



SPARROW

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WOMEN

# SPARROW

## newsletter

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**Editor:**

C S Lakshmi

**Co-editor for this issue:**

Shefali Martins

**Design:**

Mishra Roy

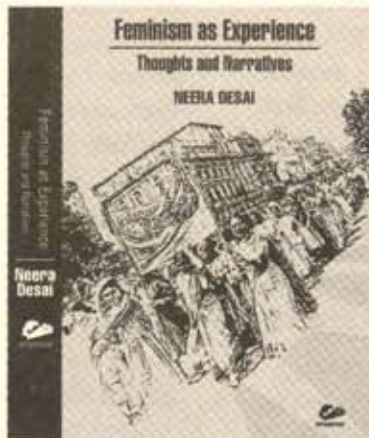
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Forthcoming  
**SPARROW**  
Publication

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### [Editor's Note]

The month of October is remembered as the month of Gandhi Jayanthi. Many remember it only as the month when there is a dry day because of Gandhi. We thought it would be interesting to see how some women have dealt with Gandhi as a person. We have chosen an excerpt from the autobiography of Sucheta Kripalani and a note on an interview done with Nirmala Gandhi, Gandhi's daughter-in-law, by Dr. Rohini Gavankar, for SPARROW. We have also chosen an excerpt from Hansa Mehta's book *Indian Woman* where she speaks about Gandhi and his views. We thought this would be the appropriate time to do this when everybody seems to be overwhelmed by Gandhigiri of Munnabhai. It is good to remember the father of the nation for what he was rather than make a caricature of him.

There are also our other usual features. Two well-known

actresses passed away this month. Padmini who was considered one of the best actresses of Tamil cinema, who also did a few Hindi films, had an illustrious career. Srividya, another actress who has acted in Tamil, Malayalam and Hindi cinema, was a brilliant actress and a great dancer. Death has claimed her very early in her life. In this SNL we pay homage to both of them.

This SNL is being co-edited by Shefali Martins, a young journalist with *The Asian Age* who would like to be involved in the projects of SPARROW.

Even before you finish reading this the next SNL will be out to give you some more interesting details about women's lives and women's history.

Do visit our website [www.sparrowonline.org](http://www.sparrowonline.org) and do get back to us on this issue.

## 0.2 Women and Gandhi

### A Woman with a Mind Of Her Own

An excerpt from Sucheta Kripalani's *An Unfinished Autobiography* from *Women's Voices: Selection from Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Indian Writing in English* by Eunice de Souza and Lindsay Pereira, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2002

On 15 January 1934, North India felt a severe shock of earthquake. In Benares, the shock was so severe that we could see our houses tilt at an angle for a few



seconds. The next day we got news of the terrible havoc in Bihar. The disaster had affected an area of 77,000 sq km. A population of crore and a half had been affected. Some towns in North Bihar had been razed to the ground. Big fissures and chasms had occurred, throwing up water and sand. Thousands of acres of land had been r e n d e r e d

uncultivable. Lacs of people had become homeless and thousands had been killed or injured.

#### *Contact with Gandhiji*

The British Government, unable to cope with a disaster of this magnitude, released Dr. Rajendra Prasad from jail to organise the relief operations. Gandhiji camped at Patana. Congress workers, big and small, all over India came to help in the relief work. When my classes were over and the students were preparing for the examinations, I took leave from the university and went there. This was the first time I came in close contact with Gandhiji and the Congress leaders. I was encouraged in this venture by Kripalani who was then spending all his time in Bihar. He had in the last few years become a very close friend of mine.

I was assigned to go and work in a village called Rampur Hari in Mazuffarpur District. Another lady and a young boy of about 16 formed our unit. We had to survey 10 villages and help the people of the area.

Jamnalal Bajaj came to like me very much and wanted me to leave the university and join the Mahila Ashram in Wardha. He had started this national institution to educate and train women for national service. At his invitation, I went on a short

visit to Wardha. The Mahila Ashram was located among a group of buildings on a big compound. One was occupied by Gandhiji and his party. The life of the students appeared to me somewhat harsh and rigid. However, as Jamnalalji was pressing me, I was half inclined to take it up. Vinoba Bhave was, I think, the chairman of the Board and had to approve of me. When I was taken to see him, he was fasting to expiate for the sin of two young people living in the ashram complex who had fallen in love with each other! These two were going about the ashram with hurt faces. The whole thing appeared to me rather atrocious. Vinoba's rigid attitude and extreme self-mortification somehow put me off from joining the Mahila Ashram.

