

Book on Mumbai's Paniwali Bai released



Mrinal Gore (left) and Aruna Roy at the release function.
Photo by Priya D'Souza

On November 8, 2003 SPARROW made public one of its dream projects. The oral history project on veteran socialist Mrinal Gore, had been on for a while. Her close friend, Dr Rohini Gawankar, had interviewed her on her life and work. The interview had run into several tapes. As Mrinal Gore was turning 75 this year, SPARROW proposed that Dr Gawankar write her biography. The result, in Marathi, is *Paniwali Bai*, (a popular name given to Mrinaltai, as it was her activism that brought water to

Goregaon). The book was released by Aruna Roy, the activist from Rajasthan, who works with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangatan. Mrinal Gore herself received the first copy. A lot of work had gone into the book and designing the cover and the layout had been exciting work. With the warm support of Mauj Prakashan Griha, this book was printed in record time. It was Mrinal Tai's work and her life of commitment to the cause of the poor that had inspired us to do the book. In a way, it was also SPARROW's contribution to the history of women in Maharashtra. If all of us felt a little euphoric after the function, it was justifiable as the 200 copies we took with us were sold out and there was clamour for more.

Global Feminisms: University of Michigan Selects SPARROW for International Collaboration Project

The Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan has chosen SPARROW as the India collaborator for a project on the global expressions of feminism. This international project seeks to gather oral histories from ten women in each country—India, China, Poland and the US—whose lives and work reflect feminist thought and scholarship. The material generated will be used to educate students of Women's Studies and social sciences. Each site selected 10 women for video documentation. The four sites met on September 5 and 6 at the University of Michigan and the meeting generated a meaningful connection across cultures. SPARROW began this venture by interviewing Dr Neera Desai and Dr Vina Mazumdar—both pioneers of Women's Studies in India. Some parts of the video interview with Neeraben were screened at the conference. The China site has asked for the films to be used as texts in the Women's Studies Department at the China Women's College in Beijing.

Editors' Note

The Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women brings you news of our experiences and activities in the area of Women's Studies and history.

SNL will be a roadmap of the journeys that women have made through the ages and the new terrains they have discovered.

We aim to preserve the significance of women's lives through the collection of oral history, print, visual and cinematic material related to women's lives.

SNL will reflect the kind of creative archiving that SPARROW is committed to and reach out to scholars, students and those interested in women's lives and history.

Your feedback is important to us. Kindly address your queries and comments to sparrow@bom3.vsnl.net.in

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Tamasha artiste Vithabai Narayangaonkar

Born into a family of poor, Dalit tamasha artistes, Vithabai knew no stability. She was often sent around whichever village her father's troupe was performing in, with a basket and a cloth to beg for food.

As a little girl, Vithabai says she was mesmerised by her parents' performances and that she loved to strike theatrical poses and dance.

After her father's death, it fell upon Vithabai to continue the family tradition. She went on to become a legendary tamasha artiste winning many state and central awards and putting her tiny town of Narayangaon on the map. Vithabai recalls the events of her life and her performing career for SPARROW.

“

We used to get once more calls wherever we danced. But I used to like the tent audience more than the theatre ones. The upper class audience will like whatever is shown to them. In Tamasha, we have to act, dance and sing to draw the audience to us.

”

Vithabai was one of the most famous tamasha artistes but her story is also one of domestic abuse, grinding poverty and exploitation. She suffered an alcoholic husband who took away most of her earnings. It was a marriage that was forced on her while she was still a teenager. Sawant, a local roughneck, leapt on to the stage after one of her performances. He brandished a knife and threatened to kill her if she didn't marry him. He threatened her family and there was no other go, she says, but to marry him. She calls it, “the worst incident of my life.” Vithabai was the only earning member of her household, forced to perform even when



Photos by Vishnu Mathur, Narayangaon, April 1, 2001

Video Notes

SPARROW has a collection of video films on artists of various regions and styles. Structured as dialogues with an artist, these recordings are termed 'Video Notes.'

