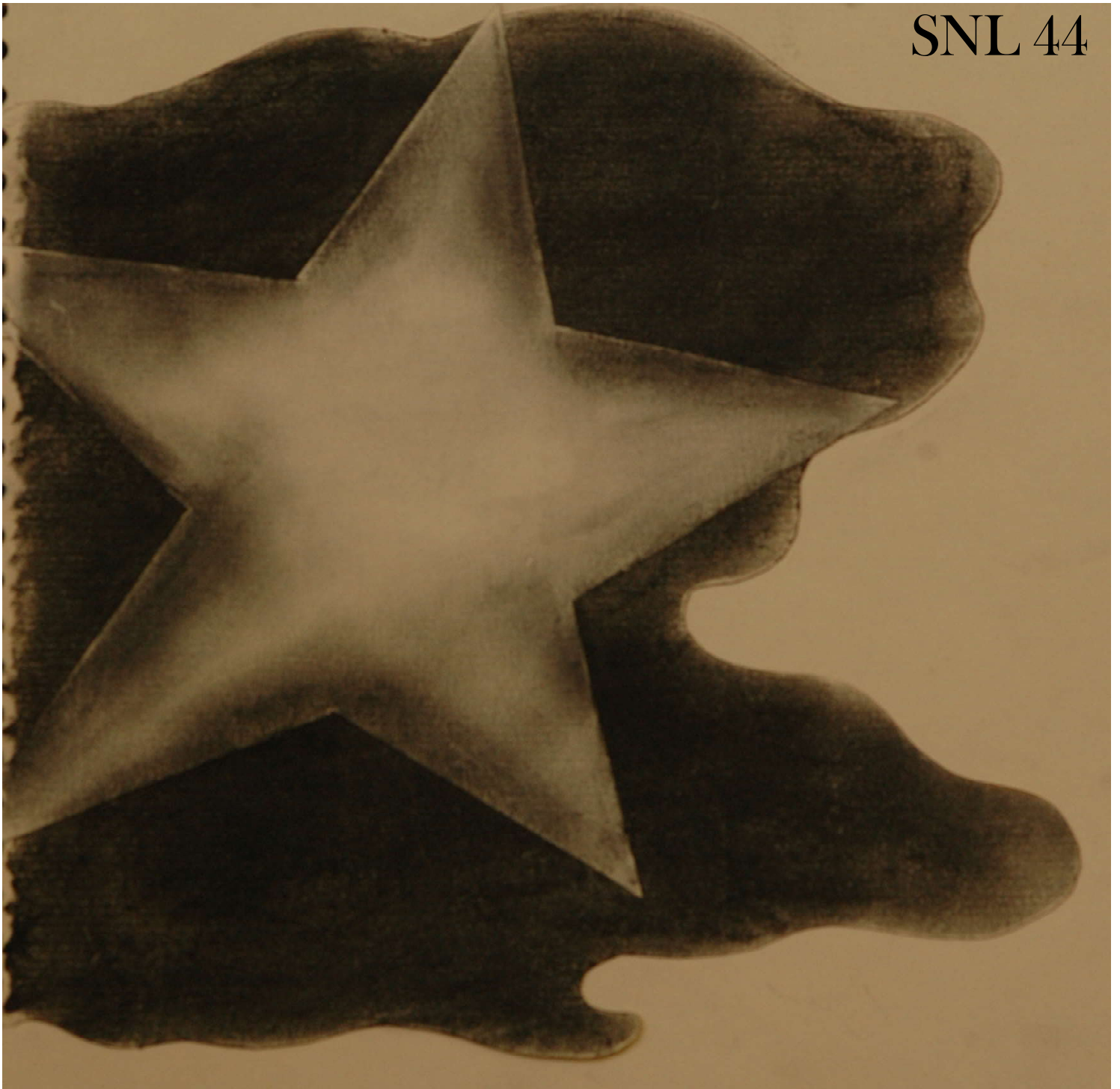




*Doesn't life have a permanent dwelling? It has taken
shelter in this body.*

(Thirukkural, Chapter 34, 340)

*(From the blog of Kannan's Translations of Thirukkural in English: A Modern
Rendition of the Tamil Classic)*



2025

One Who Laughed Away Life's Sorrows: Uma Mohan (27 January 1966-6 January 2025)



Uma Mohan was a senior announcer with All India Radio (AIR). She was based in Puducherry and had been working with AIR since 1995. “Poovaiyar Poonga” (Women’s Garden) programme that she anchored was quite popular. She was a poet, a fiction writer and had also ventured

into writing historical essays on women in the freedom movement. She shared her poetry and articles in her blog ‘kural-sakthiblogspot’ (<https://kural-sakthi.blogspot.com>) and a section ‘pullikolam’ that she wrote in the blog.

I met Uma Mohan during one of my trips with writer Padmaja Narayanan to Puducherry three years ago at the AIR Puducherry. Uma was a friend of Padmaja. Uma gave me some of her poetry books and I did not realise then that it was going to be the beginning of a very deep and loving friendship. Very soon I also realised that everyone who knew her had a special relationship with her. That was the way she was. She was an intense person deeply emotional and sensitive and fortunately she had a way of putting all that she felt into words. Last year I decided to interview her for SPARROW. We had a long and interesting dialogue at the end of which she told me laughing that she had still some twenty-five years or so from her life to cover and we agreed to meet again some other time. We did meet again a couple of times but she was very busy and there was no time to sit down for a long chat. The last time we met in Puducherry she said, “Next time definitely.” It never happened. Her sudden death plunged many of her friends including me into deep sadness. Those who had known her better than me knew about her loneliness and her health issues. But they always thought that she would keep herself afloat with her positivism and laughter and immense love for everyone. That she would die of a heart attack was not something anyone even thought of. Many have written warm tributes to her. I have taken from some of them to draw the image of the much-loved Uma Mohan.

Writer Kalayarassy says that she met Uma under strange circumstances. They met in a hospital. Both their husbands were kidney patients admitted in the same hospital under the same doctor. Both Uma and Kalayarassy were in the

same boat for a few years dealing with kidney failure, dialysis and kidney transplant surgery followed by deaths of their husbands. They faced storms and bore the same sorrow of challenges and pain. They shared their grief. In a way, it was their interest in reading and writing that brought them out of this personal tragedy. Kalayarassy remembers Uma Mohan as someone who showered love on others like an innocent child.

The bi-monthly magazine *Puduvai Bharani* brought out a section for paying tribute to Uma Mohan in its January-February 2025 issue. Nivedita Louis through whose publishing house Her Stories, Uma had brought out many books wrote an emotional tribute to her excerpts from which are given below:

The Pole Star that Smiled and Disappeared

Uma Mohan was laid in the hall before the photo of her holding a mike considered her favourite. In a mixed orange and blue coloured sari. Orange necklace. Elegantly painted red nail polish on her toes. Uma liked elegance. From the pin on her sari to the sentences she wrote. The next photo was that of a kitchen. Someone was saying that she always sat under the photo and wrote. She must have written the 7 parts of *Brave Women in the Field of Freedom* sitting there.

Someone was saying with sympathy that she lived in such a big house alone as a widow. I am quite aware of how Uma dealt with her loneliness. It came through in some of her poems. Even in that loneliness she was full of empathy for others. I remember her in many ways—Uma who spent long nights laughing and talking, after calling after I I in the night and asking “Can we talk?” and talking about two hours about the unprofessional Professional Courier company and about how her husband came to “see” her for marriage selection. Uma who called you “Thozhar” (Comrade) firmly and with deep affection. And those night auto rides every book fair at least once with me to my house. Uma talking about her Cauvery Delta stories and her childhood and youth then. And the last message that she sent: I have completed my work. Now it is in your hands. Tell me beforehand about the release of the book. I have to apply for leave.” The last meeting in the Pondicherry University. Uma who told me with her eyes shining, “Keep causing a sensation!” Uma who chided me saying I had come all the way but not

come to her house. Uma who came running from Puducheri for book discussions and book introductions. Uma who would ask innocently “How is the story?” every time she sent a story. Uma who said, “What are we going to take away with us?” when asked how she adjusted with so many different camps of friends.

In April 2021 she called and said that she would be writing stories and would send them. “Periyachi” (Goddess Periyachi) was her first story published in the website of Her Stories. Apart from a story she would also include a food item in the story and it would seamlessly become a part of the story. She had included a photo of the particular dish and its recipe. When asked if this was going to be the template, she confirmed it and spoke about how special the Cauvery Delta food was. I got familiar with the special food items of that region. At the same time, I had to often look up spoken words from that region that I had no knowledge of. Her story “Malar” (Flower) that won the prize in Riyadh Tamil Sangam’s short story competition, had recorded with great feeling things that remain unspoken in the course of life.