In the last few years, Kripalani and I had been getting closer to each other. We exchanged letters regularly. His letters were wonderful, revealing the yearnings of a soul dedicated to freeing India from poverty and degradation. There was much in common in our ideas and outlook. This gradually developed into a strong attachment.

We decided to marry but the impediments were many. There was a great difference in age and he lived a life of extreme austerity and hardship. Mother was opposed as she wanted a life of ease and comfort for me, i.e., the life of a normal housewife. On the other side, his only sister Kiki reacted very strongly against the idea of her 'Sadhu' brother marrying at so advanced an age. He was in his forties at that time. She thought he would lose his reputation and all his life's work would be destroyed. She was a well-known and respected Congress worker.

#### *'You will Break my Right Arm'*

She wrote to Gandhiji. Gandhiji himself was opposed to the marriage. He was generally against his lieutenants and workers marrying. He thought family responsibilities diverted their attention from the work before them and weakened their ardour for the struggle. Gandhiji sent for me. I went to see him, a little afraid. But he had a wonderful capacity of putting people at ease. Further, no subject was taboo for him. So the talk was not the ordeal I thought it would be.

Early in the morning, while taking his walk, he spoke to me in a leisurely way, persuading me to give up the idea. He finally said, 'If you marry him, you will break my right arm.' I asked him why did he not think that, instead of losing one political worker, he would gain two. But he just brushed

## 0.3 Women and Gandhi

aside the idea and said: 'I have seen many cases. they just got embroiled in family and household.' I returned to Benares without arriving at any decision.

The marriage was delayed also because of Jawaharlal's long imprisonment. Kripalani and he were close friends then. He could not think of marriage while his friend was in prison. During this waiting period of over two years, Gandhiji called me two or three times to Wardha. Finally, I bowed to his wishes and agreed to give up the idea. Then he said: 'You have to give him up in thought, word and deed, have no contact, no letter even.' To that too I agreed. Then the next day, he came out with something more. He said, 'If you remain unhappy, it will hurt Kripalani. So you must marry someone else.' At this, I turned round and told him that what he was proposing was wrong, it would be unjust and immoral to do so. He had no answer to that. That ended our discussions.

Jamnalalji's sympathy was with us; he did some canvassing with Gandhiji for us. However, some time in early 1936, Gandhiji sent for me and told me that he had no objection to our marriage, but he would not be able to bless us, he could only pray for us. We were satisfied with his prayers. In April 1936, we got married according to Brahmo rites in Benares. From there we went to Allahabad where Jawaharlal's mother Swaroop Rani warmly received me with the gift of a very nice sari. At a wedding reception held in Anand Bhavan, our marriage was registered with Jawaharlal as one of the witnesses....

### A Duty-bound Daughter-in-law

**O**n January 8, 1998, Nirmala Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's daughter-in-law was interviewed by Rohini Gavankar for SPARROW. This interview brings out the various facets of Gandhiji in his family life. She begins her story with her childhood days and says that she was a regular visitor at the Sabarmati Ashram. She was so taken by the simplicity and peace of the Ashram that despite the disapproval of her mother and grandfather, she continued going there.

While seeking an alliance for his son Ramdas, Gandhiji considered the daughter of a mill-owner in Ahmedabad. He however changed his mind because he thought that such a pampered girl would be a misfit in his hardworking family that was committed to a greater cause. This shows Gandhiji's practicality even in family matters. When a marriage between Nirmala and Ramdas was proposed and Nirmala heartily agreed to it, Gandhiji called her and asked her what had been her considerations for consenting to this wedding. He told her that they would not be able to give her any jewellery or any other

gifts associated with weddings. She replied that she did not want anything beyond their love. She said to her aunt, while accepting the proposal, "I don't like jewellery at all. I like khadi."

