographs from this period are hard to come by and there is very little printed material relating to these films. In the 1970s, I could meet some pioneer filmmakers and actors from that age who were still around. However, our major source of information for this period is the **Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee of 1927** headed by Madras lawyer T. Rangachari. The sound era in South India began with the first Tamil talkie *Kalidas* in 1931. In the first five years, there was no facility to produce sound films and Tamil films were made in Calcutta, Bombay and Kholapur. Once the sound studios were constructed in Madras, it was here, along with Bombay and Calcutta, that the foundation for Indian cinema was laid. In fact, till the early 1960s, the city, along with Salem and Coimbatore, continued to be the main centre of production and related activities for the cinemas of the four languages of Southern India.

The Questions

How was the changeover from the pantomime of silent cinema to the cinema of spoken language carried out? From which source did the contents and features of this new art form that was completely a child of technology, unlike other traditional performing arts, come? What was the narrative tradition followed in the early Tamil talkies? How was the challenge of sound handled by the filmmakers? Unfortunately we do not have any of the films of the first five years and have to rely on imprints of the period in the form of interviews, reviews and song books.

Unlike in the West, the transition from silent to talkies in South India took a different trajectory. Tamil cinema did not

grow out of its silent phase as the other cinemas in France, Germany and England did. Instead, in an abrupt switch, it adapted an already existing, a ready-made art form, complete with trained artistes, writers, singers and a sound design. It was the stage plays of the commercial companies, known as company drama, popular as an entertainment format of that period that was adopted. These dramas themselves were predominantly aural in nature, mere vehicles for songs, rather like an opera. The early Tamil sound films were mere photographed dramas and this set in motion a strong aural tradition.

However, my main argument is that artistes from Isai Vellalar community (Devadasi) who had been traditionally attached to temples, made a major contribution to the early talkie cinema, by providing much of the content, drawn from their own traditional repertoire, thereby deciding the style and content of Tamil cinema. This development came about by a historical coincidence when the Devadasi system was abolished through legal measures and the artistes of the community—dancers, dance teachers, singers, musicians—had to seek a career elsewhere. They first moved into the world of commercial stage and from there came into cinema. Their contribution endowed Tamil cinema with certain characteristics that remain ingrained. The song and dance component of Tamil cinema, which has taken many ramified forms, owes its origin largely to the performance of the artistes from the Devadasi community who worked with early talkies. Along with the actors, song-writers and musicians from this tradition came into the world of cinema.

Stage Plays

When the talkies made their appearance, the company dramas were the main popular, mass entertainment in South India. Commercial drama troupes appeared by 1890s and in two decades many towns had permanent drama halls in which daily performances were held. The legendary Otravadi theatre of Madras where many well-known plays were premiered was built in 1872 in Mint. By one account there

Devadasi Tradition and Early South Indian Cinema



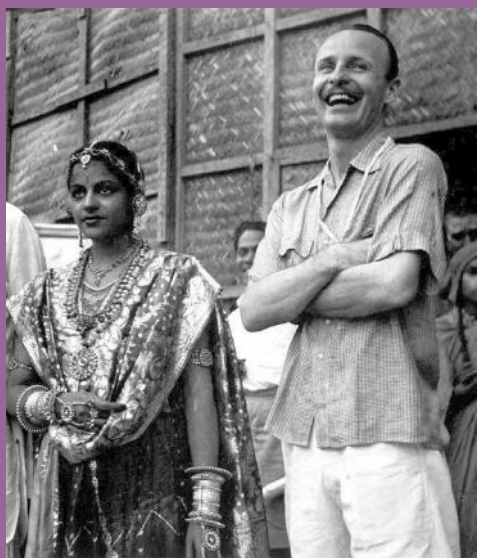
Dasiattam in Madurai. It is out of this style of dance that Bharatanatyam evolved and came to be performed as concerts.

Photo Courtesy: Theodore Baskaran



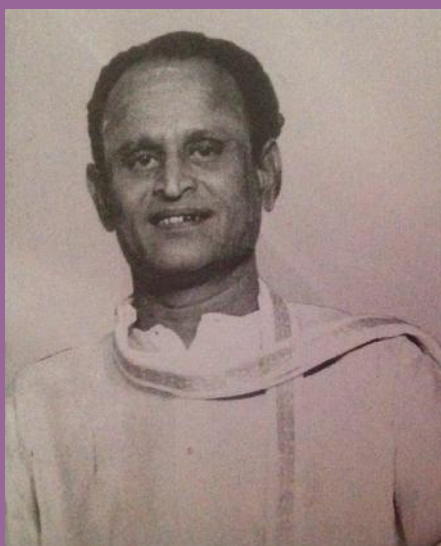
M R Santhanalakshmi in *Ambikapathi* (1937).

Photo courtesy: Theodore Baskaran



M S Subbulakshmi with Ellis R Dungan during the shooting of *Meera* (1945) in Chennai.

Photo courtesy: Theodore Baskaran



Nattuvanar Kanchipuram Ellappa Pillai.

Photo courtesy: Theodore Baskaran



T R Rajakumari. She was active in films until the 1960s.

Photo courtesy: Theodore Baskaran

were nearly 240 itinerant drama companies operating in Madras Presidency in the 1920s and 30s. Many artists from the Devadasi tradition found a place in company dramas. There were all-female Drama Companies also. One run by a Devadasi named Balamani has been well documented. (1) T M Kamalaveni also had a similar troupe called Kamalambigai Sabha and travelled to Sri Lanka also. Later, she came into cinema with the film *Gopalakrishna* (1935) (2)

The selection of plays staged by these companies was limited to a few mythological that had been written as musicals. The playwright, called *vathiyar* in these companies, wrote the songs, composed the music and also directed the play. All the actors had to be singers, including the clown. The emphasis was more on singing than on spectacle. Singing was the main component in these dramas. When a character died on the stage after singing a mournful song, she would, in response to cries of 'once more', get up and start singing that song all over again.

The printing press helped spread the company drama culture. There was a steady stream of inexpensive publications of Tamil drama songs and scripts. From 1873 to 1900, at least two-hundred and eighty six plays had been published in book form. This factor that the songs and dialogue was available in a ready-to-use form facilitated the switch over from silent to sound. (3)

The Devadasi Tradition

The Devadasi community, a group of men and women, skilled in music and dance whose life centered around the temple has played a crucial role in the cultural history of South India. They were the repository of the major music tradition of Tamil Nadu and were the hereditary music community that performed during the rituals and ceremonies, for the temple and for the king. This tradition was prevalent mostly in the Kaveri delta area where during the Bakthi revival the Cholas had built a large number of temples. Through epigraphical evidence in the Great temple of Thanjavur we know that the tradition of Devadasis goes back to at least a thousand years. An inscription states that King Rajaraja Chola brought in four hundred Devadasis and settled them in houses near the temple. For centuries the women artistes of the Devadasi community were known to have performed in temples rituals during festivals (4) Not only in front of the deity in the temple or in the *prakara*, they also danced in processions when the portable bronze image of the deity was taken out ceremonially. The dance of the Devadasis was known variously as *sadir* and *dasiattam*. It is out of this style of dance that the modern day Bharathanatyam evolved in the beginning of the twentieth century and came to be

performed as concerts and in social events quite independent of its original context.(4)

The men were experts in instrumental music and in teaching dance. These musicians' groups were divided into two ensembles: *Periamelam* (The Big troupe) who played *nagaswaram*, and *thavil*, and performed in temple rituals, processions, at weddings and other such life-cycle rituals at homes and the *Chinamelam* (the lesser troupe) handled smaller musical instruments that went with dance like *mridangam* and harmonium. (5)

As the nationalist movement was gaining momentum by the turn of the century, reformists in India began critiquing the Devadasi system as demeaning and immoral. They particularly condemned the ceremony in which the young girls of the community were dedicated to a temple. Moovalur Ramamirdham Ammaiyar and Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, women leaders from this community, were in the forefront of the movement demanding legal measures to abolish the practice of dedication. (It was Ramamirdham Ammaiyar who re-christened the community as Isai Vellalar, meaning 'farmers of music' at a conference in 1925). This reformist activity was in fact, one dimension of the nationalist movement. Leaders like Gandhiji and E V Ramaswamy Naicker supported the legal steps proposed against the Devadasi system. A series of legislative measures were taken against the practices relating to the system. In 1924, Indian Penal Code (IPC) was amended and Sections 372 and 373 of IPC declared the practice of dedicating girls for the ultimate purpose of engaging them in prostitution as illegal. Dedication and using the person for prostitution were made liable for prosecution. The amendment to the IPC, however, did not directly interfere in the practice. In 1930, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy of the Women's India Association, introduced in the Madras Legislative Council a Bill for the "prevention of the dedication of women to Hindu temples in the Presidency of Madras" popularly known as the Devadasi Abolition Bill. Since many devadasis themselves strongly protested against the Bill, E V Ramaswamy Naicker suggested, much to the chagrin of Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy, that the Bill should be introduced only as a private Bill and not as a public Bill. The Bill was modified and passed only in October 1947. One of the results of this movement was that Devadasis lost their regular income from the temple. In addition to this development, the princely states and zamindars began steadily losing their power and influence and this resulted in less patronage for performing arts like music and dance. Many artistes from the Devadasi community began moving into the world of commercial entertainments, into company dramas to begin with, which ensured a steady income. During the silent era, in the cinema houses extraneous entertainments like dance, magic shows

and gymnastics were performed on the stage, in front of the screen during the many breaks that the show had. Certain Devadasi artistes danced in these shows and they even travelled to various towns and danced. When talkies appeared some of them found a place in films.

Instrumentalists like *mridangam* players also joined the drama companies. And with them they brought in their repertoire of music. These plays were a mere string of songs and they were known as *Isai Natakam* or musical plays, more like an opera than theatre. Some of the drama artistes, after gaining fame on the stage, were invited to perform in independent concerts and to record songs for gramophone companies, a new invention that was fast getting popular with the arrival of inexpensive Japanese machines.(6)

What is germane to our discussion is that several artistes from the Isai Vellalar community—men and women—joined company dramas. Women with their training in vocal music and dance joined as stage actors while many men got into the pit orchestra as instrumentalists. Some men entered as song-writers and eventually became *vathiars* directing plays. When the sound cinema appeared, from the stage it was but a step for them into cinema.

A few decades earlier, by the turn of 20th century, when gramophone discs were released there was hesitancy on the part of singers to have their voices recorded. But some vocalists from the Devadasi community came forward to record. A few of them attained star status as gramophone artistes and companies like Odeon had artistes like T M Saradambal and Shanmugavadivu on their regular pay roll. The reputation they established as recording artistes helped them to be active on the commercial stage and later to enter into talkies also. One such gramophone artiste T M Saradambal played the lead role in the film *Prakalatha* (1933). (7)

Politicisation of the Entertainment Media

In a small town in Punjab in 1919 a British police officer opened machine-gun fire on a crowd of people who had gathered, defying a ban. Hundreds perished. Jallianwala Bagh massacre as it came to be known, shook the nation and electrified the artistes of the entertainment media into action. Gradually the world of company dramas got charged with nationalistic fervour and this involvement came to be expressed in their performances. The trend began with patriotic songs on the stage. Many of these songs were released as gramophone records and as inexpensive song books. Stage artistes used these songs in appropriate contexts during their performances and they were also sung from political platforms.

The next phase was staging patriotic plays. Even though the repressive Dramatic Performances Act of 1876 was in force, many nationalistic plays like *The Triumph of Khadi/Kadharin Vetri* were staged. Soon people began demanding nationalistic plays, with patriotic songs. Number of nationalistic plays came to be produced.

In the next point of development, stage artistes took to direct political action. They got involved in the Non-Cooperation movement of 1919 that was spreading across the nation. Some artistes campaigned for Congress candidates in the elections. Many took part in *Satyagraha*; burnt foreign textiles, picketed liquor shops and courted arrest. The entertainers had another major incentive in getting into active politics. Traditionally stage artistes were despised and stigmatised. Through their political activism, they gained a respectability they had hitherto lacked. Entertainers who were despised and neglected for centuries could now take their place along with leaders on a political platform. Political leaders cashed in on the ability of the artistes to draw crowds. So by the time film producers sought them out, the company dramas were already politicised. The *vathiars* and singers came into cinema with their political ideology which had percolated into their repertoire. This was the beginning of the interaction between politics and Tamil cinema. The very first Tamil talkie, *Kalidas* (1931) had a song praising Gandhiji.

The Devadasi tradition of music and dance came into Tamil cinema through the company dramas. Songs used by the drama companies were mostly based on Carnatic music. Along the way a new strain of music was introduced, *natyasangeeth* (drama music), a kind of Hindustani music appropriated from Marathi drama companies that toured Madras Presidency in the beginning of the century. Through this strain, Hindustani ragas were assimilated; the resultant synthesis claimed a large following. Another influence came from Parsi drama companies that followed the Marathi troupes. They introduced a mixture of Hindustani music and Gujarati folk music called Parsi tunes which eventually found their way into cinema. Folk songs were also featured in these dramas, usually performed by the comedian. Here, the difference between classical musicians and stage singers familiar with classical music must be made clear. The former were basically classical musicians and sang in concerts and recorded for gramophone. The latter only acted on the stage, though some of them, after gaining fame through dramas, gave solo concerts. K B Sundrambal is a good example.

The absence of sound recording facility in Madras in the early years of sound era was a key factor that made the filmmakers to turn to company dramas. In the first few years they had to take the artistes to far away Calcutta, Pune, Kolhapur, and Bombay where sound studios were already

functioning. In this predicament for the film producers the drama troupes came in handy. In the company drama every aspect of a sound film was there in a neat package ready to be used. Even if one artiste fell ill the other could replace her because, as per the company drama tradition, every performer was familiar with different roles in the play to meet any contingency and the printed drama song books facilitated this process. All the 61 films that were made in the first five years of Tamil talkie were reproductions of successful plays staged by the drama companies; and they were exact duplication of the stage show. Most of the female leads in these films were from Isai Vellalar tradition. Their daughters and granddaughters also shone in Tamil screen. Jothilakshmi and Jayamalini who were active on the screen in the sixties and seventies were the two daughters of S P L Dhanalakshmi, star of the films *Parvathi Kalyanam* (1936) and *Kalamegam* (1941). Now Jothilakshmi's daughter is acting in films.

The talkies produced in the first few years were all film versions of successful, song-laden plays staged by the drama companies. When cinema was silent, only stunt men and gymnasts found a place. There was no need for singers. But once talkies came, the situation changed suddenly. There was demand for singing actors because the facility of recording the song separately on a track had not been invented and sound recording was done *in situ*, even as the film was being shot. The artistes had to sing as the camera rolled. Thus stage actors familiar with classical music, found themselves being welcomed into the tinsel world of cinema.

Sarvotham Badami, who directed the second Tamil talkie, *Galavarishi* (1932) described to me the manner in which the early Tamil talkies were made in these far away cities. (8). The film producer chose a certain play of the drama company, usually one that had proved popular and hired the troupe that had been staging that particular play, including the musicians and the *vathiyar*. This troupe was taken to Bombay or to any one of the cities that had a sound studio and the film was shot. A proscenium stage was set, with backdrops of painted on canvas and flats; the camera was placed in front; the play was enacted; and the film was shot, head on, in lengthy, frontal shots. Almost the entire film was shot from a single camera position because any side angle shot would go out of the stage and the studio will enter the field of vision of the camera. The shots, which were mostly frontal as was the lighting, lasted for long stretches and whatever movement there was, it was within the frame, that is, the stage set. Since the stay in the city was expensive, there was pressure to complete the film as quickly as possible and return to Madras. The content of these films were from the repertoire of the Devadasi tradition and their songs and dance

filled the early movies. The choreographers also from the Isai Vellalar community who worked on these films did not get credited in the early talkies. However, they continued to work and influence Tamil cinema well into the seventies.

The Pioneers from the Isai Vellalar Tradition

Kumbakonam, the temple town in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, was a centre of Isai Vellalar tradition. Music teachers and dance teachers practised in this town. We see a number of artistes from this town moving to Madras when the demand for teachers appeared in that city. After the sound studios came up more opportunities opened up for them.

While the filmmakers of the silent era needed stunt artists and men who could ride horses well, for sound films they needed actors who could sing. The technology of recording sound separately was to come nearly a decade later when a new breed of artistes, the playback singers appeared on the scene. There were occasions when due to the dearth of singing actors, filmmakers did not hesitate to cast women artists in male roles. (9) One of the earliest to move from the stage to the screen was K R Saradambal who appeared in the film *Prakalatha* (1933). M R Santhanalakshmi, from Kumbakonam, came into movies from the stage making her debut in the film *Radha Kalyanam* (1935). She was active up to the late fifties. Though many artistes of the Isai Vellalar tradition came into films the most well-known of them was N C Vasanthakokilam and M S Subbulakshmi. Vasanthakokilam had already established a formidable reputation as a classical singer when she made a debut in film through *Chandragupta Chanakya* (1940) directed by her partner C K Sachi. After a number of films came *Haridas* (1944) which had a record breaking run. M S Subbulakshmi featured in four films, the most famous being *Meera* (1945) directed by the American director Ellis R Dungan.

A good example of the men from this tradition that came into cinema and enriched it is Ku. Sa. Krishnamurthy (1914-1990). Born in 1914, in Kumbakonam he joined company drama at the age of ten and worked in renowned troupes like the Nawab Rajamanikkam Company where he built up a reputation as a song-writer and a music composer. When the entire world of drama artistes got politicised in the wave of the nationalistic movement sweeping the country, Krishnamurthy became Congress secretary for Pudukottai and was active in politics. In 1948 he got a chance to write songs for two films *Sri Andaal* and *Bhojan*. One of the plays he wrote *The Prisoner of Andaman/Andaman Kaithi* had a good reception from the public when the renowned T K S Brothers troupe staged it. In 1952 it was made into a

successful film with the legendary M G Ramachandran as the hero. Among the many songs Krishnamurthy wrote for films, the most enduring is *In the life of the sinner/kutrapurindhavan vazhkayil* featured in the climax scene of the film *Tears of Blood/Rathakanneer* (1954). He wrote the songs for 37 films and he was active as a lyricist and a dialogue writer till 1975 when he worked in the film *Divine Secret/Devaragasiyam*. (10)

Singers and music composers also came from this community. The most well-known of them is C S Jeyaraman who began his career as an actor in the film *Sri Krishna Leela* (1934) and lasted as a popular playback singer well into the sixties. N Rajaratnam Pillai, the nagaswaram maestro, played the lead role in the film *Kalamegam* (1940) directed by Ellis R Dungan. Among female playback singers, M L Vasanthakumari, (1928-1990) who was conferred the prestigious *Sangeethakalanithi* award, was the most well-known. Beginning with the film *Krishnabakthi* (1948) she was active in films till 1965.

Some men who were dance teachers (*nattuvanar*) in the community also found a place in the film studios. The *nattuvanar* functioned as the chief musician and conductor of the dances. These men who taught dance had traditional dance schools called *Silambukoodam* at home. They belonged to a guild called the *Nattuvamela* and had a position in the temple. Though the company dramas had a large number of singing artistes, they did not have a dance teacher as the dance component in the plays was not much. So the dance teachers did not find a place there but they moved into the film studios when sound films appeared. One writer records "the uncertain future prompted several *nattuvanars* to leave their villages and migrate to urban centres, where upper and middle class girls had started showing an interest in learning the art. The celluloid medium was a new frontier and a veritable gold rush commenced." This coincided with the period when the Devadasi dance *sadir* had been reinvented as Bharathanatyam and was getting popular with the upper castes in urban areas. The talkies, in addition to songs, had dance features also brought in by the Isaivellalar artistes. The *nattuvanars* found jobs as choreographers in studios and brought in, in addition to the songs, the dance tradition of Isaivellalar artistes. (11)

Though some of the *nattuvanars* worked in films in the early thirties, their names did not appear in the credits. It was only in the films of the forties and fifties that the names of the dance teachers began appearing in the credits. One of the well-known *nattuvanars* of the film world is V A Muthuswami Pillai (1921-1992). When he was 15, he travelled to Madras with his teacher Vaitheeswarankoil Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, who found work in the studios

and directed the dances of his famous students, the sisters Yogam and Mangalam, who acted and danced in the film *The God who Knew Tamil/Thamizharyum Perumal* (1941). Muthuswami too eventually gained entry into the film industry. The career of Muthuswami is characteristic of the trajectory the life of many of these dance teachers took when the patronage to dance declined in temples and in small towns. He began with a position in the dance school Nrithyodaya founded by pioneer filmmaker by K. Subrahmanyam. Dance teachers from different dance and music traditions were brought together in that school. The performances were apparently result of fusions of various styles falling under the rubric "Oriental Dance." Famous Tamil comedian Chandrababu, much loved by the Tamil audience for his dance and song, was trained in this school. Muthuswami soon began to get work in the studios. For him, a boy from a village, "the arc lights and the proscenium stage must have been a novel experience. Dance was becoming the entertainment of the elite and the proletariat."

We see the name of Muthuswami Pillai in the credits of films like *Sababathi* (1941). A good example of his work is the dance sequences by his students Sayee and Subbulakshmi, both from Isaivellalar community, in the film *Bandit of the hills/Malaikallan* (1954). He choreographed the dance sequences in the film *Rathakanneer* in which the duo danced to a song that is supposed to be sung by devadasis addressing the patrons. Vyjayanthimala danced the traditional Devadasi style *sadir* form which he choreographed, in the film *Marmaveeran* (1956). Subsequently in 1963 he was the choreographer for the film *Chitoor Rani Padmini* in which also Vijayanthimala danced. There were other well-known dance teachers such as K N Dandayuthapani Pillai and Vazhuvur Ramaiya Pillai whose names often appeared in the credits of Tamil films. (12)

While a number of women artistes came from the community in the early years of Talkies, arguably the best known among them is T R Rajakumari (1922-1999). Born as Thanjavur Ranganayaki Rajayee, she was the granddaughter of Carnatic musician Thanjavur Kuchalambal. (13) Rajayee was sent to Chennai when she was in her teens to be with her aunt S P L Dhanalakshmi, who was already into films playing lead roles. She got a break in the Hindi film *Devadas* (1936) where she played the role of Chandramuki with G L Saigal. Director K. Subrahmanyam gave Rajayee a role in the film *Kachadevayani* (1941) with a changed name Rajakumari. One after another successful films followed and *Haridas* (1944) in which she played a wily courtesan, became one of the most successful film in Tamil film history and conferred stardom on her. The next milestone in her career was the bilingual Gemini film *Chandralekha* (1948). She began specialising in

Devadasi Tradition and Early South Indian Cinema



In *Malaikallan* (1954), M G Ramachandran with Sayee, Sarangapani and Subbulakshmi.
Photo Courtesy: Gnanam



Sarangapani and Vyjayanthimala in *Vazhkai* (1948).
Photo courtesy: Theodore Baskaran



C S Jayaraman in *Sri Krishna Leela* (1934)
Photo Courtesy: Theodore Baskaran



Sivalli (1945)
T R Mahalingam, T R Ramachandran and Kumari Rukmini
Photo Courtesy: Theodore Baskaran

seductive roles, as the embodiment of feminine evil. She was active in films till the sixties. At this point in her career she turned a producer and made a couple of successful films.

Once some of the artistes from Isai Vellalar community established themselves in the studios, they found a place for their relatives in different fields. One such was V S Ragupathi who was a sound engineer in AVM studios in the initial years and in turn trained quite a few in the field. Ramanna, (given name T R Ramachandran) younger brother of actress T R Rajakumari, started as a sound technician and shone as a director and had successful films like *Caged Bird/Koondukili* (1954) and *Gulebakavali* (1955) to his credit. He was active well into the sixties.

The Lasting legacy

The list of artistes from Isai Vellalar community active in cinema in South India in the early years is long. I have provided only examples. What is clear from the evidence is that it was these artists who provided the initial thrust for Tamil cinema, a totally new art form, to take off. The content of the early Tamil cinema, largely decided by the art of the Devadasi tradition had a lasting impact, both on its aesthetics and its audience.

The repertoire of the artistes of this community—song, dance and music—formed the substance of early Tamil cinema. The song and dance component became an essential entertainment ingredient of a film while the story, often already well known to the viewers, became a mere peg to hang them on. The aural element in cinema came to be emphasised. There is evidence to show that the variation between the two art forms, the stage play and cinema, was recognised neither by these artistes and nor by the early film makers. The difference in terms of relationship that these art forms had with regard to the performing space and the screening space and to the audience was not understood. The expressive potential of the camera, in terms of mobility, different angles, editing and lighting was not realised. Cinema was not identified as a separate art form, with its own grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Film acting came to be judged by standards of the stage. Simply put, it did not use the language of cinema. And it has taken Tamil cinema a long time before it could even show signs of moving away from this legacy.

Cinematic Vocabulary and Deterrents

The dependence of filmmakers on drama troupes in the first five years left a lasting impact on Tamil cinema. None of the filmmakers of the thirties, arguably with an exception of

one or two, seems to have been familiar with the characteristics or nature of cinema. They were, in fact, handling company dramas and these films were exact reproductions of the plays; simply photographed dramas. The camera acted as a mere recording medium and not as a creative medium. It was mechanical reproduction of one kind of art form, as Walter Benjamin would say. In some of the early films the first shot, before the titles, was of a screen going up as in the opening of a stage play. Films made on contemporary themes, 'socials' as they were referred to, though few in number, were also stage plays that had proved popular. These filmmakers brought into cinema, the dramatic structure, music and style of acting from the stage. Thus Tamil cinema, in its formative years, came under the influence of the aesthetics of company drama, which also provided a repertoire of plays and corpus of songs to draw upon, mostly episodes from Hindu mythology. Out of the 210 films made during the nine years from 1931, films based on mythological episodes were 177.

The important point to remember in this context is that some of the lead actors of the early talkies, all from the stage, brought in their mannerisms and body language into the cinema. For instance, S V Subbiah Naidu invariably made his first appearance on the stage, singing the song *Jeyajeyakokulabala*. When he acted in the film *Subadhra Parinayam* (1935) he sang the same song when he made his first screen appearance. On the model of drama notices, the handbills on films were printed and distributed. This practice continued up to the late nineteen-fifties. Some drama companies transformed themselves into film-producing units under the same banner.

It is worth noting that several persistent characteristics of Tamil cinema have their origins in this period. Later, when films based on contemporary themes were made from 1935 onwards the filmmakers were not equipped to narrate a story visually; it was something the audience were not familiar with. So they gave in to the filmmaker's perpetual temptation of verbal narration. A character in the film would often explain things verbally rather than those things being shown visually by the Director of the film. This led to a preponderance of orality in Tamil films, a tendency that still persists.

I pointed out earlier that the stories of the company dramas that were made into films were episodes from mythology, stories already well-known to the audience. For instance, in the story of Valli's wedding when the old man appears before Valli as she is chasing away the birds in the corn field, the audience know that it is god Murugan in disguise. Therefore, when such episodes were filmed, the filmmaker did not have the burden of telling the story visually, cinematically. He felt no pressure on him to develop a language of images. This

retarded the growth of a cinematic vocabulary. There was little attempt to realise the specific possibilities of cinema as a visual medium. For instance the use of symbols was not developed in Tamil cinema. In the early films song sequences were often like stage concerts and the reviews of films often read like reviews of musical performances.

Songs, forming an important part of filmic entertainment, continued this oral tradition. Spoken words gained dominance, discounting visuals. There is another dimension to the predominance of songs in a film. By curbing the cinema-specific characteristics, songs keep films at the level of entertainment. This makes the prospect of political cinema blossoming rather bleak. Even films that espouse an ideology, however obliquely, are diluted by the position given to songs. The viewers do not receive the message due to being distracted by songs and dances. The possibility of a movie audience developing a sense of cinema is severely circumscribed by this practice. It was difficult for the filmmakers to get familiar with the nature of cinema. There

— sound—and this militated against any development of a visual sense. There have been filmmakers who tried to break this tradition but broadly, the aural nature of a film persists. Instead of images, spoken words take the prime place. Without the primacy of images, orality stands out.

The company dramas, along with the gramophone and later talkie films, brought classical music closer to the common people who rarely had opportunity to listen to this kind of music. These artistes sang Tamil songs, as different from Telugu and Sanskrit songs that were in vogue in concert platforms, which was an added attraction. Classical music compositions were reduced in duration, only for three or four minutes to suit the 78 rpm discs. The improvisations and innovative embellishments characteristic of classical style of singing was given up. Such simplification made this music acceptable to a larger audience. At a time when cinematic entertainment was despised as a plebian art form, the classical music component of Tamil cinema earned it a certain respect from writers and critics.

The commercial stage in South India had got politicised after the 1919 Jallianwalla Bagh massacre and many stage artistes took direct part in political activism of the Non-Cooperation movement that followed. When they came into film studios, they brought with them their political ideology, their propaganda methods and of course, the corpus of songs. Thus the politicisation of Tamil cinema began with these migration of artistes.

(Based on the paper read at the conference “Dance, Music, Politics and Gender in Early South Indian Cinema” at Musée du Quai Branley, Paris, on 30th May 2013)

Endnotes

1. Loti, Pierre, *India* (London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd., 1906) and many other later editions by many publishers including Rupa & Co, New Delhi.
2. P. S. Vasana, *Thamizh Talkie Pramugargal* (Chennai: 1937).
3. Padmanabhan, Arimalam Su., *Thavathiru Sankaradas Swamigal Nadakangalillaikooral* (Pondichery: 2000). See the list of drama companies from p.219 onwards.
4. K. Narmada, *Thamizhagathil Thevaradiyar Marabu*, (Chennai: 2006).
5. Terada, Yoshitaka, “The Effects of Nostalgia: The Discourse of Decline in Periyamelam Music of South India,” *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology*, 21 (4) (1996) pp. 921-93.
6. Pandanallur K Jeevarathnam and K Rajalakshmi were the first devadasis to perform at the Music Academy Madras in 1931. Viswanathan, Lakshmi, *Women of Pride: The Devadasi Heritage* (New Delhi: 2008).
7. See P S Vasana.
8. Interview with Sarvotham Badami, Bangalore, *The Hindu*, 20 July 1990.
9. In *Baktha Nandanar* (1939) K B Sundarambal played the lead male role, of Nandanar. In the film *Savithiri* (1941) M S Subbulakshmi played the role of Naradhar, the celestial singer.
10. Pon.Chellamuthu, *Kavignar Ku. Sa. Krishnamurthy Thirailsai Padalkal*, (Chennai: 2014).
11. “Nattuvanars were traditionally members of a hereditary community of non-Brahmin, professional musicians and dancers (called Isai Vellalar) that made their living through arts of their exclusive domain. The dance style of this community was known as *Sadir* or *Dasiattam*, and it was this dance that was reconstructed and named Bharatanatyam in the 1930s as nonhereditary dancers from outside the community began learning and performing this” Minai, *Cinema Nirtya Gharana* (Blog).
12. Viswanathan, Lakshmi, *The Magnificent Migration of the Masters*, *The Hindu*, 28 August 2014.
13. Randor Guy, *Starlight, Starbright: The Early Tamil Cinema*, (Chennai: 1997).
14. The women folk of this community took their initials in their names from their mothers’ names like Madurai Shanmugavadivu Subbulakshmi and Madras Lalitangi Vasanthakumari.

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Dosebai Cowasjee Jessawalla

An Indian under the Crown

—Roshan G Shahani

At the foot of the busy Byculla Flyover, in Bombay, stands the neglected statue of the “Ubhbha Parsi” (1) Many Bombayites and perhaps a few Mumbaikars are familiar with that odd name. Fewer still, would know the identity of this personage – Seth Cursetjee Maneckjee Shroff, a 19th century philanthropist and father of the founder of the Alexandra Girls’ English Institution, arguably the first of its kind in India. It does not come as a matter of surprise, that none at all, apart from her immediate descendents, would have heard the name of Maneckjee’s granddaughter, Dosebai Cowasjee Jessawalla. Yet, this woman has also made history; she has left for posterity, a rich legacy of her life and her world, spanning over half a century and three continents, in the form of an autobiography entitled *The Story of My Life* (2)

What follows in these pages, is not a ‘Book Review,’ in the strict sense of the term. One cannot review a book published in 1911, over a century ago. Nor is it a text that can be categorised easily and could well prove to be a librarian’s nightmare. It is an autobiography; it is a history of the Parsi-British encounter during the Raj; it is a fascinating travelogue, a meticulously kept diary, and a re-creation of 19th century Bombay. Unfortunately, like the statue of yore, this remarkable personal history remains unknown, except to her family.

Questions have often been raised as to the veracity of the personal voice or the authenticity of a diarist as sources of history. A subjective position could misconstrue facts, the memory of a septuagenarian, as in this particular instance, is prone to error; biases, prejudices, factual errors, inevitably seep in. However, contemporary questioning of the grand narratives has created and legitimised archival spaces for personal histories and familial narratives. Sources of knowledge, it has been increasingly argued, need not be only institutionalised records; personal testimonies, diaries, and letters constitute history as well. What is essential for history, are not just facts, but how people remember and construe those facts. Hence, what we see Dosebai doing, is

particularising the generalities of the colonial moment. She does not necessarily set out always, to contest official history or public discourse. However, she is looking at the same moment from her own, individual perspective. Personal histories, such as hers, offer us, as Urvashi Butalia remarks—in the context of the oral narratives of Partition—a way “of turning the historical lens at a somewhat different angle, ...” (*The Other Side of Silence*, 1998, p.15)(3) Besides, public chronicles and empirical histories are shown up to be as fallible and prone to biases as is the human experience. Inherently fallible though it might be, the phenomenological experience of a living, breathing individual constitutes a challenge to centrist notions of truth and authenticity.

Hence, recent postcolonial and feminist scholarship have disrupted the over-determined nature of academic and professional histories, offering new possibilities for a poetics of the archives and valid spaces for a text such as Dosebai’s. Paradoxically, such a text will not readily allow for an unnuanced postcolonial/feminist paradigm. If we, as readers, locate ourselves in a particular moment in history, we need to allow, equally, historical space to the textual narrator, persona, and “authoress.” Dosebai’s historical position confers certain inevitability to her ideology. She out-colonises the coloniser in her imperiousness and her loyalty to the British Crown emerges unabashedly on every page of her 500-page tome. Similarly, her claim, on her mother’s behalf as well as her own, to be pioneers in the field of 19th century women’s education is open to question.

In that sense, one even hesitates to use the term ‘alternate’ history when defining this text. No doubt, it is a personal, subjective record and often it directly and very sharply questions public records of the time, whether newspaper chronicles, or historical texts, thereby providing an alternate reading of the period. At the same time, Dosebai’s is not, strictly speaking, a ‘people’s’ history. This particular personal history is created by a prominent personality of the time. Hence, *The Story of My Life* is no act of subterfuge, in

contrast to, say *Amar Jiban*, the autobiography of her Bengali contemporary, Rassundari Devi. (4) In fact, in the manner of a meta-narrative, the text constantly alludes to her act of writing and to important personages inquiring of its progress. Both the style and content follow the dictates of the Grand Narrative. Paradoxically, these very ambiguities in her work and in her personality, and which were the ambiguities at the heart of Empire, enrich our understanding of her narrative.

Dosebai's autobiography, as suggested earlier, is hybrid in its nature and I would like to take up some of these issues. A single thread which runs its course, from the first to the last page, is the matter of 19th century education for women and her mother's role in 'pioneering' this 'movement.' Inevitably, one's comments on the text take that as a starting point.

'The Woman Question'

Social histories have recorded the Reform Movement that so radically altered the lives of 19th century Indian women. However, as Lalita and Tharu have posited, despite its attention to 'the Woman Question,' and its recording of events in which women were involved, these histories seem incapable of capturing the structural importance of gender in colonial politics.(5) Contemporary feminist scholarship, with the significant inclusion of *Women Writing in India* marks a strategic shift in perspective by calling attention to the complex dimensions in which women's subjectivities were being sculpted and the way in which women negotiated, resisted or subverted the master narratives through their lived experiences and, in the case of some, through their writing. It might seem pertinent to read Dosebai's views in a similar vein, even while bearing in mind that she was no sub-altern.

In her very individualistic and even personalised manner, Dosebai places her "revered mother", Meheribai, at the epicentre of change in the cause of education, pushing to the periphery, male reformers and educationists, the 'Eminent Victorians' of India, such as Cursetjee Maneckjee (founder of Alexandra School), Jamshedjee Jeejeebhoy, and Sorabjee Bengalee. Without quite realising it, this strong-willed lady is, thereby, radically altering the politics of gender representation.

The *raison d'être* of Dosebai's authorship is to pay tribute to her mother for her contribution to the social reform among 19th century Indian women. Interestingly, as she sets about this task, from its very dedication, preface, and invocation, to the last page when she is confronted with the remains of her days, Dosebai shows none of the diffidence or humility, traditionally associated with early autobiographies

by women. She opens her saga, or rather declares it open with great fanfare, which, as we read on, we discover is her characteristic style. "Every human life," she states majestically, "plays its God-assigned part in the *unwritten* history of the world. But there are some who are *destined* and *privileged* to *record* the annals of history, in which they have participated (emphasis mine.) She is one so destined, for her mother's "foresight" had made her "the instrument of pioneering the noble cause of higher education among millions and millions of the gentler sex in India." (Preface, p.i) Dosebai has donned the Miltonic mantle but with this difference—she invokes the memory of her *mother* first, even the Almighty is relegated to a secondary position.