After her demise Her Stories published her short story collection “Matrum Sila Thiruvavarur Pennkal” (Some More Women from Thiruvavarur). The women in these stories are strong and those who did not allow life to take its course and who turned the rudder of the boat with their decisions. They are women who smile despite dire poverty and complex relationships. In the poems and stories of Uma the kitchen and the inner world of women always open up. One can see it in this collection too. Uma belonged to the generation that wrote without mistakes. Since she came from a simple background, she is able to capture the life of simple people in her stories.

She worked with such dedication and commitment on her women in the freedom movement series. She spoke to me on December 13, 2024 after completing the last part. Uma is not amongst us now. I take from her the rare quality of getting along with everyone.

The series she wrote is a great treasure she has left for the Tamil community and the Indian nation. She did what had to be undertaken by a government by collecting material from various sources on 400 women freedom fighters. I would consider this her lifetime work. Her Stories is

proud to have published it. Only someone like Uma can bring out another work like this.

Maybe there was nothing in the hands of Uma whose body was brought out of the house and kept outside. But the friends around who were quietly paying their respects to her were those she had gathered. She would remain smiling in their memories. There is no more Uma there to giggle when I pinch her and tease her saying, “All matching, matching.” Someone could have taken away some of her loneliness, illness and pressures. Even I could have done it. Uma is at a distance where she can’t hear these utterances of “If only...” Farewell Uma. My kisses to you.

Those who went to offer their condolences say that in the hall she had kept an enlarged photograph of hers with me. To know that I occupied such a central place in her life brings tears to the eyes. That second interview with Uma could not be done but elsewhere in the Newsletter we have published her poems translated by Sri N Srivatsa where with just a few words she spreads a great life before us. You lived a meaningful life Uma, which very few are able to do. Next time I am in Puducheri you won’t be there but there will be memories of our long chats, laughter and yes, those hugs and kisses you always demanded from me.

—C S Lakshmi with inputs from Kalayarassy Pandian and Nivedita Louis.



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

A Flower Creeper Wilts: Pushpalatha (1937/1938-4 February 2025)



When news came that veteran actress Pushpalatha passed away on February 5, 2025, I could immediately recall the films that she had acted in which were big hits those days.

Pushpalatha belonged to a strict Catholic Chettinad family in Mettupalayam, Coimbatore. She was the fifth child out of 8 children. She showed a keen interest in arts from a young age and mastered Bharatanatyam by the age of nine. In her career as a film actress, she acted in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada films. Although her debut film was a Telugu film *Cherapakura Chedevu* (If You Ruin Others, You will be Ruined Yourself) produced in 1955 followed by another Telugu film *Aada Bidda* (Girl-Child) produced in the same year, it is the Tamil film *Nalla Thangai* (Good Sister, 1955) that is referred to as her debut film and the 1958 Tamil film *Sengottai Singam* (The Lion of Sengottai) as her second film. But most remember her for her lead debut film *Kongu Nattu Thangam* (Thangam of Kongu Region) 1962). She acted in more than 100 films many of them acclaimed films like *Sarada* (1962), *Aalayamani* (Temple Bell, 1962), *Paar Magaley Paar* (Look Daughter, Look, 1963) and *Kalyanaraman* (1979). She shared screen space with many veteran actors like Sivaji Ganesan, MGR, Gemini Ganesan, and Muthuraman. In the film *Naan Adimai Illai* (I Am Not a Slave, 1986) she acted as Rajnikanth's vampish mother-in-law.

In 1963 when she acted in *Naanum Oru Penn* (I Am Also a Woman) with AVM Rajan they fell in love and got married. Pushpalatha was a Christian, while AVM Rajan was a fervent Hindu devoted to Lord Murugan. Pushpalatha produced two films both of which flopped. She suffered severe financial loss due to this. The couple has two daughters, one of whom, Mahalakshmi has acted in films. The family converted to Christianity in later years and began doing full time ministry work.

Pushpalatha and AVM Rajan were a very popular couple and when they appeared together people flocked to see them. I remember a late evening programme in Soundarya Mahal theatre in Govindappa Naicken Street, in George Town, Chennai, when the couple came as chief guests. During my post-graduate days in Chennai, the terrace of my local guardian's house, in Govinadappa Naicken street, shared a

wall with Soundarya Mahal. We had made a hole in the wall through which we could peep into the theatre. The evening when Pushpalatha and AVM Rajan came, the entire audience rose and roared in welcome when they entered the theatre. They had just recently got married and Pushpalatha had become the Lux soap model in 1964. It took some time for the noise to die down. Pushpalatha looked beautiful in a pink sari and a matching blouse with zari border and AVM Rajan looked simple in a dhoti. The excitement caught on to us peeping from the hole in the wall and at one point we screamed so much that people in the audience began to turn and look at the hole to see where all the noise was coming from!

That Pushpalatha in a pink sari is still fresh in my memory and that she has passed away at the age of 87, is something I can't believe. The mind does not accept that some popular personalities we admired can age and pass away. Pushpalatha must have left many such memories in the minds of people of my generation.

—C S Lakshmi



Words that Ooze Blood: Shirin Hasrat (13 October 1950-4 February 2025)



On her Facebook page Shirin Hasrat wrote about herself thus: "I am 63 years of age and seeking the answers to life's many mysteries. Life has been a roller coaster ride, and a great learning experience. I am alone but not lonely. I enjoy interacting with people to discuss life, its mysteries and mysticism.

Honesty is very important to me. Being from the hills I love nature and also animals particularly dogs. I have lived life and am grateful to it for all that it gave me. I am the sum total of all my experiences and have no regrets or guilt for anything. I am grateful to be so blessed with a loving family and supportive friends who have held my hand steadfastly in the darkest of times."

In her anthology *Musings* (Authorspress, 2015) she talks about how she began to write poetry:

"Shirin Hasrat an alumnus of Convent of Jesus and Mary, Simla, and graduate from Punjabi University Patiala, ended her career as a teacher of English at Pathways World School.

Convalescing from a surgery gave her the time to reflect on life. A chance sighting of Vijendra Trigathia's photograph of the Kasauli hills at dusk led to her first spontaneous outpouring of poetry, and there was no looking back thereafter. Vijendra, I owe you big time. Your photography is the catalyst that led to this anthology."

Shirin did not consider her poems mere poems. In the poem *My Poems* she wrote:

*They are not mere words
They are the blood that oozes
From a broken heart
The debilitating pain
That pierces deep
And spills on the pages*

*Blurred words?
Perhaps a tear drop
Escaped
Tired of being imprisoned
In sleepless eyes.*

She called herself a seeker in the 'The Speaking Tree' page and she was deeply spiritual and, in her blog, she wrote about her spiritual thoughts and experiences. Writing under the title *Sunset of Life*, she quoted Rabindranath Tagore and wrote:

"Clouds come floating into my life, no longer to carry rain or usher a storm, but to add colour to my sunset sky—Rabindranath Tagore.

These beautiful lines made me reflect on the status of my life which definitely falls into the sunset category. Yes, life is now on a more even keel, as the turbulence of youth seems a distant memory. And yet, had it not been for those storms would I be the person I am today? Each storm has helped me grow and evolve and be more loving and compassionate as I empathise with those who may be facing similar situations. Clouds still appear sometimes, but as the poet says, they only add meaning and beauty to my days. If it were not for adversity, how would we appreciate serenity? So, friends let us not complain that roses have thorns, let's be happy that thorns have roses. Blessings for each one of you who journeys with me."

She had attended Vipassana programme on meditation but was very clear about what meditation does to a person. She wrote in her blog this beautiful story:

Once Buddha was asked, "What have you gained from

meditation?"

"Nothing," he replied. "But will you not ask me what I lost?"

Questioner, "What did you lose?"

Buddha, "I lost anger, anxiety, depression, insecurity, impurity of heart, fear of old age and death."

Sri N Srivatsa, who translates poems from Tamil to English and English to Tamil was a friend of Shirin Hasrat for many years and has translated her into Tamil. Three years ago, he had translated a poem of hers into Tamil and he has paid a tribute to her by reposting that poem. It is a beautiful poem to pay her a tribute. But for this tribute her death may have gone unnoticed and we would not have known what a wonderful poet the world has lost.

*I see in my wardrobe,
the colours coming back
After years of whites,
beiges, greys and black.
Green and yellow,
now interspersed with blue
There is something
in almost every hue.
Each colour for me
represents a phase
Of unhappy times
or blissful days.
As I look back
upon the years
The choice of colour
symbolises smiles or tears.
A query arises in my thoughts
Have I by superstition
now been caught?
Are our moods by the colours
we wear determined
Or do we wear the colour that
reflect our state of mind?*

—C S Lakshmi with inputs from Sri N Srivatsa.

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

A Woman Extraordinary: Vimala Rangachar (1929-25 February 2025)



Everyone who lived in Malleswaram knew Vimala Rangachar because the MEWS (Malleswaram Enterprising Women's Society) Ladies Club that she had founded (the MEWS itself had been founded by her along with the daughter of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan) had made

the building available for a dance class. U S Krishna Rao and his wife Chandrabaga Devi used to conduct Bharatanatyam classes there twice a week. Many young kids in the area, including me, learnt dance there and Vimala Rangachar's daughter Revathi and her cousin Asha, also learnt dance along with us.