A very interesting dimension to her wedding was that when she arrived at Sabarmati for the wedding, she was given the same welcome as a barat, the groom's family, is

given. The liberal views of the Gandhis and the message of equality was given right at the outset to Nirmala. She liked her husband's decision of staying with the family even after marriage and so she became an integral part of life at Sabarmati Ashram.

Through domestic dialogues which seem innocuous, Nirmala captures her relationship with Kasturba. For example, Kasturba called Nirmala by her pet name, Nimmo. She narrates how Kasturba trusted her completely with work and let her make her own decisions.

Ramdas, her husband and his brother, Devdas, did not stay at the Ashram as they were busy with other work related to Gandhiji's mission.

In the interview she makes several references to Gandhi's ideology and her ideology being similar. When the Namak Satyagrah began, Gandhiji collected people from other ashrams and told them that as they were fighting for a big cause, they needed to stay together and eat together. Their food could be anything, but it had to be without salt. At this time a joint kitchen was operative at the Sabarmati Ashram where 200 people ate together which Nirmala willingly supervised as she also believed that being together and eating together was a gesture of solidarity.

Nirmala discusses how Bapu was very particular about the lives of the people at the ashram. The basic necessities were there and everybody had to manage all the work by equal division of labour. He did not want to spend money which would be used for the nation, to be carelessly spent. But as Nirmala says in the interview, "Everybody used to work with such excitement, that all work seemed like play. With Bapu's encouragement, everyone would manage well."



# 0.4 Women and Gandhi

Asked whether she wanted to participate in the independence movement or not, she says, she definitely wanted to and had made all preparations to go to jail. But Bapu refused to give her permission because firstly, her children were small and secondly, the work she was doing from outside would be interrupted. Bapu was a real father to her. Nirmala says that he took a lot of care of her diet when she got anemic. He kept her on raw milk for several days which really helped her regain health. Bapu defined their relationship very beautifully; as Nirmala narrates, "Bapu used to say that he was my mother. What I couldn't tell my own mother, I could easily share with him."

She participated in countless activities that Gandhiji organised, like taking care of the khadi bhandar, the ashram kitchen and the bal mandir. Whatever work was given to her, she did with full commitment. Talking about khadi and swadesi, she also discusses a reply she sent to Vice-President Krishnakant's greeting card. She had stated in the letter that the multi-national corporations would ruin the Indian farmer and pointed out that the card was worded in English. She asked him: "If we forget our language, how will the nation thrive?"

Gandhiji wrote her several letters emphasising the importance of duty that are currently archived at the Nehru Memorial Museum. Rohini summarises the interview by saying, "Probably books can supplement information about the social aspect of Gandhiji, but such family details give a fresh angle to his persona."

## What Life Taught Hansa

**Mehta** An excerpt from *Indian Woman*. Delhi 1981

...**A**nd finally, I cannot forget the spell that Gandhiji had cast over those who came in contact with him. The first time I saw Gandhiji from a distance was when he was attending the Session of the Indian National Congress in Bombay in 1915 after his return from South Africa. With his Kathiawadi dress and a Kathiawadi turban on, he did not look very impressive. He settled down at the Sabarmati Ashram and I heard people talking about his way of life at the Ashram and about his idiosyncrasies.

The second time that I saw him was in Godhra where he was presiding over a Gujarat Political Conference. I happened to be there to attend the Social conference meeting at the same time and presided over by Shrimati Sharadagauri Mehta. I remember the sensation created when Gandhiji insisted on the Harijans sitting with the *savarnas* and not in a separate enclosure. It was, however, after my return from England at the end of 1921 that I began to take more interest in Gandhiji's activities and this was because of my association with Sarojini Devi.

When Gandhiji was first arrested in 1922, Sarojini Devi went to Ahmedabad with a group of women from Bombay. I joined the group at Baroda. We went to Sabarmati Jail to see Gandhiji and Sarojini Devi introduced me to him. That was the first time that I saw him at close quarters and for no reason at all, I was visibly



moved. Though I cannot call myself a close associate of Mahatmaji, I had many occasions to meet him and talk to him.