Dosebai 'makes' history in many ways, often in dramatic ways. "The year 1842 may be cited as the dawn of English education," she states. Why it is so, is left in abeyance. The remainder of this first of many chapters, then undertakes to trace the ancestral history of her family patriarchs (one of whom was Maneckji of the *Ubhbha Parsi* fame) since "it has been thought advisable," possibly by male advisors. Even so, what seeps in, as a sub-text, is the story of her infertile step-grandmother's active role in stepping aside, not just willingly, but purposefully, in order that her husband remarries and begets his progeny. Her parents virtually imprison Barozbai for her initiative. Besides, the Parsi community is in a state of uproar and the Parsi Panchayat, then as now, decides to interfere in the matter. Its disapproval comes in the guise of refusing the loan of the huge pots and pans required for the wedding feast. The question, however, does remain—are these facts? Was it a family myth, perpetuated to honour the philanthropist's second marriage? Dosebai is often an unreliable narrator but then so are official historians. Facts, half-truths, fiction, these are the family myths that bring the historical past to life, and convey a great deal about the author of this piece of history. In that sense, Dosebai is not only recording history, she is creating history as well, even while we might doubt her claims to the many firsts, which according to her have created a female family history.

In the next three chapters, devoted to her mother, Dosebai gives us the reason for the significance of 1842. It was the year when her mother sent her to an English school and thereby "pioneered" the cause of English education among Indian women. Undoubtedly, hers was a bold and daring act, especially since she had been a young widow and this decision was hers alone. Moreover, she had to face the wrath of her father-in-law Maneckji. The fact that she was staying independently of the family clan was itself an act of defiance. Dosebai, as family and social historian, as well as the defender of all that her mother stood for, is very vocal in this all-important matter. She gives the reader a meticulous record

of the consequences of this step and the furor it raised, in the family, community and the press. She reproduces the correspondence between her mother and her father-in-law, which Dosebai claims she had in her possession and which would have been invaluable archival material, had it been extant today. However, the translation (from the original Gujarati, one presumes) is couched in the spirited tone of Dosebai and one would want to believe that the fieriness was her matriarchal legacy.

The thrust of Meheribai's arguments seemed to be sharp and pointed. Since her own brother-in-law, Cursetjee Maneckjee Cursetjee had appointed governesses to teach English to his daughters, why then, should the father-in-law raise objections against her effort for her daughter? The reply comes in the form of another argument. Those girls were being educated in the privacy of their homes. Meheribai counters the old man's argument by pointing out that had Meheribai's own public initiative not got so much publicity, her brother-in-law would never have thought of educating his children.

The press of that period had thought this act significant enough for it to report it in sensational details—some filled with venom, others, (the English press according to Dosebai) full of plaudits.

Dosebai attacks the press for attacking her mother. "These Parsee lordlings" i.e. the editors of two contemporary Gujarati journals *Jame-e-Jamshed* and the *Chabook*, had resolved to excommunicate Meheribai and her household. The mother is heard to have lashed back in an unequivocal fashion. Dosebai is equally vocal in setting the record right where another contemporary paper was concerned. This was the English *Bombay Courier*, which, not surprisingly, praises the "enlightened" family for sending a girl to an English school; ironically, it is the wrong member of the family—Maneckjee Cursetjee, Meheribai's brother-in-law and target of her attack, who receives praise! Maneckjee receives these and other eulogies, including one from Elphinstone, former governor of Bombay, "quietly."

Dosebai also chastises the author of the popular *A History of the Parsis*, Dosabhai Framji Karaka, because he had failed to mention Meheribai among the galaxy of eminent Parsis. This book, incidentally, is still valorised today, wherein Karaka invests the Parsis of the 19th century with an inherent worth, carried down the ages from their Persian ancestors.(6) Now, Dosebai does not refute the 'fact' that hers was the Golden Age of the Parsis; what angers her, is the mother's exclusion as contributor to that golden age. "The male sex is," she notes, "always tardy in acknowledging the merits of a female rival."

Mother and daughter are confronted with the 'charge' of

defying convention by occupying public spaces, both literally and figuratively. Besides, the press has moved the familial into the public sphere. Dosebai's need to re-create this piece of familial history by way of a spirited retaliation, with the full understanding that it was going to be published, also points in the same direction.

It was certainly no mean achievement for a young widow in 1842 to have made and carried out her own independent decision, in the very controversial matter of a daughter's education. Equally, the daughter's attempt to set the record right, and using her educational tools to do so and to write this very piece challenging the patriarchal nature of her world, was no small matter.

Having said that, Dosebai's unqualified claims on her mother's behalf, as on her own, raise several interesting issues. Some of her statements need reconsidering. "Meheribai's independent spirit waged war upon "the custom of centuries" (p.32) "This was at a time when fathers entertained not the remotest idea of educating their daughters"(p.29) it was "under the benign rule of her late Majesty, Queen Victoria" that this act of emancipation was made possible; "and by slow degrees others have followed her example"(p.30)." The school [Mrs. Ward's] was situated in that part of the Fort exclusively inhabited by Europeans and known by the name of the English Ward, a quarter, scrupulously avoided by the native ladies." (p.32)

Meheribai's decision, emancipatory as it might have been, cannot merit the beginnings of English education among the Parsis and other Indian communities. If it was a pioneering act, in the sense that a Parsi girl had received a public school education, it was also an individualistic, isolated act. Dosebai's mention of male educators who were supposed to have 'followed' her mother's precept, emphasises the chronology, but does not see either those contributions or her mother's as a consequence of, rather than as the cause of change. The larger movements for reform, the conflicts and controversies regarding the Woman Question, all these are erased from her text. At times, it is not so much what she says as what she does not, that we need to look at. The absences are as relevant to our understanding of Dosebai and her narrative, as are the presences. The "benign "rule of Victoria" seems to this delightful anglophile the inspiration behind the 'sweeping' changes that her mother brought about. As for the entry into the European quarter of the Fort, the family's privileged class position—it cannot be forgotten—was also instrumental in making entry into its 'bastions' permissible. If the quarter had been "scrupulously avoided by native ladies," more likely than not, it was because of the presence of unwritten but well-defined laws of segregation rather than the absence of courage among the ladies in question.

Colonial Encounters of the Closest Kind

The textual emphasis, without doubt, is on the *Englishness* of Dosebai's English education. Macaulay's (in)famous Minute finds a living, breathing, articulating representative in Dosebai Jessawalla. Indian in blood, if not so much in colour, Dosebai appears totally English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. Unsurprisingly, the dedication to her mother is immediately followed at the opening of Chapter 1, by an excessively eulogistic tribute to Macaulay, the prototype of "our kind and paternal government" and the true representative of "Victoria the Good." She quotes at length from Macaulay's "memorable speech" delivered in the House of Commons in 1833, with its rhetorical evocation of India's barbarism before the advent of the British.

The impact of Macaulay's Minute, then and now, is the subject of a history, too vast to discuss here. If it is true that Indian nationalism emerged, partially at least, from just such a class of people as Macaulay had envisioned, it was equally true, that the man's contempt for oriental scholarship, "a single shelf of a good European library [being] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia," dealt a fell blow to Indian languages and culture. His devout disciple, William Bentinck, it is believed, had hatched a plan to demolish the Taj Mahal (an emblem of oriental sensuousness?) and to ship its marble to England for sale and reuse. (Archie Baron, *An Indian Affair*, 2001, p.216)(7) On friendly terms with Bentinck, Dosebai had not, however, heard of this near-disastrous venture. Just for once, in fact, her astonished gaze at the "eighth Wonder of the World compels, even this Honorary Memsahib to compare the Taj favorably to "the large and showy architecture of British rule." (p. 206)

Returning to the point, Dosebai unequivocally endorses the civilising mission, sees herself civilised by it, and seeks to civilise others by the same principles. One cannot, however, view Dosebai's predilections in an isolated manner; rather, we need to locate her within the larger framework of the Parsi bourgeoisie under the Empire. Formerly from Surat and Navsari, a predominant section of the Parsi community had moved to Bombay by the 19th century, as commercial partners and collaborators with the British. As trade and commerce grew, so did the social connections between the British and the Parsis in matters of education, culture, taste, and habits. While for some, the learning of the English language was a part of the broader desire for knowledge and learning, for others, especially for the emerging class of *seths* or merchants, western education became a matter of expediency. It was a means, not only for easy communication with their colonial masters, but also for stepping up social ladders.

There were, of course, those like Dadabhai Navroji, Madame Cama, and Pherozsha Mehta whose absorption of western mores and non-native intellect had not blinded them to the exploitation by the ruling class; rather, it had sharpened their critical awareness—Dadabhai's Drain Theory, which Dosebai mentions in passing, points to the economic exploitation of India under the Empire. One sees in Dadabhai as in some others, Parsi or otherwise, the cutting edge of a liberal education. The scope and vision of such men and women, is beyond the ken of Dosebai, although she styles herself a social reformer. The duality of her position was the position of the majority of this westernised class of people. Parsi women enjoyed greater social and cultural freedom, compared to other more secluded women in India. However, liberalism, as advocated by the British ruling class, was wholly myopic about larger sections of Indian society. The beneficiaries of such liberalism, Dosebai being one such example, were equally myopic about their Indian "sisters," as she was wont to address them. Dosebai was no recluse but this much-travelled woman led, paradoxically, a very sheltered, insulated existence.

Many instances come to the fore but her visit to England can be cited as one. It is in 1907-08 that she is in London, and although she is "in the eve of her life" (p.458), she visits parks, friends, attends public meetings and functions. One such public meeting is at the Duke of Westminster's Grosvenor House where she meets "foremost ladies of rank taking keen interest in the cause of women." No details follow. Another is the *Tableau Vivant*, held in aid of the Indian Famine Fund. A vivid recreation of the colourful pageant follows but nothing about the raging famine and the course of action. A "gratifying sight" and one which inspires a spirited comment on the refreshing changes in society, is the fact that a Mrs. Hormusji Vakil had travelled from Bombay to London all alone to visit her son. The author observes with pleasure how these "social movements" are acceptable now unlike at the time when her daughter travelled alone in the 1880s and 90s. "Now none of the Chabooks or Halkaroos or Mansooks would dare to comment on such public spirit on the part of my bold and enterprising sisters." The credit for all these vast changes goes to "none but my old and revered mother, who had suffered so much at the hands of the bigoted orthodoxy." (p.458)

The key phrase here is "social movement." An indication of the sweeping changes that had altered the lives of Indian women is centred, in Dosebai's scheme of things, on the figure of the travelling Indian woman. Travel, especially to the European world, entailed encounters—as *near-equals*—with the western world, outside the confines of one's domestic and native worlds. Dosebai's interpretation of

'social movement' is thereby limited to mean geographical movements and interaction with people (preferably) with the ruling classes. The European gaze is upon the Indians and they were becoming increasingly worthy of the gaze. The *leit-motif* is heard once more and in no subtle undertones—her mother had been responsible for bringing about these social movements.

A lot can be said about the new freedoms that at least a certain section of Indian women had begun to enjoy—the freedom to travel being one of them. Life behind the *Purdah* was certainly never enjoined upon Dosebai and her ilk. Of course, typical of Dosebai, that she takes pains to mention this in no uncertain terms and more than may seem necessary, to prove her point. One can perceive, for instance, her patronising tones when she mentions how life for Parsi women, at *one* time, had been the way it was for contemporary Muslim women in the *zenana*.

Dosebai is very vocal, very articulate, at times, very verbose. Yet, if there is a lot she says, there is a lot that she does not. These gaps and fissures in her story are crucial in our understanding of the writer's mindset and ideology. The year of this traveller's visit is 1907-08. Britain's insularity is being increasingly threatened. If things are in the process of falling apart, and the centre does not hold, it is in great measure owing to the increasing challenges from the colonies. Hence, while private and public narratives interpenetrate the text, there is a notable absence of anything even remotely pertaining to anti-colonial movements and of the nationalist histories surging around her. This is the period when personages like Dadabhai Navroji and Madame Cama, are, in varied and contradictory ways questioning the Empire and making their impact on the metropolitan centre of London as well as on the home front. Dosebai knows them in her personal capacity and meets them on her visits to London except Mme Cama although she repeatedly mentions being with the Cama family. However, she is conspicuously silent about the import of their actions. This is the time when Madame Cama embarks upon a crusading campaign in London, giving speeches at London's Hyde Park (Dosebai mentions her delight at visiting the same Park.) It is in 1907 when at Stuttgart she unfurls India's first national flag; Dosebai is in Germany at the time. Dosebai attends the Jamshedi-Naoroz celebrations in March 1908, taking care to mention that she was seated next to the "distinguished" visitor, the late Governor of Madras and for a time Viceroy of India, Lord Ampthill. (p.454-55). Precisely a year ago, at the same celebrations, Lord Reay had declared amid cheers (from the Parsis) that the "fortunes of Great Britain and India were irrevocably linked together." Referring to that event, the revolutionary, Shyamji Krishna Varma had sounded a warning

note to Parsis not to be time-servers, that the Parsis were native Indian subjects, that they could not be "enamoured of an oppressive foreign yoke" (Nawaz Mody (ed) *The Parsis in Western India: 1818 to 1920*, 1998, p.80-81)(8)

What Dosebai's reaction to the revolutionary's words could be left to conjecture but one's guess would not seem too far-fetched. She did not look upon colonisation as a "foreign yoke" and she was "enamoured" enough to desire an audience with royalty. An entire chapter, entitled *My Presentation to The King and Queen* speaks for itself. For this loyal colonial subject, an audience with British royalty becomes emblematic of the rarest of honours that western civilisation could possibly confer upon an Indian subject.

Two decades later, when, on a visit to Britain, Gandhi was asked what he thought of western civilisation, he had famously replied, "I think it would be a good idea."

Like "Victoria the Good," Dosebai would not have been amused.

A World of her Own

If Dosebai does create history, it is not in the guise of social reformer much though she loves and embraces that image. It is as a globetrotter that she maps geographical spaces and marks historical time. There is no purpose behind her travels—travel serves its own purpose. At an earlier juncture in her autobiography, Dosebai tells us that though she had "enjoyed more freedom than [her] Parsee sisters," she had never been more than a couple of hours drive from Bombay. By the time we reach the end of her narrative, Dosebai has reached the furthest ends of the world. She attends the Delhi Durbar when India comes under the crown. She goes up in a balloon in Paris, accompanied only by a flask of wine. She gets a private audience with the Pope. She is presented to England's king and queen. She visits Niagara "the Indescribable." She marvels at San Francisco's recovery a year after the 1906 earthquake "like a phoenix from its ashes." Her last voyage to England is undertaken "when the rugged path seems nearly ended." Finally, it is at this "advanced stage of...life" that she completes her task of writing the text that we are reading. The style of her travelogue is remarkable in its evocative quality.

Much of the narrative, therefore, appears to be written in the tradition of the picaresque. In many ways, in fact, she *becomes* the *Picaro*. Episodic in its mode, the traveller narrates the varied events centring around her travels so that as we learn about her travels, we learn about the traveller as well. We have already observed that her anglophilia limits her exposure to the very vibrant anti-colonial movements of the time. But as also mentioned earlier, there was much to

be said about the sheer daring of a woman who could undertake these numerous journeys and encounter a range of experiences. Her sojourns within India and to the western world can be seen to unsettle time-honoured boundaries. The globe-trotter is aware of the pioneering nature of her journeys and what is remarkable is how much at home she is, whether in her native land or in western metropolitan centres.

The exigencies of the time would not have allowed the lady, solitary sojourning; interestingly, however, Dosebai's travelling companions are given short shrift. Occasionally she mentions them—an old aunt during the Delhi Durbar trip who is, for this social snob, the source of great hilarity when she mistakes the butlers for “honoured” European guests. As casual are the references to her sons accompanying her on her European travels (although she does acknowledge at the end the help she took of their jottings). Again, though she does not *walk* the streets unlike the prototype flaneur, the focus is on herself, whether she rides an elephant in Lucknow, or becomes “a motorist” in London or goes up in the balloon in Paris, or drives in an open carriage back home. The emphasis is always on her and on the daring modes of transport. They often invite jeering comments, from her contemporaries, as often, they inspire awe. Considering the number of times she mentions the mode of her travels, she appears to relish the attention, positive or otherwise, because they are further evidence of her pioneering ventures.

True, there was increasing traffic from the colonies to the imperial centre through the mid-19th century onwards, reversing, somewhat, the trend of European flow to Asian regions. Even so, Britain's insularity till then often made the oriental figure “an object of metropolitan spectacle.” (Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late Victorian Britain*, 1998, p.3) It would have been discomfiting to most. For instance, Behram Malabari, the noted social reformer, was not at liberty to wander the streets of London without facing barriers thrown up by the exigencies of Britain's role as an imperial power and more specifically, by the dictates of the civilising mission that a variety of Britons believed to be their special gift to colonial peoples. (Burton, p.2)(9) Pandita Ramabai, renowned scholar, Cornelia Sorabji, India's first woman to hold a law degree, and Malabari, (all of whom are in England around the time of Dosebai's first and second visits) come to understand through different experiences how elusive the goal of feeling comfortably “at home” it was, as colonial subjects in Imperial Britain.

Although Dosebai's travels were a part of this culture of movement to England, her trajectory through late Victorian-early Edwardian Britain differs from the other colonial subjects

mentioned above. For one thing, the ‘Otherness’ experienced not only by Ramabai but even by the anglophiles, Cornelia and Malabari find expression in the writings they have left behind. Not so, Dosebai. Which of them can be considered representative of the Indian abroad is a moot point. As Burton points out, even if we consider a handful among the thousands who were passing through England to study, trade, to seek political and social reform they are a motley, heterogeneous crowd. “A Hindu woman converted to Christianity, a Parsi Christian woman training in the law, a Parsi male social reformer—none of them was even predictably “Indian” in Victorian cultural terms...(Burton, p.9). To this hybrid mix, could be added the presence of Dosebai—a staunch Zoroastrian, a faithful anglophile, and an enthusiastic tourist, who, from all accounts or at least from her travelogue, enjoyed being a “metropolitan spectacle” and did not seem to be troubled by imperial patronage as the others had been in various ways.

Apparently, at least, Dosebai's travelogue, if it is to be taken at face value, seems untroubled by any mention of racist slurs or arrogance. Of course, unlike the other three, she was not in England to study as Cornelia was, or to interact with Christian missions as Ramabai was, or to seek out a reformist agenda for raising the Age of Consent as Malabari was. Hence, since she was in England as a tourist, she might not have been exposed, as the others were, to the conflicting relationship with the Empire within the “home” country. Moreover, her rather privileged class positions ensured that she move within the inner circles and not be confronted by ‘street’ encounters. Besides, Dosebai seems to enjoy being the focus of attention, because she often mentions being surrounded by crowds of people, who according to her, wondered whether she was some Indian princess.

We cannot, of course, take Dosebai's accounts at face value. Her rather strong ego would not have permitted her to admit, in what was going to be a public discourse, that she might have experienced racism, even by default. One such episode that she does mention happens on her travels in her own homeland; however, since British arrogance, seemed to increase in proportion to the distance it travelled from Britain to colony, the example would be even more to the point. On the train to Delhi, two British co-passengers make fun of Dosebai's appearance, till they realise to their astonishment that she understood English. But once the ‘misunderstanding’ is cleared up, it becomes a great source of “merriment” to Dosebai and she eagerly accepts their help and hospitality. Does Dosebai hide even from herself the offensiveness of what has been termed civilising philanthropy? Alternatively, does she covet the acknowledgement of the master race to such a degree, that

she obliterates the rudeness of the remarks from both her mind as well as her narrative? Would she have tolerated the same behaviour from a fellow-Indian, especially of a humbler background? Moreover, was she so delighted at the Englishmen's amazement that she knew English?

It might be a digression but a relevant one, to refer to Dosebai's maternal grandfather at this point. The pet name of Set Jamsetjee Nanabhoy Guzdar was *Sipla* or *Sapla*, which, as she explains herself, meant possessing a "sweet": and "ingratiating" temperament in the Gujarati language. Dosebai appears to possess both the positive and the not so positive aspects of that temperament. A digression within a digression—inscribed under the title of this rare copy of the book by her great-grand-daughter, is the inscription—"Sipla ni Dosi—her pet-name" (Sipla's Dosi...)

Familial Spaces: The House as Archives

Although Dosebai does not describe her domestic life, in as sustained a manner as her travels, the many casual references add up to a vivid picture of her experiences, shared, to a smaller or larger degree, by her class and community.

In her appropriately entitled book, *Dwelling in the Archive*, Antoinette Burton explores a group of late colonial women's writing, viewing them not only as elite, private narratives of house, home and family, but as the foundations of counter-histories.⁽¹⁰⁾ The house provides the 'foundational' archive for the histories that the women have left behind. In turn, these personal, familial histories, themselves constitute invaluable historical archives. One can extend this argument to include Dosebai's own story. The religious rituals, the domestic routine, articles of furniture, food, and clothing, all assume significance, beyond being mere interesting memorabilia. Dosebai's accounts of domesticity and familial space archive history as a lived experience written at the intersection of the personal and the political, the familial and the social, the private and the public. Historical time is gauged, as it were, by domestic space. The transformation of house and home into durable archives was not just a way of rescuing domesticity from the oblivion of history, but, as Burton argues, was also a means of rescuing history from the triumphalist representations of dominant discourses. (Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, 2006, p.16.)

It has been suggested, that under colonial rule, the 19th century Bengal household generally, and conjugality specifically, came to mean the last independent space left to the colonised Hindu male. The joint family submerged individual rights whereby patriarchal strictures became near

absolute.⁽¹¹⁾ There is no evidence to prove it was otherwise among the traditional poor and middle-class Parsi households whether rural or urban. However, among the growing bourgeoisie and wealthy Parsi families where exposure to education and the outside world would have been less limited, womenfolk, like Dosebai or even her mother, seemed to enjoy a greater amount of freedom of thought, word and deed than their other Indian counterparts, both within and without the household.

Dosebai's dwelling is her domain; even her dominion. She has access to much more than a room of her own; empress-like, she rules over a minuscule empire. The customary practice whereby women ate off a common plate *after* the men folk's repast was over, and which practice had earned the contempt of J.S.Mill, appears equally distasteful to this proudly westernised householder. Even as a newly married daughter-in-law, her "Aunt" as she called her mother-in-law, would affectionately indulge her. She would allot her, special crockery, table and chairs, a special room, even providing her secretly with an extra dish or two, so as not to kindle envy in that large household, which could, at a random guess have amounted to thirty odd people. When he was at home, we are told, her husband would join her in her repast, which, she points out, was "unprecedented" in the mid-19th century among the majority of even Parsi households.

These details may appear trivial, but Dosebai is making a point and the point is well taken. The households, of a particular class of Parsis, were gradually possessed of an infrastructure, whereby, the need for greater privacy for young couples was being recognised and appreciated. Community living was being replaced by private space, a western influence, whether for better or for worse would be a moot point. Dosebai rejects what she refers to critically, as the *zenana* of the Bohras and Mahomedans and enjoys the "luxury of living in a bungalow." Parsis, as researchers posit and which one has seen in the course of generations, appeared to place a premium on privacy, and lived with fewer people per room than others of similar socio-economic standing. (T.M Luhrmann, *The Good Parsi*, 1996, p.111) ⁽¹²⁾ Life in the joint family, could have offered a sense of community and security, which the private residence of a nuclear family may not have given. At the same time, one cannot deny that a separate household offered conjugal intimacy and a sense of freedom. Since Dosebai's action had preceded most others, the young couple was the butt of "ill-natured" remarks but conversely, it added to their enjoyments, "the chief of them being the walks with each other in the garden." Even to the modern Dosebai, however, venturing as husband and wife together, in an open carriage was an impossibility although they were already

parents of married children. It would have created a furor in the patriarchal household, and Dosebai emphasises that her husband was always “obedient to the will of his father and mother.” (p. 81).

“Colonial domestication of space,” as a researcher on the Parsis remarks “indicates a colonial orientation of mind. (Luhmann, p. 111) We notice this inclination in the various shifting domiciles of Dosebai’s mother. Meheribai’s move to the Malabar Hill-Walkeshwar neighbourhood, signifies, not only her bid for independence, it also indicates her desire to approximate the colonial life-style, both of which had prompted her desire to give a public English education to her daughter. Once more, it raises a storm of familial and public protest, but once more, she weathers it. They move in 1848, among the earliest Parsis to do so; the rest were Europeans who were as astonished at their advent “as if we had come from another land.” (p.55) (There is no implied irony in this remark.) Incidental to the narrative, but significant for the post-independent Bombayite, are the ‘street’ histories of the location. “Messrs Kemp & Company,” located at a corner, had rented the house, to which Meheribai moves. The busy traffic junction of “Kemp’s Corner” bears the name, although the company has long since gone, the house demolished, the quiet corner morphing into a nightmarish crossroads.

The antecedents of Walkeshwar recede even further into the realm of myth, although the tank and temple, associated with the myth, remain as the oldest surviving structures of Bombay. But as the locality first made way for the Europeans, and then for the burgeoning merchants, the class to which the Shroffs and Jessawallas belonged, “the focus of activity,” as city historians point out, “shifted from the ancient temples of Walkeshwar to the Governor’s residence at Malabar Hill.” (Sharada Dwivedi & Rahul Mehrotra, *Bombay, the Cities Within*, 1995, p. 81)(13) Mountstuart Elphinstone was the first to build the governor’s residence, and which remains the official residence of the governor in postcolonial India. The ancient gods had departed long ago, others had taken abode, and when they were vanquished, others have always been ready to replace them—we can’t do without gods.

The other neighbourhood to which Meheribai moves is the Fort, another European garrison. Once more, the freedom-loving woman makes history, because she successfully petitions the local governing body to demolish the gloomy ramparts that projected over her house. Like the walls of Jericho, the walls came tumbling down, a whole decade before they were removed from the entire Fort area since by then fortification was redundant to the totally secure city of Bombay.

The House becomes a “telling place” in other ways. It is

interesting to note the numerous references Dosebai makes to material objects around the household. Dosebai’s style of writing further recreates these inanimate articles to life on the page. Among the many gifts that the doting mother lavishes on her only daughter, are the gifts of a working table and a writing desk. Like the piano, these very European pieces of furniture were familiar features of Parsi women’s household, and remain so as lasting legacies today in some of these homes. Undoubtedly, such items would have served a useful, practical purpose, but they might also have showcased a fashionable lifestyle and evidenced the close proximity of the Parsis to the Raj, and the participatory nature in the civilising process.

At the same time, one would like to imagine that the gift of Meheribai’s writing desk to her daughter as part of her trousseau could have been an acknowledgement of her daughter’s literacy and education. Dosebai admits she had to give up school at thirteen but that her reading continued. Apparently, her writing did so as well, at least intermittently, for surely, the minutely recorded facts, figures, events and dates, could not have been all dredged from a septuagenarian’s memory? So one can imagine this woman, seated at her writing desk, in the privacy of her room, recreating house and home, fashioning the story of her life.

If the inanimate writing desk has its own story to tell, so do the varied references to clothes, food, manners, and household work. Dosebai can cook western food for an entire contingent of friends when on a holiday the Portuguese cook is unavailable. She steps out of the confines of her home to feed the horses, much to the annoyance of the grooms. She shops herself for fabric, silks, and jewellery, which is uncommon and which again means free access to the world outside of domestic confines that this lady enjoys. She enjoys, one feels, the freedom to do so, as much as the actual doing of things. However, what fascinates most are her repeated references to the very traditional, ‘homely’ art of embroidery, which in its very nature is born at the heart of the home and at which Dosebai is skilled.

True, embroidery could have been an individual skill that Dosebai possessed and she was not one to be modest about it. However, one would like to link it with a practised skill, common amongst 19th century Parsi women. Those of more ordinary means would weave the *kusti* (the sacred thread which Parsis are supposed to wear) all their lives, for the family and as a means of livelihood. Others, who had more money and time, indulged in exquisite embroidery, as a leisurely pastime. Family heirlooms are a visual testimony of an art that unfortunately has died with time. Of course, not all were embroidered at home. Many saris like the *garas*, and *tanchois* were crafted professionally, after three embroiderers

were sent to China by Jamshedji Jeejibhoy to acquire the requisite skills. Of course, although it was traditionally, a feminine skill, the craftsmen were all male. It would have been unheard of for women to step beyond geographical boundaries, for commercial purposes.

Dosebai, however, emphasises how she stitched and embroidered her own clothes, showing the greatest of contempt for professional tailors. As for her embroidery, several *public* occasions are mentioned when she called it upon herself to use her talent. She describes the objects in the most minute of details so that the work of art emerges before our eyes—one masterpiece is a cap, which her son wears for a wedding—it has miniature photographs of the family around it. Another piece of embroidery wins a medal at the 1886 Indian and Colonial Exhibition held in London. For Dosebai, of course, the highlight of her embroidery career is when the reigning king and queen of England, Edward VII and Alexandra, accept as gifts a cap and dress-front, exquisitely embroidered and studded with diamonds and rubies. Where must these treasures have gone? Only the photograph remains, to tell the tale. Characteristically, the occasion for which the embroidery is done is given as much importance as the embroidery itself. In fact, it is difficult to imagine Dosebai seated demurely at her worktable, sewing a fine seam. It is easier to visualise her, basking in the attention she inevitably receives.

Like many of her Parsi contemporaries, whose photographs one sees today—the originals in the Prince of Wales Museum and some fire temples, their reproductions in exquisitely created coffee table books like Pheroza Godrej & Firoza Panthaky-Mistree's *Zoroastrian Tapestry* (14) and *Portrait of a Community* (15) —Dosebai's sartorial appearance definitely marks western influence and of course, she is the first to point this out. Once again, her exposure to the outside world of dress, manners fashion, follows her indoors where she designs them, and which then find themselves paraded proudly before the public gaze.

A visual record of 19th century Parsi women's fashions can be, to some extent gauged from the photographs accompanying her text. (Of course, a still more detailed understanding comes from the texts mentioned above.) For instance, Dosebai mentions wearing the traditional *mathubanu* (a white scarf) under the sari *sorr* (head covering formed by the sari). Her mother's head is tightly covered, so that not a wisp of hair is revealed; Dosebai's, recedes somewhat; her daughter's reveals her central parting quite clearly and *her* daughter is seen to wear no *mathubanu*, and though her sari does cover her head, it is fashionably only on one side. The four generations of mothers and daughters reveal the crossing of thresholds, real and symbolic, just through their

sartorial dress.

Curiously enough, apart from some references to her family, we do not get to know much about Dosebai's numerous children. While entire chapters are devoted to personages *outside* the domestic household—for instance, the visit of the then Prince of Wales to Bombay, her visit to the Delhi Durbar, the ball hosted by the Viceroy Lord Lytton and Lady Lytton in Calcutta, we do not get to know much about her children. She mentions one son in connection with the famous embroidered cap. But what was her son like as an individual? Which of her sons was he? How did she relate to him? What did he do when he grew up? What were his interests, his tastes?

Dosebai's husband, Cowasjee Jahangir Jessawalla, remains in the shadows as well, although she devotes an entire chapter to him. (But she does the same to Kesarbai, her only Hindu friend). However, we do get a picture of their married lives together. He does not appear to be the stern 19th century patriarchal figure; he is mild-mannered, benevolent and generous, giving free rein to his wife's independent spirit, considering that she ventures out of house, home, city, country, without feeling the need to escort her. The much-talked about 'companionate wife' of the late 19th century, undergoes a sea-change, in the case of this couple, for he appears to be more the companionate husband, ready to satisfy his wife's whims and desire to be in the eye of the public and in European company. Or an analogy Dosebai might have preferred—he was her Prince Albert to herself, Queen Victoria.

Understandably, given the exigencies of the time, even the articulate Dosebai would not speak intimately about conjugality. Considering those taboos, the woman allows herself to express the shared intimacy of a young bride. In the chapter entitled, "Insight into Married Life," (Chapter vi, p. 67) she thanks the Almighty, for the marital bliss that she enjoys, adding, "It would be out of my power to describe the thrill of ecstasy which the love of my husband excited in my hitherto virgin breast." (p.70)

The Almighty finds a place in Dosebai's home. He is a 'household' god, in the sense that religion centres on customs, rituals, and taboos, related to birth, marriage, or death. It is not the spiritual aspect as much as the social aspect of the Zoroastrian faith that concerns this very worldly woman. Religion is the social debt paid for all the material comforts bestowed on the family. If it could be put this way—she is as loyal to the Zoroastrian faith as she is to the British Crown. Neither the philosophical aspect of one, nor the political aspect of the other, touches her experiences. Both politics and religion are eschewed and domesticated. Both sustain her, give her a sense of well-being, both arouse within her,

unquestioning loyalty and remain an intrinsic part of her daily life.

The socio-religious governance of Dosebai's home was not peculiar to her individual household. On the one hand, the Parsis were anxious to see themselves and be seen by the ruling elite as progressive and their religion as being scientific; therefore, they downplayed some of the existing rituals and customs, which nonetheless existed as an essential aspect of their daily domestic routine, customs that were neither logical nor scientific. Thus, the lived reality was often ritual-ridden. We see these dichotomies at work in households such as Dosebai's, as well as of others from personal histories, handed down from one generation to another.

Parsi women, we are told, were gradually being allowed to defer marriage till they were in their late teens although child marriages were not totally unheard of. Dosebai marries at sixteen and only after she has approved of the match and after she has rejected an earlier one. The noted Parsi reformer, Behram Malabari had *Hindu* women in mind when he struggled to raise the Age of Consent from ten to twelve and had met with such fierce opposition from the likes of Tilak. Further, Parsi widows, although debarred from participation in festivities, did not suffer the ignominy and persecution as their compatriots did. Even so, Dosebai's criticism of their seclusion suggests her progressive stance. As evidence, she refers us to her mother's photograph, included in the text. However, the existence of such a photograph—(and according to Dosebai, her mother was the first Parsi lady to have her photograph taken) does speak of a more liberal attitude to widowhood, where the mother-daughter were concerned.

Conversely, Dosebai was no exception when it came to the observance of certain rituals, especially those associated with purification. Her English friends find her forty-day 'confinement' after childbirth to the customary "prison-like room" incredible, especially since it is observed by one who so loved "English" freedom. Her reply comes in the guise of a harangue that an All-wise Providence had willed us to respect one's ancestral religion. (p.125) Likewise, the much-coveted audience with the Pope is in near-jeopardy when she refuses to kiss his toe, not on hygienic grounds but religious ones, since "it would be considered sinful by the Parsees." (p.335).

The lived reality was often in conflict with these assumptions about the scientific nature of the religion. Ambiguities prevailed and we see these reflected in Dosebai's own rather conflicting views. On the one hand, she is at pains to prove her near-equal status with her English friends and on the other, she adheres to socio-religious rituals, which

were neither scientific nor logical. She is caught in those dichotomies as she is at pains to uphold the progressive nature of her household, which is seen as westernised, and equally anxious to endorse rather rigid customs, which she upholds as sanctioned by Zoroastrianism.

The open reception that Parsis gave to western thought, definitely and unambiguously stopped short at religion. They refused to imitate their British masters in this regard, insulating themselves against the proselytising of Christian missionaries. The apparent peace-loving community was known to have resorted to violence if they perceived—what they considered—a threat to their religion. We see an example of this occurrence when hired Parsi mobs stoned Sorabji Kharsedji, (Cornelia Sorabji's father) and more than once his life was in danger, after his decision to convert to Christianity. (Suparna Gooptu, *Cornelia Sorabji, India's Pioneer Woman Lawyer, A Biography*, 2006, p. 14)(16)

Parsis had begun to be frequent travellers to the western world, Dosebai, as we see, being one of them. However, they were careful to carry their versions of the *ganga jal* which Hindu Maharajas were wont to carry on board the ship to England. A 19th century portrait painting of the younger scions of the shipbuilding Wadia families includes an unknown figure. We are told that such a person would be a chaperon lest the Parsi youth be tempted to eat beef and pork and worse still, be converted to the Christian faith while on their stay abroad.

On their part, Christian missionaries could and did subvert the Crown's Policy of Non-intervention, in subtle and not so subtle ways. A 19th century treatise by John Wilson, entitled *The Parsi Religion*, speaks of "the glory" of the Christian god, as it does about "the darkness and ignorance" of all other religions, including the Zoroastrian religion. (17) Warning the author to desist, the Parsi editor of *Samachar* (Bombay's oldest Gujarati paper) remarks pithily, "From striking two stones together, you will elicit nothing but fire." Not to be outdone, Wilson retorts, "The spark elicited by striking two stones together, may... kindle a flame which may devour the rubbish which has long been accumulated." (*Samachar*, 8th August, 1831 quoted in Wilson, p.30)

Dosebai who has a lot to say on a lot of matters is not far behind in the championing of her faith. Typically, what sparks off these harangues are, what she perceives, as shortfalls in the modern Parsi lady's housewifery skills, which make her neglect the rituals for the dead. To Dosebai, this neglect is tantamount to a vice and contempt for the Zoroastrian religion. She warns her fellow-believers never to "lend an ear to the sly whisperings of deceitful tongues which traduce Zoroastrianism as imposture and uphold Christianity as the embodiment of truth." (p.147)

This is the same Dosebai, who, flattered at being invited to dance at a ball, regrets not having acquired that western skill. However, religion, at least its ritualistic aspects, went very readily hand in hand with the most fashionable of outdoor pastimes and Dosebai was not one to complain at these incongruities. Actually, it is these very incongruities in her personality, her life, and her times, which make this raconteur's narrative, so fascinating.

