



SPARROW

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SPARROW

newsletter

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SPARROW January Event

One River Many Streams

A Cultural Festival To Celebrate
Women , Art and Cinema
From the North East and Orissa
Organised in Collaboration with
National Film Archive of India, Pune
Along with venue partners Fun Cinemas
January 26 to 30, 2007
At
Fun Republic, Screen 2, Andheri West

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[Editor's Note]

It is the beginning of another year. We have left behind a rather traumatic year in terms of existence in Mumbai and in terms of lives of women in general and in terms of SPARROW'S existence. The passing of the Domestic Violence Act has come as a great relief to many of us dealing with the issue of women and violence. But it is disheartening to know that violence against women is an issue that is going to come up time and again. It is true that the dramatic turns the Jessica Lal Murder case and Priyadarshini Mattoo case have taken and the active role played by the media are signs of hope that one need not lose faith in justice. But the murder of Papiya Ghosh in Patna has brought up the question of whether there is a societal prejudice against successful single women. And

the bizarre murders of children and young girls in Noida have again made violence a major issue to be dealt with.

2006 has also ended with us losing some women whose lives have contributed immensely to the history of women in India. Dr. Shantoo Gurnani passed away after ailing for a few years with cancer. Mandakini Narayanan, one of the prominent leaders of the Naxalite Movement in Kerala and mother of K.Ajitha, died on December 16, 2006. Chandralekha, the dancer who brought a different interpretation to classical Bharatanatyam, did not live to see the new year. In the coming years we have to carry them with us to inspire us in our activities.

Happy New Year and do get back to us and do visit our website.

0.2 Events

Women's Lives, Women's Words

For a long time SPARROW had been planning to hold a festival of some of its films. SPARROW'S films are basically oral history documentations and a few months ago Vijaya Chauhan, Secretary, Mahila Vyaspeeth (Y B Chavan Pratishthan) proposed that a festival of SPARROW films could be held in collaboration with her organisation. And that is how this festival was made possible. It was held on November 4 and 5, 2006. SPARROW has so far made 21 digital and beta films on women from various walks of life. The festival screened nine of those films. Except for one film on the Jewish actress Pramila, which was directed by the late Asha Dutta, the other eight films included in the festival were directed by Vishnu Mathur, a well-known filmmaker from the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, who has been a constant source of support for SPARROW. He and his team have made oral history documentation possible for SPARROW.

The festival was a way of celebrating women's lives through their own words. SPARROW believes that making women's voices heard in the public domain is an integral part of development. By proposing this festival and collaborating on this project, Mahila Vyaspeeth has shown that it believes in SPARROW's work and that women's organisations must support one another's work to carry forward our mission of making women's history visible. Supporting us by being there to inaugurate and conclude the festival were writer, publisher and Director, Zubaan, Urvashi Butalia, and Kalpana Sharma who is Chief of Bureau, the Hindu, Mumbai.

We give below a few images of the event.