I attended the women's meeting he had called at Karadi during his Dandi march in 1930 and became a soldier in his fight for freedom. He was as much a champion of women as of Harijans and it was he who roused the women of India to heroic deeds during those memorable days of the Satyagraha struggle in 1930. According to him, women could make better soldiers in non-violent struggle and he looked to women to make his Satyagraha movement a success. And women did rise to the occasion and encountered all kinds of suffering and imprisonment in hundred and thousands.

Gandhiji has expressed his views in his speeches and writings on most points that touch life. It is not possible to concur with all that Gandhiji said or wrote. In fact, Gandhiji himself very often differed from what he had said or written years before in different circumstances. Those who try to interpret Gandhiji literally and accept every word he uttered as gospel truth, do not take into consideration the circumstances in which he [spoke].

Gandhiji had the greatness of mind to acknowledge his own error. Had he been alive today, he would feel differently about many things he would see happening as a result of what he had said in the past.

To learn to think for oneself is what we need today instead of taking shelter behind Gandhiji's words in everything we do. We have got over what Manu said, we shall have to get over what Gandhiji said. What we cannot and should not forget, however, are the fundamental truth Gandhiji not only preached but practiced i.e., Gandhiji's belief in the brotherhood of man; his belief in non-violence, whether in word or in deed and his belief in the dignity of the human person.



## Dehari Bhai Vides

Edited by Rajendra Yadav

Women's personal lives are very closely linked with their expression. But each time one reads about the experiences of a particular writer it seems to add a new thought or a new perspective about women's lives. *Dehari Bhai Vides* (One's Own Threshold An Alien Space), edited by Rajendra Yadav is based on the life and experiences of fifteen famous women writers, some of them contemporary and some of them from another era like Meerabai and others. In a passionate introduction Rajendra Yadav argues that a woman does not have anything she can call her own. The house she is born into is not hers for she is considered someone who belongs elsewhere. Her marital house is also not hers for she can be sent out of it anytime. The language she speaks is not her own. A woman is also identified as someone's wife or mother. Her own name gets submerged often into that of her husband's. Bereft of space, language and identity that she can call her own, when a woman begins to write she has to invent a new language; a new perspective towards her body, her existence. Rajendra Yadav says, "The liberation of women is the liberation of the entire society for liberation never comes alone..."

The book is divided into four parts. The first part is an introductory one setting the context of the book. The second part of the book is a compilation of writings of various women writers in the form of poems, articles, stories and autobiographical notes. Meerabai's short poem, *Teen Pad*, quoted, here deals with her struggles at her marital household, her love

for Krishna written in simple, down-to-earth poetry that one associates with Meerabai. An anonymous person who calls herself 'Ek Agyaat Hindu Aurat' (An Anonymous Hindu Woman), writes an article on the prayers of Aryan women who want freedom from the torment of living like jail birds in their community. In Dukhani Bala's story we come to know the pain of child marriage and the sorrows of a child widow through the protagonist Sarla. It is a story of a past social history but the details of the life of women such as Sarla remain with us many hours after reading. In *Do Sansmaran* (Two Memoirs), Mahadevi Verma talks about two different aspects of her life. The first one details her childhood days and the atmosphere at home. The second one records the influence of her parents on her life, her interaction with Gandhiji and her ideology. In *Premchand Ke Ghar Mein*, (In Premchand's House), Shivrani Devi, his wife, discusses a few instances from her married life in Kanpur, U.P. Shivrani Devi talks about being a child widow whose progressive father gets her married to Premchand. But Shivrani does not know that Premchand has a first wife who is alive. She had understood him to be a widower. She narrates the incident of how she finds out about his first wife when she chances to see his first wife's brother pleading with Premchand to take his sister back. Shivrani argues with him for the first time in her married life and tells him to bring her home and tells him he has no right to destroy the life of a woman he is married to. In just two and a half pages, Shivrani Devi is able to reveal the complexity of relationships within a family and about how women forge friendships.