Malathamma

Theatre artiste

Neela Panch

Traditional Painter

Maya Rao

Dancer and theatre artiste

RithaDevi

Dancer

Sushama Deshpande

Theatre journalist

Damayanti Joshi

Kathak dancer

Kanaka Murthy

Traditional Sculptor

Pramila

Hindi film actress of the thirties.

KR Ambika

Tamil folk theatre artiste

■ To view a video excerpt on Vithabai and other artists, please log on to our website: www.sparrowonline.org

she was unwell. The most incredible incident she narrates is of performing when she was nine months pregnant. She describes how she performed the gymnastic dance movements with her big stomach, causing the audience to wonder whether she was a devil that she could do this. She tells how she gave birth to her son backstage, all alone. “No water, no doctor, no mid-wife, no facilities at all, that is how I delivered all my children.”

Despite these hardships, she retains a marvellous sense of humour, laughing at fate, reserving the choicest abuse for her husband. Her experiences have not dampened her enthusiasm for the stage. Her passion for performance is evident as she talks of the “public” and its “once more” stamp of approval.

She was a consummate performer who learnt to walk the tightrope that is a Tamasha artiste's life—at times overcoming, at times succumbing to the pressures of that life.

The SPARROW video notes on her were made a few months before she died on January 15, 2002.

Mehrunissa Dalwai and the fight for Muslim Women's Rights



Mehrunissa Dalwai is the president of the Muslim Satyashodhak Mandal, which was established on March 22, 1970 by her husband, Hamid Dalwai, a progressive Muslim social reformist and writer. Born into a Marathi-speaking Muslim family on the Konkan coast of Maharashtra, Hamid

Dalwai joined the youth wing of the Socialist party, the Rastriya Seva Dal while he was still in school. He grew up believing that Muslims in India had to embrace modernity and liberalisation to claim their rightful place in a pluralistic, secular India.

Even though Islamic religious authorities branded him an infidel, he braved criticisms and even threats to his life to campaign for reforms in Muslim personal law in India. His book "Muslim Politics in Secular India" is now regarded as a classic. He focussed on the secondary status of women in Indian Islam, especially abandoned victims of *talaq*. He believed that a Uniform Civil Code was the only way to guarantee fundamental human rights to all Indian women, regardless of religion or caste.

Unfortunately, Dalwai died when he was only 44, due to kidney failure. His wife Mehrunissa Dalwai decided to continue the work of the Mandal. She had worked along with Hamid constantly even while keeping her job at the Khadi Commission for 35 years. She had held the house together at an emotional and economic level despite all their difficulties.

When Hamid had decided that his vocation was social work, she had been told not to hassle him with household affairs. Mehrunissa said that she would manage the house on her own and would not be dependant on him financially. However, she maintained that Hamid should earn for himself. She always took a strong stand in these issues.

In her autobiography, which has been published in both Hindi and Marathi, Mehrunissa writes that she and her husband shared a beautiful and honest relationship.

She worked as his ally both at home and outside as she helped organise Muslim women and educate them about their rights. She was one of the few women in the historical Morcha of 1966, which demanded a Uniform Civil Code.

During the Shahbano case in the late eighties, the Mandal was very active in educating Muslim women about their right to maintenance. The organisation took out a procession in various parts of Maharashtra to spread awareness about legal rights in personal laws.



Mehrunissa and Hamid Dalwai lead a march demanding Uniform Civil Code in April 1966, in Mumbai.

(Photos from Mehrunissa Dalwai's private albums)

In Her Own Words

An excerpt from the oral history recording with Mehrunissa Dalwai made by Dr Divya Pandey

"All the rules regarding women's lives are associated with religion. I feel that if there is something in a religion, which is fair, then that should be followed because no religion is totally good or bad. The good should be absorbed and the redundant has to be eliminated. Religion needs to go through a curative process too... religion has evolved along with the changing situations in the society.... Today, men are getting married, giving oral divorce and getting remarried. We want the woman to go to the court, the court should listen to what she has to say; she should get maintenance for herself and her children; she should be able to get remarried easily..."