Dosebai's narrative overflows with a fecundity of stories—stories breed more stories and still more stories.... Interestingly, when I chanced to talk with friends and acquaintances about the Dosebai 'discovery', I discovered even more stories directly or tangentially related to *The Story of My Life*. Adil Jussawalla, who so generously let me read this family archives, told me that the 'quarrel' about the pioneer in education still continues, with Sheriar Ookerjee, the great-grand-son of Cursetjee Maneckjee Cursetjee staking (perhaps justifiably) the claim for the founder of Alexandra Girls' English Institution, as pioneer against the claim of the Jessawala clan. Then there was an octogenarian, who also claimed to be the same Cursetjee's descendent and who knew so much about Dosebai without laying her hand on the book. "My mother's stories—oral histories you know..." was her response to my astonished queries. Yet another, talking generally, about women's education, told me how her mother studying at Cathedral in 1918 had her education come to a halt because her father was worried lest she follow the footsteps of Ruttie Petit who had eloped at that time with Jinnah. Another was pleased that I was showing interest in the Parsi community—"that way they will survive." Conversely, another friend was puzzled at my interest in the dead past. Without sounding too Eliotian, I tried to explain to her and to myself as well of the livingness of the past and its relevance to us today. So many strands are so inextricably woven together, the past and the present merging one into another.

Dosebai embroiders a sari of white *English* satin, which has a pattern of flowers and birds of various hues. She uses forty-two shades of silk to highlight the variegated colors. She has embroidered it especially for a family wedding, and is delighted at her sisters-in-law's envy and the wedding guests' wonder. Dosebai's narrative marks her creativity in another, similar direction. Her material is, of course, the English language. Many strands go into the weaving of the text, as vibrant and colourful, as the exquisitely embroidered sari. Sad to say, Dosebai did not live to rejoice in *this* creation and bask in the public gaze, as she so loved to do. She died on the 11th January 1911, barely two weeks after she had signed her preface, dated New Year's Day of the same year. The book appeared in public shortly after, also in the same year.

Endnotes

This article was first published in anti history.blogspot.com in October 2009. The blog has since been removed.

My grateful thanks to Adil Jussawalla for so generously lending me this fascinating book from the family archives.

1. *Ubhbha* in Gujarati and *Khaddain* Hindi, mean 'standing upright.' The term may have originated from the fact, that unlike the seated or equestrian statues that dot Bombay, this one was in a standing position. Even as I write this piece, the *Mumbai Mirror* (Sept.2, 2009) reports the decision by the Municipal Corporation to refurbish the statue "back to its original glory."
2. Dosebai Cowasjee Jessawala, *The Story of My Life* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1911)
3. Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998)
4. Rassundari Devi. *Amar Jiban (My Life)* 1876, 1906. Translated by Enakshi Chatterjee. (Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1999)
5. K Lalita, Susie Tharu (eds), *Women Writing in India* (New Delhi: OUP, 1991)
6. Dosabhai Framjee Karaka, *History of the Parsis* (London: Macmillan, 1884)
7. Archie Baron, *An Indian Affair* (London: Channel 4 Books, imprint of Pan Macmillan, 2001)
8. Nawaz Mody (ed), *The Parsis in Western India: 1818 to 1920* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1998)
9. Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire* (California: University of California Press, 1998)
10. —————, *Dwelling in the Archive* (New Delhi: OUP, 2006)
11. Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001)
12. TM Luhrmann, *The Good Parsi* (Delhi: OUP, 1996)
13. Sharada Dwivedi, Rahul Mehrotra: *Bombay, the Cities Within* (Bombay: Eminence Designs, 1995)
14. Pheroza Godrej & Firoza Panthaky-Mistree, *A Zoroastrian Tapestry* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 2002)
15. *Portrait of a Community: An Exhibition of Paintings & Photographs of the Parsees*, Exhibition Committee, Khorshed Gandhi & Others, (Mumbai: National Gallery of Modern Art, Chemould Publications & arts, October 2002) (The book includes photographs of Dosebai's extended family and friends)
16. Suparna Gooptu, *Cornelia Sorabji, India's Pioneer Woman Lawyer, A Biography* (Delhi: OUP, 2006)
17. John Wilson, *The Parsi Religion* (Bombay: American Mission Press, 1843) Reprint, (New Delhi: Indigo Books, 2003)

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Renouncing the Body for Siva: The Story of Karaikkal Ammaiyar

—Uma M Shankar and C S Lakshmi



Renouncing the Body for Siva: The Story of Karaikkal Ammaiyar

Anbu and Siva

Bhakti is a Sanskrit word which comes from the root word *bhaj* which means to share and participate. The Tamil word used for bhakti is *anbu* or *kaadal* which in English would translate as just love which, however, has several layers of meaning in Tamil. The *anbu* or *kaadala* devotee feels for a divine being can be ecstatic, euphoric, and elevating.

Anbu or *kaadal* towards a deity can be understood as devotion. When such devotion is maddening and intoxicating, eventually it becomes mystical. It is usually intense, personal, and filled with passion. Mystical devotion implies union and togetherness. Bhakti literature describes in great detail and stunning imagery this unique relationship between the devotee and the chosen deity which is not a passive or static devotion

towards a deity but a dynamic one where there is constant interaction between the devotee and the deity.

A mystical union transcends the intelligible world which is speculative and analytical. It can only be expressed with the help of symbols or metaphors. The experience of union between the subject and divine object is considered as the culmination of it. It is the immediate, transforming experience of the unification of human soul with the highest reality. Such union represents the supreme and most authentic elevation of the human spirit as it reaches a fusion with god or at least, a living cognition of god. Almost all the saint devotees merge in the effulgence of the chosen deity. Philosophers call it Ecstasy, Beautiful vision, Samadhi, Satori, Nirvana and so on. Often scholars tend to explain this merging in terms of Christian terminologies and call it beatification. (K. A. Venkataramiah, 1979)

The mysticism we associate with bhakti is a deep belief in which one can gain knowledge of reality not accessible to sense perception or to rationality or to conceptual thought. Generally associated with religious traditions, mysticism can take both forms of theistic—like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jewish—and non-theistic like Buddhism and some varieties of Hinduism. It is claimed that mystical experience is the result of prayer, worship, fasting, meditation, and other disciplines. Language of bhakti often expresses the essence of mystical experience in terms of human relationships. As Upinder Singh explains, this intense and intimate experience of devotion has visualised the deity as friend, mother, father, master, teacher and bridegroom. (Upinder Singh, 2009: p. 1096, PDF Version). In Vaisnavism and Saivism, we find many expressions of devotees as being erotic, and sensual. Andal was a saint who looked upon the deity as her lover and groom. Often male saints took on the voice of a beloved. Nammalvar imagined himself to be the beloved (Parankusanayaki) and the god as lover. (*Thiruvirutham*, 39) For Manickavasagar the god was an eternal bridegroom (*Nitta manaalar, Annai Paththu*, Verse 3.) Many such mystical experiences have been termed by later researchers as bridal mysticism, a term associated with New

Testament which talks of the union of devotees with Jesus as marriage influenced by Hebrew Bible's erotic Song of Solomon. However, the mysticism of Bhakti literature is of an entirely different nature and is inspired and influenced by Agam poetry of Sangam literature (3rd Century BCE-3rd Century CE) and the *Nayaka-Nayikabhavam* that is part of the *Natyashastra*. There are *nayikas* of many different moods and nature described in *Ashta-nayika* but the *nayaka* is only one. The male saints in their poetry have taken on the voice of longing of the *nayika* with its many different of voices.

Was the feminine voice more suited to express surrender and love? Does surrender come naturally to women given their position in the society? Are there instances of women saints assuming a male voice? These questions are appropriate when we place bhakti poetry in the physical realm and in the context of the then prevailing gender roles. But where goddesses and gods are female, male, neuter and also beyond all these gender specifications, along with relevant body-based questions in the social history context, one also has to understand that even while being in the physical realm there is a space which goes beyond the body and its constrictions of gender, caste and family. That these two realms have existed simultaneously and as parallels is something that will help us to understand not only the devotees or *adiyars* or *thondars* as they described themselves, but also the nature of Siva.

Sarada Thallam in her essay on Karaikkal Ammaiyar says the snake around the neck of Siva is a tellurian snake. Tellurian means something that belongs to the earth or of the earth. This is about oppositional elements on the body of Siva. Snake and the moon. According to Hindu mythology the snake swallows the moon during eclipse, but this moon also resembles the horn of a boar (*varaha*) that Siva carries in his hand, so it seems to live on hiding from the snake; then there is the Ganga flowing from heaven caught in his matted hair and the elephant skin of the earth. Siva is the "harmonising force who carefully balances these oppositional elements thus, synthesising diverse elements of nature, a process vital for ecological sustenance and the ultimate peace of the universe." (Sarada Thallam, 2016: p.10) Siva is a *Kalamurthi*, a master of time, or time itself, so Siva is not bound by the physical world and yet he is part of the physical world. Siva is after all, in classical Hindu tradition, the God of destruction, portrayed as yogin and also a saviour.

The devotional verses of saints who have described the beauty of the deity have not exactly been the descriptions of statues they were seeing before them. How else can one explain the ecstatic verses of Thiruppanazvar, considered an outcaste, who enters the temple on the back of a Brahmin priest on the orders of the deity Vishnu himself and sings ten verses on how the deity appears to him and becomes

one with the deity? The verses sung by him called *Amalanathipiran* is not a direct description of a deity carved in stone but his mystical experience of the deity. In the last two lines of Verse 8 he says:

*Those black, glistening, red-lined, long, big eyes
Rising and spreading, make me unstable*

In the next verse in the last line he says:

*The dark blue body, oh my, fills my heart!
(Amalanathipiran, Verses 8 and 9, Translation C S Lakshmi)*

The exclamation 'Aiyō' that he uses in the second verse which for want of any other word has been translated as 'oh, my,' makes it a deeply personal experience.

That the experience of mysticism expressed in verses is something that goes beyond figures of deities carved which one can perceive visually, is also the opinion of Sharada Srinivasan, the archaeologist. She says it is as if the bronze figures acquire certain fluidity from the verses. In her study of Chola bronzes and the cosmic dance, she uses a beautiful term "beyond vision" to understand the nature of bhakti and the actual figure of Nataraja. She says the verses of mystical longing often "reveal how the bronze deities were also at times apparently perceived by their devotees as being literally and metaphorically 'Beyond Vision.'" (Sharada Srinivasan, 2018: p.17) She says verses of the Bhakti saints also "remind one of how, within the Indian tradition, the orderly, rational/ 'mathematical' or 'scientific' aspects could also coexist with the irrational, the unscientific/religious, or the mystical." (Sharada Srinivasan, p.18) We will go into this in more detail when we see the songs of Karaikkal Ammaiyar.

Keeping this background of life, reality and mysticism in mind will help us to view the life, miracles and songs of Karaikkal Ammaiyar whose life we will try to comprehend in what follows.

Periya Puranam, The Great Story

The story of Karaikkal Ammaiyar we have come to know from her hagiography written in *Periya Puranam* (The Great Story) by Sekkizhar in the 12th century. Sekkizhar, the hagiographer, narrates the life of many saint poets of South India in his book *Periya Puranam*. It is a book that carries the stories of 63 Saiva saints and among them, there were three women. The key message of this book is—'Behold Siva, whom everyone is entitled to apprehend.' The cult of saints or the Bhakti movement as it is referred to, during the medieval period provided a religious perspective that

emphasised celebration, the importance of personal relationship in religious experience, and the significance of pilgrimage, temple rituals, involvement in social activities, etc. The saint devotees of Siva in the south came from different walks of life. A majority of them were Brahmins but there were also kings, minor chieftains, civil and military officials, merchants, and landowners. In the rank of saints were also a fisherman, washerman, cowherd, toddy tapper, hunter, weaver, potter, butcher, a highway robber, ordinary men, women, vendors and so on. The silken thread that connected all of them was an unadulterated devotion. All roads of these women and men led to the feet of Siva. They celebrated the devotion all through their lives, despite poverty, challenges, physical ailments or calamities. Every story is thrilling, fascinating, and fulfilling.

The Woman Who Forsook Her Body

In *Periya Puranam*, one of the stories of three women saints mentioned, is the story of a girl, Punitavathi, who was born in 6th century BCE at Karaikal, a flourishing seaport in South India which even after Independence remained as a French settlement for a while. Her life could be summarised thus: The young girl, the only daughter of a very wealthy merchant, was the apple of his eye. She was brought up with all values and virtues worthy of living. Even as a child, her games, words, and deeds centred on the lord of the universe, the cosmic dancer. At the appropriate time, she was married to a merchant Paramadattan with all pomp and glory. Though the usual practice was to send the girl away to her husband's home, the father requested his son-in-law to relocate to Karaikal as he was not willing to be away from his daughter. Thus Punitavathi settled in Karaikal itself after her wedding.

While living as a householder she continued to do her duties as a Siva devotee. Her house remained open always to Siva devotees. She offered food and monetary and other gifts to wandering Siva devotees who visited homes asking for alms.

This is how Sekkizhar describes her life as a house holder:

*If devotees of our Lord came,
she served them good unpolluted food,
and, moreover, according to their desert,
she gave gold and gems and good clothes,
whichever they needed...*

(*Periya Puranam* 1741-Verse 15, G. Vanmikanathan, 1985: p.533)

(“*Nambar adiyar anainthal nalla thiru amuthaliththum*”, Annaswamy Sraudigal, 1966: p.11)

Once her husband sent home two mangoes, to be served to him during lunch time. Just then a hungry Siva devotee came and she naturally took mercy on him. How could she send him away without any food? The lunch was not yet fully prepared, so she served him rice and curds with one of the mangoes. When her husband came home for lunch, he asked to be served the mangoes. Paramadattan ate one and asked for the other too, as it was extremely tasty. It is possible he asked for the other one so she could also taste it. Punitavathi was perplexed as the other mango had been given away on charity. She went in wondering how to explain it to the husband. She thought of her predicament and thought of the god she was devoted to. This is how Sekkizhar explains it:

*Standing aside there,
she gave way to despair,
what could she do for the delicious fruit?
She became lost in thought,
but the moment she recollected in her mind
the feet of the Lord astride the bull
who helps one in distress,
in her hand reposed
an extraordinarily sweet fruit. (Periya Puranam, 1741-Verse 25, G. Vanmikanathan, 1985: p.534)
("Ammarungu nindrayarvar arungkanikang enseyyar", Annaswamy Sraudigal, 1966: p.16)*

She thought of Him who was always in her mind. Many have argued that she was afraid of her husband and that in the medieval period the status of women was low and her world was her home, husband, and children. Women could not make their own decisions; they were considered socially and spiritually inferior to men. While patriarchy is an issue that cannot be denied we will deal with it later in this essay. However, here we can say that there was no fear involved. From what we have seen above, Punitavathi had the freedom to serve the devotees of Siva with food and monetary and other gifts which Paramadattan obviously knew. This means she had access to the income he brought home and had the freedom to distribute it according to her will. Her hesitation may have been due to the reason that it is the general custom in Tamil homes that when a particular preparation is asked for and it has got over, a negative reply of it not being available is never uttered. The reply would always be that something else is available. This is so even today in homes and even in grocery shops when if something is not available they would always say something else is available but not say no directly.

Unexpectedly, a mango fell on her palm. She came out and

served it to her husband. Paramadattan found this sweeter and far more delicious than the other one and realised it was a rare fruit. On inquiry, she had no reason to not tell him the truth for Paramadattan knew about her devotion to Siva. He asked her if she could get another mango similarly. This time Punitavathi prayed to Siva so that his grace was not disproved. Another mango appeared in her hand and when she gave it to Paramadattan he could not even hold it for it disappeared. He was overwhelmed with a kind of awe and fear. A fruit that his wife was able to hold he could not even hold for a second. He felt she had divine qualities and felt unworthy of her. He lived with her for a few more days but withdrew from marital relationship and soon made arrangements to travel and equipped a ship for a mercantile expedition to another land and went away saying he would be travelling. Travelling to different places was a part of a merchant's life and so Punithvathi awaited his return.

He returned after his journey and went to a different city and there he married another woman and had a daughter and named her Punitavathi, in memory of his godly wife whom he had begun to revere. As news reached that Paramadattan, had moved on, the relatives from the extended family of Punitvathi decided to take her where he was. Since only relatives are mentioned we can assume like the author Annaswamy Sraudigal, that her parents were no more. When the relatives take Punitavathi in a palanquin and reach the border of the city Paramadattan was living in, they send a message to him. He immediately forestalled them and came himself to meet them with his wife and his toddler daughter. He prostrated before Punitavathi saying he was living with her grace. 'Why and how are you worshipping your wife?' asked the angry relatives. He humbly said—"Punitavathi is a divine being, godlike, I have named my child after her, her feet are to be worshipped."

Punitavathi heard her husband's decision and since his words had released her from domestic life, she centred her thoughts on the twinkling feet of the Lord. She prayed saying that since her husband had no need for her, she now wanted to dedicate her life to her Lord. She wanted to be rid of her flesh and be given the skeletal form of the ghouls who worship him in the burning grounds. It is a simple, spontaneous prayer of renunciation of the body. Sekkizhar describes her prayer thus:

*This is what his decision is
Now let me be rid of the beautiful bundle of flesh
I bore for his sake
Grant me the form of a ghoul
To venerate your feet there
In the burial ground*

*Saying so, she meditated
On the feet of the Supreme One.
("Ingivan kuriththa kolgaiyidhu" Periya Puranam, Verse 49,
Annaswamy, p. 23)
(Translation C S Lakshmi)*

She was granted the skeletal form she yearned for and became the ghoul worshipped by all. Sekkizhar describes it in simple words:

*That very moment by the grace of the
Divine Dancer of the golden hall
Heightened feeling of the sublime path swelled in her
And she got what she prayed for
Shedding all the beauty of the flesh
Reduced to a skeletal body
She became the ghoul worshipped
By all in heaven and earth
("Aanaap pozhudhu mandrul aaduvaar arulinaalae", Periya
Puranam, Verse 50, Annaswamy, p. 24)
(Translation by C S Lakshmi)*

Those around her fell back in fear of her transformed self. Light in her body, she moved towards mount Kailas, the abode of Siva. She walked all along crossing hills, plateaus and plains eager to meet the one she was devoted to. As she touched the foothill of the most revered mount Kailas, feeling that it would be a great sin to place her foot on the sacred ground, she made the last part of the journey on her head. The inner strength and unalloyed devotion brought her that far and so near Siva. Parvathi was astonished to see the bony frame climbing the abode walking on its head and wondered who this could be. Siva smiled and said—she is the Mother who loves us. Siva called out to her as "Ammal" (Mother). She in return called him "Appa" (Father). Siva asked her to name the boon she wanted. And what she asked for has remained a much chanted verse.

*After praying for undying blissful love unto Him
She further prayed:
No more births I want;
But, if birth there be,
The boon of not forgetting you, I want
I want more; when I joyfully sing
Oh, Righteous One, and you dance,
I should be at Your feet!
("Iravaatha inpa anbu vaendi pin vaendukindraar", Periya
Puranam, Verse 60, Annaswamy, p. 28.)
(Translation by C S Lakshmi)*

The Cosmic Dancer who sets rhythm to all beings graciously bade her to return to Alankadu and witness and rejoice the dance. On her way back she sang at many temples, composed songs. There is no other story of anyone else who returned from Kailas to talk about it. She was privileged as a human to return from Kailas after this exalting experience. She returned all the way to Tiruvalankadu and witnessed the divine dance of the Cosmic Dancer with his tinkling anklets and the drums resounding in the entire universe. She was more than pleased. It was not just delight but a phenomenal reciprocation of sincere devotion. Tiruvalankadu is known as Rathnasabai, one of the famous five temples where Siva danced as Nataraja. She spent the rest of her life singing in praise of Lord Siva.

The Context of Bhakti: Brahmins, Temples and Feudal Structure

Before we discuss the songs of Karaikkal Ammaiyar and the nuances of the songs and their meaning when applied to her life, we must know the context in which bhakti itself happened. Scholars who have studied the cult of saints of the bhakti genre have emphasised two aspects of the period in which the cult flourished. The first one was the domination of what was seen as Brahmin religion and the feudal structure and the second was the marginalisation and suppression of women. Where the first aspect is concerned, some have seen the Bhakti movement as something that fitted snugly into the feudal structure where there was Brahmin domination and subjugation of people of the castes considered lower.⁽¹⁾ Some have argued that it was social reformist and heralded a kind of “bloodless revolution.” (Vaiyapuripillai, p.72, quoted in R Mahalakshmi, 2000: p.38) against the Brahmin domination of the period. In a very interesting study of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, *Kannadathil Karaikkal Ammaiyar Varalaru* by M S Shantha published by the International Institute of Tamil Studies in 1997, the Director of the Institute, Sa. Su. Iramar Ilango writes in his introduction: “In Tamilakam, when Jainism and Buddhism flourished, Vedic religion made its entry into Tamilakam from the north. It spread Vedic ideas and Vedic concepts among the Tamil people. In that dark age, when even the footprints of the Tamil people were being hidden, the Alvars and Nayanmars were those who spread rays of light.” (M S Shantha, 1997: No page no.) Some others have argued that the Bhakti movement did not quite complete what it set out to do. (Patton Burchett, 2009)

The stand of Brahmin domination and feudal structure has been a stand inspired by D D Kosambi, D N Jha et al. D D Kosambi’s book *Myth and Reality* published in 1962 had come as a fresh insight into several areas of Indology raising several

vital questions and providing answers for them. He had said, “To hold this type of society and its state together, the best religion is one which emphasises the role of bhakti, personal faith, even though the object of devotion may have clearly visible flaws.” (D D Kosambi, 1962: p.32) R Mahalakshmi, talking of D D Kosambi and his view that the doctrine of bhakti was “unflinching loyalty to a god whose rather questionable personal record was not allowed to stand in the way” of its expression, (D D Kosambi, 1999: p.208 in R Mahalakshmi, 2000: p.17, n.1) says that this views the ideology of bhakti as a concomitant of the feudal structure in India. She says that on closer scrutiny, it is evident that the ideology of bhakti served many purposes in Tamil region and that it was not merely the ideological underpinning of the emergent ‘feudal’ structures. Citing Champakalakshmi’s article “From devotion and dissent to dominance”, she says that it was “an instrument of social protest, an expression of dissent with the brahmanical orthodoxy as well as the heterodox faiths, and a movement towards socio-religious reform.” (R Mahalakshmi, 2000: p.18)

Taking Kosambi’s views on bhakti into consideration Upinder Singh says that his argument that “bhakti, with its focus on devotion and loyalty, was an ideology well suited to the needs of the feudal state” was extended subsequently by some historians like D N Jha (1974) and M G S Narayanan and Keshavan Veluthat (1978) who argued that “the emergence of temples as landed magnates made them part of the entrenched feudal set-up. Because the bhakti movement was a temple-based movement, the feudal label was extended to it, and it was argued that the movement in fact, not only reflected but legitimised feudal social relations.” For Upinder Singh such an argument poses a lot of problems. She says, “...we have seen that there are a number of problems with the characterisation of early medieval India in general and the role of temples in particular as ‘feudal’. Apart from this fact, it can also be noted that labelling bhakti as a feudal ideology conceals the fact that it did, at least to some extent, question prevailing social hierarchies, and it did expand the social contours of sacred space.” According to Upinder Singh, in order to assess the social significance and impact of the bhakti tradition, “it is necessary to look beyond the leadership. The ideas expressed in the bhakti songs and the extent to which bhakti expanded the social access to sacred space also need to be examined. Although its leadership was dominated by elite groups, especially Brahmanas, and although it did not overturn existing social relations, bhakti did create a religious community within which traditional social distinctions could be transcended, at least with regard to the relationship between the bhakta and his/her god. Such an idea comes across very strongly in some

of the songs of the saints, which recognised the community of bhaktas—*bhakta kulam* or *tondar kulam*.”(Upinder Singh, 2009: pp. 1103, 1101, PDF Version)

Upinder Singh says that scholars like D N Jha argue that “the emergence of temples as landed magnates in South India, and the increase in the number of pariharas, signify the increasing oppression of the peasantry and the growth of feudal agrarian relations.” Jha further asserts that “temples became centres of political power, leading to the decentralisation of political power.” Upinder Singh says that, however, “it is abundantly clear that the relationship between kings and temples was not one of rivalry but alliance. Patronage to temples was a major means of acquiring, proclaiming, and maintaining political legitimacy.” (p. 1108) She further states that the temple patrons included chieftains, landowners, merchants and village and town assemblies. Donations were offered for lighting lamps, making images and donations of sheep and land were also offered. Merchant guilds too made the donations in the Chola period. Artisan groups, like weavers of Kanchipuram, were also involved in temple management. (p. 1109)

Max Weber (quoted in Leslie Orr, p. 165) has called this kind of development in the structure of religious communities as “routinisation.” In her excellent study on donors and devotees and daughters of god, Leslie Orr says that in Weber’s view, “these developments, which entailed compromising with traditional lay practices and adulterating an earlier, original religious vision and doctrine, were motivated especially by the desire of priests to aggrandise their status and income.” Hinduism, for example, “constantly betrayed a growing tendency to slide over into magic, or in any case into a semi-magical sacramental soteriology.”” ([1922] 1964, 77-79 in Leslie Orr, 2000: p. 166)

Leslie Orr considers this an extremely negative view. She also says that this negative judgment “is widespread and is shared by many students of Indian religious and social history.” (p. 166) According to her the interaction between the temple as an institution and the community resulted in the mutual benefit of the temple and the locality in both economic and political terms. “The temple,” she says, “was at the centre of an economic network that encouraged trade, investment, and agricultural expansion. The exchange system worked well on a political level because the temple provided opportunities for the expression of religious values and relationships with the deity, involving notions of status that were widely shared. Temple authorities were not concerned with “popularising” or accommodating local religious peculiarities because—from the very beginning of the Chola period—temples had been strongly localised and the pattern of temple ritual had shared much with popular practice. The processes of

bureaucratisation in the course of the Chola period did not close off the temple to interaction with the outside community but seemed in fact, to have had the opposite effect. **This means that core religious values associated with the bhakti ideology of inclusivism and universalism did not deteriorate with increasing bureaucratisation but were effectively expressed, as the temple continued to involve a wide range of types of people in its activities.**”(p. 167; emphasis added)

There is an entirely different metaphor in which the ideology of bhakti has been seen in Puranic texts like Brammand Purana and Bhavishya Purana. Bhakti is seen as a girl-child born in the south and as she travels all over south she grows up and becomes old as she reaches Gujarat. Citing Te. Po. Meenakshisundaranar and his book *Thamizhum Pira Panpaadam* (Tamil Culture and Other Cultures) M S Shantha says that according to him the metaphor of the girl-child clearly indicated the concept of bhakti that the Alwars and Nayanmars propagated. (M S Shantha, 1997: p. 44)

Scholars like R Mahalakshmi while stating that brahmanical religion or no religion for that matter can be seen “as espousing a rigid set of norms” and how Puranic texts often deviate from the norms, (p. 38) are still of the view that maybe devotion to god replaced the devotion to the king for the references used for the temple and the deity were analogous to the references made to the palace and the king. She says this may have blurred the differences between temporality and the sacred place but not the notion of accepting and bowing to authority, both royal and divine. (p. 18) She gives the first line sung by Sundarar in his *Tiruthondathokai*, 7th Tirumurai, verse 39, which begins with “*Tillai vaazh andhanar tam adiyarkkum adiyaen*” (I am the servant of the servants of the Brahmins of Tillai) as an example saying that this underscores the hierarchy in social and religious relationships. (p. 18) Considering the fact that Siva himself gave him the first line to sing, it would seem that the Lord himself was partial to brahmins.

We have some beautiful alternative images in Vidya Dehejia, who in her excellent work *Slaves of the Lord* has shown how bhakti set free the individual from rituals and orthodoxy and made love all permeating and made a simple direct relationship with god with no hierarchies possible. In *Tirumurai* 5, Hymn 99, Verses 2, 4, 6, 8 and 9, Appar makes love for Siva break all the rules:

(*Gangai yaadiyen, Kaviri yaadiyen*)

Why bathe in Ganga or in Kaveri?

or take a holy dip at Kumari?

Why bathe where mingle waters of the seas?

One thing alone will to your rescue come—

Seeing everywhere the Lord Supreme.

(Vedhamodhilen, vaelvikal seythilen)
Why chant the Vedas, follow Vedic karma?
Why preach day by day the books of dharma?
Why the six Vedangas learn by rote?
One thing alone will to your rescue come—
Thinking always of the Lord Supreme.

(Kaana naadu kalanthu thiriyilen?)
Why roam the forests, wander through the towns?
perform strict tapas as in books laid down?
why fast and starve, sit gazing at the blue?
One thing alone will to your rescue come—
Faith in him, Lord of Wisdom True.

(Nandru norkilen pattini yaakilen)
Of what value good penance?
Of what value fasting?
Of what value climbing mountains
to do ardent penance?
Of what value bathing in rivers?
One thing alone will to your rescue come—
Uttering at all times, His name.

(Kodi theerthang kalanthu kuliththavai)
Fetching waters from a thousand tirthas
of what avail such futile ritual act?
Like it is to mindless fool who water brings
and guards it safely in a leaking pot!
One thing alone will to your rescue come—
Loving at all times our gracious Lord.
(Vidya Dehejia, 1988: p.13-14; Verse 8 translation C S Lakshmi)

In the last four lines of his *Tirumurai* 6, hymn 95, verse 10, beginning with the lines *Sanganidhi padumanidhi irandum thanthu* (Even if all the treasures of Lord Kubera are given) he goes even further and breaks the barriers of social distinctions:

(Angamelam kurainthazhugu thozhu noyaraay)
...
Whoever they be
wherever they be
if they bow to Siva
Siva who carries
Ganga in his locks
to me
they are as gods—

they may be lepers foul
with rotting flesh
or outcastes of the lowest breed
they may even
skin the cow and eat its flesh—
if they but love Siva
to them I bow
to them I offer worship.
(Vidya Dehejia, p. 38)

As for Siva as the god who interacts constantly with his devotees teaching his devotees caste is not a factor he would condone and that Brahmin rituals don't really matter to him, there is the instance of Somasimarar Nayanar, a devout Brahmin who believed in performing sacrifices, receiving a boon from Siva through Sundarar, that Siva would personally come and receive his offerings at his next sacrifice. Somasimarar began doing his sacrificial yagna on an auspicious day, surrounded by many Brahmins and others who had gathered to witness it. When the auspicious moment with beating of drums arrived, for making the offering, in walked a man of the Pulaiyar caste who were hunters of wild animals and considered untouchables, holding four dogs, his two sons and his wife carrying a pot of toddy. The Brahmins scattered away in confusion. Somasimarar prayed to Vinayaka, the remover of obstacles, and Vinayaka indicated to him that it was Siva himself who had come as the hunter. Somasimarar prostrated before him and gave him his offerings which he accepted. (Vidya Dehejia, p.16)

And every child in Tamil Nadu knows the story of Kannappa Nayanar who offered roasted pork to Siva. His story, Vidya Dehejia says, contains all the elements of bhakti message— "the irrelevance of caste, the futility of blind adherence to religious injunctions and the paramount importance of a love which is able to withstand all trials." (Ibid, p.23) And there is Nandanar or Tirunalaipovar, again of a caste that supplied leather to make the musical drums of the temple, uniting in the effulgence of Siva like many other Nayanmars. That he entered the fire to be purified has led to some very interesting retellings of his story cast in the mould of upper caste oppression. (See G Rajagopal, *Beyond Bhakti: Steps Ahead*, 2007 and Ravikumar, *Meelum Varalaru*, 2009, for an interesting detailed analysis) If Nandan entered the fire to purify himself as the story goes, there was Thiruneelakanda Yazpanar who along with his wife travelled with Thirugnanasambandar and was received as a guest by Thiruneelanakka Nayanar when Thirugnanasambandar visited him. He and his wife slept in the heart of the house by the pial meant for doing daily sacrificial rituals. So there is no one story here or one pattern.

The Context of Bhakti: Women, Body and Devotion Bhakti and Asceticism:

That the woman's body is an impediment in the way of salvation in a patriarchal society is a perspective that cannot totally be denied. Historians like Vijaya Ramaswamy and Uma Chakravarty have written about how the female body had to be transformed into acceptable forms for it to function in the spiritual world. Uma Chakravarty says that the experience of bhakti was different for the male bhakta and the female bhaktin. The bhakta could be a householder and pursue his relationship with god whereas the bhaktin had to break away from marriage like Avvaiyar or a family life like Karaikkal Ammaiyar. In both cases they had to deal with their bodies in ways in which they had freedom to move about. While Avvaiyar chose to become old, Karaikkal Ammaiyar transformed her sexuality into a fearsome power. Uma Chakravarty also says that lacking space in the society economically and politically bhaktins found the leverage to insert themselves into the mode of bhakti which allowed them to speak directly to god with no intermediary needed and the bhaktins left their words only in this genre of spoken words and what made this possible was turning their bodies unfeminine. (Uma Chakravarty, 1989) C S Lakshmi has also said that women had to literally trample upon their bodies to transcend the body. (C S Lakshmi, 2017) In a thought provoking and extremely relevant study in her book *Walking Naked* Vijaya Ramaswamy speaks about how bitterly contested the sacred space is. Vijaya Ramaswamy's study arises from her own life as a devotee and a disciple of Andavan Pichchai Amma and as someone who explores the sacred space of women looking for the varied ways in which women are situated in ascetic space. (Vijaya Ramaswamy, [1997], 2007)

It will be worthwhile to summarise Vijaya Ramaswamy's views on the ascetic space and women to understand Karaikkal Ammaiyar's life and her devotional poetry. While exploring the concept of gendered spirituality and mysticism she gives a wonderful example of Ramana Maharishi who in one of his talks spoke of the individual ego as the offspring of the supreme self—the Mother. Vijaya goes on to say that transvestism and androgyny can be stages in spirituality located between erotic mysticism at a lower level and gendered transcendence at a higher level. She gives the example of Akka Mahadevi who claimed that she was 'female though in name' was actually 'the male principle'. Basavanna has also said in one of his verses that he was sometimes a woman and sometimes a man. The finest aesthetic experience is, of course, the cult of Ardhanareeswara which provides the vital link between gendered spirituality and ultimate

gendered transcendence. (Vijaya Ramaswamy, p.8)

When gendered spirituality exists within social structures the female principle is symbiotically linked with sexuality. The pursuha or male principle, can be asexual. The Hindu philosophy refers to the ultimate principle which transcends time, space and gender as *parama purusha*. Creation which is tied to concepts like name, form and attributes is associated with Prakriti or the Female Principle. So, in effect, the quality of transcendence becomes unavailable to women whose procreative powers are bound to the earth. Vijaya says that gendered spirituality has to be situated in the context of this male epistemology which foregrounds all philosophical speculations on woman's right to salvation. (p.9)

Surrendering ego for the woman happens when she functions as a selfless, nurturing mother, daughter and wife. She does not seek asceticism beyond that. Women who did not subscribe to these role models were seen as 'dangerous' and 'deviant'. This deviant model clubbed together, "the most variegated social categories of women"—widows, prostitutes and saints. The only common factor among these categories of women was that they did not belong to a male owner/husband. (p.10) However, the spiritual path women chose helped them transcend stereotypes and defy social norms. Akka Mahadevi and Lalleshwari walked naked and Karur Amma broke ritual taboos and insisted on worshipping the linga while she was menstruating. The spiritual woman can seek the godhead naked or as a skeletal being. Karaikkal Ammaiyar not only shed her feminine qualities but even her femaleness. Karaikkal Ammaiyar stood for empowerment of spiritual women in a patriarchal context. Spirituality itself became a mode of empowerment in her case. (pp.19-20) (2) Thus the salvation for women came by opting out of the system and not by any ritual sanction for ascetic practices for women. (p.27) Karaikkal Ammaiyar also opted out.

Other Women and Other Stories:

We have seen the story that Karaikkal Ammaiyar assumed a skeletal form, the form of a ghoulish *pey* and that she referred to herself as Karaikkal Pey. Two things get implied in this transformation into a skeletal form. One is the fear that it invoked and the other is what it indirectly says about women devotees who are householders along with their saintly husbands who figure in *Periya Puranam*. Other scholars who have done work on *Periya Puranam* have spoken about the fear factor. A. Sa. Gnanasambandhan, the renowned Tamil scholar who brought out two volumes of his work on many aspects of *Periya Puranam*, says that the moment Paramadattan saw that his wife had magical powers he saw her as Anangu, the fearsome divine power

worshipped in the Sangam period and could not continue to look upon her as his wife. (A. Sa. Gnanasambandan, 1999: p.534) The magical powers of the Nayanmars invoked no such fears in their wives many of whom we hear about often with no names. The story of Thirunilakanta Nayanar also has the element of bodily transformation. He belonged to the potter's community and used to make begging bowls and give it free of cost to Siva devotees. One day he went to visit a harlot and his wife told him swearing on Siva, never to touch her hereafter. He kept away from her after that and also away from carnal pleasures. The couple got old but both of them continued to worship Siva. Once Siva came as a Siva devotee and kept his begging bowl there for safe custody. The begging bowl had disappeared when he came again. The Siva devotee would not accept an alternate one either. He told the couple to hold hands and dip into the river and prove that they had not stolen the bowl. How could he touch his wife? They held two ends of a stick but finally pushed by the Siva devotee they held hands and dipped into the river and came out looking young. This story has a pleasant kind of transformation but there are others not so pleasant. Apart from the magical part of it, the story also reveals that a wife had the power to keep her husband away even if she took the name of god for it. But there are other stories which work out very differently for women, some even involving violence.