The third part of the book has excerpts from the autobiographies of six well-known women, Dineshnandini Dalmia, Krishna Agnihotri, Maitreyi Pushpa, Padma Sachdeva, Kusum Ansal and Kausalaya Besantri. In *Humsafar Hone Ki Ek Raat* (A Night to be A Fellow-traveller), Dineshnandini Dalmia sketches her relationship with her husband. Even while trying to be herself she tries to take upon herself the personality of his first wife. She talks about her husband's visitor like status in her house during her illness and her strange association with him. Krishna Agnihotri's *Jal Bharu Ki Riti Jaaon* (Should I fill in or drain myself out?), is about her relationship with her lover for whom she leaves her husband. Yet, her total commitment to him is futile as he turns out to be unfaithful and unworthy of her love. She describes her struggle to give her daughter a normal life despite being a single mother and how she has to compromise her own happiness in the process. *Umra Ke Basant Mein Khadi Ladki* (A Girl At the Spring of Her Youth), by Maitreyi Pushpa is about her unfulfilled dreams of marriage as a young woman. It depicts the plight of a mother who has no identity of her own except what others give her. Her young daughter decides not to marry having watched her mother's

## 0.6 Book Review

traumatic life. She decides to become a gram sevika. She feels that young girls must now be torchbearers of development.

*Bhavisya Ki Pagdandi* (The Path to Future), by Padma Sachdev is an interesting piece on the days she spent in the hospital. She writes about its atmosphere, workers and about her co-patients. It is also about success and creativity amidst the trauma of living with a drunkard husband. Padma Sachdev strongly believes that a woman must compromise as much as possible, but not at the cost of her self-respect. She says love without respect is not of any value. She comments that women have never asked for respect, they have only pleaded that they should not be disrespected. She writes with deep emotion about the futility of her life with her husband and the pain of breaking a relationship of this nature. The story of Kusum Bansal in *Akand Aastha Ki Mashaal* (The Torch of Faith), revolves mostly around her son and her faith in religion and her need to perform rituals like havans. She also talks about her involvement with her writing and her dealings with the publishers and the long wait to publish her writings. Kausalaya Besantri's *Shaap! Shaap! Shaap!!!* (Curse! Curse! Curse!), recreates for us the life and struggles of a poor and untouchable girl and the humiliation she undergoes at every point of her life. If marriage is difficult for her divorce is even worse. She details the routes her divorce took and how she got a petty amount of Rs 500/- as maintenance to take care of herself and her son.

The fourth part is also autobiographical. Manu Bhandari's *Ek Kaahani Yab Bhi* (This is Also a Story), takes us through her childhood days and about her life in her home. She talks about how she observed life around her among her family and neighbours and how they later became her characters. Snehmai Chaudhary's *Upar Tangi Laash Ka Atmakathya* (The Autobiography of a Dead Body Hanging Above), is about a tortuous journey with a violent husband and the agony and bruises it leaves behind. Mridula Garg's *Do Ekant* (Solitudes), is a sensitive account of the loneliness of the writer in Mumbai. She is deeply emotional and is content to watch the world from within her small home. She uses her illness as an excuse to write to keep the writer in her alive.

*Wah Ek Kumarkaaz Thi* (A Wanton Woman), by Nasira Sharma talks about her bold and combative writings. She sees herself committing suicide, dying in isolation at the age of eighty. She imagines how people would see her after her suicide. She sees them commenting on her nature, language, her life. Despite her fearlessness and perseverance in the toughest of situations and the guts to live her life on her own terms, she feels that she would end her life one day and that she would be seen only as a quarrelsome and unpleasant woman. In *Ek Anupasthit Pratimb* (Absent Reflection), Prabha Khetan writes about her days in

New York and her relationship with a married man. Her choice of relationship brings its own set of problems and yet she is not able to bury her love. But she does wonder what is it that makes her go on with this relationship.

Ramnika Gupta's *Band Hai Mera Kamra* (My Room is Closed), also describes her relationship with a married man that finally breaks up. She talks about how a relationship binds both the woman and the man. Her broken relationship, however, does not shatter her as a person. She is still able to define herself in the context of her political life and ambition to be politically involved in the affairs of her country. Sudha Arora's *Gumshuda Dost Ki Talash* (Search for a Friend), is a beautifully drawn picture of her childhood days, her love for her grandparents and their care and love for her. Though she is an introvert and submissive child the writer in her was always kept alive. The events of her life at times suppress and at times encourage that writer in her. Association with an organisation like HELP is a constant inspiration.