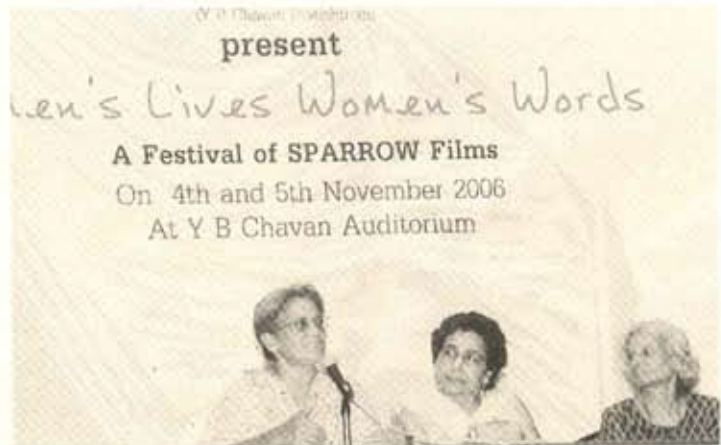
SPARROW Film Posters



People watching posters of SPARROW films



Urvashi Butalia addressing the audience during inauguration



Vijaya Chauhan, Kalpana Sharma and C S Lakshmi on the concluding day

Women Against Violence



Aawaz-e-Niswan held an open public programme on Women Against Violence On Thursday, 30 November, from 2 to 6 P.M. The venue was the Nagpada Junction, near Nagpada Police Station. The meeting was to celebrate the passing of the Domestic Violence Act, which is one of the important milestones in the struggle for women's rights. This has been a major demand in the campaigns against violence and Aawaz-e-Niswan, along with other organisations, has struggled to make this a reality. The outcome is a comprehensive piece of legislation, which would compel the police and the judiciary to take action against perpetrators of violence and strengthen our hand as well. Aawaz-e-Niswan felt that this victory would be short lived if we sit back and not work towards getting effective machinery in place for implementation of the Act. Even more important was to create awareness among women from all sections of society. The public meeting planned was to build awareness about this Act. The idea of holding it in a public open space was to enable passers by to listen and learn about the provisions of the Act so that both women and men could work together and try and put stop to domestic violence.

A number of speakers who have worked and struggled against domestic violence and are very knowledgeable about the basic provisions of the law addressed the meeting. Women who have struggled against violence in their personal life also addressed the meeting. Songs and a street play were part of the programme.

The programme was structured in a way to emphasise that apart from domestic violence we need to struggle against all kinds of violence like violence on the streets, caste based violence, violence by the police and government, violence in the form of restrictions imposed in the name of religion and violence which keeps women uneducated and unemployed.

SPARROW covered the event and we give a few images above.

0.4 Events

14th Vicharwedh Sammelan at Shiroor

The 14th Vicharwedh Sammelan at Shiroor was organised by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Academy, Satara, from December 15 to 17, 2006, to explore various dimensions of women's movement which are relevant to the present fast-paced world that is changing rapidly. Many scholars and activists of Maharashtra and teachers and their students from nearby colleges attended this conference in large numbers.

The president of this conference, Dr. Chhaya Datar, gave an inspiring speech in which she said that in the present times life is on a fast track and that this has led to a rat race with people competing with one another to move ahead. This means that people work harder and longer in metros to make more money. They have more money to spend on leisure activities and the middle-class in metros has achieved a better living standard. But this has also created psychological problems like hypertension, depression and similar problems. Chhaya felt that one has to take these problems seriously. This vicious circle of more money and more problems can be dealt with if one gave more time to one's family and this can be achieved if the working hours were reduced to six hours per day, she suggested. She said that the husband and wife must have the freedom to decide their own working hours. This way the daily household chores can be planned and dealt with more efficiently.

Pratima Joshi, reputed journalist from *The Times of India*, talked on Women and Media. According to her, newspapers have become products to be promoted and the only way to sell them is through commodification of women. Most of the decision-makers are upper-caste men. She said that when she observes the media from the perspective of a woman she does feel bad but that as a journalist she does not mind it so much.

Women activists from various fields of activity like Dr. Pushpa Bhawe, Vidya Bal, Dr. Vidyut Bhagwat and Jaya Welankar spoke on several issues of concern. The Kairlanji incident where four members of the Bhotmange family were brutally murdered and two of the women victims raped before murder was referred to by most speakers. According to a report prepared by a government agency, Yashwantrao Chavan Academy of Development Administration (YASHADA), a group of police officials, doctors and politicians all had joined hands to hush up the rape case. Infuriated members of the Dalit community had taken to the streets to protest against the killings. Many speakers referred to the incident and the conspiracy of silence connected with the incident.

The audience made up of delegates also vigorously participated in the discussions. In fact, when Madhu Kishwar mentioned that texts like Manu Dharma should not be condemned outright and should be carefully read, some of the audience rose in protest. There was also some good entertainment planned and Jyoti Mhapsekar and her group, Stree Mukti Sanghatana, presented a new show on the upliftment of women in the history of Maharashtra. This was a big hit with the audience.



President Chhaya Datar



Journalist Pratima Joshi



Activist Pushpa Bhawe



Professor Vidyut Bhagwat



Conference Banner



A view of the audience

This conference brought different generations of women together which generated interesting dialogues bringing new insights.

SPARROW covered the event and has a Video CD and photographs of this conference.