Manakkanjara Nayanar arranged for the marriage of his daughter when Siva came as a saint and asked for the tresses of his daughter who was standing as a bride, to make sacred thread with her hair. Nayanar did not hesitate one second and cut off her hair. With Siva's blessing her locks grew again and the bridegroom who was also a devotee and had allowed the girl's hair to be cut became a saint while the girl had to be satisfied just getting her hair back. Kallikamba Nayanar cut off his wife's hands because she did not offer water to wash the feet of a devotee who was an ex-servant. He got blessed but we don't know if she got her hands back. Kaliya Nayanar tried to sell his wife and Kazharchinga Nayanar was a king who cut off his wife's hand who smelt a flower in the flower pavilion of the temple. Before that a saint cut off her nose. Kotpuli Nayanar killed all his relatives including a child for eating paddy meant for Siva. Fortunately they were brought back to life. Thiruneelanakka Nayanar's wife blew off the spider sitting on the Sivalinga and her spit fell on the spot. He sent her away saying she could not be his wife. Then Siva came in his dream and showed boils on his entire face except where she had not spit. He took her back.

All these stories tell us that there are several aspects to be taken into consideration. Leslie Orr's book *Donors, Devotees and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval*

Tamil Nadu emphasises the need to study patterns of donations to religious establishments which will tell us from the point of view of social history something about women's participation in religious life. Leslie Orr's study is on epigraphic evidence of women's patronage of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism in Tamil Nadu between c.700 and 1700. From the inscriptions women can be seen as donors in all the three religious traditions although the information we have with reference to Hindu temples is more since after the decline of Jainism and Buddhism the evidence of Jain and Buddhist establishments and inscriptions have been mostly erased. Citing Leslie Orr Upinder Singh says that "the social background of women who made donations was more or less similar. Apart from 'religious women' (nuns, temple women, etc.), there were queens, women belonging to the family of chieftains, and wives of landowners, merchants, and Brahmanas. The donations were, for the most part, not so much channelised towards monasteries or mathas as towards supporting worship in shrines. They were for the construction of temples, making images, provision of lamps, flowers, and food for the deity, and providing for those associated with temple services." Leslie Orr "emphasises that instead of looking for female counterparts of priests, ascetics, and monks (the very roles from which they tended to be excluded), it is necessary to recognise the importance of gift giving as a religious activity. If this is done, the abundance of evidence of women donors in various religious traditions gives a picture of active participation, rather than total marginalisation." (Upinder Singh, pp.1109-1110, PDF version)

There were also women like Thilakavathiyar, the elder sister of Thirunavukkarasar who lived as a single woman and a devotee of Siva constantly inspiring her brother to return to the fold of devotees of Siva when he had become a Jain and giving him courage to face all the ordeals. Sharada Srinivasan in her book *Cosmology and Nataraja*, mentions the great accomplishments of the widowed tenth century Chola queen, Sembian Mahadevi. Her husband Gandaraditya (949-957 AD), fasted to death as an ardent devotee of Siva. Sembian Mahadevi did not think her life had come to an end but she "flung herself into a flurry of activity commissioning temples and bronzes until 1006 AD, and went on to found a town in her name. Sembian Mahadevi, defies the 'sati stereotype' of medieval Hindu womanhood. According to Sharada Srinivasan, although "Pallava and Chola inscriptions do suggest that sati (immolation/self-immolation of widows) was rare with women being prominent in patronage and public life, there is the odd reference to sati after battle." It looks like Sembian Mahadevi was an empowered model of widowhood who chose to channelise

energy into creativity. The finest monument to Sembian Mahadevi's devotion to her late husband is the Konerirajapuram temple erected in 972 AD. Sharada Srinivasan says, "It is at least something of an answer to that ultimate monument to the female muse, the peerless Taj Mahal, dedicated by Mughal emperor Shahjahan to his beloved wife." Sharada Srinivasan takes it even further and says that Sembian Mahadevi's story "thus epitomises the notion of 'creation arising, phoenix-like, from the ashes of destruction' as the underlying philosophy and psychology behind the Nataraja bronze." (Sharada Srinivasan, 2018: p.26)

Women, Body and Transformation:

We realise that the Karaikkal Ammaiyar story is also not one story. Let us see her through her songs.

She talks about her life minimally in *Arputhath Thiruvanthathi*. In the very first verse (*Pirandhu mozhi payindra pinnelaang kadhal*) she says:

*Ever since I was born in this world, and learned to speak,
with overwhelming love I have always remained at
Your beautiful feet. O God of the gods, whose blue-suffused
throat
shines incandescently,
when will You take away my sorrows?
(Elaine Craddock and R Mahalakshmi translation in Elaine
Craddock, 2010: p. 115)*

In Verse 29 "*Ivaraip porul unara maattaatharellaam*" she says she can see beyond what others see in his outer appearance. She says:

*Those who know not that
He is the Primal Matter,
Only ridicule Him
With His lotus-red body
Smearred with ash and garlanded with bones.
They see only His fearful pey form
(Translation C S Lakshmi)*

In Verse 41 "*Oru paa lulakalantha maalavanaa matrai*" she talks about Vishnu and Uma covering His body entirely. She says:

*If on your one side is
Maal, who measured the world,
And the other side is Uma,
We cannot see the hue of your body.
Who has covered you-
Is it Maal, or is it Uma?*

(Translation C S Lakshmi)

In Verse 45 "*Pirnavanai nokkum peruneriae paeni*" she says
He resides in her heart.

*Those who pursue the great path focussing on Him
Seeking His grace
And ask 'Where does He reside?'
He is here in the mind of people like me
Those who can see can find Him
(Translation C S Lakshmi)*

In Verse 59 "*Pann punara mattenaan*" she again asks about the quality of His body.

*O You with an eye in Your forehead and a dark throat,
mounted on a bull,
which of Your forms wears the holy ashes?
The form that has Uma? Or the form that has Maal?
I do not understand Your nature.
You please enlighten me Yourself
(Elaine Craddock, p. 126)*

In Verse 61 "*Andrunth thiruvuvam kaanaadhe yaatpattaen*" she does not yet know how He looks.

*Earlier
I was drawn to You
Without even seeing Your divine form
Even now
I cannot see your sacred form
To those who ask how my Lord appears
What shall I answer?
How does your body take shape?
(Translation C S Lakshmi)*

In Verse 65 "*Kalaiye pondrilangu maeni*" His body becomes nature itself.

*His body glows like the bright morning,
the white ash on His body gleams like the midday sun,
His matted hair looks like the hue evening has taken;
moreover, His throat is like the pitch-black darkness.
(Elaine Craddock, p.127)*

In Verse 67 "*Pambum madhiyum madamaanum paaypuliunth*" she sees his body as a huge mountain.

With snake, moon, young deer and leaping tiger

*Suitably placed and the Ganges a murmuring waterfall
His golden body with the bright forehead eye
Resembles a lofty mountain rising from a broad base
(Translation C S Lakshmi)*

In none of the songs do we find details of her life that her hagiographer has told us. M S Shantha in her study of Karaikkal Ammaiyar alludes to several aspects of her life, her songs and her skeletal form. She says that she was the first one to sing the *pathigam* style of singing about god where the poem in praise of a deity consists generally of ten stanzas with the last stanza containing the signature of the poet. She used the *Anthathi* style, a unique style where the last or ending word of each verse becomes the first word of the next verse. She was the first to describe the *Uzhik Koothu*, the dance of destruction of Siva in the cremation ground surrounded by ghouls as a personal experiential expression. She also says that by describing the various musical instruments played during the dance of Siva she inspired what later came to be known as *Thamizhisai*, the music of the Tamils.

Coming to her assuming the form a *pey* and calling herself a *pey* there have been many interpretations of this. Her first verse in the *Thiruvallankattu Mutta Tirupathikam* poems “*Kongai tirangi*” has been taken as a description of herself as a *pey*.

*A female ghoul with withered breasts, bulging veins,
hollow eyes, white teeth, shrivelled stomach,
red hair, two fangs, bony ankles, and elongated shins,
stays in this cemetery, howling angrily.
This place where my Lord dances in the fire with a cool
body,
His streaming hair flying in the eight directions,
is Tiruvallankatu.
(Elaine Craddock, p. 38)*

Her adding *pey* to her name is not unusual for her times. In the 1904 issue of the magazine *Senthamizh* the editor Ra. Iraghavaiyangar has written an article on women poets. He mentions one *Peymagal Ilaveyini* as one of the poets whose poem is in the *Purananuru* poems. (*Arimayirth thiral munkai* –Puram 11) She sang the praise of Cheraman also known as *Perungkadungo*. It is the usual song of seeking gifts from the king. She says another *padini*, a woman bard, sang his praises and was given jewels and the *Panan*, the male bard, who accompanied her was given a golden lotus strung with silver thread. It is sung in a subtle way where she talks about what others have received indicating that she herself has received nothing so far. It is supposed to have been sung in the battle field after a victorious battle. Since her name is *Peymagal*,

the author says, many have interpreted it to mean she was asking for human flesh. The author says this denies her any wisdom and intellectuality. He says the poem actually shows what a sophisticated person she was. He explains her name differently. He says there were women who had magical powers to control spirits who were known as *Thevaraatti* and *Anangaatti*. He says this poet was one such person who had magical powers to keep spirits in her control. Her name indicates only that. (Ra. Iraghavaiyangar, 1904: p.331)

Also there have been others with *Pey* added to their names. Among the Alwar saints there were *Peyazhvar* and *Bhuthathazhvar*. There was *Peyanar* who has sung some hundred songs in *Aingkurunuru*. There was also *Bhutha Pandian* who has written the 71st poem in *Purananuru*. *Napputhanar* wrote the *Mullaippattu*. (Cho. Gnanasambandan, *Ilakkiyasaral* blog)

Siva himself is called *Peyan* and *Peyandi*. We even have a banana which is called *peyan pazham*. Vegetables and other things that cannot be eaten for some reason have a *pey* added to their names like *peysuraikkai* (bottle gourd) *peypudal* (snake gourd), *peypirkkangkai* (ridge gourd). There is even *peykarumbu* (sugar cane) and *peytulasi* (basil).

Francois Gros in his article “*Karaikkalammaiyar: Between Her Legend and Her Works*” argues that the iconography of the skeletal Karaikkal Ammaiyar came much later. And in temple images where she is presented in her skeletal image sitting at the feet of the dancing Siva playing the cymbals she has replaced *Bhringi Rishi* who used to be portrayed sitting at the feet of the dancing Siva. (Francois Gros, in Kannan M and Jennifer Clare (ed), 2009: pp.35-36) *Bhringi* is an ardent devotee of Siva and one of the chief *ganas* of Siva. He has been portrayed with three legs and skeleton-like body.

The skeletal ghoul form of Karaikkal Ammaiyar has been variously seen as the renunciation of a female body in a miraculous way, as a symbol and metaphor of the inferior status of women where the female body impinged on the path to salvation and also as a purely imagined one which has been added on to her legend. While *Vijaya Ramaswamy* talks of it as shedding femininity and acquiring an emaciated almost skeletal body because of “severe ascetic practices” (*Vijaya Ramaswamy*, p.27) others like *Sarada Thallam* say that miracles are part of mysticism and have to be accepted as such as “miracles are an innate aspect of saints’ lives all over the world, whether it be *Ammai* or a *Joan of Arc*. If the miracle of her embracement of the *pey* form cannot be accepted by critics like *Vijaya Ramaswami*, how else could we explain *Ammai*’s journey to *Mt. Kailas* on her hands? How does she travel from Karaikkal to *Kailas*? How does she reach *Tiruvallankadu* from there? In *Ammai* as with the lives of saints all over the world, one needs to bring a willing suspension of

disbelief to accept the prevalence of miracles.” (Sarada Thallam, p.15)

M S Shantha discusses the concept of the *pey* in her study. She cites the work of C K Subramanya Mudaliar on *Periya Puranam* in which he says that this was not a fearsome ghoul that scared people. What she acquired was a body made of five elements where only air remained and other parts were not seen. He calls it the “*pasa udambu*”, a body still bound to life. It has the capacity to move like wind and the bones denoted the earth and it was like purified copper and a magical body but a blessed body that people could see. The body had external factors like speech which enabled her to sing and the inner factors like mind. He also says that one should also take into consideration Aludaiya Nambi and Katrarivar Nayanars assuming a glowing body form when they went to Thirukayilai. (M S Shantha, p.19)

There is also the concept of the body and renunciation itself to consider. Avvaiyar of the 12th century wrote 310 aphorisms which are called *Avvai Kural* where she makes references to the body. The fifteenth and sixteenth aphorisms are interesting in the manner in which the body is referred to in them. In the fifteenth one she says renunciation is only through the body not by consciousness; I say this after thinking through the consciousness that is in the body. (“*Udambina landri yunarvuthanillai*”). The sixteenth one is even more interesting. She says when the mind loses its impurity the body itself becomes god. (“*Masatra kolkai manaththi ladainthakal*”). Thiruvalluvar also in one of his aphorisms refers to the body as a burden. In Kural 345 (*matrum thodarppaatu evan-kol piRapparukkalutraarkku udampum mikai*) he says: When the body itself is a burden on the way to liberation, why carry other attachments?

In an article on Karaikkal Ammaiyar, although with the purpose of decrying feminist perspectives, Jataayu, the Tamil scholar, refers to this Kural and also brings in another interesting factor in perceiving Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s skeletal body as seen in her images. He refers to images and stories about Buddha. When Buddha rose after his penance under the Bodhi tree the flesh of his body is supposed to have completely melted and only the skeletal body remained and images of Buddha with his ribs protruding are quite common. One can view Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s skeletal body similarly. (Jataayu, 2013)

What of the macabre descriptions of the cremation ground, the ghouls and the dance of destruction of Siva that she witnessed? M S Shantha says that description of ghouls is not unusual in Tamil literature. *Tolkappiyam* talks about ghouls. *Kalīngkathubarani* has vivid descriptions of ghouls and Sangam literature also has references to ghouls. Moreover in Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s own songs there is no evidence of

her going to Kayilai walking on her head and Siva calling her mother. M S Shantha also makes an interesting reference to Pasupadham referred to as Leguleesapasupadam which was known in the Tamil region from 2nd century BCE onwards. The Pasupadars lived in Tiruvotriyur and Nagapattinam. Incidentally Paramadattan was from Nagapattinam. Pasupadam is a devotional concept where once rid of earthly desires, god’s qualities come to the devotee. The Pasupadars worship Pasupathi and the linga. They worshipped Siva along with the ganas and the ghouls. It is possible that Karaikkal Ammaiyar had knowledge of the Pasupadars. In Tirumoolar’s *Tirumantiram* which was before the time of Karaikkal Ammaiyar one of the concepts he mentions is Pasupadam.

Travelling Legends and Changing Stories

M S Shantha and A. Sa. Gnanasambandan also talk of how many legends from the Tamil region have travelled to Karnataka and have taken different forms. The stories of the Nayanmars had reached Karnataka and Andhra. In Karnataka the 63 Nayanmars were called Trisasti Puradanaru. Even before the time of Basavanna the stories of the Saiva saints had reached Karnataka and every household was familiar with their stories says Chidanandamurthy who has written the biography of Basavanna, and whom M S Shantha quotes. (p.44) In the 13th century, Harihara, a famous Kannada saint poet, came to the Tamil region and learnt about the Nayanmars and read Sekkizhar’s *Periya Puranam*. On his return he wrote the stories of some of them in what is known as the *Ragale* literary form. Thus he wrote *Nambiyanna Ragale*, *Thiruneelakandan Ragale*, *Bedara Kannappan Ragale*, *Kaarikalamme Ragale*. (pp.45-46)

It is interesting to see the changes that happen to Karaikkal Ammaiyar’s story in Kannada. In the first place her husband’s name was Manikkam Chetty and he was not a Saivite and was a Jain which means there was inter-caste marriage. Since there was no place in her house to worship Siva she worshipped him in her mind. In the Kannada version Kaarikalamme lived with her in-laws. None of them knew about her devotion to Siva. She made the kitchen her place of worship. Her palm was the throne of Siva; her thoughts and memories were her prayer chants; her purity of mind became the water she poured on Siva; the greens in the kitchen became the flowers; her breath was the incense and her sight, the lamp. In this version Siva himself comes as a devotee asking for alms. She asks him why he was visiting a non-Shaivite home and that these were not nice people and may kill him. But since he was hungry she feeds him the mango. Manikkam Chetti comes for lunch and the mango episode happens here too. But here she explains that a Siva devotee had come and then the magic

happens. The husband falls at her feet and says she was his guru henceforth. Kaarikalamme decides to leave the house and go far away. People try to stop her but she assumes the subtle body form and forsakes her flesh. People run away in fear. Then she goes to Thiruvallangadu and sees Siva's dance. Siva tells her "Come with me to Kailasa" and she happily goes but seeing the footprints of other devotees there she decides not to step on them and walks on her head. And when she reaches there Parvati wonders who she is and Siva tells her "This is your mother-in-law." And she becomes one of the Sivaganas.

In *Trisasti Puratanara Charitre* by Suranga Kavi also Kaarikalamme's husband was a Jain but the devotee who visits was a Jangama, a Veerasaiva saint. The same mango episode happens and her husband accepts her as his guru. She feels that a marital relationship was not for her anymore. She decides to leave the house and the city. Some relatives try to stop her but others are enamoured by her beauty and approach her with sexual desire. So she throws away her flesh to them and assumes the subtle body and the rest of the story is the same. Thondatha Siddalinga Kaviyogindra writes a similar story but only her name is Amme. In the last two versions she sheds her body to keep away sexual predators. (M S Shantha, p.50ff)

All the three versions and more which exist refer to her trip to Kailasa walking on her head. But A. Sa. Gnanasambandan while he analyses how histories change when they travel elsewhere explains a very interesting twist that happens in Karaikkal Ammaiyar's story in Harihara's version taken from one of the local Kannada versions which M S Shantha does not mention. In this version Karaikkal Ammaiyar is walking on her head on the road in her skeletal form on the way to Kayilai. Sundaramurthy Nayanar and Cheraman Perumal who are also on their way to Kayilai meet her on the way and tell her that Kayilai is very far and at the rate she was going it will take her ages to reach there and continue on their way. Ammaiyar weeps bitterly. Her tears become a river and reach Kayilai. Siva helps her to come floating in the river of her tears and reach Kayilai. A. Sa. Gnanasambandan says there is an oral history story about Avvaiyar which was somewhat similar in Tamil Nadu. The story goes that Avvaiyar had heard that Sundarar and Cheraman were going to Kayilai and she was hurrying with her worship of Vinayaka because she too wanted to go. Vinayaka asked her, "Paatti, what is the hurry?" And she told him she wanted to go with Nambi and Cheraman. Vinayaka told her not to rush her worship and she conducted her worship in the usual manner after which he lifted her with his trunk and reached her to Kayilai even before the other two. A. Sa. Gnanasambandan says this story may have

reached Karnataka and it could have got incorporated in the Karaikkal Ammaiyar story differently. (A. Sa. Gnanasambandan, pp.434-35) (3)

Where Siva Chooses to Dance

So where exactly does Siva dance? Elaine Craddock interprets both the *pey* form and the dance in terms of symbolisms found in Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry. Referring to *Arputath Tiruvantathi* verse 29, 30 and the 17th verse in *Tiruvirattai Manimalai* where she describes the *pey* form of Siva that others see and how He happily dances wearing the skull garland and the bones of others scattered on the cremation ground. For Elaine Craddock the bones are a central liberation motif in Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry. She identifies different forms of bones—there is the skeletal figure of Ammaiyar herself and then the bones which are lying on the cremation ground but also liberated by the cremation ground. The bones Siva finds in the cremation ground which Siva ornaments himself with belong to everyone and anyone; Elaine Craddock says that is a gesture of non-discrimination; that Siva does not discriminate between devotees. (Elaine Craddock, p.51)

The ultimate answer to where Siva dances comes from Ananda Coomaraswamy. In his *The Dance of Siva*, referring to verses from *Tirukkoothu Darisanam* (Vision of the Sacred Dance) forming the ninth tantra of Tirumoolar's *Tirumandiram* and *Unami Vilakkam* (Explaining Truth) by Manavasakan Kadantar he says the deepest significance of Siva's dance is felt "when it is realised that it takes place within the heart and the self. Everywhere is God: that Everywhere is the heart." He further explains: "Siva is a destroyer and loves the burning ground. But what does He destroy? Not merely the heavens and earth at the close of a world-cycle, but the fetters that bind each separate soul. Where and what is the burning ground? It is not the place where our earthly bodies are cremated, but the hearts of His lovers, laid waste and desolate. The place where the ego is destroyed signifies the state where illusion and deeds are burnt away: that is the crematorium, the burning-ground where Sri Nataraja dances, and whence He is named Sudalaiyadi, Dancer of the burning ground. In this simile, we recognise the historical connection between Siva's gracious dance as Nataraja, and His wild dance as the demon of the cemetery."

Ananda Coomaraswamy also makes an interesting connection of this dance with the Saktas. He says: "This conception of the dance is current also amongst Saktas, especially in Bengal, where the Mother rather than the Father aspect of Siva is adored. Kali is here the dancer, for whose

entrance the heart must be purified by fire, made empty by renunciation. A Bengali hymn to Kali voices this prayer:

*Because Thou lovest the Burning-ground,
I have made a Burning-ground of my heart —
That Thou, Dark One, haunter of the Burning-ground,
Mayest dance Thy eternal dance.
Nought else is within my heart, o Mother...*

Sharada Srinivasan who says one needs to see beyond vision says that the Nataraja does have elements of a morbid death cult but that nevertheless, “the Nataraja can also be seen as something of a reassuring and comforting Jungian archetype: spurring the emergence of creativity from loss and destruction as a therapeutic process. (p. 26)

Post-Script: In the introduction to her book Leslie Orr says that as a preface to her book, *Women on the Margins*, Natalie Zemon Davis engages in an imagined conversation with her subjects, three seventeenth century European women. Leslie Orr says that “Natalie Davis, displaying considerable courage, confronts the fact that the women she is writing about would not have appreciated or even recognised her description and analysis of their lives.” (Leslie Orr, p.v) C S Lakshmi, one of the authors of this essay, had similar doubts and thought it may be an interesting idea to time travel and have a conversation with Karaikkal Ammaiyar. The conversation would take time to transcribe as Karaikkal Ammaiyar stopped often in between wondering if Lakshmi knew who she was talking to and went into long silences and had to be coaxed back into the conversation. When she was told there were festivals in her name and that in such festivals when god is taken on procession people make wishes and throw mangoes at Him and that childless couples who eat the mangoes thrown are blessed with children the very next year, she had a good laugh and said that in her own life time apart from Paramadattan and the Siva devotee, she had offered mangoes to no one after that incident. Before she lapsed into silence again Lakshmi quickly asked her, “Did you really see Siva dance?” “Yes,” she said, “in my heart. Isn’t that where He is supposed to dance?”

Endnotes

1. A very interesting story needs to be told here. In the early years of the twentieth century a series of books under the title *The Religious Life of India* was brought out edited by J. N. Farquhar, M.A., D.Litt., Literary Secretary, National Council Young Men’s Christian Associations, India, Burma and Ceylon; and Nicol Macnicol, M.A., D.Litt. By 1921 they had already published *The Ahmadiya Movement* by H. A. Walter, M.A. and *The Chamars* by G. W. Briggs, M.Sc., Cawnpore. And the following books were under preparation.

The Hindu Religious Year by M.M. Underbill, B.A., B.Litt., Nasik.
The Vaishnavism of Pandharpur by Nicol Macnicol, M.A., D.Litt., Poona.
The Chaitanyas by M. T. Kennedy, M.A., Calcutta.
The Sri-Vaishnavas by E. C. Worman, M.A., Madras.
The Ramanandis by C. T. Groves, M.A., Fyzabad.
Kabir and his Followers by F. E. Keay, M.A., Jubbulpore.
The Dadupanthis by W. G. Orr, M.A., B.D., Jaipur.
The Virasaivas by W. E. Tomlinson, Mangalore, and W. Perston, Tumkur.
The Tamil Saiva Siddhanta by Gordon Matthews, M.A., B.D., Madras, and J. S. Masilamani, B.D., Pasumalai.
The Brahma Movement by Manilal C. Parekh, B.A., Rajkot, Kathiawar.
The Ramakrishna Movement by J. N. C. Ganguly, B.A., Calcutta.
The Khojas by W. M. Hume, B.A., Lahore.
The Malas and Madigas by the Bishop of Dornakal, P. B. Emmet, B.A., Kurnool, and S. Nicholson, Cuddapah.
The Dheds by Mrs. Sinclair Stevenson, M.A., Sc.D., Rajkot, Kathiawar.
The Mahars by A. Robertson, M.A., Poona.
The Bhils by D. Lewis, Jhalod, Panch Mahals.
The Criminal Tribes by O. H. B. Starte. I.C.S., Bijapur

In 1921 was published a revised and enlarged second edition of a book entitled *The Village Gods of South India* written by Right Reverend Henry Whitehead, the Bishop of Madras. There is no information on when the first edition was brought out. However, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, reprinted this second edition in 1988. The editorial preface which explained the purpose of the series in the 1921 edition, was “to produce really reliable information for the use of all who are seeking the welfare of India” and that the editor and writers alike “desire to work in the spirit of the best modern science, looking only for the truth.” They explained the method they wanted to adopt to apply this “best modern science method” thus: “In each case the religion described is brought into relation with Christianity. It is believed that all readers in India at least will recognise the value of this practical method of bringing out the salient features of Indian religious life.” Reverend Whitehead says in his preface that the book is based on his own observation and inquiry and goes on to say in the introduction that “The worship of the village gods is the most ancient form of Indian religion. Before the Aryan invasion, which probably took place in the second millennium B.C., the old inhabitants of India, who are sometimes called Dravidians, were a dark-skinned race, with religious beliefs and customs that probably did not greatly differ from those of other primitive races. They believed the world to be peopled by a multitude of spirits, good and bad, who were the cause of all unusual events, and especially of diseases and disasters. The object of their religion was to propitiate these innumerable spirits. At the same time, each village seems to have been under the protection of some one spirit, who was its guardian deity. Probably these village deities came into being at the period when the people began to settle down in agricultural communities. We may see in them the germs of the national deities which were so prominent among the Semitic races and the great empires of Egypt, Nineveh, and Babylon. Where the family developed into a clan, and the clan into a tribe, and the tribe into a

nation, and the nation into a conquering empire, the god of the family naturally developed into an imperial deity. But in ancient India, before the coming of the Aryans, the population seems to have been split up into small agricultural and pastoral communities. There were no nations and no conquering empires. And it was not till the Aryan invaders had conquered North India and had settled down in the country, that there was in India any growth of philosophic thought about the world as a whole. The problem of the universe did not interest the simple Dravidian folk. They only looked for an explanation of the facts and troubles of village life. Their religion, therefore, did not advance beyond a crude animism and belief in village deities. Later on, after the Aryans had overrun a large part of India, and the Brahmans had established their ascendancy as a priestly caste, the old Dravidian cults were influenced by the superior religion of the Aryans, and strongly reacted on them in turn." It is surprising that years later in some interesting research works done as recently as 2007 (See G Rajagopal, *Beyond Bhakti Steps Ahead*, 2007) H Whitehead's initial lines saying each village had a guardian deity are quoted without any reference to the later lines where he says that the Dravidian religion did not advance beyond a crude animism and that the problem of the universe did not interest the simple Dravidian folk.

2. Vijaya Ramaswamy elaborates on the absence of monastic orders by women. She says that Tantrism has sustained female monastic orders in the east but not in the south of India. In the south of India, Shaktha worshippers, even Sri Chakra worshippers, exclude women from the performance of rituals or the headship of Shakthi Peethams. Orthodox Hindu texts say that women cannot utter the Aum. She says in Islam there are women mystics. Dara Shikoh gives a list of 33 women mystics but not a single one of them established a *silsila* or order. Women's entry into Buddhism or Jainism was not easy either. We all know the story of Prajapathi Gautami, Buddha's adoptive mother, who approached him thrice to join the sangha with 500 women followers but was refused. Finally she was admitted when Buddha's disciple interceded on her behalf but with the ominous rider that the Buddhist monastic orders were fated to be short lived because of the entry of women. Vijaya says that Romila Thapar did touch upon women's asceticism and sangha for women in her article "Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-Culture" written in 1978, but gender problems figured only peripherally in the article although she accepted the patriarchal ordering of authority in which nuns paid implicit obedience to the male monks. In Christianity only in the 12th century did women get space in the monastic orders. In Virasaivism also women were given Janghama status only in theory. These stereotypes have been broken too. Vijaya mentions that Paravati Amma who was a devotee told her that the deity represented by the *pranava mantra* was a woman—Gayatri—and that she saw no rationality behind the exclusion of women by men from uttering it. Andavan Pichchi Amma, another realised soul, and Vijaya's guru, told her that she was initiated into the *pranava mantra* by Sri Ramana in a vision. Sri Ramanujar, in fact, conferred ochre robe on Siriya Andal,

his cousin's wife and chief disciple of Govinda Embar. (pp.25ff) In recent times, we only know of Ramana Maharishi, the only wise soul who broke these social norms and accepted his mother Azhagammal as a sanyasin and gave her instructions and finally built a samadhi for her in Ramanashram. Vijaya mentions Aanandamayi Ma of Bengal who has spoken of spiritual equality of women and men and who has given sacred threads to girls and initiated them into *brahmacharya* and has also conferred sanyasa on some deserving women. All the four Shankaracharyas of Jyotirmath, Dwaraka, Puri and Shringeri have opposed it (p.27) just as they opposed Shri Ramana making a samadhi for his mother.

3. Legends always get interpreted differently over the years. Annaswamy Sraudigal who publishes in 1966 a fourth edition of the book on Karaikkal Ammaiyar says that there was one thing that always bothered him about Karaikkal Ammaiyar walking on her head to Kailasa. Which way was her head facing? Surely she could not have walked showing her back to Siva! There were other issues that were worrying him too. A scholar in both Tamil and Sanskrit, he says in the preface, he has quoted from Sanskrit texts because the Smartha Brahmins who are not interested nor trained well in Tamil may place greater faith in the Sanskrit sources and develop devotion towards Siva. Right below the short preface is an advertisement for khadi shawls which says that either the Panchakshara or the names of Hari or Hara would be printed in both Tamil and Sanskrit according to the preference of the customers and given. The advertisement suggests that printing in both the languages would be better. (Annaswamy Sraudigal, p.1)

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WELCOME BACK INTERNS AND RESEARCHERS!

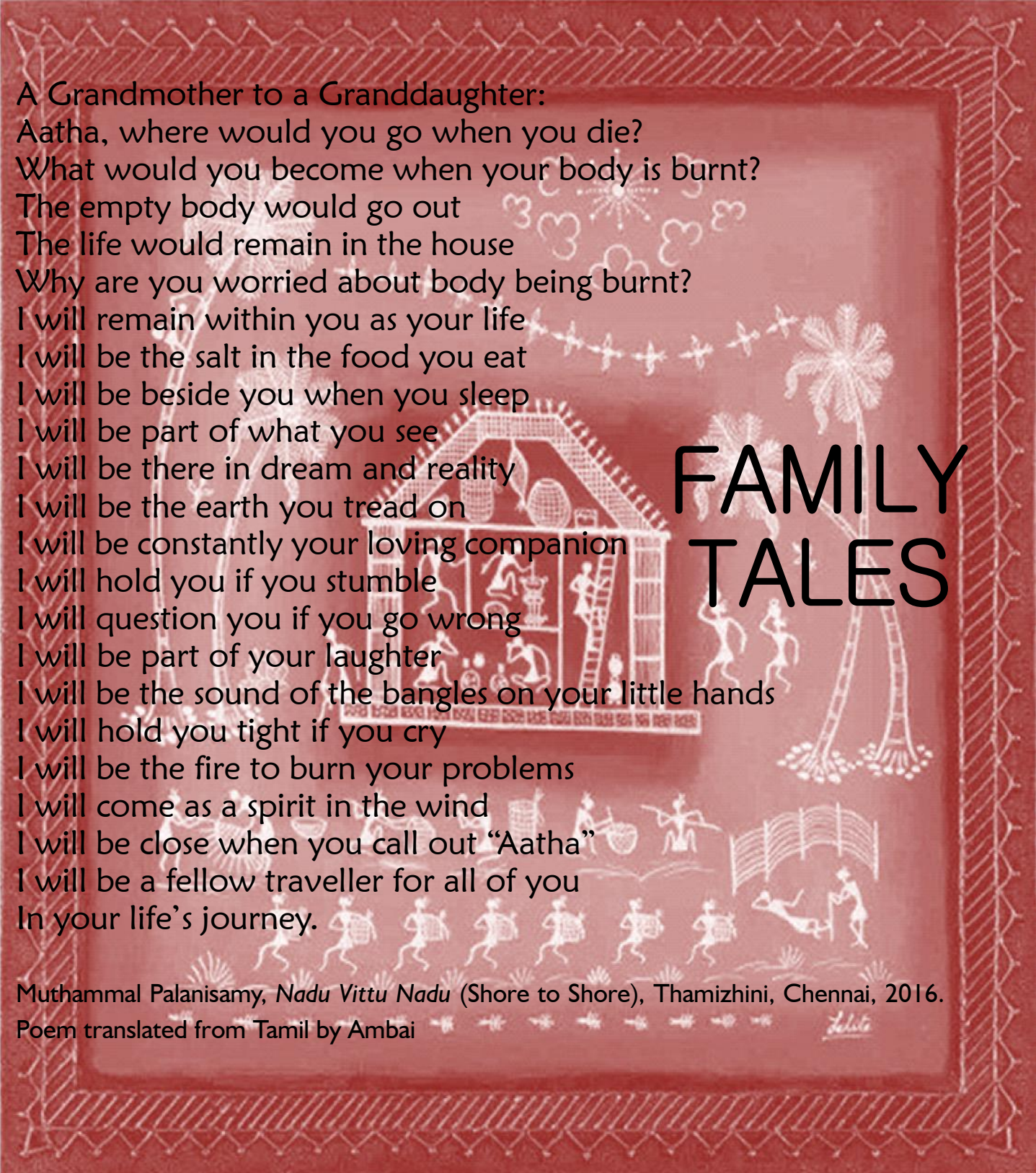
After two years of pandemic SPARROW is NOW OPEN for CONSULTATION and INTERNSHIP.



Two interns Ms Karen Sajan (MA English – Part II) of SNDT Women's University, Mumbai and Ms. Pritika Mehta (MA English – Part II) of SNDT Women's University, Mumbai successfully completed their internship this year 2022.

Priyam Sinha, a Ph D candidate at the Department of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore & Jiya Pandya, a PhD candidate at Princeton University in History and Gender and Sexuality Studies visited SPARROW this year 2022.





A Grandmother to a Granddaughter:
Aatha, where would you go when you die?
What would you become when your body is burnt?
The empty body would go out
The life would remain in the house
Why are you worried about body being burnt?
I will remain within you as your life
I will be the salt in the food you eat
I will be beside you when you sleep
I will be part of what you see
I will be there in dream and reality
I will be the earth you tread on
I will be constantly your loving companion
I will hold you if you stumble
I will question you if you go wrong
I will be part of your laughter
I will be the sound of the bangles on your little hands
I will hold you tight if you cry
I will be the fire to burn your problems
I will come as a spirit in the wind
I will be close when you call out "Aatha"
I will be a fellow traveller for all of you
In your life's journey.

FAMILY TALES

Muthammal Palanisamy, *Nadu Vittu Nadu (Shore to Shore)*, Thamizhini, Chennai, 2016.
Poem translated from Tamil by Ambai

Personal Struggles are Political Struggles: The First Woman Graduate in My Family

Anjali Monteiro

In the grand narratives of empowerment, the micro struggles often fall by the way, remaining undocumented and unacknowledged. Feminism, with its assertion of the personal as political, makes room for understanding and honouring these little journeys of individual and collective resistance to the flows of power that mark the lives of women across time and space. If I reach back into the history of my own family, an upper middle class, Goan Catholic family, I can find several women who have inspired me, who have negotiated with patriarchy in their own ways, creating rooms of their own and broadening the scope of resistance for subsequent generations. My mother, Sofia Cordeiro Monteiro, is one of them.