Vimala Rangachar was a well-known person because she was not only associated with the arts but also education and social service. She was one of the founders of the Mysore Education Society (MES) in 1956. She also served as the president of Seva Sadan, a charitable organisation that included children's orphanages. She took over this position from Lokasundari, the wife of Nobel laureate and Physicist C V Raman. She was mentored by none other than Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in the promotion of traditional Indian crafts and textiles and went on to lead the Karnataka chapters of both the Bharatiya Natya Sangh and the Crafts Council of India. She was also chairperson of the Cauvery Handicrafts Emporium. Where arts were concerned, one of her interests was also theatre. She headed the Bangalore-based theatre troupe called Kalajyothi. The group's productions included plays of the legendary playwright T P Kailasam. It was said that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was in the audience for one of their productions. She had toured the US and the then USSR as cultural ambassador. She was a recipient of the Karnataka government's Rajyotsava Award (2003) for her contributions to the fields of education, arts and culture and also the Kamala Sanmaan in 2004.

What earned her the admiration of young teenagers like us in the mid-fifties and early sixties was that she had got married to a doctor at the age of 16 but had not stopped her education. She continued to study and became a graduate with English and Psychology as her subjects. Another thing was that she wanted to break the

traditional practice of men doing women's roles in dramas and came forward to act herself and even persuaded her husband to do a few roles. During Diwali and other festivals many of our mothers trooped to her house with us in toe, to choose from some of the most beautiful collection of silk and other saris which she kept for sale. My very first silk sari in a kind of a light olive green with a magenta border was bought at her place. I remember my mother wondering if it would go with my dark colour and Vimala Rangachar assuring her that I would look beautiful in it. I often wore it when I danced and still have it.

The passing away of Vimala Rangachar at the age of 96, is really the end of a glorious era when every effort was being made to change the lives of women.

—C S Lakshmi



A Life Lived for A Hundred Years: Chittajallu Krishnaveni (24 December 1924-16 February 2025)



Chittajallu Krishnaveni is remembered as an Indian actress, producer and playback singer who hailed from Pangidi, West Godavari district,

Andhra Pradesh, worked in Telugu cinema and married the Mirzapuram zamindar. Her father Krishna Rao was a doctor who held very progressive views regarding girls and how they should live their lives. Krishnaveni was a drama artist first and later came into films. Her first film was *Sati Anasuya* (1936), as a child artist. Her family moved to Chennai in 1939, when she was only 15, so she could act in Telugu and Tamil films. But that was also the year she got married. After marriage she concentrated on producing films at her husband's Sobhanachala Studios in Chennai. Her film *Mana Desam* (Our Nation, 1949) was produced when she was only 25 years old. It was directed by L V Prasad. The film was a path-breaking one that introduced N T Rama Rao as actor, Ghantasala Venkateswara Rao as music director and P Leela as playback singer among others. It was based on the novel *Vipradas* by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay with the Independence Movement as its background. Krishnaveni also sang for films like *Keelu Gurram* (Magical Horse, 1949)

and *Bala Mitrula Katha* (Story of Young Friends, 1973)

She was awarded the Raghupathi Venkaiah Award by the Government of Andhra Pradesh in 2004, when she was 80 years old for her significant role in shaping Telugu cinema. One wonders why it took so long to recognise her contribution. A hundred years is a long time to live but Krishnaveni lived a life rich in its cultural roots and its significant contribution to Telugu cinema.

—C S Lakshmi



Death of a Nightingale: Sukri Bommagowda (1937-13 February 2025)



Sukri Bommagowda belonged to the Halakki Vokkaliga tribe in Badigeri, Uttara Kannada. Sukri was taught to sing as a child by her mother. Like most girls of her tribe she got married at the age of 16. They had two children and also adopted a child. Her life would have been like that of any other woman in her tribe, had she not decided not only to perform traditional music of her tribe but also teach the traditional music and songs of the tribe to members of her tribe. Soon she came to be known as the “Nightingale of Halakki.” When awareness was being created generally regarding different oral traditions of India, the efforts of Sukri to preserve a large corpus of tribal songs as part of an oral tradition were recognised. All India Radio came forward to document these songs for posterity. Along with the Karnataka Janapada Academy, All India Radio worked with Sukri Bommagowda to record, translate, and preserve these songs. In 1988, when she was in her early fifties, her significant contribution in preserving oral traditions was noticed by the Karnataka State government, and her work was recognised as important and she was later the recipient of multiple state awards and honours for her contributions to arts and music, including the Nadoja Award and the Janapada Shri Award. When the Padma Shri was awarded to her in 2017 for her contributions to music, it was a well-deserved honour for her relentless work for more than sixty years in preserving the musical traditions of her tribe.

Sukri must have realised that while preserving the musical traditions of her tribe was important, certain other traditions needed to change. So, she became an active member of the gram panchayat in Badigeri, and began to campaign for literacy, especially among girls. She was illiterate herself but

knew that the future belonged to girls who were educated and also knowledgeable about the tribal oral traditions. She also campaigned for a ban against alcohol in her area, following the death of her adopted son by alcohol poisoning.

In the eighty-eight long years that she lived Sukri Bommagowda made her life an ideal one for other women in her tribe to follow. With her earnest hard work to better the lives of everyone in her tribe, especially the women, not only with songs of her tribe but with education and non-alcoholic husbands, fathers and siblings, Sukri has touched the lives of all women not only in her tribe but everywhere.

—C S Lakshmi



Tales Sajni Told: Sajni Mukherji (29 June 1945-10 March 2025)



Sajni Mukherji was a much-revered professor and much-loved professor who was “Sajni” to many generations of generations of Jadavpur University students. She was born in 1945 in Karachi, and her family settled down in Calcutta. She did her undergraduate studies in English literature at the Presidency College and did her Master’s at Calcutta University. Then came the journey to Oxford on a state scholarship. She studied at St Hilda’s College there. On her return, she taught at Lady Brabourne College for a few years. Her husband Saugata Mukherji taught history at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Later he joined the faculty at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, from where he retired in 2001. Sajni herself taught at JNU for a while before returning to Calcutta. She joined Jadavpur university in January 1976 and retired in December 2007. That short paragraph just captures the factual details of her life. But those who were her students and colleagues have so much more to say about her work and her life.

She took great delight in teaching Geoffrey Chaucer, the English poet, author of *The Canterbury Tales*. Her Chaucer classes were so enjoyable that students who attended them never forgot the pleasure they derived from them. Sajni also founded a special needs centre in JU that no one had ever thought of. Sajni also wrote a fortnightly column, *Autumn Flush*, for *The Telegraph*. Many also remember the article she wrote in *Hindustan Times*, “Women must change the fundamental dialogue of Indian patriarchy...” on September

18, 2017 where she said that “the language of our protest must transcend the echo chambers of social media...” Unhappy with the way tradition and culture were being handled she ended it saying, “Let’s be mothers, daughters and sisters in a whole new way.”

Shampa Sengupta, a JU faculty wrote on her wall in Facebook on March 10, 2025 about what a pioneering figure she was in setting up the special needs centre.

“We lost Sajnidi today,” she wrote and said, “For the majority, she will be remembered as a much-admired Professor of English of our beloved University. For me, she is a pioneering figure in bringing disabled students within realms of Higher Education. It all started as blind students of English department wanted to read texts in Braille. From making Braille books to start a full-fledged Disability Cell at the centre of the University campus, she did it all. Working as a Project Officer there, I have heard UGC personnel telling her “This is the first ever such centre we have visited.” I do recall how joyous noted activist Javed Abidi was, when he visited this cell in 2005 and told Sajnidi he thought this kind of Cell was possible only in foreign countries!

“I know it may sound strange now, but this cell started functioning more than twenty years ago!! We installed JAWS in several computers at our centre. With help of West Bengal Electronics Industry Development Corporation Limited (WEBEL), we had studio built in for making audio books. As I type in this post, I feel, I can write a complete article about making of that cell. Maybe it is necessary. Too many people think JU is only for elite students but by constructing the Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN) Cell, Sajnidi showed the path how most marginalised of the students can be included. We don’t want that part of history to be erased.”

Her daughter Ankita Mukherji wrote about her mother on her Facebook wall which captured the essence of Sajni Mukherji. She wrote:

“What do you say about a mother who was more friend and co-conspirator than parent? The badass who lived life on her own terms and didn’t give a damn about convention? The tomboy who was happier playing cricket and football and whose two-finger whistle could put any roadside Romeo to shame? The trailblazer who won a scholarship to Oxford in the 1960s, flirted with Eamon de Valera in a pub and insisted on attending a Beatles concert in a saree?