— Malavika Ahlawat

An Apology: The interview with Mahatma Gandhi's daughter-in-law *Nirmala Gandhi* which we carried in our last issue was actually done by *Dr. Rohini Gawankar* for *Mani Bhavan* and later given to SPARROW for archiving and consultation purposes. We apologise for not mentioning it.

0.6 Book Review

Spy Princess: The Life of Noor Inayat Khan

By Shrabani Basu



On Amazon.com are available English and French versions of her beautifully illustrated *Twenty Jataka Tales* published in 1939, when she was twenty-five years old. Given a five star grading by modern day American readers, one of them finds it “much nicer than Aesop”, while another applauds her vision imbibed from Sufi philosophy, and appreciates the universal application of the lessons for both children and adults. Her specific selection of these Buddhist animal fables stress the need to overcome weakness, while underscoring the ideals of courage and sacrifice and suggests an uncanny portent for the future direction of her own life.

In the late 30s, and early 40s, her magical creatures inhabiting the world of nature had filled the children's page of the leading French newspaper *Sunday Figaro* and her stories were broadcast on children's hour in Radio Paris. She sang, wrote poems and composed small musical pieces, which she and her three siblings performed for the family. She had knowledge of the Indian ragas and learnt the veena while also being proficient on the harp. She studied music at the Ecole Normale de Musique, and did child psychology at the Sorbonne. Described as “dreamy, beautiful and gentle”, and creating an indelible impression of luminosity of spirit, kindness, selflessness, and strength of character, on all who met her, she by no stretch of imagination fits the image of a clandestine underground agent engaged in dangerous sabotage activities, working for the British SOE (Special Operations Executive) in Nazi occupied France in order to help the French Resistance movement. The transformation of Princess Noor-un-nissa Inayat Khan, the daughter of the Sufi teacher and musician Hazrat Inayat Khan, and the great-great-granddaughter of Tipu Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore, to Nora Baker, code name Madeline, is a remarkable, inspirational, tragic tale of courage and sacrifice, pieced together

by Shrabani Basu, London correspondent of the *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, in her text.

Noor was only thirty when she met “a horrible death” at the hands of the Gestapo in the in famous Dachau concentration camp in Berlin in Sept. 1944. Posthumously awarded the George cross, Britain's highest civilian award, and the Croix de Guerre with Gold Star, France's highest civilian award, she was the first woman radio operator to be air-dropped into France in June 1943, the only Asian secret agent in Europe in the Second World War, and only one of three women in the SOE to receive the George Cross. However, it was only after the 1952 publication of her biography *Noor-un-nissa Inayat Khan*, by her friend and comrade Jean Overton Fuller, that there was a much wider public awareness of her sacrifice and invaluable contribution towards the war against Nazi oppression, leading to Noor's attaining the status of a female hero. The book cleared some of the myths and confusions surrounding Noor's life and exploits but much still remained. Two fictions romanticised and further mystified facts, one a French best-seller by Laurent Joffrin, *La Princesse Oubliée* and the other, Shwana Singh Baldwin's *The Tiger Claw*. Basu's well researched biography of Noor, appearing fifty years after Fuller's, gains from having had access to the opening of the personal files of SOE agents in 2003, which included Noor's chiefs and associates. Though most of Noor's colleagues were dead, fresh material was available to Basu from Noor's and her colleague's files, and from conversations with her brothers Vilayat and Hidayat, a few other family members as well as some of her father's Sufi “*mureeds*” in Europe. Despite the inevitable gaps that remain because of the very nature of the secret service organisation, Basu does an admirable job of piecing together Noor's history from all these various sources.

Noor called herself an “international person”, claiming her strong links with India, where lay her roots, Britain where she trained, after her choice of the “violent option” of active service on the front, and France, closest to her heart, where she had spent her happy childhood and growing up years and where she returned to serve the Resistance. The French reciprocated their feeling by remembering her sacrifice at the alter of freedom, on each July 14, Bastille Day, when a military band plays outside Fazal Manzil, her erstwhile home on the outskirts of Paris in Suresnes, where a square has been named “Cours Madeline”.