Sofia was the first woman graduate in her family, at a time when education for girls beyond a certain level was not common. Born in 1919, she lived in Goa (then a colony of Portugal), where there were no facilities for University education. She was a brilliant student, finishing her SSC with distinction in 1937. She was awarded the Dalgado Portuguese scholarship, which entitled her to a completely free education in any college in Bombay. However, her paternal grandmother did not want her to leave Goa. It was unheard of for girls to leave home for higher education in those days. She writes in her memoirs:

I was now confronted with a big problem. My grandmother refused to give me permission to study in a college in Bombay. Fortunately my uncle Jose, my father's brother, who lived in Bombay with his wife and three children, came to my rescue and said that I could stay with them. My grandmother accepted this arrangement with great reluctance. I left home for Bombay with tears in my eyes. I felt very lonely and missed the warmth of my parents and siblings. I cried for two days and finally told my uncle that I wanted to

return to my parents. He shouted at me. Finally I decided to stay on. I joined St. Xavier's College where I was awarded another scholarship of Rs. 90 (it was a princely sum then) for having the second highest marks among all first year students who joined the college.

Sofia finished her inter arts exam with distinction in Mathematics and French. She wanted to take Mathematics as her main subject for her BA, but her uncle did not permit her and so she chose French. She turned down several marriage proposals while she was studying and graduated with a very high first class in 1941. Whilst she was a student,



Sofia Monteiro

she fell in love with a fellow college mate. Due to family opposition, she could not marry him for many years. She went back to Goa, did her B.Ed and became a school teacher. She finally married him in 1945. She was widowed at 30, remarried her husband's brother (my father) a few years later and had a total of 5 children.

My earliest memories of my parents are of my father's warm motherly embrace and my mother's great love for reading. In many ways, they defied gender stereotypes. Inocencio, my father, was the more gentle, artistic and soft-spoken one, who rarely if ever scolded us. Sofia was more assertive, intellectually inclined and mercurial. Very different from each other, their lives entwined and created a beautiful space where all who entered felt loved, unconditionally accepted and understood. This unconditional acceptance is very rare, bound as most of us tend to be in our iron chest of norms, beliefs and prejudices. The imagination and the generosity of spirit to accept difference, to be non-judgmental while at the same time holding on to one's beliefs and values is truly exceptional, and this is the most important lesson

that I imbibed from my parents. It is perhaps what encouraged the five of us children to think and act in ways that defied societal norms and to forge our own paths.

My mother was a dedicated and popular teacher of Maths, French and English all her working life. She taught in schools across the country for over 30 years, accompanying my father, who was an officer in the Indian army, on his transfers. She retired in the late 1970s, as the Principal of a teacher training college in Goa. A powerful, socially engaged and gutsy woman, she imparted to all her children a love of Maths, a passion for reading, a sense of social commitment and a zest for life.

Sofia was a great raconteur and would relish telling the same stories over and over again! I have fond memories of her spending all morning on the verandah of our home in Goa, in her old age, deeply immersed in reading the newspaper from cover to cover, and then moving on to a book, oblivious to all around her. After my father's death in 2004, to pick herself out of feelings of loneliness and depression, she wrote her memoirs, just for her family. It is a marvellous, unsentimental and refreshingly honest description of her life and times. The book was released just 4 days before she passed away of cancer in February 2007. At the time of her death, she was reading three books simultaneously—one of them was Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul!

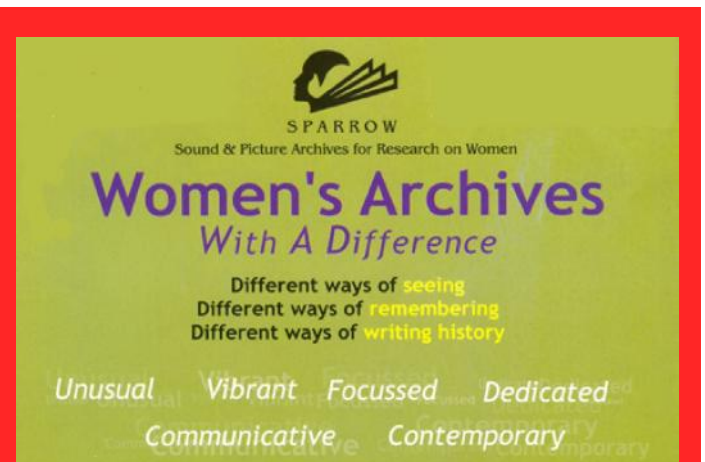
—Anjali Monteiro

This article first appeared in FemAsia magazine 25 October, 2020 issue. We thank FemAsia for allowing us to reprint it.



Anjali Monteiro is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, media researcher and teacher. She has recently retired as a Professor and Dean of the School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. More about her work at www.monteiro-jayasankar.com

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

The conversations can be viewed on the following links

Conversation with Kalyanee Mulay

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSSOEwjKbERIPDZ7pjc6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Vimmi Sadarangani & Puthiyamaadhavai

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSSOEwjKbERIPDZ7pjc6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Jhelum Paranjape

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTxTDSSOEwjKbERIPDZ7pjc6UzqVPzvZV>

Conversation with Purvadhanashree & Ranjana Dave

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySGI55ZhsBEdaH0dnf8q0zc>

Conversation with Sumathi Murthy

https://www.youtube.com/_playlist?list=PLGQe1I6sLySGI55ZhsBEdaH0dnf8q0zc

Conversation Sudha Arora

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

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

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

The Banyan Tree And Its Aerial roots

Damodar Chandru

On 7th June 2013, my paternal grandmother Pavayammal passed away at the age of 96. Her death kindled many memories of her that I have stored in my heart. My Appatha, which is how we addressed our grandmother, was the one who planted the banyan tree of our family and she tended to it with great care and thus grew the banyan tree of our family with many aerial roots. She lived to see five generations of her family and what a grand life hers was! I was her eldest grandson and she had a special love for me. She had given me breast as a child.

Appatha was a hardworking woman. She got married to my grandfather at the age of 15. My grandfather's name was Palaniappa Gounder. Appatha was not educated. My thatha had studied up to 5th Standard of those days. Theirs was not a consanguineous marriage. They came from two different families. Appatha had an elder brother. Her father had a shop that sold cottonseed. Her elder brother had set up a rice mill plant. It was a well-to-do family. Appatha and grandfather had four sons and no daughters. My father was the eldest. Till my father was born they stayed in a village called Perodu near Erode. After his birth they came away from their native place to the village South Naththam near Thanjavur Oraththanadu. They bought land there, made it cultivable and began to do farming. Appatha was someone who did all the exacting work that farming life demanded. Both of them worked hard and earned well and bought seventy acres of land and built a huge house and lived in that.

They owned some seventy buffaloes and Appatha also did milk business with 100 litres of milk every day. I lived with

them for five years and was a part of this farming life. My Chithappa, my father's third brother, stayed with them. The other two Chithappas stayed with my father in Erode and studied there. Including those who have come into our family after marriage we are now 63 members in our family.

For some reason Appatha had got estranged from her own family and the relationship was renewed only after her elder brother's death. So her entire life was devoted to her own family and children and grandchildren. When it was the sowing season some seventy to eighty agricultural hands would work in the fields. Appatha would cook for all of them singlehanded and send food across to the fields. Even when visitors who were not close to us or known to us came she would insist that they should eat and go.

She dressed very simply and in the traditional manner. I don't remember ever seeing her with a blouse. My grandfather would get up at 3 a.m. and feed the buffaloes with cottonseed and bran. Appatha would also get up around that time and be ready with the milk cans. Chithappa and Thatha used to milk the cows. People used to come from nearby villages and around 100 litres of milk was sold to them every day.

They were very loving towards me. There is an interesting story about how I came to stay with them for five years. An incident happened in my teenage years when I lived with my parents. I was in 11th then. Last year in school. After that it was Plus Two. We were the last batch doing 11th. I was a good student. Like it is for many in their teenage years my father seemed like a villain to me at that age. On a Saturday my father and I had a quarrel. Monday was the annual exam. My father had really walloped me. I did not want to live there anymore and went away to my

Ammayi's house. Ammayi was my maternal grandmother. We called her Ammayi. Ammayi saw the marks on my body and began to cry. She gave me some money and asked me to go to Thanjavur to my Appatha's house. I decided my future was going to be with Appatha and came to Thanjavur. I still had the memory of sleeping on her chest as a child. When I reached there she hugged me and said, "You don't have to go anywhere. Stay with me."

From my young age Appatha was some kind of an ideal for me. Most of the properties that we bought in Erode were from the money sent from Thanjavur by Thatha and



Pavayammal Gounder (Appatha)

Appatha. If anyone in the village got sick at night they would come home. Orathanadu was seven kilometres away. Ours was the only house that had a tractor. We would not hesitate to take them at night in the tractor to the hospital. Appatha was ever willing to help others. She was an Annapoorani who fed everyone.

I got married in the eighties. Chithappa and his family stayed on with Thatha and Appatha. I came to Erode and joined my father in his textile business and the business flourished after that. My father did not want Thatha and Appatha to stay there on their own and wanted to bring them to Erode. We brought them almost against their will to Erode. But they had laid down a condition to their moving to Erode—they said they would prefer to live independently and that they needed some land to cultivate. So they came here and did farming and also had buffaloes in the cattle shed. In the South Naththam village we had an orchard of some two acres. They donated it to the Primary School of the village. That school is still functioning in that village.

Even though they had come away love for that village did not ever go away from their hearts. Appatha would keep mentioning the names of all the women in the village. There was no cell phone then. So she could not talk to anyone and that left her very lonely. I used to spend all my Sundays with them. Thatha and I used to sit and enjoy a drink together. Appatha would cook delicious mutton.

Thatha died in 2007 at the age of 90. Thatha enjoyed reading. He was a member of the Oraththanadu library. He enjoyed reading historical novels by Chandilyan and Kalki. It was through him that my reading habit began. Appatha lived six years after him. She was adamant about living on her own. We used to visit her at least once a day. All the festivals were celebrated with her. In Perodu village where Thatha was born, we have built a guest house in their memory. All of us gather there during festivals even now.

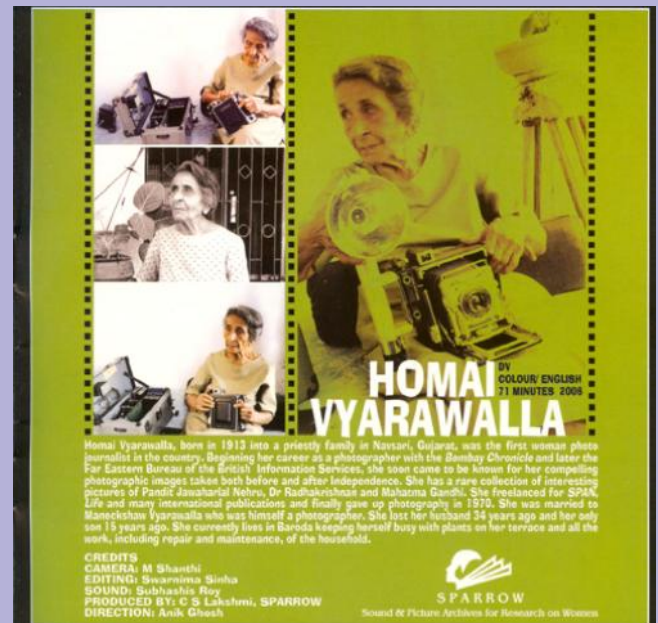
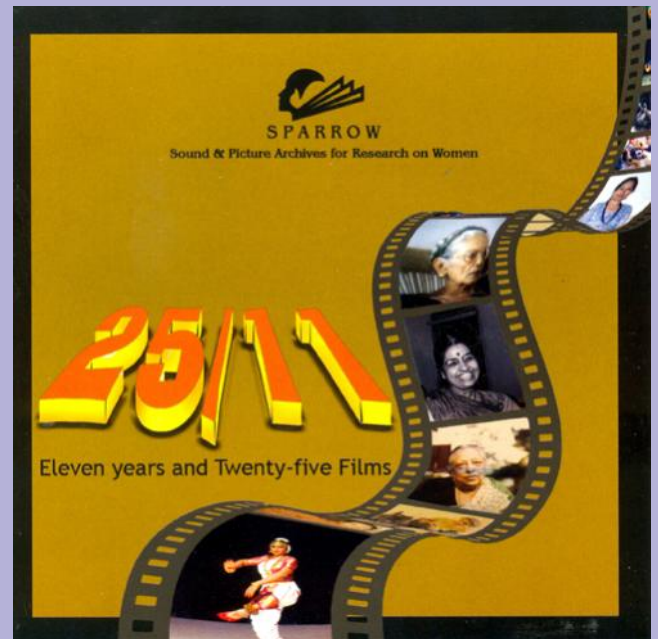
—Translated from Tamil by C S Lakshmi



Damodar Chandru used to be the Manging Director at Jayya Chandra Mills, his family enterprise. He continues to do textile business. He is an avid reader of modern Tamil literature and all writers who visit Erode inevitably end up at his place for a meal and the lucky women writers always get a sari from him.

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SPARROW FILM





Duraisamy

My Father and His Struggles for Justice

Durai Guna

In 1977, when my father Duraisamy got married to my mother Mookayi and came to Kulanthiranpattu he was asked to fall at the feet of the locally dominant caste of Kallars in the village and pay his respects. My father was the first communist who refused to fall at the feet of locally dominant castes.

Appa asked the Kallars who were the dominant caste in the village: "Should I fall at your feet for marrying a girl from this village or should I fall at your feet to ask you to meet the debt of ten or twenty thousand rupees that I have accumulated for the marriage expenses?" And that is how he began to rebel.

Had Appa compromised he could have gone places. B Srinivasa Rao, affectionately called BSR, who was one among the pioneers of the communist movement and peasant movement in Tamil Nadu especially in East Thanjavur, put forward the slogan "If you are hit, hit them back". At that time the unwritten rule in the Kaduvettividuthi village in the Thanjavur District was that the locally dominant castes would be given rice first in the part-time grocery store in the village and only after that would the scheduled castes be given. Appa questioned this system. They hit my father and my father hit them back. The heads of many Kallars got broken that day.

Next day in the Mariamman Temple compound of Thiruvonam village, the Kallars of ten villages held a meeting. They put a price on my father's head. The police searched for my father high and low. Our relatives were harassed by the police. Then they arrested Appa. They broke many police batons in the lock-up in the process of beating up Appa. Appa escaped from the police station. Later he went underground for two years and lived in villages like Nambivayal and Naduvikottai.

In the Kaduvettividuthi village the locally dominant castes had done land classification and taken away seven and a half acres of land that belonged to the Dalits. Appa did not allow them to get away with that. He fought legal battles for 19 years and won that land back. T Murugaraj, who was the Thanjavur Collector then, took the trouble to go through Appa's honest demands and issued the necessary orders.

Today when I fight against injustice, Appa, who is now ailing and resting at home, would tell me:

"Your struggle may fail; but you should never withdraw from the struggle. You should never prostitute yourself for money even if it means giving up your life."

I must add that my mother Mookayi stood by my father in all his struggles against injustice.



Durai Guna is a Tamil writer and Dalit activist.



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



Saris Smelling of Naphthalene Balls and Vappumma

—Shameela Yoosuf Ali

The year was 2012. Exams were around the corner. My sister and I had locked up ourselves in a room and sitting with cups of half-drunk tea and notes for the exam.

It was past midnight. Umma, tired of calling out to us several times to come and have our food, had gone to sleep. I must have gone to sleep on the floor with the Economics notebook spread on my chest. I don't remember how long I had been asleep.

Some strange dream. But it was cut short when the telephone rang. I ran and picked it up and heard someone saying in a crying voice: "Ummumma is not well. We are taking her to OSRO hospital. Please ask Vappa to come."

My legs moved of their own volition, and I found myself standing outside Vappa's room. By then, a three-wheeler stood outside the house. I ran and tried to shake Vappumma, who was sitting leaning back in the auto. "Vappumma, Vappumma," I called out to her. Vappumma's head fell back with a last long sigh.

Till the end, she had continued to ask for her eldest son, they said. Her eldest son was my father. All medical interventions failed, and a soul fluttered its wings to the Supreme One.

"*Vappumma mauthaakittaanga...*" (Vappumma is no more)

I don't remember who uttered those words. But I collapsed, not being able to bear the weight of those words. My whole world shattered. It was the first death that deeply affected me in my adolescent years.

Vappumma—

When Ummumma had passed away, Umma was just three years old. Umma's Vappa had been buried just before my birth.

When Appaa (Vappa's Vappa), who was fair and tall, had died, I was just six years old.

So for us, the only one who was the bridge to the magical world of old times was Vappumma.

When writing about Vappumma, the confusion is what to write and what to leave out. That is because my heart is filled with memories enough to write a book.

Besides, some memories are special; deeply personal. I let those memories be only between Vappumma and us.

Vappumma had studied only up to Fifth Standard. But even in those days, she was determined to educate her children. Her family had lived well with a car and no dearth of money. But it was later thrown to times of struggle for everyday meals.

I cannot even imagine what she must have gone through to educate and take care of her nine children! Vappumma's



Vappumma

specific instruction to all was that one should not exhibit one's poverty and seek sympathy and support from others.

Though one wears torn rags or fills one's stomach with a bit of porridge, if guests showed up, one had to cut a chicken from the home poultry and prepare a grand meal. She believed in such kind of hospitality.

Vappumma was a little shorter than average. She had a wheatish complexion bordering on the dark. She had jet black hair that had not greyed till the end. She had passed 83 summers at the time of her death.

Vappumma was not comfortable staying with her children. So till her last breath, she remained alone in the detached house built by my father for her.

When we go past that house with the copper plate with No:7 written on it, we can see Vappumma standing at the

doorway leaning on her walking stick.... Is this an illusion or real? I am not able to make out even today.

It was a small paradise with a firewood stove on one side and some chairs on the other side, and a dividing wall in between. She had many grandchildren of different ages.

Vappumma always kept some special snacks ready for children. She considered even Vappa, who had crossed fifty and my chachas as children.

We have never returned from her house without either dates, biscuit, rock sugar or the oil-dripping dodol or all of them together pressed into our hands.

Have you heard the story of dates coming alive?

Vappumma could eat dates only after crushing them open in a small hand-held mortar and pestle. So one day, as usual, she put the date in the mortar and was about to crack it open. But the date slipped from the fingers and began to run fast, escaping the pestle. It turned out to be a cockroach! I can't help bursting into laughter even now.

And then there is Vappumma's kiss. Again, not something one can easily forget.

I can still feel the warmth of that kiss on my cheeks. Since we all had grown taller than Vappumma, we would bend down to receive that kiss which was an outpouring of all her love.

A grandson of Vappumma had bought her a radio. So she would listen to the Muslim programme which plays from 8 to 9 p.m. on the radio.

Her life ran according to an unwritten timetable. It was more disciplined than that of a working woman. She liked only half-ripe fruits, and she had to eat on time. Whether there was thunder or rain, she would bathe in the morning. Even if she had a cold or fever, she would not stop bathing. After the bath, she would drink tender coconut water as a regular routine. And she would tie her hair into a tiny bun. The last time I saw her, it was with her hair pulled back into a bun.

I did not know then that it would be the last time I would take leave of her.

Vappumma's favourite colour was black-tinged red and dark violet. When Vappumma spoke, one felt as if one was watching a play. When she described some incidents, she would become the characters she was talking about. And in her speech, there would be a generous blend of words from colloquial Tamil no more in use such as *Etharakkatti* (Ice cube) *Vagarakkattu* (broom), *Sira* (Stick).

I must definitely tell you about Vappumma's cooking. Those who walk past her kitchen would need an extra nose. Especially the beef fry she made... my mouth waters even now when I think of it. I have eaten many different varieties of beef fries cooked in western, eastern and Indian and

Chinese styles. But I can swear the taste and fragrance of Vappumma's beef fry is something else; it is incomparable.

Vappumma had an old traditional almirah. It could be taken apart and set together. Our regular pastime was to open the almirah and run our hands over her saris smelling of naphthalene balls.

We have never seen her lying down sick on a mat. On the contrary, even before her death, she swept her garden and burned the trash.

Vappumma is a history by herself. So what I can offer here are only prayers and droplets of tears.

You sleep in the qabar in the dark graveyard

Vappumma

No more the agony of listening again

Your talking as narrating stories.

At midnights when it rains and thunders

The dark graveyard and Vappumma's dead body—

The memory of it evokes pain.

On Fridays Vappa never fails to say

That he saw you standing with your walking stick

Near the qabar.

I am able to fathom

The unbearable pain Vappa experiences

Even in his sixties.

Vappumma

The henna shrub that has flourished

Absorbing your body juices

Might know

That death is only an exit door

And that life is endless.

—Translated from Tamil by C S Lakshmi and Shameela Yoosuf Ali

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Shameela Yoosuf Ali is a journalist, writer, researcher and Editor-In-Chief of FemAsia Magazine.

My Mother Vasanthi, the P. T. Teacher

Shyamala Madhav

28th August 2020.

Amma steps into 99, today. Vasantha to the people of her father's family in Mangalore, she is Vasanthi to her folks at her mother's in Uchil and at her Besant Girls' School.

P.T. and Girl Guide teacher at Besant, she is well known for her discipline and efficiency and even now her old students keep visiting her, with all the memories of their *Aata* (Games) teacher, during their Besant School days.

When I met Dr Shivaram Karanth at Dr Ninjoor's, during his final visit to Bombay, and introduced myself as Vasanthi teacher's daughter, he exclaimed, "Oh! Games teacher! Such a disciplined lady! Where do we find her kind now?!"

Having lost her father as a three-months-old baby, Amma was reared at her father's Seegeballe House, for six years. This mansion gave shelter to people of our village, too, who came seeking education. Our great grandfather Manjappa was the Founder of our Uchil School, that he established with Sri Beecha Belchappada, to impart education to the poor people of our village. Besant School celebrated its Centenary, last November, a memorable milestone in its history.

Amma's paternal uncle, Judge Rao Bahadur Ramappa had lost his wife and his little daughters were sent to Seegeballe House, to be nurtured by Aunt Devamma. These little girls, along with my mother were taken to their Estates at Salem and Amma used to narrate the merry time they had in the orchards there.

Ajja, who couldn't sleep at night, would have tea prepared at night, with the fresh milk from the cows in the shed and he used to wake up the little ones, calling out, "Vasantha, Laxmi, Meena, get up! Come and have tea.!" And the little ones would have tea and go back to sleep, remembers Amma. She fondly remembers her Koppal Chikkamma too, who fed her so lovingly during her visits on holidays there.

After her initial six years, Amma was under the care of

her Tulasi Vilas Doddappa and spent memorable days there. Excise Inspector Parameshwar, who was also known as Ganjam Inspector then, lived a pompous life those days. The bungalow Tulasi Vilas was built under the supervision of my mother's father, Krishnappa, those days.

The beautiful bungalow had outhouses for the servants and a stable for the horse. Ajja went on his rounds to collect excise tax, on horse carriage and two bodyguards with swords in their hands, ran alongside. My aunt Devaki, father's sister, also niece to Tulasi Vilas Tulasamma, who accompanied her uncle on these tours revealed to us the pomp and show then.

Like Seegeballe House, Tulasi Vilas also gave shelter to boys from the village, who came seeking education. These boys were housed in the upper floor, and near relatives like Amma and my elder Chikkappa, stayed below.

Tulasi Vilas children, studying Medical, Engineering, Law and other Post Graduate streams, were said to be boys born with a silver spoon in their mouth. The daughter, Lakshmi, won a Gold Medal in her English M A from Madras University and Yashoda was a French teacher.

Amma remembers Ajja's affection and his discipline as well. Lady of the house, was a devout Hindu, performing Tulasi pooja without fail. The way she served equally to all the 25 plates, is often remembered by the inmates there.

Out in the yard was also placed mango leaf and salt in a plate, for the master of the house, to brush his teeth and that is how his teeth remained healthy and strong till the end, remembers Amma.

A series of deaths of such illustrious children, soon put an end to the glory of Tulasi Vilas. Devastated, Ajja in his last years turned religious and spent more and more time in the church, finally getting converted

to Christianity. But he did not succeed in taking his wife along in his faith and she remained a devout Hindu till the end.

From Tulasi Vilas, Amma moved to Madha Vilas, the abode of her younger aunt, Ponnamma. Madhav Vilas too housed boys of the village seeking education.

One afternoon, Amma was sitting in the cowshed reading *Gone with the Wind*, with tears flowing down her cheeks while reading the pages narrating Scarlett O'Hara losing her mother. Our Champaka Vilas Ajji, who had come visiting then, asked Ajji Ponnamma, why the poor girl was crying!

A year later, Amma lost her mother too, who was away at Chervattur, with her nephew, our Anand uncle, then General Manager in the Agriculture Department there. When the



U Vasanthi



U Vasanthi

news came, Amma was frying malpuries and that was the last time she indulged in preparing the same.

Though Amma wished to pursue college education, she could not, as her aunt advised her to take up Teachers' Training, instead.

After the training, when Amma applied for a teacher's post at Besant School, Ekambar Rao, the then School Correspondent, asked her to take up Physical

Instructress Training at YMCA, Madras.

Amma's cousin Guddappa uncle, who had applied for a post in the Customs, also joined Amma, as she was going alone. Joining there, uncle returned, when he got posted in Customs and Amma continued with her training.

Whenever we went through the old photographs, Amma has often told us about Mrs. Buck, the English lady who was the Principal there. Mrs. Buck had taken Amma to a Dentist on her own, to extract a canine that was protruding into her jaw. She also wished to separate through surgery Amma's two toes that were joined together by birth. But Amma's Doddappa, the Judge Ajja ruled against it, saying that it was not important.

We as kids never questioned Amma about this special toe, but her grandchildren were inquisitive and Amma used to reply smilingly that she had stuck them with gum, when she was little.

Returning with all the efficiency and discipline of YMCA, Amma joined Besant School as a Physical Training and Girl Guides teacher. The school won many laurels and Championship Shields in Dassera Sports and other events and many Girl Guides Presidents emerged under her training, bringing name and fame to the school.

Amma found Tulasi Vilas Amma's nephew from Uchil, who was tall with simple and steadfast ways and always dressed in clean white clothes that matched his fair complexion, very appealing. The attraction was mutual but it took Amma away from her paternal house in Mangalore.

Amma's maternal uncles from Talebadi, Uchil, conducted the wedding in their Talebadi House, on 30th August, 1946. It was Ganesh Chaturthi and there were no trains plying, due to some reason, but still the students and teachers came walking all the way to attend the wedding.

Amma and Papa often told us about the first Independence Day midnight in Bombay and it was a pleasure listening to

the same.

As the pollution from the Bombay Mills harmed Papa's health, they returned to Mangalore and Amma was called again to teach at Besant School and Papa joined Vartak Vilas in Bunder, Mangalore.

Amma would be standing the entire day on the ground, attending different periods of games of all the classes. Later in the evening would be the class for the Girl Guides. She would reach home after 6:30 p.m. And once at home, she worked hard like a machine, at home too.

Equipments like gas stove, mixer, water tap and washing machines were non-existent then. Amma burnt firewood, drew water from the well, ground with grinding stone and washed a lot of clothes on Sundays from morning till evening. Amma and Papa would hold the dried clothes at the edges and pull at them to take away the creases and fold them neatly making them look like well-ironed clothes. Amma's copper and bronze vessels and plates and tumblers, washed with tamarind and ash, shone like gold and everything was in order.

While grinding Amma used to read stories of Cinderella and Sindbad the Sailor, and other stories to us.

Papa, after the day's duty at Vartak Vilas, used to catch the evening train and go to Uchil, to look into the School affairs as the School Correspondent. After he returned late in the night by the 11 o'clock train, they both would have their dinner. But Papa could never sleep as he was highly asthmatic. Amma tended to him, preparing coffee at night, patting his heaving chest and his back, giving medicine and often I felt that she was his Savithri, bringing him back from Yama's clutches.

This severe asthma, a fatal accident at the age of 75 and finally blood cancer, took our dear Papa away after four years of ailment. Till his last breath, he kept singing his favourite patriotic songs and never once complained of ill-health.

It is twenty years on, and Amma is still taking care of his house for him, with all her zeal.

We are deprived of the chance to be with her on this day, due to the present circumstances. Just hope for a better tomorrow to be with her, celebrating her Hundredth Birthday.



Shyamala Madhav was born in Mangalore, had schooling at Besant National Girls' High School and college education at St. Agnes College, Mangalore. Father Narayana Uchil, an educationist and reformist, and mother U Vasanthi worked as P.T. and girl guides teacher at the Besant National Girls' School. She is a Kannada writer who began writing at the age of 11 and she has several publications to her credit and has won many prestigious awards. She is also a translator from English to Kannada.



Jaswant Singh

Sardar

Simrat Gagan

I never got crushed
Under the weight of my father's pagdi
To tell the truth
He never allowed me to be
He taught how to fly
And the bird
Found its own sky
He said...
To do anything
You don't have to be a boy
Remain what you are
You will have your own rules and customs
All your decisions will be acceptable to me
But he looked at me straight in the eye and told me...
Your freedom is your right
Protect it responsibly...
With great sensitivity he shaped my role
And made his daughter a Sardar

—Punjabi poem *Sardar* translated via Hindi by C S Lakshmi



Simrat Gagan is a fresh young voice in contemporary Punjabi poetry who claims that it is not she who writes the poetry, rather it is the poetry that writes her. With her first collection of poems titled *Panjilshq* (Five Love Affairs) published in 1997, she distinguished herself as a poet with fresh imagery and style. Her later book *Tasbi* (A Rosary, 2006) entrenched her position in the Punjabi literary world. Simran's poems are celebrations of grief, pain and sorrows and her poetic thoughts mostly spring from the space beyond mind, according to her.

Remembering My Father

**S A Vengada Soupraya
Nayagar**

Today, 6th August, 2021, the day I am writing this note, is my father's hundredth birthday. It would have been a happy occasion to celebrate with him. But not all wishes come true. But I am recalling what he thought of how long he would live. In 2010 my friend Reverend Mathew had visited us from Tiruvananthapuram. When he saw my sprightly father climbing up the steps at the age of 90, he expressed his wish, "May you live a hundred years" as if in blessing.

Quick came Appa's retort.

"I can live even longer. But this gentleman here may not be able to bear it," he said pointing at me.

Although it was a casual jocular response, when one considers it a little seriously one can make out that it contains a certain reality.

My father, M S Arumuga Nayagar, belonged to a farming family. His father was Muthu. Subburaya Nayagar. His mother was Thaiyalnayagi. My father was their sixth child. My Periappa, my elder uncle, M S Vaithiyalinga Nayagar and my Athai, my paternal aunt, Alliyangkothai, were his siblings. His other siblings had passed away before my birth.

Though my father was an old Congressman and he was very much involved in politics, fortunately he did not lose much of his wealth and time in politics and withdrew from politics when he turned 50. Puducherry's great political leaders like Chellan Nayagar, Ansari P Doraisamy, V Subbiah, S R Subramaniam, Muthupillai, Purushothama Reddiar, Govindapathar and many such leaders were his close associates. He used to meet regularly on Party work leaders like Kamarajar, P Subbarayan (Mohan Kumaramanagalm's

father), Kakkan and R Venkataraman. In the Puducherry government gazette on Puducherry's freedom fighters his name appears in the seventeenth place and details about him are mentioned.

Whenever I speak about Naina (that is how we called him at home), the late Professor Chevalier Cho. Murugesan, senior writer Ki. Rajanarayanan, Professor Panchangam, Professor A Pasupathy, my English professor Raja and friends Nagarathinam Krishna and Cheenu.Thamizhmani used to encourage me to write about him. I would also like to write a book on him similar to *Athaiyain Arul* (Athai's Grace) that I wrote on my paternal aunt. Let this note be the starting point to such a book.

Many who knew him would tell me even now about what an interesting person he was. While paying homage to him today I would like to share some unusual habits and qualities of his that I used to admire.

He had the habit of getting up early in the morning and having a shave and going out with well-ironed fresh Khadi clothes. He would read the newspaper *Dinamani* before that. He also enjoyed reading the journals *Kalkandu* and *Vanoli*. He could not drive any vehicle, not even ride a bike, so he went

walking everywhere. He had the family characteristic of walking fast. Sometimes he took the rickshaw. From 1970 to 1990 Mani and Ramalingam were his regular rikshaw men. Not only for rickshaws but also for tailoring he had his favourite tailor; he always gave his shirts for stitching to Kothandapani who had his tailoring shop in the Paikadai Lane in Puchcherry. Along with the shirt he used to get stitched V-neck banians in khadi. He also had his favourite barber Deivanayagam who came home to cut his hair.

"Don't think he is an ordinary person. He is the one who cuts the hair of important people of this

city," he used to say with pride. But my athai used to tell me teasingly, when Naina was not around: "Yes, yes, he needs someone from London to come and cut his hair!"

He did not have breakfast in the mornings. Lunch was always his first meal of the day with nothing in between. But he had his lunch by 11 in the morning except on days when sowing was done in the fields. In the harvesting season sometimes he ate at 7 in the evening. Until then he used to have only tea and water.



M S Arumuga Nayagar

With a wet towel wrapped around his waist he used to go to the room where gods were kept and pray for less than five minutes and then sit down for his meal. He had made it his habit to eat some kind of greens every day. The garden in the house had a lot of drumstick trees, so drumstick leaves were often prepared at home. He used to extoll its virtues saying drumstick trees were Brahmavriksh, divine trees; the tree contained a lot of nutrition. Where non-vegetarian food was concerned he liked to have all varieties of fish including pond-fish and fish found in the water in the fields. He liked to eat goat leg. He used to say that old goats were good to eat. When asked why he would say it would have grazed more. He also liked home grown chickens and also duck-eggs.

Till the end he ate only on banana leaf. We knew that no one must serve him food while he ate. I found out that he had started observing this habit after the death of Amma. The 45 years that he spent alone after Amma's death he made this his habit while eating. He would serve himself a handful of cooked rice and eat his meal. His meal would end with his drinking three-quarter litre of water from a bronze tumbler held high, bending his head back. Even when he had porridge called koozhu or rice soaked in water the previous night he used the same bronze tumbler.

On some days, around 4 in the evening he would have some snacks at Mathru Café, which was the symbol of Puducherry's Nehru Street, in those days. He would normally choose to eat the special sweet of the day, plain dosai and coffee. The owner of the café, Sabesa Iyer (father of poet Jothidasan whose real name is Sivasubramanian) would serve him lovingly. On the porch outside the café, he could meet his acquaintances and friends. He would chat for a while with regular visitors there like Ansari P. Duraisamy, Puduvali Sivam, Ananda Govindasamy Mudaliar, Kalthakuppam (Kalitheerthan Kuppam) Dandapani Gounder, Kuppusamy Mudaliar, Sharaf Kannappa Udaiyar and Mudaliarchavadi Krishnamurthy Iyer who was an astrologer. (I am giving here names I remember) In the 1980s when the restaurant was closed he began to go to India Coffee House. That restaurant did not mind even if a client ordered just one idli. Wherever he went he would be back at home by 6 in the evening.

By 7 in the evening he would have his night meal. Like in the morning he would eat cooked rice. He avoided eating greens or curds because when eaten at night they couldn't be digested. In the mornings, evenings and at nights after meals or in between meals he used to snack with either boiled or roasted peanuts. By 8 p.m. he would go to sleep. On some days his friend Murugesu Mudaliar who lived opposite would come and wake him up at 10 or 11 in the night and a chatting session would begin. Sometimes it went on even

until midnight. But it did not stop him from waking up at 3 or 4 in the morning. So in a day including the afternoon snooze he had, he went to sleep some three times.

Only after he became 80 he began to go easy with these habits. Even that was only towards his last days, that is, the last year of his life that he began to eat something sweet as soon as he woke up in the morning. He used to make sure what the sweet would be for the next morning the previous day. When he told me "Get that spiral-shaped sweet" I would know he is referring to the mini-jangiris. I enjoyed watching him eat it with relish.

He was quite lean and did not have to visit the doctor much. There were reasons for that. He did not take to what were considered swadeshi evil spells like alcohol, cigarette and tobacco. He was not in the habit of even taking betel leaves with areca nuts. He lived for 91 years with his teeth intact and with no hair fall. He never oiled his hair even for Diwali but he washed his hair every day.

His body did not weigh much but it did not have to be subjected to any surgery. But the precautions and care he took with regard to his body need to be mentioned.

.....th year, I was arranging Naina's table. I saw some pieces of paper at that time. When I saw his handwriting I read them with curiosity. I got a bit dismayed reading them. "I have come here to Villupuram to meet the lawyer. I get fainting fits sometimes. Please take me to the address, 1/26, Main Road, Laspet, Puducherry" was written in one of the pieces of paper. All the bits of paper had the same message only the towns he visited and the dates varying. Perturbed, I asked him immediately. He answered calmly explaining the use of those chits. "It is nothing," he said. "In case I happen to faint nobody will have the trouble of enquiring and can reach me home without wasting time. That is why I carry them."

In those days when there were no cell phones, just as we have the E-pass now in Corona times, which gives the address and the place we are visiting and the reason for the visit, he had this wonderful idea. Even today if one loses one's wallet or cell phone this could be a useful aid while travelling.