“What do you say about the favourite professor, role model and surrogate mom to generations of students? The intellectual who wore her erudition lightly, whose lectures were legendarily risqué (especially when teaching Chaucer) but always inspiring? The disability rights activist who founded a special needs centre to make Jadavpur University a more

inclusive space? The columnist whose fortnightly ‘Autumn Flush’ pieces gave senior citizens a new template to live by? The friend, philosopher and guide to her own adoring brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces and grandkids and legions of adopted ones too.

“What do you say about someone who refused to be cowed down by a cancer diagnosis and continued to take a big juicy bite out of life, ignoring her increasing physical frailty? Who continued to flash her 1000-watt smile even when she was in unimaginable pain?

“What do you say about someone who simply refused to go gently into the good night?

“I don’t have the words.”

Sajni was loved by so many that when she was unwell Ngig wa Thiong’o, the Kenyan author and academic, considered East Africa’s leading novelist, sent her a personal video message, something that moved everyone deeply.

Sajni has found freedom from the pain of her body but she lives on in the minds of her students and all those who loved and admired her. Naureen Shah, a Facebook user who was one such person, commented on the wall of Jayant Kripalani, actor-director and brother of Sajni, “In the spirit of Chaucer’s pilgrims, Sajnidi’s journey may have ended but her stories and wisdom will live on.”

—C S Lakshmi



A Secret Bloom of the Forest: A Roslin (18 June 1980-11 March 2025)



I have not read all the poems of A Roslin but only random ones she posted or someone else posted or read out. She passed away on the 11th of March this year after a long battle with cancer. This tribute to her is based on the details given in the tribute written by Senthil in the magazine *Amrutha*, in the May 2025 issue and information given in certain

other web magazines that published her, and my translations of some poems of hers I found on the web.

Roslin was born in Kerala and she grew up in Usilampatti in Madurai district. With a Master’s degree in Tamil, History and Education, she was working as a teacher in Vadippatti Government High School from 2000. She got her MPhil degree working as a teacher. She began writing poems at a very young age. Her poems got published in many well-known literary magazines and web magazines. Her poems

were extremely metaphoric and filled with visually rich, unusual images. Some reviewers even compared her poems to poems written in the classical Sangam period. She has five books to her credit: *Azhugiya Mudhal Thuli* (Rotten First Drop, 2011), *Mazhai Enum Penn* (Woman Called Rain, 2015), *Kaadariyaathu Pookkum Malar* (A Secret Bloom of the Forest, 2017), *Roslin Padaippulakam* (The Creative World of Roslin, 2017), *Payanathin Mozhi* (Language of Travel, 2020), *Vaalaik Kuzhaikkum Prapancham* (Universe That Wags Its Tail, 2021). Roslin faced cancer with great courage and has left for Tamil readers her beautiful and powerful poems written in a language that was uniquely hers. The caption on her Roslin Pages says: "I pick up words growing in love and create my poems." Such poems never die.

Untitled Poem

Whether teacher
Office Assistant
Assistant Inspector
Administrative official
Income tax officer
Doctor
Collector
Chief Minister
Space Scientist
You are Rama's Sita
That is all.

Published in *Nutpam* web magazine, 23 October 2022.

Mango Girl

Caressing the tender leaves
in the garden
my daughter asked, "How smooth this is, Amma!"
I also saw
the tender leaves with red tips.
They carried the wetness of a new born child.
Saying, "You too are like that, my girl"
I touched her.
With the fragrance of a tender mango leaf, she runs away.

Slush-filled Stories

She is carrying her life
As if it were a bird that is about to die.
Earlier
she has spoken to a stream
she was familiar with,

about old stories
without caring about time passing.
Running and jumping
when she kept scooping
the splashing water drops
and anointing her body
the stream began to tell her
many forest stories.
Throughout
her long ritual of sacrifice
her endless body pain
the essence of childhood she has travelled past
she has been cherishing them.
Like the henna plant drenched in the stream,
releasing her even at this time,
from the thorny pressure
like that of the warm, flowing blood drop of first coitus
the forest is moving away.
She becomes a flamingo
and extends her long neck
towards the stream's ears
thinking of the
slush-filled stories
that she loved.

—C S Lakshmi



A Spiritual Leader who Travelled 31,000 km to Spread Her Message: Dadi Ratanmohini (25 March 1925-8 April 2025)



Dadi Ratanmohini, spiritual leader and chief administrator of the Brahma Kumaris, died at a private hospital in Ahmedabad early on April 8, 2025). She was the chief administrator of Brahma Kumaris since 2021. Her 100th birthday had been celebrated on March 25. When she became unwell, she was shifted

from Rajasthan's Abu Road to Ahmedabad. Dadi Ratanmohini is the second leader and administrator of the organisation to live such a long life. The first, Dadi Janki, passed away in 2020 at the age of 104.

One should know what the Brahma Kumaris movement is to understand the significance of the life and work of Dadi Ratanmohini. The Brahma Kumaris is a worldwide spiritual

movement focussed on personal transformation and world renewal through Raja Yoga meditation. It was founded in India in 1936 in Hyderabad, Sindh, Pakistan, by Lekhraj Kripalani as Om Mandali, and later shifted to Karachi and in May 1950, Om Mandali moved to Mount Abu, Rajasthan. In 1952, a more structured form of teaching was offered to the public through a seven-lesson course and it has expanded to over 110 countries with over 5500 branches. The organisation emphasises a shift from a material to a spiritual perspective and fosters a collective consciousness of peace. It later came to be known as Brahma Kumaris (Daughters of Brahma) as the membership and leadership was mainly female. The Brahmakumaris don't believe in caste or religion and believe that women have the right to remain celibate within and outside marriage. In 1980, the Brahma Kumaris became registered as a non-governmental organisation, with the United Nations Department of Global Communications. In 1983, the Brahma Kumaris achieved consultative status with the Economic and Social Council at the United Nations.

The Brahma Kumaris movement emphasises values such as peace, purity, love, and the importance of self-transformation through spiritual wisdom. Women continue to hold primary leadership positions within the organisation. The Brahma Kumaris movement has distinguished itself from its Hindu roots and sees itself as a vehicle for spiritual teaching rather than as a religion.

Dadi Ratanmohini was born in Hyderabad, Sindh, now in Pakistan, in 1925, into a prosperous and devout family who named her Lakshmi. She migrated to India after the Partition and represented the Brahma Kumaris at the World Peace Conference in Japan in 1954. She has also travelled to Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia. In 1985, at the age of 60, Dadi Ratan Mohini undertook a series of spiritual pilgrimages to promote cultural and moral values. She went on a 31,000-km-long journey in 2006, at the age of 71, to spread her message.

Dadi Ratanmohini became the spiritual leader and chief administrator of the Brahma Kumaris, when she was in her late nineties. To have taken up this challenging task at that age speaks volumes of how disciplined, dedicated and committed she was to the principles of Brahma Kumaris. Initially she had been transferred for dialysis at the Trauma Centre in Shantivan, Abu Road and later brought to Ahmedabad. Her body was later taken and kept at the headquarters of Brahma Kumaris, Shantivan, in Abu Road, to enable people to pay their last respects.

The President Droupadi Murmu who has been associated with the Brahma Kumaris since 2010 when she reached out to the Brahma Kumaris to deal with a personal tragedy, offered her condolences and several leaders across

the country, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma condoled Dadi Ratan Mohini's death.

Dadi Ratanmohini transitioned to her onward journey on 8 April 2025.

—C S Lakshmi



Where You Tend a Rose, A Thistle Cannot Grow: Dr Rose Kerketta (5 December 1940-17 April 2025)



Dr Rose Kerketta, was an acclaimed tribal writer, poet, and social activist. Her writings, revealed how life was lived in Jharkhand and gave a new direction to social discourse. Dr. Kerketta belonged to the Kharia tribal community. She was born in Kaisra Sundra Toli village in Simdega district. She did her M A and PhD in Hindi literature. Dr Kerketta took upon herself the task of working tirelessly to improve the lives of tribal women and took up the issues of education, human rights, social development and uplift of tribal women. She was actively associated with organisations such as the Jharkhand National Alliance of Women, the Pyara Kerketta Foundation and the Jharkhand Mahila Mukti Samiti. As early as 1986, she had raised the issue of women's migration and had argued that it was linked with absence of land and property rights. Since women had no rights to property, they were dependent on male members of the family. Many tribal leaders had believed, according to her, that the solution to all the problems was a separate state. Yet, migration had only increased after Jharkhand was formed. Rose Kerketta explained that "In tribal families, the burden of providing for the family rests with the woman. The girl might be sending her income back home, but it is misused. If men don't work, poverty will only increase." (pp156-7, Freddie D'Souza, *Labouring Domesticity and Domesticating Labour*, 2005).

An article written by Harsh Thakor in *Counterview* on April 23, 2025, excerpts of which are given below, captures the essence of her life:

...Known as a bold protagonist in shaping the Jharkhand movement and a prolific writer on Adivasi rights, Rose was not merely a figure of activism—she embodied the spirit of resistance and cultural preservation.