Noor's childhood was steeped in music and a Sufi way of life. Her father Hazrat Inayat Khan, a Sufi preacher, was the grandson of Maula Baksh, the founder of the Faculty of Music

0.7 Book Review

in the University of Baroda, and Casimebi, Tipu Sultan's granddaughter. Advised by his teacher to spread Sufism in the west by a combination of music and philosophy, Inayat, together with his brothers, moved westward. During a lecture at the Ramakrishna Mission in San Francisco, Inayat met his future wife, Ora Ray Baker, who became Amina Sharda Begum. Noor was born a year after their marriage in 1913, in Moscow, where the brothers had been invited to perform. Noor imbibed music in her blood from the time she was born, with Inayat lulling his child to sleep with his singing. With the politically charged atmosphere in Russia, and the 1914 war in Europe, The Inayat Khan family moved to London, where he met many Indian leaders. Having incurred British suspicion and disfavour, six years later they moved to France. A Dutch "mureed", bought him a house on the outskirts of Paris. Inayat named it Fazal Manzil, or 'House of Blessings'. Noor's unconventional upbringing continued in the midst of a happy family, where the dreamy, sensitive four-year-old mothered her siblings Vilayat, Hidayat and Khair-un-nissa, or Claire. The atmosphere in the house was Indian, and Inayat's love and attachment to India, was passed on to Noor. She also imbibed her spirit of tolerance and syncretism from her father's initiating "Universal Worship" which recognised the oneness of all religions. With her father's death in 1927 in Delhi, during a visit to his beloved India, a new and difficult phase in Noor's life began. At age thirteen, the dreamer had to take over the day-to-day running of the house, supervising her siblings and caring for her mother who became increasingly frail and reclusive. Profoundly affected by her father's death, Noor found solace in books, her writing and music. Her constant effort was to keep her mother in good spirits, which she partly did by writing beautiful thoughts in poems "To Our Amma". At the peak of her writing career, with war clouds hovering over Europe for the second time, and Germany invaded by France, Noor, Vilayat, Claire, and Amina Begum managed to escape by sea to England. Before leaving Noor and Vilayat had taken the decision to join in the war effort, a choice that would, for Noor, seal her fate.

Her short life began its roller-coaster ride towards the end, as she volunteered for the WAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) and started her training as signals and wireless operator, that would lead her to being recruited as secret agent in occupied France. Within ten days of her landing, the Prosper network, to which she was attached, collapsed, mostly due to betrayal by double agents. Noor dodged the Gestapo, moving from place to place transmitting messages with speed and accuracy, operating almost "single-handedly", under tremendously dangerous conditions. Asked by her superiors to take a flight back, she refused, determined to keep radio links open for the Resistance, hoping that the cells would be able to regroup. She was finally betrayed to the Gestapo in October 1943, three

months after her landing, and held in their Paris head quarters. Forced by the Germans to continue her transmissions, Noor managed to slip in the agreed upon signal alerting SOE of her capture, but was ignored. In captivity, Noor made two daring bids for escape. She might have lived had she signed the declaration promising not to do so. Noor refused, stating, it was her "bounden duty" to keep trying. Declared "highly dangerous" and uncooperative by Kieffer, the Paris head, orders of her transfer to Germany came, thus declaring her death warrant. Noor was held in solitary confinement for ten months in Pforzheim Prison. She was shackled hand and foot, kept on a starvation diet; slapped and tortured, but still gave no information, not even her real name. Some French women prisoners, aware of a person in the isolated cell, devised an ingenious way to communicate with her, by scratching on their food bowls with the knitting needles provided to keep them occupied. It was thus they learnt about her unhappiness, her enchained condition, and her name and address—which remained Nora Baker. One of those who survived could thus later trace her family. She still would not let her captors break her spirit, drawing strength from thinking about her father and Sufi teachings. She was removed to Dachau, where she was stripped, abused, tortured and kicked repeatedly by the SS all through the night of Sept. 13, 1944. In the early hours of the morning, as the fatal shot went through her head, she cried out one word "Liberté". Her body was immediately thrown into the crematorium. That same night Noor appeared in a dream to Vilayat and Amina Begum, dressed in her uniform, her face surrounded by blue light, looking happy, as she told them she was free.