I have also seen some other precautionary measures of his. Even today, I explain the necessity of these measures to my friends who are old. For example, he always let the light in the toilet be on at night because one can avoid the unnecessary inconvenience of looking for the switch at night when one is sleepy and accidents that may happen in the process. I also learnt from him not to latch the toilet and bathroom doors while using them. I have come to know from many experiences told to me by others how much tension and insecurity can be created when a senior person

has latched the door while bathing or while using the toilet and a mishap happens. Not just for the old but for whatever age group these two areas are places where mishaps normally occur. We know of many who have slipped and fallen in the toilet or the bathroom and have become bedridden after that. There is no doubt that if the doors are not latched it is easier to give first aid to the person concerned.

When I think of Mathru Café that played such an important part in Appa's daily life I can visualise Duplex Street that was unique in Puducherry of those days. One cannot forget the contribution of Sethilal in the development of the city of Puducherry. In 1972 when he was Lieutenant Governor he took up many efforts to beautify the city. The credit for building footpaths for the streets of Puducherry and bringing certain kind of order to the city must go to him. The VIPs of Puducherry who came to Mathru Café could be seen in that street in the mornings or in the evenings. But there were a few who could be seen there whatever the time of the day. Among them there were those who went around begging approaching people who came there.

Whenever I went to town with Appa I loved watching these people. I used to particularly look for a middle-aged person. He used to behave differently from other beggars who pleaded in the usual way. His clothes used to be dirty and with a trim beard that he never shaved he used to walk briskly and he had a booming voice. His voice had gone gruff due to constant speaking and he could talk like public speakers modulating his voice where needed.

As he walked he would stand for a while and rest his legs. He would look at what he was holding in his hand fondly. He would shake the tin collection box in his hand which was related to his entire capital and his income, and create a racket. That tin box which was at one time a Dalda tin created whatever sounds he wanted, like a grateful faithful slave. The sound was like a siren that announced his intentions and also what he had already collected.

And above all this, the card hanging around his neck would induce people to stand and read what was written on it. On some days instead of a card there would be a slate hanging from his neck. It would contain a proverb, some national news or a local gossip. He was like a walking media house. He behaved like he was demented. One would wonder if he had assumed this artificial personality to face the interference and reprimands from society. So he made his appearance both his weapon and his armour. There was no easier method maybe to reveal the truth the world hesitated to accept and express what he felt in his heart freely.

What he wrote showed how clear he was in his mind. One day he had written something controversial on the card. He had written the name of an important businessman on

the card and had written 'Down with Him!' The second line said, "Hail, Nirodh!" Only he knew what those lines subtly indicated. Sometimes he would write "Charity Protects You" and follow it with a low-priced suggestion to save oneself: "Give ten paise and save yourself." Occasionally there would also be English words. Maybe some people felt uncomfortable with what was written on some days. But he would keep moving not really bothering anyone. Everyone liked this unusual way of begging.

Appa took me into town by rickshaw on most of the days. The rickshaw driver who took us would take the vehicle around the Chunnambukalvai (Chunnambar Backwater). The present Krishna Nagar had not then come up and so both sides were fields and the ride would be in a green-filled ambience with cool breeze blowing.

Some ordinary incidents during such rides would lead to my receiving advice from Appa. One day, when we were going in the rickshaw someone said aloud:

"Hey, you idiot!"

He used some stronger words of abuse. Since the voice came from behind us the rickshaw driver looked back. I also looked back with curiosity. My father scolded us.

"Why do you look back, are you an idiot?" he asked the rickshaw driver. I knew the question was for me too. I understood what Appa was trying to say. The rickshaw driver and I apologised and Appa explained why he was upset. He said when we look back it means we accept whatever that person was saying. He explained that one must naturally have enough self-respect and confidence to believe that no one could call one that.

His advice to me was to avoid places where there were fights and public meetings. He used to say that I must not be in the front row or near the stage particularly where political meetings were taking place.

"There will be many rowdies there. They would suddenly start throwing stones. Why should you go there? If you want to listen to the speech, stand afar and listen to it," was his advice.

Even when going to temples he would give some advice about how to avoid crowds. His advice may sound like the present day Corona advice to maintain social distance to some! There were his suggestions:

You should not push your way in the crowd to have darshan of the deity.

No need to offer worship with flowers or offering worship pouring water, milk or honey on the idol.

Apply the sacred ash and vermilion powder at home itself when you leave for the temple.

It is enough to circumambulate the temple.

If it is very crowded just stand outside and fold your hands

in worship and come back home.

If you want to put money in the collection box, give that money to people begging outside the temple.

He would give many such advices.

Twenty years ago he wanted to meet a senior lawyer in Chennai regarding a case and wanted me to come with him. I hesitated. He told me, "It is because if something happens to me, you should know the status of all these cases; that is why I want to introduce you to him."

Where these cases were concerned I took a stand that was totally opposite to Appa's. I am not interested in them even now; more than indifference, it was a kind of aversion, one can say. I felt I was in the position of a driver caught on a hot sunny day in the traffic unable to go forward or go back, with regard to these cases. However, once a path is chosen whoever has brought one on to the path, one is forced to face all the obstacles in that journey.

I went with Appa to that well-known lawyer's house in Chennai. His office was in the front portion of a huge bungalow. Before Appa could tell him what he had come for the lawyer interrupted him and said:

"Who is this Sir?"

"He is my only son. Thambi, why don't you tell him?"

The lawyer asked me eagerly, "What do you do?"

"I am a lecturer in the Tagore Arts College in Pondicherry, Monsieur."

"Oh, is it a government or a private college?"

"It is a government college."

"Very good," he said and told Appa, "What else do you need? He is going to help you with all the French documents."

Appa interjected and told him what really irked him: "That is true. But he is the only one in our family, who gets a salary after signing obediently on a pasted stamp." The lawyer could not control his laughter.

"You have made his post seem like an ordinary one. Do you know what respect this job carries in the society?" the lawyer said to Appa, not wanting to let me down.

"I don't know about all that. We must always be in a position where we are in a position to give things to some people," Appa argued not giving up his stand.

"Do many study French there?" asked the lawyer trying to change the topic.

I have noticed that Appa was always proud of being a landlord. At times this pride would become boasting and embarrass me.

Appa greatly admired lawyers. In 1971, when I was 8 years old the Puducherry Parliamentary elections took place. Mohan Kumaramangalam was fighting the elections on a Congress ticket. Appa liked him more than his father P Subbarayan, the veteran politician. It was because Appa greatly

admired his law degree. The loudspeakers of the election propaganda vehicles would cross the house shouting, "Vote for our Congress candidate Bar-at-Law Mohan Kumaramangalam." Before the vehicles turned to the next street Appa would tell me,

"No one who has stood for election so far is as educated as he is. He is a Bar-at-Law."

"What is Bar-at-Law, Naina?"

"That is a very advanced education. It is education meant for an advocate. He has gone to London to study. You should also take this up when you grow up."

I was too young to understand what he elaborated later. I understood why Appa admired this education so much only much later. The well-known national leaders he admired like Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar were all lawyers. He may have had one more reason though. His close relative Chellan Nayagar, with whom he had an opportunity to move closely, was a famous lawyer in Pucucherry those days. He had the honour of receiving the Chevalier Award from the French government in 1933 itself. He was the forrunner among those who sowed the seeds for the liberation of French Indian Pucucherry. Appa got to spend many evenings with him in the last days of Chellan Nayagar, who had made an immense contribution to politics and Appa would often recall those evenings.

One evening, a few years before Chellan Nayagar's demise, Appa went to see him. Chellan Nayagar's eyesight was failing at that time. After the usual exchanges Appa gently introduced details of a case and said only he could solve the case. Chellan Nayagar could guess what he was aiming at but did not reveal it.

"How come you are elaborating on this case today, Arumugam?" he asked.

"Nothing important. Just thought how it would be if you argue for this case. Wanted to know how you would pose questions to counter the opposition lawyer...."

Chellan Nayagar was nobody's fool. He began to directly tackle the issue. He asked Appa not to beat about the bush and get his lawyer to speak to him. Next day Appa took his lawyer to him.

Chellan Nayagar gently admonished the lawyer for sending my father for discussing the case. The lawyer apologised and asked for his help.

"I understand. Now open the almirah behind me and take out the fourth book on the second row."

The lawyer took out that particular book.

"Now, keep going through it. Read the third chapter. Do you find what you are looking for?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

Chellan Nayagar understood he would need to take notes

from the book.

“Take it home and read it at leisure at home. If you have any doubts come and ask me. Read it properly. Bring it after four days. Don’t lose the book, okay?” he told the lawyer.

The young lawyer was in praise about his memory even at that age.

Whenever we passed the Vellala Street in which Chellan Nayagar used to live Appa would never fail to tell me about this incident. He would also narrate the incident when Chellan Nayagar’s political rivals tried to murder him and how he got shot and later recovered.

His love for lawyer’s education was not only because he had moved closely with a lawyer like Chellan Nayagar and because he admired national leaders who had studied law. Appa having to face many legal cases in connection with our family property must also have been one of the reasons. Cases, adjournments, lawyers and courts are probably not sweet words for many of us. But my father never got tired of them. Nor did the words scare him. On the contrary, he took up the activities in connection with the cases like a hobby, like the dedication of a sportsman who would consider it part of his life, like a gamble that he enjoyed participating in. In short, cases became his daily habit. I have felt this very often and have admired it.

One particular day was the day judgement was going to be given on a case. Appa had asked for the rickshaw to come in the morning itself and got ready to go to the court with his usual enthusiasm. The court known as the tribunal was located on the seashore maybe to cool tempers and also for the general well-being of everyone. The court complex was situated at the intersection of Dumas Street, one of the oldest streets and Bussy Street (today’s Lal Bahadur Shastri Road). Appa could make out from the gist of the judgement read that it was in his favour. But Appa returned from the court in the noon not looking happy. When asked he explained why he was upset.

Like I had said before for Appa took these cases as sports. Like sports people who shake hands with the opponent whether they have lost or won, Appa also had gone up to the person who had lost the case to exchange pleasantries.

“So, how are you?”

“I am fine, Uncle.”

“Is everyone fine at home?”

“Everyone is fine, Uncle.”

“So how are you going to proceed further in this case?”

“What can be done, Uncle? I just have to give it up at this stage and get busy with other things.”

“Do you think so? Have you talked to your lawyer?”

“What will he say? He will say let us take it up to the higher court. I don’t have faith nor do I want all that. I am just going

to forget about the cases and spend whatever time is left of my life in peace. Let me take your leave, Uncle.”

Appa had not expected this reply from his opponent who had lost the case. Before he could ask him to fight the case further, like persuading his opponent to play the game some more, his opponent just melted away in the crowded court. Appa had returned home disappointed even though he had won the case, for this reason.

Only when he described what happened in the court one could understand what had upset him.

He had enough quarrels and property to satiate his strange thirst for fighting cases. Only the quarrels were what he had earned on his own. He would accept that many times. He had become an expert because he had the experience of fighting cases and knew the basic process and twists and turns such cases could take. Based on his experience he would not only advise others but would also argue with his own lawyer. His school friend, the late N Govindasamy Mudaliar, would tease him whenever he met him, saying, “Here comes our local lawyer. Let us consult him.”

As if to suit Appa’s interest in cases he was a fighting a case for more than ten years with a person who lived nearby. From lower courts it had gone up to the High Court in Chennai. The person who had filed the case was older than Appa. For some reason or the other they would quarrel and keep their flame of enmity alive. Sometimes it would stop with abusive curses. At other times the police had to intervene.

Around this time when they were sworn enemies, my second elder sister Devaki’s marriage was arranged in 1978. We went from house to house to invite. More unexpectedly my father entered that old man’s house and invited him with the traditional betel leaf and nuts. Everyone, including me was surprised. I remember after a few years when that gentleman passed away Appa went immediately to pay his respects.

When this was referred to in a conversation, the very different moral standards that Appa had was revealed.

“Quarrels and court cases are different. One should not mix them up with auspicious and inauspicious things that happen in life,” he said.

His attitude was similar when someone fell sick. He would say, “If you get to know that someone you know is sick you must visit him. You must not start thinking about all that he has done at that time. One may not even be on talking terms with that person. That does not matter.”

“But he would not even talk to you. Who can one talk to? What is the point of going there?”

“Let him not talk. We lose nothing because of that. He may not care about your coming, but that disease, it will

care.”

It may seem like his moral standards were somewhat superstitious. But it is true that more than the faith that every disease has a ritual antidote, such a thought does help and console the sick person in some way. Sometimes that person may get over his anger and a friendship may blossom again. But there are some who would not like to be seen while sick.

Just as he went to console the sick he also had his ways of paying his condolences. He would not only visit the bereaved family and offer condolences he would also stay around to supervise and help in other things that had to be done. Whether it was a friend, a close relative or someone from the same town as his, as soon as he got the news he would be there in their house to do all the work connected with the final journey.

My Athai would comment about this jocularly in her own way:

“He can’t just go offer condolences and come back. He will resurrect him after he is buried and only then return!” Once when Athai was speaking like this he ignored it and said:

“She does not know anything. This is the last respect we pay the dead. Especially if someone who has worked with us dies we have to go up to the cremation ground.”

Funerals in Puducherry always happened the way Appa spoke about them. I have observed it from when I was a small boy. When a funeral procession passes those who are in vehicles would get down to pay respect and those wearing a hat would remove it as a mark of respect. In today’s fast-paced world vehicles following a funeral procession honk impatiently.

Appa also explained why it was necessary to go up to the burial ground.

“Once the body is carried out of the house, those in the same street will come till the end of the street. A person from another town will come up to the bus stand. But a person who has worked with you will come till the final point.”

This happened in the eighties. Vijayarangam, who did farming for many years in Appa’s field, fell sick. Appa admitted him in the hospital and did all he could to save him but all his efforts failed. I went along with Appa till the Karuvadikkuppam funeral ground. When the body was being placed in the grave, Appa did the rite of taking some rice and putting it in the mouth of the dead saying,

“I thought you will come to throw the soil on me when I am buried. But you have made me do this for you,” and put the rice in his mouth.

The explanation Ooran Adigal gave for this rite of putting some rice in the mouth of the dead comes to my mind. In

one of his discourses he once asked why rice should be put in the mouth of the dead and also answered it.

“Some of us may die before we do any charity. Some may have the wealth and the chance to do charity but may not have the inclination. Some may want very much to help others but may not have the necessary means to do it. So our ancestors thought that those who leave this world without having done any charity must not die with regret. That is why this rite has been conceived. What we give them now is known as “Rice in the mouth”; it will not reach their stomachs. There will be other living beings and stomachs that will wait for this rice. The rice we give the dead will reach those living things in the soil. Since it comes from the dead person it will be added to that person’s account of charitable acts and even if that person has died without performing any charity, this will take care of that lack.”

Ooran Adigal’s explanation brought to my mind what the 14th Century Pattinaththar said when he talked of the human body and about the stomach being an alimantal hole that cannot be filled.

—Translated from Tamil by C S Lakshmi



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A Father to Remember

Magudeswaran Govindarajan

April 18 is the death anniversary of my father. In the year 1998, on this day, he died of heart attack while travelling in a bus. He was 52. Since he died in the bus, his body was taken directly to the hospital. He was brought back after autopsy as a white bundle and that is how we buried him. He was diabetic and also had hyper tension. But he never took this seriously.

When I was studying in the Second Standard I found four pages of *Ambulimama* magazine in which something came wrapped from the grocery shop. The story printed on those pages captivated me. I kept it safely and read it again and again whenever I found the time. My father noticed this and asked me, "Do you like reading story books?" I nodded shyly. That same evening he bought *Balamitra* and brought it home for me.

At that age, that magazine seemed like a treasure. I read the stories in that hundreds of times. I asked him to get me *Ambulimama* and *Balamitra* every month and read them regularly. If I went into town with my parents I would pester them to buy me only these two magazines. It was my father who initiated me into reading books.

I must have been around 10 when he asked me one day, "What is the film showing in the local theatre?" "*Chakravarthi Thirudan* (Emperor Thief), M G R's film," I told him. "Is that how you read? Go take your cycle and go to the theatre and read the title of the film properly," he told me. I was wondering what I had done wrong and took my cycle and cycled some two kilometres and saw the poster. Yes, I had read it wrongly. I came back and told Appa, "Yes Appa, it is *Chakravarthi Thirumagan* (Son of an Emperor)." "Whatever you read, you must read it carefully, everything else comes only after that," he told me. I have become a careful reader since then.



Govindarajan

My father had a very beautiful handwriting. I practised writing neatly to write like him. Many have praised my handwriting including writer Sujatha. But till the end my father was never satisfied with my handwriting. "Your handwriting must be better," he used to tell me.

When I was around 7, I had gone to the village for summer holidays. I went to the kiosk there and bought a blue inland letter and wrote to my father enquiring after him and also giving him bits of advice. I heard that he showed it to everyone proudly. I think that was the first time I had written something in a concentrated manner.

He had bought me *Balamitra* when I was in the Second Standard, isn't it? When I was in the Third Standard my letter to the editor beginning with 'My name is Magudeswaran, S/O R Govindarajan...' with my full address got published in *Balamitra*. That was my first published writing. The year was 1983. My father was thrilled. But he never revealed to me how happy he was.

My poem got published in *Gokulam* magazine for children when I was in the Eighth Standard. From then he started calling me Pulavar, a learned man. Whenever he was upset with me for something, he would stress the word and say, "Pulavvaa...."

Later many of my poems continued to be published. I began to write without adding his name as initials. He felt a little upset by that gesture. He asked me one day, "How is it that you don't write your initials?" "It is difficult to remember names with initials, Appa. But how does that matter? Only if the name that a father has given is changed and one writes with a pseudonym one should feel bad. It is

you who has given me this name, isn't it?" I consoled him. But I don't think he was satisfied with that explanation.

In 1990, since I got 441 in my 10th exams, he wanted me to study in the best school in Coimbatore District. I had been reading newspaper advertisements and was in a kind of elation. "In that case, admit me into Central Higher Secondary School A Nagoor, near Pollachi," I told him. He woke me up early one morning and took me to that school. The Correspondent who interviewed my father asked for an unbelievable amount which my father would not have even dreamt of, as donation. Not only that. He asked my father in a ridiculing tone, "Are you a BC?" I could not bear that insulting reference to the backward community and I told my father I did not want to join that school.

My father was never demonstrative about his love or affection for me. I also had fierce disagreements with him.

Once he saw me riding my bike carelessly on a road with heavy traffic and told me in a choking voice when I reached home: "Why do you go so fast on the road? I have not earned much. And whatever I have earned is gone already. Whatever I consider my property that remains of what I have earned is only you. What will I do if something were to happen to you?" From that day onwards I became very conscious about road safety rules.

He deeply believed that he would live up to 80. That did not happen. His life was so full of difficulties that he yearned for death. The last time when he was leaving somewhere he had told me, "There is not much left for me. Anything can happen to me anytime" and taken leave of me. And he left just as he had said!

His memories come flooding on every 18th of April. In 2018 on this day it would be twenty years since his death. When I was small if he got late coming home my eyes would fill up. In a house in a deserted area like an empty jungle, my mother and I would wait anxiously for my father sitting in the dull light of a kerosene lamp. In the nights when I would get tired and go off to sleep, he would wake me up and speak to me softly and tenderly and only then go to sleep.

I did not know how to go to nearby towns without Appa. I was scared of getting lost. And I never ate anything that was not bought by Appa. Appa was everything to me then. When he left his village with black bell bottom jeans with combed back hair and sideburns his village was proud of him. How can one forget the life spent in that village that had wells that never dried up and fields full of paddy and banana trees?

Twenty years have passed by without someone who was everything to me. I can't believe this. Only imagining that he was somewhere provided relief and escape from the sorrow of loss. He was the beginning of everything.

In the dark of the night some deep memories would come alive. When I am deceived sometimes or cheated and stand with no strength to oppose or fight, I would feel like weeping aloud saying, "Aiya... I have no father, Aiya... Don't do this to me..."

I began my life as the head of the family with an illiterate mother and a brother and sister who were studying in eighth and ninth class.

I realised what a low status I had without a father in the assessment of a marriage broker, when I went for a marriage alliance on the insistence of a relative, to Kovaipudur. "Look, you have studied only up to 12th... You have no degree... You say you are self-employed and are doing some business... You have built a small house for the present... You say your mother is dependent on you... Your brother and sister are also dependent on you for education and sustenance. You

have to take care of their marriage and other auspicious functions that would follow marriage. Who do you think will offer a daughter to someone who has so much of nagging family responsibilities?" the broker asked me. I died that day.

While returning my relative and I remained quiet. We stopped the vehicle near a lake to attend to nature's call. When I stood by the shore of the lake tears were flowing down my cheeks. I don't know how I consoled myself and came out of it all. Now when I think of it I am amazed.

Had Appa lived it would have been such a support to someone like me. I could have saved myself from at least some harsh words. Appa, you taught me everything, but you left without telling me how painful this life can be...

The only consolation is that I did not suffer even one percentage of the troubles that my father had to undergo. I believe that he protects me and watches over me. Appa... I am not able to forget you Appa!

On April 18, 2021, I remember Appa with a poem:

*It is father's death anniversary today.
He has five siblings.
When I yearned to see him
I saw my uncles and felt happy.
In their
Appearance
Gait
Speech
They were almost like my father.
One after another
In years that followed
The elders went under the soil.
There was only one left
Who died at 80 in the last lockdown.
The void today
Without a father
Is like a barren land.
He belonged to the generation
That left with heads bowed
Unable to reach or get
What they desired.
Had he lived for a few more years
And given me a chance
I would have changed everything.
When he eagerly picked up
A shining razor
I was standing on his right side.
When he asked for the price
And then shocked
Hastily put it down*

*I looked away.
He used a broken old razor
Till the end.
They handed over his specs
After his death
And it had scratches
As if hundreds of strands of hair
Had covered it.
I tried it on.
Aiya,
It looked like
I was looking at the world
Through a pine forest, Aiya!
From my small income
I could only buy him
Some shirts
And Khadi slippers from
Koduvai Sarvodaya Sangh.
And he showed it with pride
To everyone in town.
If only he had delayed his death
By some more time
I would have bought for him
Everything he wanted.
He didn't give a second thought to
His bullet bike
Lost due to debts.
All he wanted was
That shining razor
Gold-rimmed specs
And a brand new bullet bike.
Heart attacks make their entrance
Just when someone's life
Is starting to go downward
And it strangles the blood veins
Just when the person begins to rise
It is in such a routine
That my father
Died of heart attack.*

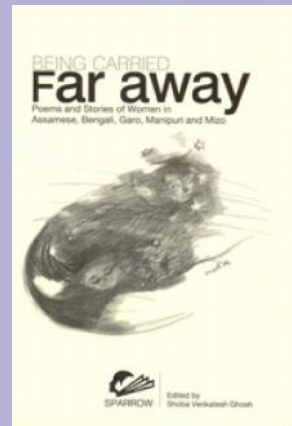
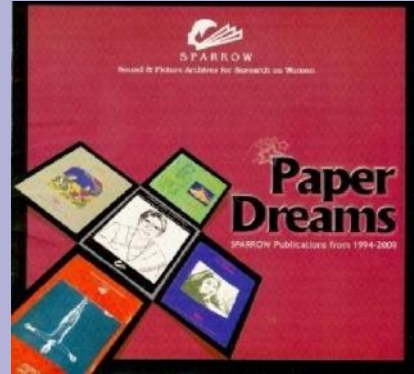
—Translated from Tamil by C S Lakshmi



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Shankaranarayanan

My Father

Vidya Subramaniam

For every girl it is always her father who is the initial hero in her life. It is the same for me. My appa was someone whom I held in awe. He was also someone who made me think. I have learnt a lot from him. Nellai was Appa's native place. Since my paternal grandfather was working as a registrar in the Trivandrum Royal State the family shifted from Nellai to Thiruvattaru.

Even as a young boy Appa had opposed some blind beliefs. Appa had two elder sisters. Among them my elder aunt got married at the age of 14 and returned as a widow at the age of 16 with a baby boy in arms. Preparations were being made according to the Brahmin customs of those days for tonsuring her head and for giving her the widow's robes normally in white or cream colour cotton, worn by widows. My father who was only thirteen then, got to know about it and he threw a tantrum that his elder sister's head should not be shaved. They had to literally carry him and lock him up in a room and only then could they carry on with the traditional formalities. He used to say that it took him a long time to get over the shock and pain of that event.

Appa got married at the age of 20. Amma was 14 then. She came from a family that was not very well-to-do. Her parents were no more and she had been brought up by her four brothers. Appa's family had asked Amma's elder brother for a dowry of Rs.100. It was a big amount for my mama, my maternal uncle. They had come to the conclusion that it was better to give up this alliance. When my father came to know about it my father spoke to his parents and sisters with great anger: "Are you people trying to sell me off for Rs.100? Isn't this disgusting? Look Amma, if you want Rs. 100, you ask me. I will work hard and earn it and give it to you. Don't make my marriage an excuse to get Rs. 100 from the girl's family. See to it that this alliance gets fixed. If not, I will take the girl to a temple, tie the thali around her neck and bring her home." All this was during times before

Independence. No one dared to oppose the parents those days.

After marriage they lived in Thiruvattaru. Those days there were a lot of purity and pollution customs. If there were elders at home who observed such customs the menstruating girl would get her food only after the entire family had eaten. It was called observing *sesham*. *Sesham* literally means what is leftover or leftovers meaning the food that has been left over after others have partaken of it. After Appa's marriage once when Amma had her monthly periods, Paatti had gone to the river for a bath. Appa thought his wife who was just fourteen would get hungry by the time his mother came back and cooked and others had eaten. Without any hesitation he went into the kitchen, lighted the firewood stove, put the idli pot on and prepared some idlis and also ground some chatni to go with the idlis and placed the steaming idlis and chatni on a plate and went and gave it to his wife who was sitting all by herself in the backyard and told her to eat. Amma was hesitant but when Appa raised his voice and urged her to eat she was hungry enough to gobble it up. When she returned from the river after her bath Paatti saw the idli pot on the stove and asked Appa about it. He told her he had prepared the idlis and given his wife.

"This entire idli dough has now become *sesham*, unusable. It will all go waste. What is to be done?"

"Pour it down my head, if you want. A menstruating woman won't get hungry, is it? Is hunger important or is your *sesham* important?"

After that Paatti made it a habit to prepare something and give Amma before she had her bath. Appa did not like anyone being hungry. Even during festivals, occasions or annual funeral rites after the banana leaves were spread for lunch and the payasam, pachadi and one dry vegetable were served, he would ask for rice and sambar to be served immediately. He

would say by the time all the items were served and rice was brought people would lose their appetite. It is not that customs and Shastras were not important. But he thought they should not make old people and children remain hungry. In the fifties he came to Chennai looking for better job opportunities. The Thiruvattaru house with its huge backyard and front was sold for just Rs. 200 to a distant relative. He was not highly educated but he had a skill. They say no one could cook like him. The food he prepared used to be so tasty. So he got the job as a head cook in the Woodlands Hotel. He became the much pampered boy of the Woodlands Hotel owners. Wherever a branch of the Woodlands was opened, that he had to go there and cook first was an unwritten sentimental rule. He had gone all over India including the Expo 70 in Kolkata, Mumbai and Delhi.

When he wanted to set up a business of his own the Woodlands Hotel wished him well and sent him but with one loving condition: that in future wherever a branch of Woodlands was opened Appa must agree to take the responsibility for cooking there for four or five months. Appa agreed.

So in the seventies when the Woodlands Hotel was set up in New York they invited Appa saying he should be the first one to go there and take over the kitchen. Appa said that he did not mind if it was within India and that he could not leave his family and go all the way to America. He also said that he was comfortable only in veshti and that he was not used to wearing chappals or shoes. Yes, it was true that he never wore footwear and always walked barefoot. But the Woodlands company did not want to let go of him. They convinced him over a period of time.

Since it was outside India a good contract with considerable salary for a two-year period was drawn. He learnt to walk with chappals and shoes a month before leaving. The Hotel administration got him suits, ties and got other things ready. His accommodation was a beautiful one in a sky scraper on the 42nd Street, in what is called the heart of New York. The Woodlands Hotel of New York became popular with the tasty food prepared with Appa's hands. No one who went to New York from India ever returned without tasting the food in Woodlands there.

After eating at a hotel the chef of the hotel being complimented for his food was part of the culture of New York. Appa's preparations have been appreciated by people from many different fields. We even have a photograph of his with Latha Mangeshkar who came inside the kitchen to appreciate the food he had prepared. He knew many of the important people who came there personally but he never sought any personal favours from them. The fact that he was there on a two-year contract and that he would return

to his normal life after that never left his mind.

Appa was waiting for two years to get over but the Woodlands owners were making efforts to get him a Green Card and keeping him there permanently. Appa was not for it. He insisted that his family was very important for him. They told him he could bring his family there and tried to persuade him but Appa was adamant. He told them that he had come there to experience the work and life there and that he had no plans to permanently settle down there. He explained that he could manage to make a living wherever he was and requested them to let him go.

They told him to arrange for an alternative person in his place. Appa agreed. Appa came back to India after two and a half years. He sent his second elder sister's son-in-law to America in his place. Today my paternal aunt's daughter's family members are citizens of the US and have happily settled down there with grandchildren and recently even celebrated the wedding of one of their granddaughters.

Appa often used to say that he was someone who had come from Thiruvattaru to Chennai clad in a veshti with a towel on his shoulder. His capital was his hard work. He was not greedy for anything having refused even the opportunity to settle down in the US. He was not ambitious even to expand his professional work of making wedding snacks and sweets and to earn money in crores. Many wealthy people have approached him and asked him if he would like to partner a business of setting up a sweet shop. But Appa did not agree. He told them what he earned now was enough for him. He conducted his business as a home-based one till the end. Several influential people were his regular customers despite his business being a home-based one. He always priced his preparations fairly. And he was satisfied with whatever he earned. He managed to get his four daughters married with what he earned in this manner and also got a house built.

Although Appa was firm about not taking a dowry in his own marriage, he gave dowry for his four daughters. But for his only son's marriage he never in any way forced the girl's family to give anything. Not only did he not ask for dowry, but he also made jewellery for the daughter-in-law and bought her everything including saris for daily wear. I asked him once why he had given up on his principles and given dowry for his daughters. He said that one who has daughters cannot be too rigid; the dowry system will go only when the parents of eligible men make up their minds. "What can you do about people who have no qualms about asking for dowry even while hanging the picture of the revered senior Shankaracharya of Kanchi Mutt and offering him worship? Those who take dowry must feel ashamed; I am not ashamed to give it. When they cannot reform themselves even at the instance of the great Guru will they

heed my words?" he said.

People of those times always yearned for a male heir. Appa begot five daughters in a row and then a son. A daughter died of illness, so there were four daughters. There is a saying that even a king who begets five daughters will become a mendicant. Appa was also tired of one girl child following another. But that was also the reason why he worked so hard and earned well. He did not get into debts and celebrated five weddings including that of his son. He used to joyfully say that he was a mendicant who got four daughters and became a king.

Appa was very particular about cleanliness. The firewood stove used to be burning always. He used to sweat profusely sitting before the cauldron of oil. But he wanted everything cleared up in the kitchen immediately after the preparation. He was strict about keeping the kitchen clean. He used only the best ingredients for the confectioneries he prepared. He was particular about bathing twice a day and keeping the finger and toe nails trimmed and clean. He would wash his feet well before stepping on the bed sheet spread on the floor at night. Honesty and cleanliness were qualities I learnt from Appa. If one brought Appa's face to mind one could not make a mistake even in one's dreams.

Appa did have some bad habits—his smoking and betting on horses. He gave up betting on horses when he realised it was wrong. But he could not give up smoking. Smoking may have been one of the reasons for his sudden death at the age of 63.

Not highly educated, he was also not a very influential person. But Appa was respected by many. As a professional he was without any blemish. He was honest; he had self-respect. He would not bow down before anyone. Once a five-star hotel was opened in Teynampettai and they requested Appa to come and join. Since many people insisted Appa agreed. Four or five months went by. One day the owner of the hotel had come and all the employees humbly went and paid their respects to him. Appa was busy in the kitchen with his work. Even when the hotel owner entered the kitchen Appa was concentrating on his work. "I am your boss standing before you and don't you have any courtesy?" the hotel owner yelled at him. Appa stared at him for a few minutes and put down the ladle in his hand on the kitchen platform and told him, "Please employ someone who has courtesy," and left the place. They begged him to come back but he refused to go.

Appa has not cheated anyone. He has never broken anyone's trust. He had no greed. If an example has to be given for the kind of respect he had earned I can cite one incident. Ten years after his death, my elder sister was collecting donations for the development of her school. One

day she thought she would try her luck and went to the Woodlands Hotel and introduced herself as his daughter and requested a donation for her school. As soon as she mentioned his name, "Are you Shankaranarayanan's daughter?" they asked in admiration and within seconds gave her a cash donation of ten thousand rupees.

When my elder sister narrated the incident to us her eyes were wet and she said in that instant she understood what immortal fame was.

—Translated from Tamil by C S Lakshmi



Vidya Subramaniam is a well-known Tamil writer and a traditional painter. She enjoys travelling and takes up challenging trips like the one she made to Mount Kailas.

* * *



Solvanam - Tamil Arts and Literature

Solvanam -Tamil Arts and Literature has republished some of the SPARROW booklets translation from Tamil volumes published in July 2001 in Solvanam YouTube channel.

<https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCEk2q9JZIE7Y6ACZGy87ieQ>
Voice, Video: Saraswathi Thiagarajan

Standing on her own feet: Kala Shahani November, 1997.

The World As My Laboratory :Shantoo Gurnani's Tryst With Science April, 1998.

Amhihi Itihas Ghadawala: Urmila Pawar And The Making Of History July, 1998.

Sakhubai: Talking In The Transplanting Season October, 1998.

Jameela Nishat: A Poem Slumbers In My Heart January, 1999.

Speaking from the Guts: Memories Of Communal Riots December, 1999.





The Many Different Ways I Remember My Mother Lakshmi Rajarathnam

—Rajasyamala Prakash

The word ‘Amma’ has a special meaning in the dictionaries of our Indian heritage. Unlike in the west, a mother in India is a divine representation, a figure of reverence. At the same time, ironically, also a person taken too much for granted. Imagine how it would have been for me—a single girl child born after ten years of my parents’ marriage. She was everything to me—a mother, teacher, guide, sister, friend and much more! However, she was a motherless child herself.

Having lost her mother at the tender age of 4, she was brought up by her grandmother, in Trichy. She got married at the age of 16 to my father who was 21 then and already a double post-graduate degree holder, pursuing his third M A degree. She was an innocent, outspoken, merry girl with just an SSLC to her credit and a mellifluous voice, when she entered a big joint family as its last daughter-in-law. Theirs was the instant love that Kampan explained as “*Annalum noakinar, avalum noakkinal*” (The venerable one saw and she also saw) about Rama and Sita seeing each other before the Swayamvar. It was that type of love story, that ended up in a ‘lived happily ever after’ marriage bond. The understanding that my parents shared is something beyond words. My father has never restricted my mother and my mother has done nothing that would bring the least discomfort to my father. Perfect understanding. Eminent people in the literary circle used to address them as “*Andril Paravaigal*” (Andril birds)—the love birds referred in Tamil literature for their steadfast companionship.

Though circumstances prevented her from attaining a degree, her thirst for it was not quenched until veteran writer Sandilyan consoled her saying, “You have a great writing skill. Why do you want to waste time in trying to understand the nuances of some grammar, losing your originality and creativity? Let others carry their research work on your writing. You are a creator. Be proud of it.” Taking his word as final, she gave up chasing her dream of pursuing a degree. But, time honoured her with an honorary doctorate.

She was idealistic and strict

With the help of her husband she chiselled herself into a pleasant, beautiful soul that she was. She was a perfectionist, a disciplinarian. She had set some discipline for herself too. She wrote only what she practised. She was conscious of what she wrote. She used to say, “I will never write to sell cheap stuff to the society. What I forbid my daughter to read, I will not write.” But at the same time, she had a heart full of love and empathy. She was very understanding. It was not just me, but also my friends, youngsters of our family and neighbours who were able to easily approach her, discuss their problems and get them sorted out.

My father had been a very strict officer, straight forward throughout his service time, for which he was often rewarded with a transfer. My parents have never grudged or grumbled about shifting from one place to another. They happily settled in new places making new friends. Soon after his retirement, my father gifted my mother with an expensive silk sari, on the day of my wedding, saying, “You deserve this. The woman behind my honesty was YOU. Without your cooperation, I couldn’t have been honest.”

She was a singer and a spiritual seeker

Her voice was a combination of the legendary singers M S Subbulakshmi and K B Sundaramabal. As a six-year-old she had had the privilege of learning from and singing bhajans with the revered devotional singer Pithukuli Murugadas. In later years, when my father was posted in Delhi, she got the opportunity to attend the classes of Guruji Ragavan, the renowned scholar of *Thiruppugazh*. All these helped her in mastering the most difficult hymns of *Thiruppugazh*, which flowed effortlessly from her mouth. She knew more than 600 *Thirupugazh* by heart set to beautiful ragams. Her love for Tamil drew her to pursue Tamil literature. She was fluent with *Thevaram*, *Thiruvagasam* and *Kamba Ramayanam*. This

steered her slowly towards writing spiritual articles in spiritual magazines like *Kumudam* group's *Bhakti* and other similar magazines like *Gopura Darisanam*, *Gnana Aalayam* and *Kalki Group's Deepam*. She also rendered musical discourses in temples and religious circles.