Rose's contributions to the Jharkhand movement played a pivotal role in crystallising its

goal—the formation of the state in 2000. She fiercely championed the causes of “Jal, Jungle, and Zameen” (water, forest, and land) and amplified the voices of tribal women, using her literary works as a platform for empowerment. Her writings and activism leave behind an indelible mark, inspiring generations to build on her legacy.

Born on December 5, 1940, in Kaisara village (now in Simdega district), Rose inherited the reformist zeal of her father, Eto Kharia, a teacher and cultural leader. Over her lifetime, she fused academic prowess with a relentless quest for women’s rights and indigenous language preservation, becoming an epitome of tribal renaissance. Kerketta’s professional journey began in 1967 as a librarian at Simdega College. Her career evolved as she became a Hindi professor at Sisai College and later joined Ranchi University as a professor of Kharia language, where she worked closely with Ram Dayal Munda—a fellow intellectual and protagonist of the Jharkhand movement. Together, they laid the foundations of tribal and regional language studies, preserving oral literature and cultural traditions.

Beyond academia, Rose was an activist in the truest sense. She led initiatives under Mahila Samakhya to educate and empower rural women and relentlessly fought against patriarchal tendencies, even within her own community. Her fearlessness extended to organising protests in challenging regions, often stepping into spaces where even authorities hesitated.

Rose’s legacy as an editor of *Adhi Duniya*, a magazine that ignited rebellion among tribal women, and as a resilient advocate for land rights, remains unparalleled. Her leadership in addressing gender-based violence, like the protest she led in Mandar village in the 2000s, underscores her undeterred commitment to justice....

Her literary works powerfully expressed tribal consciousness, social justice, and feminist themes. Some of her notable books include:

- *Pagha Jori-Jori Re Ghato*: A Hindi short story collection that explores the complexities of the female psyche. A Memoir of Struggle and Triumph Over Poverty and Social Injustice.
- *Sinkoy Sulou*: A collection of short stories in Kharia.
- *Kharia Lok Kathaon Ka Sahitik Aur Sanskritik Adhyayan*: Folk Stories in Kharia
- Premchandao Ludkoe: Premchand’s Stories

– *Hepad Avkadin Ber*: A compilation of poems and folk tales in Kharia.

Her literary works brought her accolades, including the Madhya Pradesh government’s ‘Rani Durgawati’ award. Other awards she received were, Ayodhya Prasad Khatri Samman and Pravawati Samman.

On March 7, 2014, *Hindustan Times*, (Ranchi) published a wonderful article titled “This Rose chose to pluck the thorns from Jharkhand’s oppressed women” on Rose Kerketta written by Saurav Roy. Excerpts from that article will complete the portrait of Rose Kerketta that this homage is trying to draw:

A rose by any other name would have smelt just as sweet but she refused to be a flower in a vase.

Instead, Rose Kerketta chose to pluck the thorns from Jharkhand’s oppressed women, give them the healing salve and encourage them to live with dignity. Even at the ripe age of 74, Rose’s job is not complete. Rose Kerketta is a writer, tribal rights activist and one of the founders of the Mahila Samakhya, a government undertaking that helps rehabilitate women subjected to oppression in society. She has also worked for years to curb the menace of human trafficking which has emerged as one of the major problems in Jharkhand’s hinterland.

Hailing from Ranchi, she still travels to rural areas of Jharkhand at least once a month to spread awareness among women and empower them. The society, according to her, has changed drastically in the past 30 years. Sharing her experience from the past, she said that increase in crime against women has robbed rural women of their freedom. “Women are not safe even in the villages anymore. When I was young, people were more sensitive about women and rapes rarely happened,” she said.

Rose used to organise employment-related workshops for women in the rural areas. However, she strongly feels that the employment schemes for rural women are not of their interest. Her experience has made her come to the conclusion that rural women in the state enjoy doing work that require physical strength and they get easily bored by creative works such as handicraft and handloom. “All the schemes make the women either make toys or design clothes and ornaments, but very few people know that they only enjoy doing work that require physical

strength,” she said. Interestingly, under Rose’s supervision, women had erected a dam in Chanhob block of Ranchi 10 years back. “The dam still functions well and is an example of what women can do in Jharkhand,” she said.

Poverty, however, seems to be the reason for all the problems of women in the state. Right from human trafficking to lack of education and unemployment, “everything is related to poverty in this part of the country”.

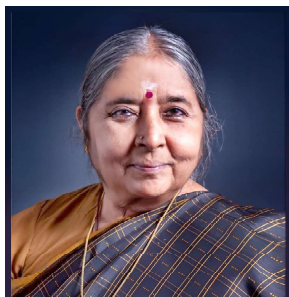
Rose Kerketta didn’t vote the last time as she couldn’t find any candidate promising enough to solve the problems of women in Jharkhand. Though she plans to vote this year, she is apprehensive about India having another government that would be “ignorant” about the plight of women, especially in rural areas of tribal states like Jharkhand.

Rose Kerketta was laid to rest at the GEL Church cemetery in Ranchi. May many more Roses arise in Jharkhand!

—C S Lakshmi



Shivonmukh, Facing Shiva: Kamalini Nagarajan Dutt (24 December 1950-27 April 2025)



27th April morning 7:30 AM, Amma left her body. From the day I was born, in 1979, I have not seen her healthy. She was always in pain due to Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA). But this beautiful dancing warrior—the phoenix, the yogini, Lord Shiva’s and Devi Lalita’s friend—lived a life of grit,

grace, fortitude, hard work, devotion, madness, passion, surrender, innocence, persistence, and fearlessness.

Kamalini Nagarajan Dutt—born in Jamshedpur to Leela and Nagarajan shifted to Thanjavur at a very young age. She continued her dance journey from her previous lives for it is nearly impossible for a child who is less than 7 years old to do a three-hour long *arangetram* (maiden performance) on 1st December 1957, in Thanjavur. She was under the tutelage of devadasi Lakshmikantam Ammal for almost 4 years. Kamalini did not go to school. She was home tutored till the age of 10 so that she could completely focus on dance.

Soon, Kamalini shifted to Delhi where she continued her dance journey under Guru Sikkil Ramaswamy Pillai. She was

deeply drawn to Hindi which led her to her second love—Kuber Dutt. Both grew together with Doordarshan over a span of four decades. In 1979, a *pagal phool* (mad flower) came into their lives whom they lovingly named Purvadhanashree. The house was always filled with lots of energy and inspiration for the rest of the world but as a unit of three creative people, who loved one another in their own ways, it was not a happy fairy-tale family. We struggled with ourselves and with one another and it was Amma who kept the three of us together.

From 1950 to 2025, Amma’s life has been a *margam* (a path) in which many people walked with her. There was no one who was not touched by her. Some loved her, some feared her, some even hated her but all respected her for her intellect, vision, artistry and her path-breaking work in Doordarshan.

As I write this essay on my mother, Guru, friend, daughter (I ‘mothered’ her from the age of 14 taking care of her in every possible way), critic, co-traveller, soulmate—it feels like I’m taking a few cups of water from an ocean, a few leaves from a forest, a few drops from a rainfall. Sometimes in my effort to take care of her, I unknowingly stepped beyond my boundaries where I took it as my responsibility to make her happy. Sincere as it may be, but sometimes I suffocated her. Why am I sharing this here is because I know many daughters/care givers will read this essay and they should not badger themselves for being ‘harsh’/‘aggressive’/‘over-protective’/ ‘control freaks’ (I was called all this). It is very difficult to see one’s mother suffer and be practical and objective about it all the time.

I have touched on five most important aspects of her life. Although I will be talking about the positive qualities of my mother and the wonderful creation of God that she was, but I also want you to know that sometimes she was irritating, exhausting, unreasonable, ballistic, stubborn, naïve and gullible. But I see these behaviours as the cracks in a Wabi-Sabi bowl (a bowl that embodies the Japanese aesthetic philosophy of Wabi-Sabi which finds beauty in imperfection, impermanence and the natural aging process), which she mended with her golden love and affection for God, art, and everyone around her.

Dance

I often told Amma that she must have been born as a devadasi in some previous life. Her relationship with dance was not just 75 years old. It went beyond many lifetimes. With no senior members in family to emulate, she related to dance like a co-traveller of many journeys. Amma learnt Bharatanatyam from Thanjavur Lakshmikantam Ammal and Sikkil Ramaswamy Pillai; Odissi from Debaprasad Das; and



Kuchipudi from Vendantam Prahalada Sarma. Amma performed and taught Bharatanatyam till she was 35, after which she had to completely focus on her Doordarshan career where she danced with the camera lens and interacted with many dance traditions and dancers. Her relationship with Guru Sikkil Ramaswamy Pillai, whom she called Sikkil Thatha (grandfather), was based on trust, respect, surrender and love. He moulded her not only into a dynamic dancer but also a spiritually evolved person. Like a true Guru he guided her, encouraged her and pushed her to take her own flight.