Jaya Jaadmani's *Chamkeelay Din* (Days of Shining), talks about the writer's village life in Punjab. She has minutely depicted her uncomplicated and simple life and her relationship with her neighbours. She describes various events and her first encounter with an unwed mother which teaches her about the different layers in life. *Akeli Stri Ka Sach* (A Single Woman's Truth), is Jayanti's truth about her life as a single woman. She has her own ideas about sex, family, marriage, children and about men and feels life has to be lived on one's own terms. She lives alone but she is not judgemental about other women who opt to live within the family. She feels both options carry their own consequences.

The pieces put together for this volume overwhelm one by the weight of the varied experiences they carry. There is pain, there is agony, there is struggle but there is also love, affection, friendship and above all, the joy of words— of finding a language, building a creative space to live in. What is written here is not to prove a point or to draw the road map to one kind of liberation but to share the many ways in which women choose to live and write.

— Kiran Sinha and Shefali Martins

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*Debari Bhai Vides*

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## *Gol Maal* designed to create awareness among young people

**O**n September 20, 2006, an event was organised by Point of View at Trafalgar Chowk, Bandra. A game called *Gol Maal* that has been designed and produced by Bishakha Datta, Maya Ganesh, Jyotika Jain, Yael Friedkin, Vishal Rawley, Neelima P. Aryan, Meenu Pandey and Shivali Sharma was played.

This is a board game that uses a fun and interactive methodology to discuss gender, sexuality and HIV/AIDS with young people by providing them information they need in a

digestible way, discussing dilemmas faced by them and shattering myths through information and discussions.

It consists of five sections exploring the issues of masculinity and femininity (called *Hum Tum*), sexuality, health, body politics and relationships (called *Saathiya*), violence against women (called *Darr*), laws, women's rights, milestones in women's lives (called *Ardh Satya*) and gender and HIV/AIDS (called *Kal Ho Na Ho*).

*Golmaal* can also be customised to the need of the groups that are playing it.



## Padmini: A Thillana to Remember



Actress Padmini, who passed away on September 25, 2006 in Chennai, formed the famous trio of actresses, Lalitha, Padmini and Ragini. Lalitha and Padmini made their debut first. Their dancing set the screen on fire. Later both graduated to the position as heroines. But it was Padmini, who became the most famous of the trio. She co-starred with Shivaji Ganesan in many films, the most famous being *Thillana Mobanambal*, where she enacted the eponymous role. Coupled with her dancing ability, she was in great demand. She acted in many Hindi films, like K.A.Abbas's *Paredesi* and Rajkapoor's films. But in Hindi films she did not make much of an impact, because the focus was not on her histrionic ability but her physical attributes like her buxom figure. But Padmini's films still continue to draw crowds, whenever they are released. She had returned to India from the U.S. where she had settled down, and had many plans for the future which were cut short by death.

— Rajeswari Thiagarajan

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## Srividya: A Rare Melody

The famous singer M.L.Vasanthakumari's daughter Srividya, who died on October 19, 2006, was also a dancer. Her expressive eyes and her flawless diction, hastened her debut in films. She was very popular. Many remember her for her memorable role in K.Balachandar's *Apoorva Ragangal* (Rare Melodies) where she played the role of a woman in love with a younger man. Kamalahasan played the role of the young man. However, she moved to Malayalam films, where more meaningful films are made and she proved to be very popular. But her private life was in shambles. The man she married in defiance of her mother, proved to be an exploiter. He looked upon her as the goose that laid the golden eggs. She was thrown out of the house she had built, at midnight. But Kamalahasan and Rajanikant came to her rescue. Although she was young, she began playing the role of a mother.

In Mani Rathnam's *Dhalapathi*, she played the role of Rajanikant's mother and in *Apoorva Sagodhararkal* she played the role of Kamalahasan's mother even though she was not older than them. But later, she realised that roles were drying up and she appeared on the small screen. Three years ago, she discovered she had cancer. She had to discontinue her career as she was undergoing chemotherapy. Sreekumaran Thampi, who was producing a T.V.serial with Srividya in the lead, decided to discontinue it because he felt no one could be as

effective as her. She was cremated with full State honours by the Kerala government. Maybe death came as a relief to her because life had given her nothing but grief, pain and betrayal despite her immense talent.

— Rajeswari Thiagarajan