Meeting Homai Vyarawalla



Photo by Priya D' Souza, Baroda, March 14, 2003

The 'deluxe luxury' bus from Ahmedabad to Baroda was anything but. The temperature outside was 36 degrees. Inside the bus, it was hotter. Sticky velvet seats clung to our backs. My colleague Priya and I were on our way to meet Homai Vyarawalla, India's very first woman news photographer. We found Homai Vyarawalla's house quite easily. A neat black wire gate opened out to a long flight of stairs. The bell at the gate set off a loud ringing upstairs. She was wearing a blue polka dot dress. Her short gray hair framed a lined, wise face. "You'll have to speak up, I'm a bit deaf, you know," she said.

Later, we learned that the 90-year-old Homai Vyarawalla had built the gate herself and engineered the doorbell mechanism. The house is full of big and small things that she has built or recycled. We saw light fixtures that were fashioned out of the flashguns she used back in the fifties; a foldable ironing board that she made with a hacksaw, a sofa set that she reupholstered and even a defrosting mechanism for her old refrigerator.

Pointing to the staircase, she said, "I can do masonry work also. Not wanting to brag (laughs) but I am telling you, I have no time to feel bored or lonely. If you start doing things for yourself, you feel very confident. In the worst of times, you can manage." She lives alone, her husband died 33 years ago and she lost her only son to cancer 14 years ago.

Born in 1913 to a priestly family in Navsari, Homai Vyarawalla had a very conservative upbringing. She was the first girl in her class to start wearing saris. When the family moved to Bombay, she fell in love with a neighbour, Maneckshaw. "He was passionately in love with photography so I became interested," she said. She began her career as a photographer with the Far Eastern Bureau of the

British Information Services. "I would cycle all around Bombay in my sari carrying my heavy camera equipment at any time of day or night. There was no fear," she said. She never took any posed pictures, waiting instead to capture people at their natural best. They make for compelling images and have great historical significance — evocative of a new, free India and its people. She has a rare collection of spectacular pictures of Pandit Nehru, Dr Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. She freelanced for *Span*, *Life* and many international publications. Even though she was the only woman in a big coterie of male photographers, she never really thought of herself as different from them, she said. She was even elected president of the News Cameramen's Association.

Mid-interview, she asked us if we'd eaten any lunch. She made us a fresh salad, steaming dhansak and fragrant pulao rice. When we thanked her profusely for lunch, she said, "It's alright, I'll send you a bill."



“
Not wanting to brag but I am telling you, I have no time to feel bored or lonely. If you start doing things for yourself, you feel very confident. In the worst of times, you can manage.”

She spent the rest of the afternoon telling us about her adventures. Her favourite story is the one about a journey she made to take the Dalai Lama's picture. She rode all night on top of a truck that was carrying his luggage, so she could get his photograph in the morning. The other memory that makes her laugh is time she fell backwards into the canal behind the Taj Mahal, while she was taking pictures.

Homai Vyarawalla gave up photography in 1970, disillusioned by the new breed of photographers. "I had worked with gracious people, that dignity, everything that was there in the beginning was lost. Earlier there were such interesting people. Panditji, Radhakrishnan, Rajendra Prasad, people had individuality. So there was interest in taking the pictures also. You ask me to do the work now, I would refuse." So she packed up her camera and retired. "Life has its own good things and bad things and they come in cycles. But you got to learn how to take it," she said.

— Shefali Srinivas

Women's Voices: Selections from Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Indian Writing in English. By Eunice de Souza and Lindsay Pereira

"Thus comes to an end the story of my humble yet eventful life. In spite of the various difficulties that intervened, I have at last been able to place it before the world; it only remains for me to... express a confident hope that the coming generations of women in my beloved motherland will emulate whatever good and noble and beautiful they find in these pages."