At seventeen, Ma was at the peak of her performing career when she met with a fire accident. Although she continued to perform for another decade and a half, but it was not the same. As she saw her own body wither inch by inch in the clutches of Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA), she decided to dance in a different dimension.

From 3D, she went to 2D and expanded her wings in her role as a television producer. Dance became a metaphor of assertion. She went on to become the most successful dance producer of this country. She recorded all the dance forms and also created space and opportunities for the unrecognised/lesser known dance traditions, often working outside the rule book of Doordarshan, because she saw the depth and potential in those dance forms. She pioneered the subject of 'Dance Through Lens' and developed her expertise in music and literature programmes. Being the first woman producer in performing arts, she gave a new life to dance presentations through the medium of television.

Life took away her limbs but could not take away her inner body which was constantly dancing—not only with herself but with every artiste whom she shot—dance, vocal music, instrumental music, dance theatre. She was not able to do a one-and-a-half-hour performance but her dancing body expanded in various directions through new languages

of creativity. I followed her footsteps and learnt Bharatanatyam from Amma. After a strong foundation, I was taken to Guru Swapnasundari who initially taught me Bharatanatyam and later made me embark on a new journey in the field of Vilasini Nattyam under her tutelage. It has been a very challenging and sometimes a lonely journey for me but it was Amma who held my hand and walked with me. She was a tough critic and very difficult to please but like a potter she moulded me with loving hands. She is the sole/soul reason I dance.

Always research-oriented right from her college days, Amma went deep into her research in Indic studies, literature, dance theory and media studies during her DD days and after her retirement as well. As if standing in the middle of a room with mirrors on all sides, the reflections of her dance were seen in the mirrors of all these allied fields. Apart from her own research she also guided many artistes from not just her field of expertise but other styles as well.

After her retirement, Kamalini worked on two major productions *Shiv Vivah*, based on *Parvati Mangal* of Goswami Tulsidas; and *Rango'ntaratma*, a multi-media stage presentation based on Kashmir Shaivism.

The golden triad of Kamalini, Dance and Shiva is unique, mystical, and spiritual. In her later years when her body was deforming due to advance RA, she often saw her bent fingers and said I can't even make an *alapadma* (a hand gesture showing fully blossomed lotus). I told her "Amma, it's an orchid which none of us can make." Her hair was falling but holding her thin plait, she danced to "*Bhamane Satya Bhamane*" song (from *Bhama Kalaapam* in Kuchipudi in which the dancer enters holding her long and thick braid). Hair falling, weak eyes, ears not functioning properly, coughing lungs, cracking bones, infected nails—with all this, this *shikha nakha varnan* (head to toe description) is not a pleasant one but she was one of the most beautiful, powerful, graceful, and compassionate dancers I have ever seen. Every morning she went to Nataraja and danced— sometimes in silence, sometimes singing to herself. She danced to T M Krishna's "*Amba Neelayatakshi*" or Sanjay Subramaniam's "*Tunbam Nergayil*" songs, and her face would glow with creative energy. She also danced to Boney M.'s song "*Rivers of Babylon*" and Nomcebo's song, "*Jerusalem*." Kamalini Nagarajan Dutt is my dancing warrior. She is the lotus looking at whom the sun smiles.

Doordarshan

Ma joined Doordarshan in 1975. With no background in television media, she entered this tough field which was highly male-dominated. Rising from the ashes after her fire accident, like a phoenix, she knew she will not be able to

dance the way she used to. Her father asked her to join DD after seeing an ad in the newspaper. With zero knowledge about this media, Amma still went for the interview as if being pushed by the angels of destiny. She was selected on the basis of her love for Hindi literature, her dance background and sincerity. Each day was a lesson to be learnt, each day was a test also. She had to prove herself at many levels. A South Indian in Delhi, a woman in a male-dominated field, a dancer with no media training—she learnt fast, she learnt smart, she learnt with sheer will, focus and commitment. Kamalini Nagarajan went on to produce many dance and music productions. She enabled the viewers to ‘watch’ and ‘hear’ dance in a different way. She developed the tastes of the nation which at that time was re-defining itself culturally. Every new technology was tried and adapted for the arts. This also challenged the artistes to re-mould their art according to the lens. Audiences could enjoy the magic of close-ups, they could see the wonder of every *mudra* and expression, they could see the dance in the music of stalwarts, they could hear the music in the dancer’s *bhava*. Kamalini also made programmes where she brought in comparative studies between different poets from various linguistic backgrounds. She gave a new life to dance dramas as the characters could now be shown in multiple frames. She also made several series which could educate people about the aesthetics, theories, history, growth, pedagogy and journeys of different arts.

Ma was a very sensitive producer who balanced both the technicians and the artistes with empathy and understanding. Long hours of recording and challenging situations on the sets did not deter her from giving more than the best. She transformed the studios into *darbars*, temples, villages, river banks, gardens, burial grounds. She pushed the limits of her team to incorporate new ideas and methods of recording. She was a democratic leader who took in everyone’s ideas but was also very particular about her vision. It was not her ego to earn laurels through her productions. In the credit roll she kept her name last but she certainly asserted herself to set higher and higher benchmarks. In review meetings she criticised her own programmes telling others about the mistakes she had made. Some people saw this as her honesty, others saw it as a publicity stunt.

Amma’s contribution in the designing and execution of DD3 and DD Bharati, channels dedicated to the culture and traditions of India, was immense. She believed that arts can make a major contribution in the cultural fabric of a country. Arts not only inform people, they educate and entertain in an aesthetic manner which influences people at emotional, mental and spiritual level.

She was shifted to DD Archives. From a dumping place

of old recordings, it was transformed into a full-fledged audio-visual archives, where Amma not only saved thousands of analogue tapes but also created a digital library of documentation. She again brought in artistes, scholars, critics as subject experts to document each recording. The purpose of any archives is knowledge dissemination. Past contributes to the present by laying the path for the future. It is very important to understand where we are coming from in order to see how much we have grown and how much there is to grow. The arts of our country prove that we have a syncretic nature. We have created this nation together, we have grown religiously, spiritually, ethnically together; and we need to grow more.

Kamalini also re-packaged several recordings into CDs, VCDs, DVDs. It is a blessing to see the stalwarts perform even if the recording is for a few minutes and Amma understood this very well. The priceless artistic legacy of our country was given back to society to watch, see, enjoy and internalise.

Doordarshan was Amma’s temple, her stage, her home, and her *karma bhoomi*.

Friends and Family

I asked Amma, “Like Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashyap did you make a contract with God? Why did you choose this disease? Why did you choose so much pain?”

Amma could live with RA for 45 years because she received tremendous love and support from friends and family. They were her soldiers who fought with her throughout her life against the army of suffering. Amma was a very compassionate person who did not judge people. She also gave them a lot of space to express themselves. None of her friends showed her sympathy. They always walked two steps behind and let her face her reality on her own terms. All her friends were artistes who also worked with her, accepted her completely and exchanged their energies with hers, with truth and beauty. She was always thinking about everyone’s happiness and pain, and sometimes forgot her pain to comfort the other.

Her family respected her, nurtured and protected her. Never did the South-North union of Amma and Appa create any form of discordance. Her in-laws held her at a very high esteem out of love and also for her knowledge and outlook towards life. Initial years were difficult when Amma had to balance her home and office. Having run away from her parent’s home to marry Appa, she had to build her home on the foundation of trust and respect.

I never saw Amma impose her ideas on anyone. She did have ideological debates with some people but that did not affect her love for them at all.

There are a few people who developed deep connection

with her and saw her as their mentor, mother and guide. Our home was like a laboratory of ideas, images, sounds and narratives. She was also 'Ma Annapurna' for everyone who came here nurturing their stomach, mind, and soul. Many have taken her to the hospital, sat with her for hours, endured seeing her suffer and prayed for her. They have also healed her with their art.

Kuber, Kamalini, Kunju: The Krazy 3

Amma was senior to Appa in Doordarshan by one year. He approached her for music for his documentary titled *Chhuaram*. Amma was very apprehensive about this work and she even misjudged Appa by his appearance. But when she saw the documentary it was the beginning of a new journey which led to their marriage. They were very similar in their outlook towards life, nature, culture, fellow human beings and society; and as a team they gave some of the best productions of Doordarshan together. While Appa focussed on language, literature, politics, and visual arts; Amma worked on music and dance. Our house was like a laboratory of ideas, images, metaphors, symbols, movements, music, rhythm, narratives, opinions, critiques and colours. Many people came, observed this laboratory, participated in many ways, and took away whatever suited them. My parents were not good in laying boundaries. They were also not good in judging who deserved their time and energy. They gave, gave and gave.

What they should have given each other was a healthy lifestyle. While Amma was struggling with her health issues, Appa was sinking in alcohol and cigarettes.