She was an imaginative teacher

My father often used to quote, "A mother is the first teacher, and the teacher is a second mother—not a stepmother though!" True to this saying, my mother was literally my first teacher. When in Delhi, as a three-year-old kid, communication with friends was difficult for me. It was my mother who helped me with my English then. Later when English and Hindi were taught in school, she feared that I may not have access to my mother tongue Tamil. She took the reins in her hands. I still remember the way she taught me the Tamil alphabets. She had interesting ways of making a child understand how to write the alphabets. When she taught me the consonants and writing prefixes and suffixes to make sound extensions she would teach me using words a child was familiar with in everyday life. For example, for the letter 'ka' in Tamil, she would tell me to add a plait so it becomes 'ki'. The plait would really look like the curved handle of an umbrella placed on the letter but it is easy for a child to relate to a plait. And then would tell me to add a hair bun to the letter 'ka' to make it 'kee'. With all those interesting images of plaits and hair buns in one's mind, one could never forget the alphabets. Of course, she was a great teacher.

It was she who indirectly taught me the art of writing stories. In the morning someone would have come with a gossip of some neighbourhood girl eloping with her lover. That very evening, when I return from school, that simple incident would have turned into an interesting piece of story in the pages on her desk. It not only taught me the story writing technique, but also shed some light on the plight of the parents whose daughter had eloped, which taught me to look at all the sides of an incident.

She moulded me effortlessly, setting herself as an example. She gave talks and wrote about women's emancipation, women's rights and other issues that concerned women. But she was not the type to spit venom on men as she believed that only a balanced society could flourish. The heroes of her stories were like her husband mostly teetotalers who respected women.

A loquacious person, she loved people, irrespective of their class, caste, or religion. She would recount her meeting with the workers of the salt fields in Vedaranyam with the same pride that she would talk about our meeting with *Indira Gandhi*!

She was my backbone

She encouraged me to learn whatever I wanted to learn, be it Bharatanatyam or painting or violin. She was very happy when I got my master's degree. It was as if she herself had achieved it. A mother's pride!

She was courageous and strong

Her last ten years, from 2011— soon after my father passed away—were very difficult for her physically. She underwent four or five major surgeries like heart bypass surgery, toe amputation, cataract surgery and so on. But she never gave up. Her last request to me even while in the Emergency Ward was, "Bring me my writing-pad tomorrow, without fail." The doctors who came to treat her, always returned light-hearted, drowned in her humour. Soon after her bypass surgery, on request from a junior doctor, she had sung a song in the ICU itself!

She wanted to be reborn

Every pious person would pray for *moksha*. But, my mother wished for rebirth. Not as a rich landlord or famous personality. But she wanted to be born in Tiruchendur. Sitting in the corridors of the temple, she wished to spend her entire life singing the hymns from *Thirupugazh* in praise of Lord Muruga.

It is nearly ten months since she passed away. She is still and will continue to be the source of courage and inspiration to me, my husband and my kids, who miss their sweet, favourite Paatti who they used to affectionately call *Amba*.



Lakshmi
Rajarathnam
drawn by
Rajasyamala
Prakash



Rajasyamala
Prakash is an
award winning
writer, dancer
and a painter.

SPARROW LITERARY AWARD 2021

SPARROW Literary Award, instituted by R Thyagarajan, Founder, Shriram Group, was announced in December 2021. The award function is usually held every year in December but due to the pandemic we had to cancel the SPARROW Literary Award function but SPARROW hopes that sometime in the future we will be able to meet the awardees in person.

The genre chosen for this year's SPARROW-R THYAGARAJAN Literary Award 2021 was fiction. In this genre the SPARROW Literary Awards are normally given to a woman and a man writing in Tamil and either a woman or a man for the non-Tamil language category. The SPARROW panel of judges this year were D I Aravindan and Ambai for Tamil and our consultant as always, was poet and writer, Sukumaran Narayanan. Although we concentrated on fictional writing we also took into consideration non-fictional contributions like literary essays, translations and other works of the writers as contemporary writers work in many different genres.

The final award decisions were taken by D I Aravindan and Ambai in the panel of judges. This year SPARROW decided to award two women writers and a male writer in Tamil. In the other language category we have chosen Tulu language this year.

The awardees this year are Tamil writers Lareena Abdul Haq, Kalaiselvi and M Gopalakrishnan for their wonderful fictional efforts and also other contributions to Tamil literature and in the other language category, award was given to honour and in recognition of her immense contribution to Tulu language to renowned Tulu writer Suneetha M Shetty whose mission in life has been to bring recognition to the Tulu language.

The awardees have honoured SPARROW and the panel of judges by accepting the awards.

The award citation for **KALAISELVI**:

The writing of Kalaiselvi who has given us remarkable fiction for the past many years, speaks about the tangled knots in human life and how life continues with the knots unravelling or holding fast. Apart from the women and men entrapped in these knots, nature comes entwined in the form of birds, animals, forests, mountains, rivers, water bodies, marshy lands and pouring rain and writes its own story in her fiction. In appreciation and recognition of her writing which reveals life like clear water through which its bed can be seen SPARROW has great pleasure in giving Kalaiselvi the SPARROW Literary Award 2021.

The award citation for **LAREENA ABDUL HAQ**:

Lareena writes in different literary genres like fiction, prose and poetry and her fiction is a mirror to the Muslim women's world in Si Lanka. With the determination to speak the truth, her writing reveals this world with mixed feelings of kindness, empathy, frustration, friendliness and rage. In appreciation and recognition of her fictional work that spreads before us the quality of life in a language filled with metaphors, mythical allegories and poetry, SPARROW has great pleasure in giving Lareena Abdul Haq the SPARROW Literary Award 2021.

The award citation for **M GOPALAKRISHNAN**:

M Gopalakrishnan works in both the fields of fiction and translation. His fictional writing deals with memories and erasures entwined with magical moments that happen when reality is confronted in the everyday tussle of life. His fiction expresses with extraordinary clarity and innate mystery the ways in which the world of reality before our eyes relates to the inner mind's deep conscious world. In appreciation and recognition of his writing that erects a fictional world from reality and makes it a wondrous experience SPARROW has great pleasure in giving M Gopalakrishnan the SPARROW Literary Award 2021.

The award citation for **DR SUNEETHA M SHETTY**:

Dr Suneetha M Shetty is a Tulu writer whose mission in life has been to bring recognition to the Tulu language. She has received several accolades for her contribution to the language, including the Tulu Sahitya Akademi award among several others. Recently her contribution to Kannada language was also recognised with the Kannada Rajyotsava Award under the category of Horanadu Kannadiga (non-resident Kannadiga) given by the Government of Karnataka and the title 'Chennabhairavadevi' and award given by the Kannadiga Patrakartara Sangha.

Suneetha Shetty writes poems and articles in Tulu and Kannada, and is a gifted orator and singer. She has three collections of poetry to her credit: Pingara (The Arecanut Flower, 1986), Sankranti (The Harvest Festival, 1989) and Nagasampige, 1994). Karajana (Jewel Box, 2002) is a collection of her essays. Pravasiya Hejjegalu (Travellers' Footseps, 2002), a travelogue in Kannada, has received wide acclaim. Nadedda Hadiya Hoogalyu (Flowers on the Trodden Path), a book of tribute to her, Nanna Teera-Ninna

Doni (*My Shores - Your Boat*), a collection of poems in Kannada and a collection of Tulu poems called Pada Pan Kannaro (*Sing a song, Dear one*), were brought out in 2007 on her seventy-fifth birthday.

In appreciation and recognition of her immense contribution to Tulu language and her efforts to bring recognition to the Tulu language SPARROW has great pleasure in giving Dr Suneetha M Shetty the SPARROW Literary Award 2021.

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

An Outlet for Immense Sorrow Lareena Abudul Haq

I got to know about fiction and publishing from my mother. Yes, my mother used to write serial stories in the weekly "Mithiran" in the name of Mathalai Farveen. Once it was published she used to carefully cut it out and file it. She used to receive letters from many readers. I grew up watching all this and got naturally drawn to writing.

I wrote my first story in the exam paper I wrote for Grade 5 scholarship exams. Then I began to write poems also. Amina Girls' College in Matala helped me to find the various talents in me. Tamil Language Day, Sinhalese and English Language Days and Art festivals became the occasions to express my talents. I am eternally grateful to the principal and teachers of my college for shaping my multi-faceted personality.

My childhood was not a happy one. My mother, my younger brother and I were greatly oppressed by a drunkard father and his tortures. After my parents separated, things only got worse. Poverty and its burden weighed heavy on my tiny shoulders and I got crushed by it.

The tragedy of the moments when I was treated worse than a servant in the houses of relatives where I was put up temporarily for the sake of education cannot be expressed in words. Caught in relentless misery the only relief my mother could think of was battering me.

Dark skin and an old, much faded and crumpled school uniform became the reason for being ignored by many. The scholarship money helped to take care of my education but going without food was something that did not go away.

In this situation, my mother's remarriage did help to deal with the poverty but it did not bring mental peace or security. I felt Umma withdrawing herself further from me. When I was 14 and in the Ninth Standard I was forced to fend for myself. From then on I started taking tuitions and earning money. In the later years I also took up family responsibilities and took care of the education and other needs of my siblings.

This continued throughout my college going years too. What became the great outlet for me during my days of untold suffering were two things. One was my open hearted conversations with god and the other was my reading and writing. I wrote whenever I got the time. I read whatever I could lay my hands on. This provided me the much needed relief. I felt as if I had a companion by my side. All the bindings in me got broken and made it possible for me to acquire my wings. I got the feeling that my sky was an extensive one. I got the deep belief that being alive and writing were synonymous. My writing gave me the inspiration to carefully step forward in my journey.

At this time, my husband who could not bear the social recognition and media attention that I got because of my writing and social activities went against the promise he had made before marriage and threatened me saying, "If you want me to continue to be with you, it will only be possible if you give up your writing." That moment of bargain and threat by him was terribly horrifying.

Those threats that were extensions of the physical and psychological tortures I had suffered from someone who had shared my life, rose before me in a gigantic form. I was forced to choose between writing and family life. My inner conscience told me to choose writing that gave me true peace instead of fearing the society and trying to safeguard a false life full of oppression where there was no love or mutual respect.

I thought that I may die if I gave up my writing. I began to meditate and pray seeking the right solution. I spoke to my two children since they were direct witnesses to all the tragedy that had happened. They perfectly understood my situation and stood by my decision.

After this my writing extended to new fields with much more vigour. More than twenty books in different genres like research, fiction, poetry and translation, a CD with nine songs written and composed by me—I feel that all this were how I discovered myself.

Not that this journey was easy. There were betrayals, let downs and deliberate blocking. I feel the SPARROW 2021 award as a great honour given to me for my literary activity that continued despite threats that never stopped haunting me. It has given me esteemed recognition despite voices that belittled my writing and wanted to consign it to darkness. It has given me the confidence that a Muslim woman can establish her identity with no compromises.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to writer Ambai whom I hold in great regard, and the panel of judges and the organisers of this award who made this possible, and accept this award with immense pride.

All praise is due to god alone. Alhamdulillah

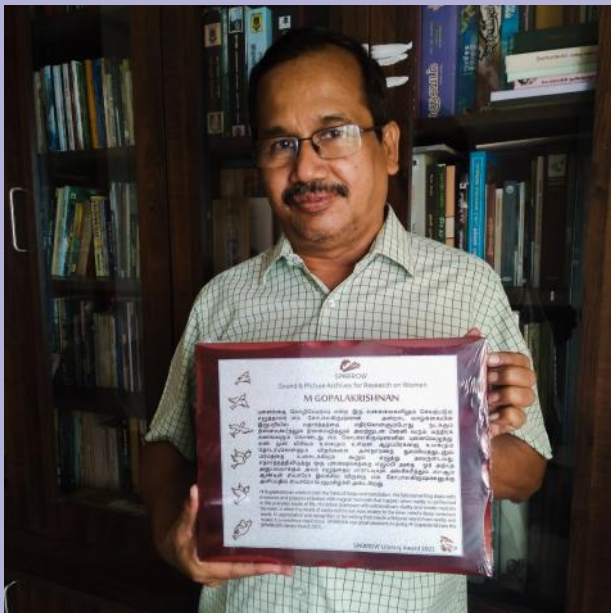
SPARROW LITERARY AWARD 2021



LAREENA ABDUL HAQ



KALAISELVI



M GOPALAKRISHNAN



DR SUNEETHA M SHETTY

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

“What is Greater Than Women?” M GOPALAKRISHNAN

I was born as the third son among four sons in a simple handloom weaving family. Although there were no girls among my siblings I was brought up by women from my birth. I grew up surrounded by women. My mother used to tell me that the girls who came in half saris to my grandmother to do the work of spinning the yarn needed for weaving used to walk around carrying me at their waists. Even after I grew up and became aware of things I remember being surrounded by only women. Handloom weaving is a profession where the entire family is involved. From the very young to the older people unless everyone does their share of work it is not possible to either weave a sari on the loom or take it as a product to the market. There were many women in the houses on our street. They were all elder to me. All of them worked on the loom and also ran their households. They were women who used to weave standing in the loom pit. So their voices rang in my ears throughout. They used to discuss cinema stories while they worked. During new moon when MGR films were screened in the tent theatre called touring talkies, they used to walk to the theatre with great enthusiasm and also take me along. During the Adipperukku festival when there is a celebration of water rising levels in all the rivers due to the onset of monsoon which is expected to occur on the 18th day of the solar month, they used tuck in their skirts at their waists and swing flying in the wind, sitting on the swings tied on the neem trees.

The voices of those weaver women slowly faded and became the voices heard amidst the sewing machines in the garment factories.

It became the voices of little girls who gave up going to schools and hastened, their large-sized tiffin carriers hanging from their hands, to the garment factories to fulfill family needs.

The factories provided job opportunities. They made economic freedom possible. The body language of women changed. So did their voices. It also changed the situation of male dependence. That the family was dependent on women got confirmed.

From handloom weaving to garment factories, the voices of these women resounded in my ears all the time. They continue to sound even today. During times when garment export reached its height, many from other districts of Tamil Nadu began to invade Tiruppur. One could hear other Tamil dialects along with Kongu Tamil then. Now languages from

other states have got mingled with the languages spoken.

These are the voices in my stories. I have tried to show through my stories, the developments, frustrations, opportunities and exploitations that have taken place in the last forty years in the lives of people, particularly women, who live in and around Tiruppur.

This is the secret of strong women characters in my stories. I can say that in my effort to portray women and reveal their attributes in short stories like “Malli” and in the novel *Manal Kadigai* (Sand Clock), and in stories like “Chudakkoduthaval” “Sivagami” and in the novel *Manai Matchi* (The Greatness of the Home) I have tried to portray the feminine that is personification of ability.

The characters in my stories are spontaneous ones. They firmly try to justify themselves in their own contexts. I don't take sides. Nor do I pass judgments about what is right and wrong. I merely say, ‘This is how they are’ and move away. I believe that that is what I should do.

‘What is greater than women?’ is Valluvar's utterance. It is also the subheading of my *Manai Matchi* novel.

I don't think it is an accident that a women's archives like SPARROW has recognised my writings and has decided to award me. I feel that the women revealed in my stories are the real owners of this award. In that context, this award is an important one for me; and also a unique one.

I have been writing for thirty years. I have been contributing in different genres like fiction, essays and translations and have written four novels and more than sixty short stories. I have been the editor of the magazine “*Sol Pudidu*” (The New Word). Although I have not received much recognition I continue to function as a writer. I write with great commitment. The hope that someone will read me somewhere and the strong belief that no one else can write what I can make me relentlessly pursue writing.

An organisation like SPARROW honouring my writing will give me the needed enthusiasm and capability to continue writing with more vigour.

I am deeply grateful to the consultants and the panel of judges for proposing my name for the award and the SPARROW organisation for choosing me for this award.



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ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

My Literary Journey KALAISELVI

My greetings to the SPARROW team.

This moment that I am receiving the prestigious award given by your organisation, I feel the need to look back at the path I have taken in the literary world.

Ten years before this day, if anyone had said that I would write or that the prefix writer would be attached to my name I would not have believed it. The first writer I heard about was Ra. Ki. Rangarjan. I recall my mother saying that he was related to one of our neighbours who lived opposite. But I did not ever get to meet him. I also remember my mother saying that she had gone to writer Akilan's house when she was a small girl. Their house was in Thennur, Tiruchi. Often she recalled that when she used to play with girls of her age, she had seen him often sitting in the front room and writing using a writing pad.

Unless I deliberately created some hurdles for myself, my young days mostly went by smoothly. My father was a senior officer in the Neyveli Lignite Corporation. I was born and brought up in Neyveli and pursued my education in Neyveli. Our home had all the facilities and the environment for reading books. It was full of comic books and Russian picture story books. There were also books like "Ambulimama", "Balamithra" and "Gokulam" meant for young people.

My father had the habit of presenting only books for birthdays, Diwali, Pongal and other festivals. We used to read them again and again till we almost got them by heart. Then there were magazines like "Kumudam", "Rani", "Ananda Vikakan", "Devi", "Kungumam", "Bomma", "Mangai", "Kalaimagal", "Kalki", "Manjari" and "Tuglaq" which got added to the list of magazines that came home. Saturday meant the day "Kumudam" came home. Thursday was the day for "Ananda Vikatan". We used to wait for those days as if we were doing some penance to get those magazines. I clearly remember even now the face of the magazine vendor. We used to call him 'Kumudam Mama'. The moment we heard the sound of his cycle bell all of us used to compete with one another and rush out. Whoever reached first was the lucky one. We used to tell the victorious one who was next. After the first one finished reading the magazine, it would go to whoever had said "Next" first. The first one was honour bound and could not give the magazine to anyone else. The magazine passed hands according to whoever had said, "Next." Till the magazine was passed on to the next person we would walk around watching the person who was reading it from the corner of our eyes. Such was our interest in

reading the magazines. Colourfully produced Diwali issues would go around the whole family. Even now I caress the old Diwali issues with memories of my childhood days. Old issues of "Rani Muthu" and "Malaimadhi" were bundled up and kept under the cot. When we had holidays after the annual exams, we would get under the cot and pull out the old issues and read them all over again. My brothers took up teaching and medical professions and I went into the normal mode of marriage, family responsibilities, job and children.

Although life took its usual path, it seems like I always have liked taking the opposite route. In my youth I was an ardent devotee of god. I was eternally in various temples. Like the Siddhars my day ended at midnight. My day began with bath at 3:30 a.m. and at 4 a.m. I was in the puja room. I was making great efforts those days to become the "sister" of Murugan. In a letter that my father wrote in despair then to my elder brother who was studying in a college in a different city he had written: "Your sister may go mad. Or she may decide not to marry. You have to look after her after our lifetime." My brother took the trouble of bringing the letter home and I still remember whispered discussions on the letter in the house. But I got married without a murmur to the person chosen by my father and surprised him and myself too.

As days passed in this manner, there were plenty of diary entries that I made. I used to fill the notebooks with fragile feelings that filled my mind, what I enjoyed, what was outside my cognition, some moments, happy memories, what I liked, disliked and so on. I was in a state of mind where I was seeking something, knocking against something and feeling unfulfilled. Those were days of great agitation that could not fit into normal life. There was not much reading that I had done those days.

I just happened to see an announcement in "Dinamani Kadir" in 2012. It was an announcement for a short-story competition as part of "Dinamani"-Neyveli Book Fair. I was drawn to it and I wrote a short story "Vaidehi Kaathirundthal" (Vaidehi Waited). I sent it for the competition with no hesitation. When I got the intimation from "Dinamani" saying that it had won the second prize I could not believe it. I had shifted to Tiruchi because of family and my job and I went to our city to receive the prize. "Dinamani" editor gives the prize on the stage. I accept it. Then I take interest in writing stories. My stories get published in magazines like "Kanaiyazhi" and "Uyirezhuthu".

All this was new. In 2013 the same announcement appeared again in "Dinamani Kadir". I wrote the story "Vali" (Pain) in my father's (Subramanian) name and it received the first prize. Again Neyveli; prize and meeting "Dinamani" editor. He asked me, 'So it was you who wrote it under a

pseudonym?” and also announced it on the stage. Next day in the newspaper and “*Dinamani Kadir*” my name with photograph, address and phone number appeared and the resounding welcome I received for that I am yet to receive for any other award for my writing.

I continued to write stories and began writing the novel “*Chakkai*” (Bagasse) the same year. It was about stone quarry workers. It was about how when modernisation sets in traditional workers get affected. NCBH published it in 2014. It got three awards including Tiruppur Thamizh Sangam award and Tamil Nadu Art and Literature Society award. It has been prescribed as a text in Nehru Memorial College, Puthanampatti. It has so far gone into seven editions.

Travels and reading began to increase. The mind that was wavering looking for something... for some reason... not knowing what... began to settle down. I began to write a lot. I have received many prizes, several awards. I have also learnt to look at the world differently. The difference between my first collection of stories “*Vali*” (Pain) published in 2014 and the stories published in the collection “*Koodu*” (Nest) in 2021, one can say, is the path I have walked so far. (I have published five short story collections so far). While my *Punitham* (Sacred) novel presents feminist views, *Atraithingal* (That Day) novel talks about tribal life and how it is ignored by central and state governments. The novel to be published in 2022 *Aalagaalam* (Poison) is about nothingness. Another novel is *Harilal S/O Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*. I am at present writing its second part.

In my literary journey, I have known about Ambai’s SPARROW organisation. I have seen with awe the announcements of the awards received by others. (I think K.N. Senthil and Thamizselvi were the first ones to receive it.) I have written letters to Ambai before being introduced to her. And today like the wonders that time creates, I am myself a recipient of the prestigious 2021 SPARROW Award. SPARROW does not follow the method of most awards where writers are asked to send their books and from among those, books are chosen for awards.

The awardees are chosen and are asked if they would accept the award and only then the awards are announced. Even after the public announcement a letter was sent by SPARROW to each awardee thanking the writer for accepting the award. Being chosen for this award by discerning judges has enhanced my urge to write.

I thank SPARROW organisation and the panel of judges who have chosen me. I also heartily congratulate fellow writers who have been chosen for the award.

—Acceptance speeches of Lareena Abdul Haq, M Gopalakrishnan and Kalaiselvi translated from Tamil by C S Lakshmi

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

SUNEETHA M SHETTY

I am very much grateful to SPARROW for recognising me as a Tulu and Kannada writer of merit by conferring on me the prestigious SPARROW Literary Award 2021.

Earlier, SPARROW, especially Mrs. C S Lakshmi, and her team had given me an opportunity to attend the Writers’ Camp at Kashid in the year 2006. It was a treat and a unique experience in my life. Thank you all.

I have received a beautiful memento and award money. Now as a token of my love and respect for SPARROW and all of you I am enclosing a cheque. Please accept.



SNL 39
supplement

SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary Award programme began in 2014. In SNL 39 supplement we have given all the acceptance speeches of the writers who got the awards from 2014 to 2019 for the acceptance speeches were not just formal speeches but stories the authors told us about themselves, their life and their writing which we felt, must be documented.

Giving below the link

<https://www.sparrowonline.org/newsletter/>

Heaven as Hell, A Child in a Garbage Dump A Girl Destroyed



3 Stories of SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary Awardees 2021 to Lose Sleep Over

DAJJAL'S HEAVEN LAREENA Abdul HAQ

It was drizzling outside and the smell of moist earth penetrated one's nostrils. The cool breeze had now intensified to a strong wind. Observing the eye-catching lightning and the roar of distant thunder that rippled across the darkened expanse of sky one got the sense of rain pouring down heavily somewhere.

Needle in hand Muneera who was embroidering a pillow cover in the corner of her verandah let her gaze wander for a while. She could sense that the uninterrupted drizzle was slowly intensifying into a heavy downpour. Her keen eyes didn't fail to notice the dark movement beside the small black stone that lay across the road. She squinted a bit to observe more clearly. It was a black scorpion. Around here, they called it a "Nattuvakali". Rhythmically moving forward and backward with its uplifted pincers it gave the appearance of rehearsing a dance recital. At one stage the pincers folded towards each other to grasp an insect which hopelessly struggled for a brief while before becoming an immobile corpse. A transfixed Muneera watched the scorpion disappear behind the stone carrying the dead insect with its pincers.

That black scorpion and its pincers reminded her of Nazir. She wondered why all of a sudden, she thought so. Could it be because his tongue like a pincer kept repeatedly torturing her with its painful stings?

Time dripped away as the rainwater coursed down the street in a steady stream. As if to match the pervading darkness outside the power went off in a trice. To dispel the enveloping darkness, the chimney lamps and bottle lamps stocked in everyone's house for emergency purposes, came out in full display. Some houses made do with candles while charger lights blazed forth in some of the well-to-do ones. It struck Muneera that even light had to modulate itself to suit the financial situation of individuals.

It was Marwan who first bothered the old lady who lived next door saying, "Pecchima, it's raining and we can't play anywhere. No current to watch TV either. It's so boring Pecchima. Why don't you tell us a story?"

"Oh! Come on Pecchima, been a while since we heard a story from you... Today please tell us a good one," Sameem joined. And just like that, next-door Peddha, the grand old woman, found herself mobbed by all the neighborhood brats. Not wanting to spoil her eyes embroidering in chimney light, Muneera carefully put aside both cloth and needle and came back to the verandah corner all agog to hear Peddha's story. When was age a bar to listen to a story!

"Now, what can I tell you, the king and queen stories I have exhausted them all, told them multiple times over. What new tale can I recount now...?"

“Something bigggg... like that one about the demon Dajjal, tell something like that, Pecchima,” said Gyas who recited in the neighbouring village’s madrasa.

“Yes, that is indeed a good one. Let me tell that one then.”

“Please do, please do” the brats pleaded in chorus. A proud smile spread across Peddha’s lips.

“This world one day will be destroyed and cease to exist; did you know that?”

“What, really? When will it be destroyed Pecchima?”

“The exact time cannot be gauged that easily by the likes of us. But there are certain tell-tale signs. All those should come to pass. Only then will the world shatter into myriad pieces and disappear. Dajjal’s appearance is one of those signs.”

“Dajjal, who’s that Pecchima?” asked Asma.

“Pecchima, how does Dajjal look? Is he like Superman? Or like Ben 10?” Ilyas eagerly asked.

“I don’t know about those wretched things, boy. But Dajjal looks like some sort of a demon. With only one eye and that too on his forehead. He is a vicious one... so tall that he can almost touch the sky. If he puts one foot here his next step will be over there.... yon..der. So tall and hefty is he. “

“Oh! Is he really so big? Then he might trample the lot of us, won’t he?”

“If we still existed here when he shows up, that might happen as well. Who knows? But if we want to be protected from him, we have to circumambulate the Masjid-al haram in Mecca and seek refuge there. Apparently, he won’t dare to show up there.”

“Sha! How unfair! It would have been great if we too were born in Saudi, wouldn’t it, Pecchimaa? Then we won’t have to flee, fearing Dajjal.”

“Hey, stop butting in and allow us to hear the story. Why do you keep thrusting yourself forward like a cashew nut?”

“Why don’t you shut up... as if you were some mighty..”

“Ok! Ok! Salma, Irfan, stop fighting now.”

“Ok Pecchima, you carry on.”

“Pecchima, presently where is Dajjal most likely to be?”

“What a question! Smart girl. Even today he is in a secret cave in some corner of the world. Whether that is beneath the earth or the sea no one knows. He is kept all tied up there, restrained by huge chains. All day he tries to whittle down the walls of the cave by licking them constantly. Then...”

“Then...?” A great fear shrouded the children as they queried in chorus. Peddha sensed this and tried hard to restrain a chuckle.

“As he keeps licking the walls gradually whittle down. Then, as day breaks, it would be time for morning prayers. The moment someone recites the Qunoot supplications the walls of the cave are restored to their former state. Dajjal would then begin all over again, try to escape by licking the walls and whittling them. The day when everyone forgets to recite the Qunoot supplications Dajjal would come out breaking the walls of that cave...”

With a grand flow of emotion, she moved the story along. Muneera was aware of myriad oral versions of the Dajjal story. That the Qunoot recital during the morning prayers will restore the walls of Dajjal’s cave to its former state and that too instantly, were all part of that oral tradition prevalent amongst old-timers. Peddha’s version is also a part of that tradition. If Nazir heard this, he was bound to remonstrate and bad-mouth Peddha. When Muneera realised that Nazir might even go to the extent of expending two-three days to prove that the Qunoot version related by Peddha had no real basis, a smile spread all over her face. She couldn’t fathom if that was ridicule or anger. Sometimes, even a fawning person who bows down obsequiously before a dictator unwinds merrily by mockingly mimicking him after he leaves. Perhaps this was akin to that!

Peddha’s story continued. With widened eyes and outspread arms, with a variety of facial expressions and voice modulations, the way she narrated a story was unique, a thing to behold. Her stories could keep the children spellbound for however many hours she wanted. The skill with which she could stretch a simple four-line story by embellishing it endlessly was indeed extraordinary.

Peddha had once delivered a spate of ten children six of which were still alive. Once married they had all gone their separate

ways leaving Peddha to spend her twilight years with her youngest daughter. Although a distant relative, Muneera's Umma was not wont to conversing with Peddha much.

"If she opens her mouth, it stretches all the way to the Bay of Bengal", this was her Umma's opinion of Pecchima. Fearing its dangerous garrulousness, she kept all conversations with Pecchima to a bare minimum.

Muneera pegged Peddha's personality as something that was at diametric variance with the middle-class mores of today. Going against the "Tail to the fish and head to the snake" adage Peddha eschewed the slippery habit of adapting her behaviour to suit the person she interacted with. Being obsequious towards the wealthy and powerful while running roughshod over the common man was something that was not in her book. Fearing none and speaking her mind with the frankness of a villager was a trait that had taken root in her. False pretenses weren't her cup of tea. She didn't know how to think one thing and say another. She treated all human beings equally. At times when her anger grew out of bounds a heightened sense of abuse crept into her tone. She had at the tip of her tongue, who was who and who did what in that neighbourhood. At the appropriate moment she didn't ever pull her punches and called out people right in front of their face. This is why she was feared by most.

When they visited her house as a newlywed couple Peddha had intuited Nazir's character astutely. That it took her almost two-plus years to understand that had always surprised Muneera, as she mulled over it repeatedly.

"Muneera's husband is a sly one. Don't be fooled by his fair babyface. He is a ruthless go-getter. He thinks he is the only gig in town. He is not the right match for that poor girl Muneera. "

When Muneera came to know of Peddha's evaluation she was seized with uncontrollable rage. She tried to brush it off by imagining an envious Peddha, jealous of her for landing a good catch for a husband. She hated Peddha with all her heart. She didn't even take leave of her when she departed for her in-laws. Proud of her handsome, well-versed in religious studies husband, she was on cloud nine. She repeatedly relished the idea of being bestowed a blessed life.

Nazir was in charge of the IT Department at his office and he was beset with some system issues that day as well. It took him almost two hours to get to the root cause and

solve it. Intending to take a break he headed to the canteen for a cup of tea. Seeing his manager and the recently transferred MD discussing over a cup of tea he grew hesitant. Not wishing to reveal that, he went ahead to order a cup for himself. When the two of them waved at him in a friendly fashion he was forced to take the remaining seat at their table.

"Sir, this is Mr.Nazir, the husband of the writer Muneera you were talking about. He is in charge of IT." Although he didn't like the way his manager introduced him Nazir was discreet enough not to show his displeasure.

"Very nice to meet you. How is Muneera? We went to the same campus; she was a star junior. Excelled both in studies and the arts. Very active on campus. There was almost no one who didn't know her, she was that famous. To have such a brilliant woman for a wife, you are truly blessed. Does she still write?"

"Oh! Even in yesterday's morning newspaper, there was an excellent story by her Sir," the manager preempted Nazir which irritated him quite a bit. He knew that his manager was a literature buff. 'But the MD too, heaven help us!' he lamented to himself disgustedly.

'Writing four-five poems and seven-eight stories, is this such a big achievement? A woman who could barely boast one-tenth of his computer skills, to invoke her name to introduce him... as if she were much greater than me... This manager is a damn fool' he mumbled to himself as he finished his tea.

"You look a bit down Nazir, pale-faced, everything OK?"

"Nothing like that Sir. The system was down and I had to struggle for two hours to get it up and running. So just a bit tired; nothing else."

"Ok! Hope the tea refreshes you," he kindly rejoined, patting Nazir on his shoulders before leaving the canteen with the MD.

After the break, he had to go to his manager's room to fetch a file. Letting him search for the file the manager left his office citing some prior commitment. After successfully culling out the required file Nazir turned around only to be surprised by Muneera's name on a newspaper that lay bundled up on his manager's table. Extricating that single sheet that had his wife's name on it he returned to his seat. Reading that accidentally found short story increased his

anger manifold.

‘How could you ask me to take it easy and stay calm after setting fire to my dreams and leaving scorched earth for my heart?’

No billows in this sky now, no stars, no rainbows or their colors. No sun or moon, nothing there. It lies bare and forlorn.

Colourful streamers adorn your street...Musical instruments thunder to announce your victory. You march forth in proud euphoria. After you generously bestowed the flowers to the mobbing fans surrounding you, from the bouquet that is too big for your hands, you flung the thorns that have submerged my street. My love, today you stand tall at the pinnacle while I wallow in my bloody swamp with tattered feet...’

On his way back home, he was completely overwhelmed by irritation and anger, his thoughts dappled with the shadow cast by the past.

Shortly after their marriage, her short story collection won a national award. On her insistence, he had taken her to the award ceremony, albeit only half-heartedly. More than calling it a crowded event it would be more appropriate to call it a male-infested event. The bobbing crowd of males that jostled to greet her and talk to her irritated him unbearably. More than that, the way she cheerfully thanked and conversed with them stoked his anger much more. Only after much effort could he restrain himself.

One week after that function there was another one commemorating the award winners from their region. Muneera was invited as well. As one of the speakers was a local dignitary whom he respected Nazir chose to go to the event with his wife. She was the only woman on stage, the rest of them were all male. The event had barely begun and Nazir was already squirming in his front-row seat. He couldn't bear the sight of the males seated on either side of his wife turning to converse with her and she, without the smile leaving her face, responding to them in earnest. ‘If those guys were shameless enough to be all smiles shouldn't this woman have more sense?’ he mumbled to himself. Wait till we get home, I will set her right with a pungent word or two, he kept reminding himself. But alas, his sister, her husband and children were visiting them on a ten-day break and he didn't get that opportunity after all.

Despite having had ample opportunities to genially interact

with so many women at work as well as at other public places it never occurred to him that what he had just witnessed was something akin and he couldn't grapple with the fact that interacting freely with others had nothing to do with one's morals. Even now, he couldn't make that connection and assuage himself.

As usual, his wife welcomed him with a beaming face and a cup of tea, but this instead of decreasing his displeasure only served to increase it. Even the lisping jabber of his dear daughter Asma couldn't cheer him up.

“Looks like you were damn famous in your campus! Apparently, there was no one who didn't know you!” She failed to notice the irritation and the streak of sarcasm in his voice as he sipped his tea.

“Oh! that's so common in a campus, isn't it? Pretty much, everyone knows everyone else.”

“As if it was some extraordinary campus! I too did my degree in a campus, you know. Don't give me these campus stories.”

“You studied in a Madrasa and got your degree as an external student. I did my degree as an internal student. Although the degree is the same, there are definitely some differences, don't you think?”

“Bah! What big difference?”

“Indeed, not a big difference, but if you are an internal student, you would have been forced to take on certain responsibilities in associations there, for instance, the Muslim Majlis, Tamil Sangam Dance & Music club, and the like. There would be frequent literary and art competitions, poetry symposiums that you would need to participate in. Literacy drives, flood disaster relief, opportunities to be a part of such community initiatives galore...”

“Wow! So everyone would know the women who gallivant with no restraints and sing and dance on stage, isn't that right?” For a while, she was left speechless stunned by the mocking ridicule in his voice.

“Why are you saying all this? Who is wandering unrestrainedly and performing on stage?”

“Who else but my dear wife Muneera? Our new MD came to the office today. Apparently, he is your Senior. He said you were very famous at college. I wanted to understand how

you became so famous, that's why I asked."

"Whoever it was there is no way he could have spoken of me in a bad light. I am pretty sure of that. "

"Oh yes, I forgot, you know everything! You think too highly of yourself. Let me tell you now, no more writing for any paper..."

'Why, why shouldn't I?'

"Why, because people read your sob stories and think that I am mistreating you, that's why."

"Who told you that?'

"You don't need to know all that. You have to heed my words. A wife's first duty is to be obedient to her husband. if I don't like it, you should stop writing. That all, end of story."

"This is atrocious! You keep talking about Islam, Society, and Dawah, what you just said has nothing to do with all that. Before we got married, I had come to your Dawah class, what did you say to all of us then? Writing is a sort of Amanah, an entrusted obligation. Those who are skilled in that should not waste it. They should use it to raise social consciousness, always keeping in mind that it is a weapon... Was all that a lie? How could you say that then and bar me from writing now?"

"Stop it, you dare to question me? You are my wife and belong only to me. I don't like all and sundry to relish what you write word by word. I get the feeling that they are relishing you bit by bit..."