Noor till the end remains a paradox. A Sufi pacifist, who was fiercely determined to thwart Hitler's aggression, an Indian in origin, who fervently supporting India's struggle for freedom, yet fought for Britain and France. At her interview for her commission, she was questioned about her loyalties. Noor, never one to lie about her beliefs, passionately expressed her views, telling the board that her loyalty to the British Crown remained for the duration of the war but after the war, she might reconsider her position and support India's fight for independence against the British. This was undoubtedly the voice of Tipu Sultan's great-great-great granddaughter!

— Krishna Sarbadhikari

Book details:

Spy Princess: The Life of Noor Inayat Khan

Shrabani Basu

2006

Published by Roli Books

Number of pages: 22+ 234 • Price: Rs.395

0.8 Homage

Shantoo : The World As Her Laboratory



A young girl in Karachi whose family did not allow her to study beyond the fourth standard, read all the papers especially for information on new discoveries in Science and worried that there would be nothing left for her to discover if they did not let her study further. At the age of twenty-two this girl walked on the streets of Mumbai with her brother after Partition, to find out if the

city could give succour to her large family of five sisters and five brothers. She later became a research scientist who never got tired of her laboratory. Much later she became a sanyasi who wanted to find out the nature of the subject since as a scientist she could grapple only with the objective world. She decided to make the world her laboratory. That was Shantoo Gurnani, who passed away on November 8, 2006, after battling with cancer for a few years. SPARROW has always admired Shantoo Gurnani for her strength and resilience and she will remain a special person in our memory.

Chandralekha: The One who Breathed Dance



One always thought of Chandralekha as someone eternal. With her flowing grey hair and graceful body when she performed or discussed art, dance or women with you, you felt enveloped by her words and her personality. You always left her house feeling that she would always be there sitting on the swing ready to get into a conversation with you. But Chandralekha knew better. As someone who believed in obeying

the truths of the body, she knew that her body would perish some day and she was prepared. The note sent by Sadanand Menon said that like Socrates, she wanted to experience every moment of her body sinking into death. The last forty-eight hours she was in agony. But later she was calm and passed away peacefully in the night of 30 December, 2006. She has left behind a body of work for us to explore further in the realm of dance.

— C S Lakshmi

Mandakini Narayanan: 'Ma' to All



Mandakini Narayanan, one of the front-runners of the Naxalite movement in Kerala, died on December 16, 2006. She was 82. She is survived by her daughter K. Ajitha, a naxalite-turned human rights activist.

Popularly known as 'Ma', Mandakini is the wife of the late Kunnikkal Narayanan, who was one of the founders of the Communist extremist movement (Naxalite movement) in Kerala. She along with her husband and daughter had led several agitations waged by naxalites in the late 60's and 70's in Kerala.

Following the Naxalite attacks at the Pulpally and Thalassery police stations in 1968, Mandakini was arrested and sent to jail before she was released due to ill health. She was again arrested and jailed for two-and-a-half years during the Emergency. A 'Ma' to her friends and comrades, she was part of almost all the radical movements in the post-independence period in India.

Mandakini was born in Bhavnagar, to a Gujarati couple, Navin Chandra Osa and Urvashi Osa. The family moved to Bombay during her adolescence, where she did her graduation from Elphinstone College. Even from her school days, she was active in politics and worked with the undivided Communist Party during her college days. She was active in the *Friends of the Soviet Union* in the 1950's and later joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist) when the party split in 1964. She met Kunnikal at Bombay, where he was an active member of the communist party.

Moving to Kerala for personal reasons, she took up a teaching job at the Gujarati School in Kozhikode for several years before becoming fully involved with the Naxalite movement.

After the death of Kunnikal Narayanan in 1979, she gradually withdrew from active politics living a very peaceful but active intellectual life. Ma was always a keen follower of political and gender struggles, and took active interest in them. She spent her last years listening to and learning classical music, painting and reading. She had a very warm and lasting friendship with a number of people, from various walks of life. During the last two years, her illness did not permit her to move out of her house.

She was cremated at the Mavoor Road crematorium

— C S Venkateswaran