And I was trying to understand the meaning of life in middle of all this. Being the single child, I was mostly surrounded by cameras, books or animals. It was a tough childhood. On the one hand, my parents set very high standards in everything they did. On the other hand, it was challenging to grow in the middle of this artistic chaos. God kept sending a cat or a dog to our family from time to time to keep it sane and protected. When Appa died there were nine cats surrounding him and when Amma was sent to Holland for training in new recording technology, there were 12 puppies and 1 dog in our house. To this day, I find it easier to understand animals—human beings perplex me.

Khalil Gibran says in *The Prophet*:

*"Your children are not your children
They are the sons and daughters of Life's
longing for itself."*

He further adds:

"You are the bows from which your children

As living arrows are sent forth.

*The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
And He bends you with his might*

That His arrows may go swift and far.

*Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness
For even as HE loves the arrow that flies*

So He loves also the bow that is stable."

The lines truly capture the story of me and my parents.

Amma tried her best to keep a balance between me and Appa—two very adamant and strong forces. She also got pulled in opposite energies. It must have been very difficult for her to make the father and daughter understand their love for each other—something which both did not understand till the last breath which Appa took in 2011. The reason these three could live together was arts. Like an invisible being in the house, art connected us in its own way.

Shivonmukh

Why did you give me this health? Why did you put me in dance and then take away all possibilities to perform? Why did you send a wonderful human being in my life who could not walk with me the way I wanted? Why did you make me prove myself again and again in the field where I was fully committed?

Amma never asked these questions to God. I do and I will ask even after my death. But Amma lived every moment of life as if it was a divine will and she chose to go through it as if it was a loving *aadesh* (command). I have seen her scream in pain only after all options of treatment were tried on her body. I think we have visited all the hospitals in Delhi for different kinds of ailments as RA is a slow killer. Hundreds of blood tests and scans were done on her but her soul kept dancing, no matter what happened on the outside.

Towards the end of her life, she started a blog where she wrote on women poets. Her last article was on Karaikkal Ammaiyar. I felt Amma was no less than a saint. She did not leave her family. She did not renounce clothing or jewellery or small material pleasures that she enjoyed. She did not stop engaging with the social issues but her commitment, devotion and love for God were unshakeable.

Although she connected to *Shiva-Shakti aikyam* very deeply she was not closed in her approach to religion, philosophy or spirituality. She worshipped all forms of gods and practised certain rituals which made her happy. She read Bhakti poetry from all parts of the country. And she was a true secular in her approach to all religions. We made small decorations for Eid, Christmas, Nanak Jayanti, Buddha Purnima. Amma prepared dishes to celebrate these festivals. She did not

believe in the caste system or any form of discrimination. Both my parents were humanists. They cried for everyone who was a victim of certain social, religious, cultural beliefs. They voiced their opinions through their work. They practised their philosophies in life as they did not believe in just preaching. Ma refused to put *ghunghat* in her in-law's house. Appa supported it and eventually the practice was stopped. She enjoyed the human thought of capturing the God in a form—be it any art—but she also saw God in the blue sky and the tall trees outside her home.

She believed in the human spirit. We had long fights at home regarding the changing scenario of our country as I told her that she is being a hopeless optimist but till her last breath she believed that there is hope for humanity, as every human being is a spiritual being.

Her love for animals, soft toys, cartoons, was such a joy to watch. Even in the hospital she always insisted to have a soft toy next to her pillow. She could connect to anyone irrespective of age. She could talk on almost any subject related to arts and culture. No matter how much in pain, she would take care of her plants and keep adding more members to her garden, even if she could not go down to see them every day. I think she carried the garden within her like she carried the temple within her. I remember the day of the tooth extraction when she held both her hands in the *mudra* of a *shivalinga*. The doctor looked at me and I just smiled. Like Oham-Soham she kept reciting Shiva's name—while bathing, eating and perhaps even sleeping. Every prayer ended with the verse “*Nalla Nalla avai nalla nalla adiyaar avarkku mikavee* from *Kolaru Padigam* of Thirugnanasambandar meaning good people and good things are good for devotees and “*tera mangal, tera mangal tera mangal hoy re sabka mangal sabka mangal sabka mangal hoy re*” prayer.

Her commitment to arts also irritated me sometimes because it took a toll on her health. Be it her Doordarshan phase or later the production *Rango'ntaratma*, she pushed her body beyond limits because she never compromised with her art. During *Rango'ntaratma*, she hardly slept for many months as she was researching, composing, ideating and choreographing, writing, compiling, recording. She even asked the doctor to give her steroids to numb the pain during that period which I came to know later. Something possessed her at that time and she had to create this production. As an artiste and her student, I was in complete daze and felt blessed to be a part of it but as a daughter, I cried silent tears.

Who were the ‘Angels of God’ who enabled Kamalini to become Kamalini? Her parents—who took her to Gurus Thanjavur Lakshmikantam and Sikkil Ramaswamy Pillai and

supported her art at every stage. Her dance gurus who believed in her. Her spiritual Gurus who walked with her on the path of Bhakti. Her life partner who embraced her and stood with her in every challenge. Her friends, who danced with her in joy and pain. Her students who showered her with petals of love. Her family and adopted son who held her close to their hearts every second.

And then there is me.

I was born 10 days late, after the due date. Many a time I asked Amma, “Why did you bring me into this world when I did not want to come?” I sang “*Meri duniya hai ma tere anchal mein, sheetal chhaaya do dukh ke jangal mein*” for her whenever we both felt low. For a long time, I saw myself as her extension or reflection which was not good for both of us. But I worked on myself and slowly realised who I am.



(It's a lifetime project but at least I made the beginning!!) This gave a new flavour, texture, melody and rhythm to my journey with Amma.

I have made many mistakes because of which she also suffered but we both knew that we had to go through those stages to reach where we are today. On 25th April night when I went to meet her in the ICU she said “It's very cold and noisy here.” I wanted to pull away all the tubes and take her to her comfortable bed but I didn't, I couldn't. Something which makes me cry even today. Next day when I held her

hand when she was in coma, I told her, “Amma I know you are fighting hard to come back, for me. It’s been a long fight for both of us. I assure you I will be ok. If you want go, I won’t stop you but if you want to come back... I will fight for you till my last breath.”

Amma left us the next day.

We had discussed her final farewell several times in the past. Although no one can predict death but I wanted her to go first. So that I can take care of her till the very end. She did not want any religious rituals—*Brahman bhojan*, etc. We all sat together on the 11th day and chanted all the *stotras* which she chanted and fed all the family members and workers of our apartment.

I am sure she is listening to Appa’s poems somewhere in the clouds. They both must be dancing together. This home keeps chanting “Amma, Amma.” Chinnu, my cat, also assures me that Amma is ok. Whenever I sit in front of Nataraja and Devi I tell them:

“Amma was one of your *ganas*. No matter what happened she held your feet. She drank the poison of suffering. She tore the skin of pain and wore it as her garment. She ornamented herself with snakes of challenges. She covered herself the with ashes of disappointments. She played the *damaru* and *shankha* of her breath to make you happy. Please take care of her. And if she is born again, please make me her daughter.”

—Purvadhanashree



The Better Half: Leila Kabir Fernandes (1937-15 May 2025)



Once in Bengaluru, where I come from, a person was introducing an artiste couple on stage and he went on about the man and at the end he said, “As for his wife, she is his better half” and the audience roared with laughter for the wife was really an extremely talented artiste who was behind all his creative work. When one thinks of Leila Kabir and George

Fernandes that is the image one has of Leila—the better half. She was the daughter of Education Minister Humayun Kabir and socialite Shanti Dasgupta, who studied at Delhi University and Oxford and worked for the Red Cross. George was the fire-brand trade union leader who was from a Mangalorean Catholic family who had rejected seminary life. In their life together Leila always comes out as a person who knew how to keep her own views and identity intact while never making public statements about their life together and caring for him in the end, despite many years of separation, when he was ailing.

V K Cherian, a family friend, who has known her for more than three decades, has written about her in his blog and the portrait he draws of her and her life, makes a fitting tribute to a woman who lived life on her own terms and died on her own terms. It is reproduced here to celebrate the life of a fiercely independent woman who lived 88 years of her life in the way she thought she should. She grew up in a new independent India and was close to the makers of a new India and was at the centre of political activities and lived to see all the agony and ecstasy of the turbulent times that the country she loved went through in the years following.

V K Cherian writes in his blog on 18 May 2025:

Leila Kabir Fernandes: A true secular activist in a giant’s shadow

In the last 16 years I have known Leila Kabir Fernandes, wife of late George Fernandes, the socialist defense minister of India, personally, I could never decipher her faith in any religion. The 88-year-old who died on last Thursday never wore or spoke of any religious symbols which lead one to her religion. She was born to a Muslim father who was the first Secretary of Education Department under Prime Minister



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Jawaharlal Nehru and then Education Minister after the demise of Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad. Her mother was Shanti Devi, a Hindu Brahmo Samaj born lady. She was married to a Mangalore born socialist who escaped rigors of a Catholic seminary to serve the people as a socialist. Her son, Sean Fernandes, with a Christian name married to a Japanese Buddhist. To such people one never asks their religious affiliation.