"Chee! Go wash your mouth. I didn't expect you to be a man full of so much najis. Chee!"

"What did you say! I am full of najis, is it?" Rattled by his slap she lost her balance and fell. But his rage hadn't subsided yet. He beat her a few more times and left the house in a huff. Terrified, their daughter Asma began to cry and scream. Nazir's mom didn't make any attempt to control her son's tantrums. She just picked Asma up and left, not bothering to help her daughter-in-law who lay on the floor, a victim of a brutal assault, to get on her feet or assuage her. She had an unshakable belief that whatever her son did must of necessity be right since he had been trained for years on the "religious way" at the Madrasa. 'The daughter-in-law must have committed some unforgivable mistake. He must have punished her to correct her,' she thought. No wonder the

thought of empathising with her daughter-in-law never occurred to her at all.

After that assault, he didn't attempt to abuse her physically. He just used his tongue as a whip instead. That violent experience and the subsequent tongue lashings and jibes had almost managed to transform Muneera into a walking corpse. Well-versed in Islam, a graduate, one who indulges in Dawah, cultured— she had so many grand illusions about him. As they began to unravel one by one, she grew debilitated both physically and mentally.

She used to work as a teacher and he had cajoled her to take a break when she had got pregnant. She had always thought that he had wanted this out of an overwhelming sense of concern for her as a pregnant woman. She never imagined that this could be a result of his inferiority or superiority complexes. These days his tongue had morphed into a black scorpion. Although unable to bear its vicious venomous stings she tried to put up with it as much as possible keeping in mind the future of her daughter. She abandoned her writing and cut herself off from the outside world. She bore his accusations silently. Although she grew more and more docile there was no respite from his verbal abuses and deplorable behaviour. The fault-finding and irritable carping kept increasing day by day.

It was 10 o' clock and Nazir hadn't come home yet. The child was fast asleep. Unable to sleep and looking out of the window Muneera's eyes happened to look at the sky. The twinkling stars were luminous and made the sky more beautiful. Watching them unleashed a wave of thoughts... Children, men, and women, almost everyone liked stars. How many poems and songs extolled their brightness and splendour! So many wonderful descriptions of them in so many stories!

The star was a sun too. Yes, in unknown obscurity, hiding its pain, it burns away setting alight immensely dark spaces, doing its fair share of duty—Muneera thought expansively.

Her daughter Asma had tripped once and lightly scratched her knee. Before she could console her, wipe her tears, and take a breather, Nazir who had just got up from bed went on his usual rant and needled her, "Oh! You wax eloquent on child care in newspapers, but don't even have what it takes to safely take care of an only child...."

"Haven't I stopped writing altogether, why bring that up again?"

"I decide what I talk, you shut your mouth and stop advising me..." he slammed the door and left. The child curled up in her lap in fear. As she gently rubbed her back in an attempt to pacify her, Muneera teared up. She choked up and it felt as if there was something stuck in her throat. She didn't know for how long she stayed like that. Hearing someone gently knocking on the door she hurriedly wiped her tears and opened the door. Nadira awaited her on the other side. Nadira hugged her friend who had forced a smile and said Salaam.

"Long time! So, you remembered the way!"

"No time dear! So many chores! Always busy. Even this is a lightning visit, have to hustle back soon. Here, take this invitation. You and Naseer Sir must definitely come..."

"What is this invitation for?"

"My poetry book release. Nazir Sir is the special guest of honour..."

"I will inform him... don't know if he will attend..."

"What dear, now that you are Nazir Sir's wife, you think you are a big shot, eh? It's only after talking to him yesterday morning and getting his permission I went ahead and put his name on the invitation...But here you are, making a big fuss!"

"What did he say?"

"He was so thrilled! He appreciated me so much. He was always into women's education and progress, wasn't he!" 'Definitely Muslim women should come forward and participate at the social level. They shouldn't lose heart when faced with opposition. Without the contribution of women, no big social change can be achieved. Not just this book, you should write several more. It is women like you our society needs most. I will always be your well-wisher and pray for you. Don't hesitate to ask me for any help,' he said. I was so happy. You are truly blessed to have got a husband like him. Masha Allah!" As she went on speaking excitedly, Muneera couldn't decide if she should laugh or cry.

'Oh! Looks like Your Nazir Sir thinks every woman other than his wife is wise and intelligent! He will move heaven and earth, make speeches, write, to make them all more capable! Bah! it's my fate!' She almost blurted out but managed to restrain herself. Although she was anxious to ask him about this when he got back she eventually didn't. As she expected,

he went to the function alone.

She couldn't fathom why her husband treated her like that. She tried to console herself by speciously imagining that his unbounded love for her was the reason for his hysterical behavior. But she realised that her patience was slowly eroding. At one stage she decided to put an end to this by confronting him head-on.

"I need to talk to you alone..."

"What do you want to talk? I don't have anything to talk to you in private."

"But I do. I have a lot to talk."

"....."

"What has happened to you? You are always grumpy and eager to put me down. If you continue treating me heartlessly, pretty soon I'll go insane."

"Oho! So, I am torturing you, is it? I am a torturer now, right? I knew it, when you kept spouting all that feminism nonsense, I knew that this is what it will come to. Calling me a torturer, what cheek! "

"That's not fair, don't put words in my mouth. You talk grandly till the cows come home about the advancement of the rest of the womenfolk. If only they knew how you behave at home, it won't be good for both of us."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Not threatening, just telling the truth. Why are you so two-faced? Who are you trying to fool by wearing this mask?"

"Can't you stop your drivel on 'me', 'my self' and all that?"

"What am I asking and what are you replying? When did I talk about me or my self? For argument's sake, even if I had said that what's wrong with it? Are you saying that your wife should be an inert object without a self? Is that what Islam preaches? You keep preaching the world about social reform and the social contribution of women; aren't you ashamed to talk to your own wife in this manner?"

"Maini, what you are saying is wrong. 'I have studied in college, have a mouth, will speak' kind of talk is improper. Equal rights, freedom for women all this look nice on paper,

but to expect this in our homes is foolish. It's not practical, first understand that, Maini. If it were my husband, you would have known! If I had talked like this, he would have beaten the hell out of me. Lucky for you my younger brother studied at a religious school and is a patient man." Without seeking permission her sister-in-law barged into their bedroom and interjected, pouring kerosene over the raging fire.

"A woman should be humble and obedient. One can't speak just because one has a mouth." Her father-in-law grunted outside their bedroom.

"I didn't say anything wrong..."

"She didn't say anything wrong apparently... what cheekiness, brother!"

"Sister-in-law, I..."

"Enough! Shut up! After all those insults do you think I would be shameless enough to continue living with you? Get going now. I will teach you a lesson you will never forget. Don't even dream of stepping on my doorstep ever again. I have made up my mind!"

They kept yelling one after another. She didn't get an opportunity to speak her mind freely and get in a word edgewise. If she had been tied up and beaten black and blue, the situation wouldn't have been more deplorable. He was able to successfully corral his family members in support and had put her on trial under the pretence of discussing her issue. It was a joint family. She could have spoken freely about her situation in such a restrictive setup, but considering the fact that she had to live with them all for years to come, she kept mum. That very day, Nazir took Muneera and their daughter to Muneera's Umma's house and dropped them off there. That was the last she saw of him.

In the Qadi's court only his words carried weight. They thought he was an Alim who had studied Islamic religion and whatever he did would be right. They did hear her side but that was only a formality. Finally he gave her the talaq. She observed iddah for three months.

She came to know that they were looking for another bride for him. She wept bitterly till her tears dried up. She asked herself what her crime was. Was it a crime to go to university? Was it a crime to showcase her writing talent? Didn't he choose to marry her after knowing all this in great detail? From being "a cherished resource of society" of those

days how did she end up suddenly as the "gutter" of today? What were the reasons for that? She yearned for someone to question him on this matter. But unfortunately contrary to her expectations, society found her at fault. They kept talking about her story over and over again as if it were a means to pass time.

"A woman should be subservient to the husband who has deigned to marry her and should heed his words, remain humble and not talk back at him. If you let your education go to your head and behave arrogantly towards your husband, this is what would entail. Instead of taking care of your household do the righteous ways of our religion recommend women to dabble at stories and poetry? This is where incomplete education will lead you to, ditched by your husband and lamenting your woes"—several people mumbled within her earshot.

At first, all this depressed her and she withdrew into her shell, fearing to show her face in public. 'Maybe I will become a mental patient,' she feared. Despite all this, the situation got better with the arrival of her paternal uncle from abroad. He consoled her a lot. He clarified to her the hypocrisy of Nazir that he peddled under the guise of Islam. He tried to cheer up by reiterating that she should be happy for having escaped the clutches of someone with sadistic tendencies like Nazir. He counselled Muneera's family as well. He also made the requisite efforts needed to get back her old teaching assignment. He restituted to Muneera the self-confidence that she had lost in her life.

Suddenly the earth trembled and it felt as if the walls and roof of the house would imminently collapse. 'Ah! Was that an earthquake? Would the earth split in half and swallow me?' a startled Muneera wondered as a section of her roof crumbled and fell. Through the gaping hole, a terrifying face peered with its single eye. That the eye was filled with hatred and rancour was clearly visible. Muneera attempted to scream and exit the house running. But her tongue had cleaved to her palate. She couldn't scream. Her legs felt leaden as if they were chained to balls of iron. She could hardly lift them, let alone take a single step. Terrified she looked up only to see Dajjal's right hand extending down to firmly grasp her. She screamed with all her might. But not a peep emerged. Her terror-struck eyes kept observing to make sense of what was happening to her. The gigantic figure was like a mountain of flesh. Carrying her, with earth-shaking stomps he reached the school grounds where a massive crowd had gathered. Among them a group of people had been tied in chains. She saw that Peddha was in that group as well. 'Peddha was the

cause of all this trouble. Why did she start narrating that Dajjal story? That's why he has made the journey and come here. Tche! We are all trapped! What'll ensue?' Muneera was thoroughly confused.

Dajjal looked at the people gathered in the school ground. In a hoarse voice, he shouted like someone raging, and asked who amongst them had faith in him. He announced that he would lead those who trusted and obeyed him, those who heeded his words and not dare question it, into the heaven at his disposal, the demurring rest he would consign them to a burning hell. His thundering voice sounded strange as if it were an amalgam of a lion's roar and an elephant's trumpet. Muneera thought her eardrums were about to burst.

When he questioned, "Who are my faithful?" "Me, me..." several voices answered simultaneously resulting in a raucous cacophony. Dajjal lifted her to eye level and peered at her intensely. All atremble with fear, Muneera look at the single eye which looked as if it would brim forth any moment and splatter. How miraculous! Dajjal's face gradually began to morph. Indeed, it was no longer Dajjal's face that was on display there; it was Nazir's face. One couldn't exactly pinpoint but an unfathomable expression could be discerned in it. A mysterious smile blossomed forth in it. A euphoric Muneera nodded approvingly. He led her to heaven. There, heaven's door was ajar. He urged her to go inside and she asked him to accompany her. He stood near the entrance and signalled her with his hand to go in first. She walked ahead. She must have taken only a few steps past heaven's doors... Oh! What's this? Muneera had begun her upside-down descent towards the nether world. At its rock bottom, ravenous tongues of flame burned forth monstrously waiting to consume the entire world.

"Umma... Umma..." as if it emerged from the bottom of a well, a distant voice followed her and beckoned continuously. It was her daughter Asma's voice.

—Translated by Nakul Vac

Translated from the original "Dajjal in Sorgam" (Dajjal's Heaven) published in the short story collection Dajjal in Sorgam (Dajjal's Heaven) (Sri Lanka: S Godage & Brothers, 2016)

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

BIRIYANI KALAISELVI

She couldn't open her eyes. But still, every now and then her eyeballs moved beneath her lids as if they were looking for something. Her neighbours, Aunts Anjalai and Maragatham, Maariamamma Akka, Ganga, Chinnamma, they woke her, made her sit up and gave her coffee, it felt almost real. Once when she got hit by a bicycle and passed out, they had woken her and made her sit up in a similar fashion. But now there was no coffee, no one near her either. Just random memories running helter-skelter.

As if today were some rare festive day, her mom kept popping into these random thoughts of hers. Her mother tried to carry her on her hips but being thirteen years old now, she could no longer easily sit there anymore. Her legs had got too long. Will they touch the ground? She felt like smiling. She kept doing that, cracking up at everything for no rhyme or reason. Last year, when she had got her periods for the first time and had become a 'grown up', she had guffawed like this and the old crone who habitually sat on the pial outside berated her, "Tut, enough of that, a girl laughing like that for everything, whoever heard of this..." She had also wanted to break into guffaws when Kanaka Akka raised her hand in mock anger and said, "If you laugh anymore I will smack you right on your mouth." And now, as she imagined her legs dangling down her mother's hips and touching the ground, she wanted to laugh as well. But when she tried opening her mouth wide in an attempt to smile, her cheeks burned as if they were afire. "Mmaa..." she moaned reflexively. It was a very faint moan but even that was a bit too much for her bruised mouth.

Expending much effort, she determinedly moved her body towards the window sill. She couldn't move her right hand which lay heavy like a corpse. The open wounds all over her body got the flies excited. Not to mention that she had no clothes on her. But though the flies were annoying, they helped her retain consciousness, or what little remained of it. She stretched out her left hand and fumbled for the heap of clothes that lay near her and pulled at it. Two old chudidaars, one skirt and top... The small bundle just had a few worn-out undergarments and as if it were waiting for her touch, it fell down with a thud on her, somewhere upon the lower part of her body below her hips. Startled into

searing pain she writhed in a spasm of intense suffering.

She didn't know who he was when he had come the first time. Not that she knew now either. But she had felt good, or so she thought. But her thoughts were muddled. She too wasn't that coherent these days. Since when, did her thoughts break down, or was she born this way? The confused village folks couldn't say. Her father was the first one to die. She was about two years old at that time, maybe even younger. She was obsessed with the effort to huddle beneath the loose end of her mother's sari. The fear of her brother claiming her spot could have been a reason. He was four or five years older than her.

The newspapers had covered the "on the spot" deaths of the two women construction workers who were killed when the scaffold on which they happened to work collapsed on them. Her mother Ramakka was one of the two names that were mentioned. At that time, Ramakka was collecting money for her husband's first year death ceremony rites. It was after that unfortunate incident, she got accustomed to being addressed as "Ramakka Mava", and started to respond to that epithet which simply meant 'Ramakka's daughter'. Later, she got used to being addressed 'Seyanthi' which was her real name. When the construction bosses fearing retribution, or perhaps desiring a slave without familial ties took her brother along, she and her house, both were left all alone. It was loneliness alright, but not an outright one. Perhaps, if she were a bit more aware the village might have treated her with more cruelty. But when they saw her smile with her whole being when beckoned "Seyanthee..." they couldn't spurn her easily. The fact that she could easily pick up useful skills irrespective of who trained her might have been an additional factor in their concern for her. She could rinse clothes without resting her hands and she was not averse to clean the piled-up dishes. And yet, she was also capable of dropping on a whim, whatever it was she was doing, and going about her happy go lucky ways. She didn't even know how to raise her voice to ask for the left-over cooked rice soaked in water. With hands for pillow, she used to sleep on the cow dung smeared floors of the houses at which she worked. She had to sleep in that dilapidated house of hers only on the days when she got her periods. The pial-crone would give her company.

Even if the memories slipped away the flies reminded her of her pain. She felt that turning her supine body around might provide some relief. Unable to bring her spread out legs closer, she lay burning in pain. She could hear someone walking by, on the road outside. She felt anxious to get up

and walk out.

"I had asked her to fetch that lad Suresh and this damn girl is not to be seen...." Amuthaakka was looking for her. "Oh God! Suresh would be waiting for me at the school..." she felt flustered. Even though she could not read the clock she could still tell time approximately. But lying there for three hours, she had lost all sense of time.

"Akka, here, here, I am here..." she tried to raise her voice. But it fizzled out as gibberish within herself. "What are you blabbering?" was typically how the townsfolk generally reacted to her talk. They probably meant she was immature. This gibberish might possibly be due to the wobbling of her tongue. Still, she had to raise her voice to let others know of her presence. That much she knew. All this, despite this being her house. It was one amongst the disorderly many that were isolated from one another, along that street. It was a house that did not look like a house. Its frames, lacking a door, were infested with termites. The windows, missing crossbars, looked like large gaping holes.

The lack of human traffic and the house's mud walls made it convenient for both on the days he visited. Yes, indeed for both. Of course, he had intentions, and though she had none it was not as if she didn't enjoy these visits. Today was the fourth time. Each of the visits happened on afternoons like this one. The entire village was busy at the fields during that time of the day. Working in the fields didn't suit her. And yet she did not shy away from washing those piled up cooking utensils that just lay there unattended at the homes where she worked. She spent the day gathering dung off the stable floors when the cows were on their grazing routines and depositing them in the manure pits or doing laundry. But when she got hungry, it didn't matter whose house she was at, she fetched the utensil that held the cooked rice soaked in water, with pickle or left-over sour broth and sat down to eat immediately.

It could have been two months since he started coming. First time around, she was washing Ganga Akka's utensils. He stood on the other side of the bamboo fence and kept staring at her. He had well toned arms and legs and had a wheatish complexion. He was perhaps less than twenty-five years of age. "Who's it..." she asked trying to restrain the laughter that accompanied those words. "No one.... Just looking around," he muttered for the sake of replying but didn't move.

"Did you eat yet, Anna?" she asked familiarly, assuming that

he must have been from out of town.

“Did you?”

“Not yet” she pointed to the utensil which had yesterday’s rice.

She finished her washing chores and looked up. He was still standing there.

“Are you hungry? Come, let’s eat, Anna,” She sat down to eat. He mustered enough courage to push the bamboo gate open and went in.

“Ayyo, it stinks,” she blurted out. He was drunk and was struggling to control his roving eyes that leered all over her body.

“I have biriyani, would you like to eat some? “

They took good care of her during the Wedding at Ravuthar’s place. The biriyani was so delicious that she wanted to keep asking for more. She couldn’t overcome her shyness at a moment’s notice.

“It’s OK Anna, you eat.”

“Shall we share it?”

“Then who will eat this rice...” She smiled,

Without reciprocating he grabbed the utensil and emptied it into the trash pot.

“Anna, no, don’t do that Anna,” she ran after him.

“Don’t yell... come let’s go there and eat....” He clutched her hand and walked quickly. “You are holding my hand as if I were a convent school girl.” Her laughter crackled but without any resistance she walked alongside him. Looked like he knew her house. Run down three quarters of a wall on all four sides, whose plaster had flaked off long ago. Only the bamboo poles remained of what was once a tiled roof. If they huddled up next to the wall, no one could see them from outside. He maneuvered her next to the wall and lay down beside her. She got a bit scared and wondered if she should run away. But he pinned her down forcefully thwarting all thoughts of escape. He turned her around to kiss her and squeeze her body against his. Without too much fuss he started to fondle her. Amidst all this, the thought of biryani

suddenly assailed her and she exclaimed “Anna... biriyani...”

“Wait... We’ll eat later...” He was intent on finishing what he had started. Such a young and tender body might have been new for him.

After he had finished, he put on his shirt, preparing to leave. “I am hungry...” she said as the biriyani aroma kept enticing her.

“Here...” he pushed towards her the plastic bag that was lying in the corner.

“Don’t you want some...” she asked pulling up her skirt and fastening it tightly.

Not paying heed, “Not a peep to anyone about me coming here... Do you understand... Only then will I get you biriyani the next time around,” he said.

“OK Anna...” she replied and smiled. Her body was in a sort of dazed stupor. The biriyani was quite delicious.

“Seyanthee... Come here girl... Where the hell did you go?” Atthachi from the corner house was looking for her. It was the same Atthachi who had enquired her earlier if she already ‘sat’ for her periods that month.

“There, see, I am sitting now,” she playfully responded sitting on the raised pial in front of Attachi’s house.

“Stupid girl.... I asked you if you got your periods yet...”

“Not yet...”

“Everything is some sort of play for you. Don’t try to hide it because you are scared to sleep alone... God will punish you...” she threatened her.

Hearing Atthachi’s voice, she made a vain effort to pull herself up, and wept with frustration. Usually she cried loudly and it took a while for her tears to subside. Today she couldn’t even manage a faint sob. “Atthachi please come here, I am lying right here Atthachi.” Her pleas subsided within her and weren’t heard.

“That fool of an ass. Must be chattering with the pial-crone,” Atthachi concluded and left. The loneliness scared her now and she felt angry towards Anna.

He had come twice after that first afternoon. Her face blossomed when she saw him.

“Biryani?” she asked. “Yeah Yeah, I brought some, now come and lie down...” he possessively ordered even at that second time. Her body was brimming with excitement as well. In general, she was greatly fascinated by clothes. She wore the upper garment of the chudidhar and wrapped the duppatta over it as if it were a dhavani. She would then fasten a pavaadai around her lower half. She liked to grab whatever lay hanging on the clothesline, be it a sari or a lungi, and wrap it around her body. He got impatient with the layers of clothing and started to manhandle her roughly.

“Ouch! Anna that hurt...” she demurred. When she tried to shout, “Do you want biriyani or not?” he asked angrily.

Preparing to leave he ordered “Get dressed first” and then “next time around I will get you parathas,” he promised.

“No, I want biriyani only” she said, inserting her head into her upper garment.

He gave her bare body a pinch and said, “Alright... I will get biriyani...But don't tell anyone about my visit... do you understand...?” in a threatening tone.

“OK Anna,” she replied.

Even today her taste buds started to tingle as soon as she saw him. As he walked ahead with the biriyani packet she followed with quick steps, almost running. The usual place. She huddled assuming her usual posture. He was rougher today than all the previous days. More impatient too.

Unable to bear any longer, “Anna, it's painful, please let me go,” she pleaded. As she frantically tried to free herself he put a hand over her mouth. Seeing her startled eyes, he removed it and smiled faintly, “Didn't I tell you not to shout?” he asked. She smiled as well and asked, “Is it over? All done? Can we eat?”

He started to get rough again and her body convulsed, unable to keep up. She was suffocating. It was at the very moment when she tried to shout that she noticed them. Many more Annas. One... two... three..., at first count she could see four of them. Later everything became hazy in her semi-conscious state. Until now.

The village was busy with preparations for dinner. Suresh...

Sneha... Kanaka... Vijaya... Seela... Murugan... she could hear them all playing in the street. An urge to play surged within her. Her body had never ached like this before, even when she was bedridden with fever. “No more biriyani. No more nothing... I need to tell that Anna very strictly that I don't like this game anymore...” she thought to herself.

That was her last thought as well.

—Translated by Nakul Vac

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THE LONE FEATHER

M GOPALAKRISHNAN

Only when he was almost back at the shaded spot where he had parked his vehicle did he see the bird perched on the silk cotton tree. Its long, bright yellow beak caught his eye first. Then its downy neck, stippled night blue and ash, then the pale blue and red feathers of its body that shone golden slant of the sun. The deep green of the long ilavam panchu, the silk cotton, leaves set off the colours of the bird wonderfully. It was almost a bird had been waiting to share in his depressed state of mind.

He began to observe it more keenly. The bird's darting eyes showed panic. He knew there was something wrong with the bird from the awkward way it hopped along the tree branch, as though it was about to lose its hold and, even as he watched, it careened down in a spiral of fluttering wings. His hands stretched out on their own to catch the bird, but he missed and it landed on the cushioned seat of the scooter, its body twitching spasmodically. He immediately picked up the bird. Its warmth sent a frisson through him. Holding the softness of its feathers and the richness of its plumage—like holding a dream—was disconcerting. He saw its long beak open and close rapidly, its eyes roll back. Gently, he parted

the bird's feathers for any telltale sign of injury. There was a reddish bruise on its underbelly. The moment his finger touched the wound, the bird's body convulsed violently.

The movement made him hesitate. A drop of water might give it some comfort, he thought. Placing the bird on the seat of the scooter, he dripped water drop by drop into its mouth from a bottle that he was carrying. As the water coursed down its throat, a semblance of calm appeared in the bird's eyes. He fed it a few more drops and cradled the bird in his hands once again. Its convulsions had not stopped. He felt helpless. Almost as if the bird could no longer bear his anguish, it leapt from his hands. It floundered on the ground, squawking in agony, its brilliant feathers growing dim with dust. Then its body convulsed one last time. Its glistening eyes grew as they gazed at the sky.

He stood there, numb from having seen death at such close quarters. The bird's shrieks still hung in the air. He felt his legs give way. He could hear the pounding of his heart and feel the dead bird's gaze boring through him. Sorrow choked his breast. The colours he had marvelled at, only a moment ago, now filled him with fear. Slowly, he lifted the bird in his hands.

Its body already felt heavier though it was still warm.

He was not sure what to do next. It occurred to him that he would bury it, but he doubted his mental strength to carry out the task. Undecided, he started walking towards a nearby well and laid the bird in the shade beneath its rim. He stroked the bird one last time, softly, took a hurried step back and, turning abruptly, walked quickly away.

The bird's calls seemed to follow him. Though he did his best to drive on unconcerned, the calls seemed to pursue him. It was only when he reached the gates of the hospital that he calmed down.

"How long does one have to wait here? And that too after you promised to be here early ..." Irritation and accusation mingled in her voice.

He did not offer any reply. The eyes of the bird as they stared at the sky, still tormented him, its warmth still burnt his palms.

The sun was beginning to set. The brightness of its rays struck him as somewhat incongruous. He wished it would grow dark soon.

He was in the same frame of mind as they left the hospital. He drove on, unheedful of her questions as she sat behind him. It was as if the bird had snatched all the words from within him. Still indignant at his silence during their visit to the doctor, she mumbled about his continued lack of response. At the turning near the fruit godown, a little way off the road, he saw a crowd and, almost involuntarily, stopped the scooter. The place broke into his languor and pulled him towards itself.

Telling her to stay near the vehicle, he approached the crowd. Shouldering his way through, he peered in. At first glance he only saw the overflowing garbage bin. He pushed aside one or two more persons, and moved further in. Now he could see the white bundle which was the focus of the crowd's attention. The thing wrapped in the white veshti moved, the cloth parted to reveal two tiny legs. The dampness of the cloth, and the blood that stained it, indicated that the child had been born not very long ago. Its eyes, mere slits in its face, had not yet opened. Someone shooed the flies that sat on the infant's forehead. The flies buzzed, flew about, and then came back. Using the *thalappu*, the free end of her sari, a young woman fanned the flies away again. The child's face puckered each time they landed on its face. The colour of the newborn baby as it lay there was in sharp contrast to the garbage bin.

"Wonder what woman was heartless enough to do this ... Didn't even let the baby suck at her breast before throwing it away ..." The old woman's face was distressed.

"She would have cared for it if she had slept with someone in the proper order of things ... What can you say about the rascals who service their urges whenever they like?"

"At least if it had been dumped at an orphanage or an *arasanga thottil*, it might have been all right. But like this, dumped with garbage ..."

The words flew thick and fast, but no one made any move to pick up the baby. The infant moved feebly every now and then as if to prove that it was still alive though too exhausted to cry.

He couldn't bear the sight any longer. Driven by an unseen force, he approached the baby. Bending down, he stretched out his hands to lift it up.

"Why should you get unnecessarily involved, sir ..."

The voice yanked him out of the crowd and walked him slowly back to his vehicle. He was unable to assert himself.

“What is it? Something about a baby. They were saying...”

Ignoring her, he started the scooter and though she asked him all the way what was it that he had seen, he did not reply.

When the door opened, it was she who answered the anxious queries of those who were waiting for them. The questions were almost accusatory in their own tone, and she answered in a weak voice, full of hesitation and fear. “The test report will only be available tomorrow morning. The doctor said he would look at it and...”

He lay in silence. A monstrous weight bore down on his chest. He squirmed, unable to escape its relentless thrust and struggled to suppress the sobs that escaped him. She slept soundly. The wounds caused by all those unanswered questions must have been anaesthetized by the strain of the hospital trip. If she had felt even a bit of that pain, she would not be sleeping like this.

Behind his closed eyelids, the child stirred. Its feeble wailing grew louder and louder. He clapped his hands over his ears but could not shut it out. He struggled to escape the web spun by its tiny fingers from the blood and slime that covered its body. Caught in the web, he could move neither hand nor foot. He squirmed like a trapped insect and saw the grinning visage of a spider in the baby’s face. Unable to bear its mocking laughter, he shook himself and opened his eyes. The thought that someone might have taken the child home brought him some comfort. After all, hadn’t there been many people there? Without a doubt, someone would have picked up the baby and taken care of it. There were some women among them ... Surely, they would not have left that tiny creature in the filth. Yes, it must be sleeping peacefully somewhere, warm and fed, with someone gently rocking its cradle at this very moment ... This brought him a measure of comfort.

But the thought lasted only an instant. His mind reverted immediately to its earlier train of thought. What if everyone had just gone about their own business—like him? What if everyone had the same why-should-we-get-involved attitude? Why am I not the one rocking the cradle? What kind of an act was it to turn away from informing the concerned authorities about the baby? Wave upon wave of questions crashed against his mind.

He sat up. There was a knock at the door. A light sound. One that did not disturb the stillness of the night. He extricated himself from this web of thought and walked to the front room. Noiselessly. He opened the door. A cold wind blew past him into the room.

There was no one at the door.

An uninterrupted darkness ... bubbles of light flashed, here and there.

Disinclined to go back inside, he sat on the steps. The neem tree swayed gently and each time it swayed, his feet would vanish into the tree’s shadow. The dampness he felt in his feet slowly worked its way up through his body. He closed his eyes and waited for it to ascend to the tip of his head. In that instant, when the chill sprang from the top of his spine to his head, he heard the voice again. A voice unimpeded by words or meaning. The wordless cry of a child. Senses heightened, he stood up. The voice was definitely coming from the tree. He stared intently at it. The dense darkness around the tree slowly receded and a radiance emanated from it. He saw the bird in that light. It sat on a low branch, preening its feathers. Even amidst the mottled patches of light and dark, its glorious colours shone brightly. It was as if someone were strumming the notes of the bird’s song from within its glittering blue and red feathers. Suddenly, it rose with a flutter of its wings, and flew down to sit at his feet.

Stooping to pick it up in his hands, he suddenly drew back in disbelief. Swaddled in the blue feathers, the baby crawled at his feet. Its arms were lined with the brilliant plumage of the dead bird. The joy of flight shone radiantly on the infant’s face; its happiness reflected in its glowing eyes. The baby smiled and held out its arms to him invitingly. It was an invitation he could not refuse. He moved closer and stretched out his hands, and the baby leapt into his arms like an effulgent ball. He sat on the steps cradling the infant in his arms. The soft warmth of the baby’s body filled him with exhilaration. Its touch sent a thrill through him. The calmness in the baby’s face pervaded his being. The feathers brushed against his belly. In his joy he bent over to kiss the child.

In that second the baby whipped out of his arms and brushing past his downturned face, floated away, laughing. Swallowing the kiss, he stood there disappointed. Clapping its hands, the baby wheeled above him. Coming within an arm’s reach of him, it would dodge his outstretched hand and fly away again. Each time it escaped him, his desire to hold the child

in his arms increased, its laughter spurring him on. Grasping the feathers that trailed from its wings, he pulled at them with all his might. As he pulled, the feathers coiled around his feet like a coir rope and the child soared ever higher. Flying with the wind, it moved away on the waves it had created.

His efforts wore him out and he slumped on his back. Seeing him that way, the baby flew lower. The sparkle in its eyes comforted him. It came down and sat playfully on his heaving chest. But as soon as it had seated itself, a bolt of lightning struck the infant. As it began to wail, it was whipped up by a whirlwind reeking of garbage, of rotting polythene bags and putrefying plantain leaves which carried it away into the darkness. The arms of the wind ripped the feathers off the baby. Its voice cracked with pain. Torn feathers floated silently in the sky.

He watched, his head raised off the ground. Drops of blood spattered his face. At the outer limit of his vision, at a great great distance, he saw the arms of the whirlwind vanish with the baby. And the only evidence of the carnage, a lone feather, fluttering down slowly and settling on his chest.

In the morning, the lone feather continued to flutter inside him but it seemed to be weighed down by the unbearable burden of the previous night.

As he approached the garbage bin, he saw a crowd gathered there again. A dreadful stench pervaded the area, frightening him. His legs shook as he steeled himself to peer in. The bundle of cloth was still there. The white cloth had turned a disgusting shade.

Ants crawled over the infant's body. The stench was emanating from the putrefying corpse. There was a pit where the left eye had been. A black insect emerged from a nostril. The sight made his gorge rise, gagging him. He felt faint. Holding his head in his hands, he stumbled away and spat out the vomit that had pooled in his mouth. The fear that had tormented him had reached its peak. All his escape routes in blind alleys and trapped in the center of a road that led nowhere, he felt he had nowhere to go.

Unable to cope with his inner turmoil, he immersed himself in work. Staring at the green digits on his monitor he tried to find refuge in the world of numbers. It was only when the phone rang that his attention shifted from the square screen in front of him.

"Have you collected the test report?" It was her voice on the telephone.

Her question brought the corpse he had buried deep into the ground, out in the open. The smell of its putrefaction enveloped him.

"Not yet," he replied.

"At least go and get it now—and show it to the doctor to find out what he thinks," she said. There was hope in her voice; at least they would know for sure.

"All right," he said, and put the receiver back on the hook. What terrified him was the thought of the other report, the one about the child's death.

—Translated by N Ramakrishnan

Endnotes:

Arasanga thottil: Literally, the Government cradle. As a measure for preventing infanticide, the Government of Tamil Nadu provides cradles at public gathering points, churches or temples where unwanted babies are left for adoption.

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Dr Lata Desai / Dr. Lataben Anilbhai Desai
Medicine
Medical Doctor, Gujarat (found-member, the Society for Education Welfare and Action - Rural (SEWA Rural), a voluntary organization devoted to health and development activities in the tribal area of South Gujarat.)
Padma Shri

Basanti Devi
Social Work
Indian environmentalist, Uttarakhand
Padma Shri

Lourembam Bino Devi
Art
Appliqué art / Artist, Manipur
Padma Shri

Muktamani Devi
Trade and Industry
Innovator and Entrepreneur, Manipur
Padma Shri

Shyamamani Devi
Art
Odissi classical singer/ Vocalist, Odisha
Padma Shri

SPARROW CONGRATULATES ALL THE WOMEN WHO WON THE PADMA AWARDS THIS YEAR! MANY OF THEM WE WOULD HAVE NEVER COME TO KNOW BUT FOR THE PADMA AWARDS.

Sosamma Iype
Others - Animal Husbandry
Veterinary professor and animal conservationist, Kerala
Padma Shri

Sowcar Janaki
(Sankaramanchi Janaki, popularly known as Sowcar Janaki or Shavukaru Janaki)
Art
Actress, Tamil Nadu
Padma Shri

Tara Jauhar
Literature and Education
Writer and Educationist, Delhi
Padma Shri

Vandana Kataria
Sports
Hockey player, Uttarakhand
Padma Shri

Avani Lekhara
Sports
Paralympian and rifle shooter, Rajasthan
Padma Shri

R Muthukannammal
Art
Sadir Dancer / Devadasis, Tamil Nadu
Padma Shri

K V Rabiya
Social Work
Physically Challenged Social Worker, Kerala
Padma Shri

Gamit Ramilaben Raysingbhai
Social Work
Tribal Social Worker, Gujarat
Padma Shri

Padmaja Reddy
Art

Kuchipudi Dancer, Telangana
Padma Shri

Prabhaben Shah
Social Work
Works, Education, Women's Empowerment and Health, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu
Padma Shri

Tatiana Lvovna Shaumyan
Literature and Education
Russian Scholar and Champion, Indo-Russia Friendship, Russia
Padma Shri

Vidya Vindu Singh
Literature and Education
Hindi and Awadhi Languages Writer, Uttar Pradesh
Padma Shri

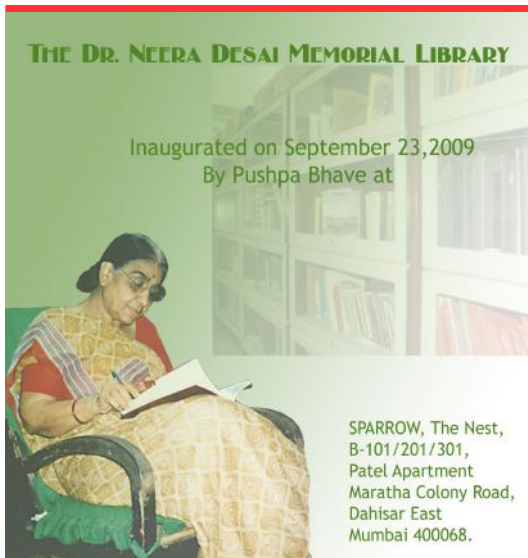
Ajita Srivastava
Art
Kahari Folk Singer, Uttar Pradesh
Padma Shri

Lalita Vakil
Art
Embroidery Artist, Chamba Rumal - Traditional Form, Himachal Pradesh
Padma Shri

Durga Bai Vyam
Art
Gond Traditional Artist, Madhya Pradesh
Padma Shri

Badaplin War
Literature and Education
Professor, Khasi Department North Eastern Hill University, Meghalaya
Padma Shri

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