One hundred years later, these concluding words of Dosebai Cowasjee Jessawalla in *The Story of My Life* make for fascinating reading. Her autobiography documents the events of a time from a woman's perspective, the "first Indian girl to receive the benefits of an English education." Besides, the book dedicated to her mother, emphasises the fact that it was her mother, not her father who was the guiding factor in the daughter's education. She bravely contradicts the popularly held belief then and even today that it was Maneckji Kharsetji who was the pioneer of English education for women in India, (the founder of Alexandra Girls English Institution, the first of its kind in India,) championing once more her mother's pioneering efforts.

One can imagine "the various difficulties that intervened" in the publication of this zestful autobiography—perhaps domestic responsibilities, publication problems. Even more telling is the hope invested in the "coming generations of women" who might "emulate all the good and beautiful."

Judging by the range and depth of "women's voices," heard in this collection, this sprightly lady's hopes have not been belied, least of all by Eunice de Souza, whose committed research has led to this publication.

"Gathered in these pages," are excerpts of letters, speeches, essays, articles, diaries, and autobiographies by women—well known, little known or not known at all. With well-researched head notes by Lindsay Pereira, this book comes, not as a mere adjunct to the two pioneering volumes, *Women Writing in India* it adds immeasurably to that venture, by focussing on women's writing in English which Tharu and Lalitha had consciously excluded.

The narratives range from women's comments on education, politics, social reform, to art, travel and literature. We hear the firm voice of Pandita Ramabai converted to Christianity but not in meek submission—"I am not bound to accept every word that falls from the lips of priests... if it pleases you to call my word liberty as lawlessness

you may do so." Yet another woman, caught between the cross-fire of Indian Nationalism and British Colonialism, the Reform Movement and the orthodoxies of patriarchal politics was Dr Rukmabai, whose letter, aptly entitled "Enslaved Daughters" speaks for herself as for her generation (and one might add for ours as well) when she fought and finally won her way in her refusal to join the man to whom she was married as a child.

Other voices can be heard—voices of women as far apart as Vijaylakshmi Pandit, India's first cabinet minister, who shocked her all-male staff by her insistence on having a bowl of flowers to brighten up her dreary office—and the voice of her lesser-known contemporary, Mithan Chosksi, who, long before the Tower of Babel language issue was to peak in the fifties, had pointed out the anomalies of western education. Even while it gave a profound stimulus to the cause of social and political reform, it would produce a generation that would write, "a better English essay on Chaucer than on Tulsidas and Tukaram."

Sucheta Kriplani's voice echoes Gandhi's dictum, "put a stone in place of your heart... but never give the poor free dole." It finds an echoing response in Lady Mehri Dorab Tata, one far removed in her worldview from either Gandhi or the socialist Sucheta Kriplani. "Stop the foolish charities," to the Parsi poor. She advocates instead the idea of dignity of labour.

A very different world is the one inhabited by Amrita Shergil. Writing as eloquently as she painted, she tells Nehru, on receiving his autobiography, that he was capable of "discarding his halo occasionally." "You are capable of saying, 'when I saw the sea for the first time' when others would say 'when the sea saw me for the first time'."

Growing up in the 1940s and 50s, we were midnight's children of a young, independent India. Many of us knew from near or afar, some of the women included here, frequented the places mentioned here—we visited the Ratan Tata Institute, we were in and out of the Pandita Ramabai Hostel, we played at Gowalia Tank Maidan. But educated in colonial history and literature, we did not know the living history of our times or of these places. We know now.

— Reviewed by Dr Roshan G Shahani

Book Details: Published by Oxford University Press, 2001, No. of pages:451, Price: Rs 595

Women's Work, Its Value: Portraits of Self-Employed Women



SPARROW's photography collection is focussed on providing real images of women and their environments as opposed to consumerist constructions of women's bodies and identities in mass media.

One of the women's groups we chose to record this year, was the Self Employed Women's Association, in Gujarat. The aim was to capture diverse images of the SEWA members at work. We have presented a few portraits from this grassroots organisation, which now has over 3 lakh members countrywide.

Samuben Thakkar, agricultural labourer, SEWA member since 20 years: Eighty-five-year-old Samuben Thakkar is one of the oldest members of SEWA. In the 1980s, SEWA initiated a programme of wasteland development in Mehsana district. The aim was to increase fertility of the soil and provide sustained work and income to women farmers in the area. SEWA began negotiations with the Ganeshpura village panchayat to acquire around 10 acres of fallow land in 1980.

Samuben was one of the women who played an active role in the negotiations. Finally in 1987, the Vanlaxmi Mahila Sewa Tree Growers' Cooperative Society was registered. For over 15 years, Samuben and other landless labourers have worked on the land, turning it into a lush green paradise, fragrant with flower saplings and lemon trees. Each woman is responsible for her own plot of land. The members stay motivated as they pay to lease the land and keep the profits from their produce. Because of her sustained involvement in these activities, Samuben represented SEWA at a conference on agriculture and labour in China. It was the first time that she had travelled out of her state, let alone country. Samuben said that she was a little afraid to sit in an airplane and travel out of the country by herself but she was very proud to have gone and she enjoyed the trip. "I saw the great wall of China. I met lots of people. But my big problem was that I couldn't eat anything there," she laughed.

Women's Work, Its Value



Kasiben Bijalpai, firewood collector and SEWA member for the last two years. She earns one rupee for every kg of firewood she collects



Vandanaben is an agarbathi maker, SEWA member for four years. She earns seven rupees for every 1,000 agarbathis



Neelam Dave, co-ordinator of Video SEWA, in the editing room. She was formerly a labourer who had received some formal education.

Photos by Priya D'Souza, Ahmedabad, March 13, 2003

Artist Mukta Venkatesh bids Goodbye

On 19 October 2003, Mukta Venkatesh passed away peacefully at 6.30A.M. Born in 1902 as Muthulakshmi, Mukta was the daughter of the legendary Tamil writer A Madhaviah.

SPARROW had an opportunity two years ago to record her memories of her life and times and photograph some of her paintings. Her daughter Girija Madhavan and son-in-law A Madhavan had explained to her the purpose of the interview and had kindly agreed to be present during the interview in case she needed some help with facts. Not that she needed any help. She had a sharp memory. She instructed us to speak aloud for she was a little hard of hearing.

The interviews took place in two sessions. In the first session, we went prepared to interview a painter who was a hundred years old. But in the course of the conversation we discovered that she was the daughter of the famous Madhaviah. So a second session was arranged to record memories of her childhood and growing up.

When she began talking about her father she became a young girl, recalling how her father took her to a meeting where Sarojini Naidu recited her poetry. She spoke about how her father wanted his daughters to wear only handloom saris and how when she got married she wore no silk. Later, when she came to Mysore and everyone told her that she cannot meet people in cotton sarees, she wrote and asked her father and he told her she was not under his wings now, and must



Photo by Priya D' Souza,
Mysore, January 21, 2002



Anthuriums, December 2001,
Painted by Mukta Venkatesh

do what her husband wished her to do. Mukta may have worn silk after marriage but she held on to many other principles of her social reformist father. She did not believe or approve of the caste system "I have no caste" she said. Her early lessons in painting she got from Hope Peters of the Madras School of Arts. Later, when she went to England, Xavier Wills, a renowned painter, taught her the intricacies of mixing colours.

Mukta began with landscape painting but later began to do floral painting. Almost till the end of her life Mukta painted for one hour every morning as a regular routine. The flowers she drew were bright and captivating, very much like her own countenance.

At the end of her interview with us, a friend who had come along asked her a question which people think old people have to be asked. "What do you think of modern women?" she asked. Pat came the reply: "Why, what is wrong with them?" The modern woman that she was, Mukta successfully floored the person who had dared to ask her the question.

We will carry you with us Mukta for we have your words to listen to and your flowers to see. What better gift could you have given us?

— C S Lakshmi

Publication No. 38

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Design and Layout: Shefali Srinivas

Printed at Mouj Prakashan Griha,

Khatau Wadi, Goregaonkar Lane,

Girgaum, Mumbai 400004 Phone: 23871050

Published by



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