But when her dead body was taken out to the crematorium, (many asked, not burial?) I heard that she wanted to play two Bengali songs of the Brahmo Samaj before the last rites. As one of her young friends played it from a mobile, her son who arrived from USA during the previous night and all of us present at the cremation silently listened. To my surprise the friend's mother later informed me as everything else she had planned her last rites as a Brahmo Samaj faith person. The old lady went on to say that Leila's mother was a Brahmo and belonged to the family of veteran of Swadeshi movement leader Bipin Chandra Pal of the British era. A fact Leila never claimed even with her friends. Though she was a proud daughter of her father Humayun Kabir, she never observed any routine rituals of a Muslim nor she went to church as her husband went back to Church only after he was detected of Alzheimer's and also invited the Delhi Bishop to do so. She remained a truly secular person, keeping her faith to herself carrying it to her cremation.

Fiercely independent, as a human being and rationalist to the core, Leila was a social activist who claimed to be the "alter ego" of her late husband, George Fernandes. "When he deserted me, he also left that portion of his personality and got engaged in all kinds of undesirable political affiliations, which got him a bad name" she used to lament. She hated him for deserting Janata Party origin Prime Minister Moraji Desai overnight after a long speech defending him in Parliament. "I never wanted to recall what went on in my house that night. It will never show George in good light," she used to say when asked about it. George was Industries Minister in Morarji Ministry from 1977-79

Leila, while saying bye to George Fernandes who was disappearing underground to fight emergency of 1975 from Gopalpur on sea at Orissa, never thought she will meet him again, as her family friend "Indu", Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, had developed a phobia about George after the all-India railway strike of 1974. Many feared that if captured from underground he will be killed in an encounter. Back in Delhi she feared her own

arrest and going to jail with her one-and-a-half-year-old son. That prompted her to escape from India to Canada with the help of German Socialists who arranged an escape through Lufthansa Airways. "I escaped the police guards around my house through the back lanes in the night and with 100 dollars with me landed in Canada with a high fever," she recalled. From there she went to her brother in USA. Americans issued her travel papers, as Ms. Gandhi's government had revoked her Indian passport by then. She became the international face of struggle against Emergency, travelling to Europe to meet socialist veterans seeking intervention to ensure safety of her husband George by meeting socialist leader Francois Mitterrand of France, Chancellors of Germany, Willy Brandt and that of Austria Bruno Kreisky. She also appeared in a US Senate Hearing on human rights violation in India those days. Leila undertook all these against the family friend "Indu"'s government.

According to her "Indu", had sent a note warning her against her marriage to George Fernandes. The note from "Indu" read, "Hope you know what you are getting into." She smiled years after, narrating the incident, as she knew George and his ways with women. "Ours was not just union of a man and a woman, but minds united in our thoughts to change India's destiny," she said once, narrating the ups and downs of her marriage. From 1984 to 2009 she was separated from George and he had refused her divorce. "When I sent him the divorce papers in the 80s, he sent me two bangles of his recently dead mother asking me to keep it. What can I do with such a person," she wondered and never insisted on her divorce, freeing him to do what he wanted.

As a medical worker with Red Cross in the 1970s and also associated with nursing establishment of All India Medical Sciences (AIMS) she was quick to react to George's failing health following his second brain hemorrhage. With her son she took charge of him and transferred George from his official bungalow at Krishna Menon Marg to the house she and George built for Rs 1.5 lakhs in the 70s on the land which was donated by her father in the then new Panchsheel Colony of South Delhi. The house is now worth over Rs.20 crores as it has become one of the posh colonies of Delhi. Both George and Leila died there in the same ground floor room of the house.

Leila Fernandes is someone who was well organised even for her last journey. She had prepared all of her last journey with her friends and even the son, who used to be on a facetime call with her on a daily basis

from USA. After the late discovery of her colon cancer, she prepared for the worst. Called up crematoriums, selected the dress for her son for her funeral and gave her attending persons and friends a list as to whom to inform on her demise. As she was active in the Panchsheel Resident Welfare Association, the ladies in her neighbourhood remained her only local support system, as her son was away in USA.

Before her death she ensured all the papers and even old photos of George Fernandes were donated to the Teen Murti archives of top leaders of the country. It was ironical that she passed away on the day, when the last of George's papers were received by the Teen Murti archives. She also called George's Mumbai associates to take care of all the papers in the name of George in those institutions established by George as a trade unionist in Mumbai from the 1960s. Leila donated all the books of the huge library of George to the school she was associated with and also a few other libraries for the under privileged. Some books were already with the St. Aloysius College library at Mangalore, the alma matter of George. She once wondered why so many of George's associates were asking her to push her son to politics. "He is not interested and so am I or George will never approve of it," she quipped. Personally, she remained a Left liberal and even wanted to walk with Rahul Gandhi when his padayatra was entering Delhi recently.

A Bengali family stayed with her looking after her personal needs. But the house which was visited by Prime Ministers and a host of political leaders across India when George was alive and also after his death was a lonely place for her. "For the first time in my life, I feel lonely, as I have no one around me whom I can call my own," she told me in one of our last meetings. She did not meet any visitors as the cancer aggravated and limited her interactions with her friends to occasional calls, as she refused to share her days of misery with even friends.

Leila was worried that her son will have the same issues of her martial discords, once when Sean Fernandes and his wife were going through some issues in India. Sean unsuccessfully tried to settle in India with a restaurant chain in Gurgaon in mid 2010s and to be near his ailing father and old mother before Covid. Not knowing the business ecosystem of India and not using his high-profile father's name, it was natural for him to fail and finally he got back to USA where he is a successful investment banker. His Japanese wife who got rooted in India reluctantly followed him six months later. But

seeing his son Ken Fernandes in his teens and his wife witnessing the funeral of Leila through Face Time, one can be assured that the family has overcome their issues.

Leila Fernandes is survived by her son, his Japanese wife and two grand kids and they stay in New Jersey, in USA. Her brother got drowned sometime back in the sea at Gopalpur, while on a visit to their ancestral home there. Her sister-in-law attended Leila's funeral and shared fond memories of Leila as the only one reminding the entire family of birthdays of all of them every year.

A meaningful life which stayed in the shadows of the national politics, never ventured into it, but remained as a keen observer and was more into social work than politics. I remember her calling up to ensure visa for an Afghan girl in Delhi who was being treated to regain her face smashed in a bomb blast. I also remember many approaching her to come out against George during the Tehelka controversy days, which she refused. I also remember how she described Prime Minister Narendra Modi's shocked face when he came to visit ailing George who could not recognise anyone by then. She fiercely guarded her personal space not to get carried away by others and remained true to her own ideals of society and humanity. Rest in Peace, Leila Kabir Fernandes.

There is no resting for a person like Leila Kabir. Her ashes have mingled with nature and taken her to another dimension maybe.

—C S Lakshmi



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A Folk Singer Who Enriched Tamil Cinema: Kollangudi Karupayee (1925/1926-14 June 2025)



If one had to write Kollangudi Karupayee's life story in a paragraph it would read thus: She was a pioneer Tamil folk singer who was from Kollangudi village, located on the Madurai-Thondi Road in Sivagangai district, who also performed in films. Her first film was *Aan Paavam* (To Sin

Against a man) 1985) starring Pandiarajan, where she played the role of veteran actor V K Ramasamy's mother and Pandiarajan's grandmother. It was Pandiarajan who introduced her into films. A talented folk singer, Karupayee has sung over 1,000 folk songs. After *Aan Paavam*, she appeared in several films including *Aayusu Nooru* (A Blessing to Live a Hundred Years, 1987), *Yettikku Poatti* (Tit for Tat, 1987), *Gopala Gopala* (1996) and *Kabadi Kabadi* (2001). She has also sung in *Aan Paavam* and *Yettikku Patti* and *Aaha Enna Porutham* (How Well Matched! 1997). She was probably the first folk artiste to perform in films. Her career as an artiste, however, began as a performer on All India Radio, some thirty years before her entry into Tamil films. In recognition of her contribution to the arts, she was honoured with the Kalaimamani Award by the then chief minister J Jayalalithaa in 1993. Karupayee died on 14 June 2025, at the age of 99. But Karupayee's life was not an easy one. It would be appropriate here to reproduce an article written by R Ilangovan in 2003, in *The Hindu* newspaper, when Karupayee was sick and alone, practically abandoned.

Her Life Reflects Reel Life Tragedy

By R. Ilangovan
Mar 30, 2003 *The Hindu*

MADURAI MARCH 29. A deep sense of solitude engulfs her. Exhaustion and weakness are discernible in her heavily wrinkled face. Time was never her ally and with fame came tragedy too.

For the Dalit folk singer, 'Kollangudi' Karupayee, who acted in a few popular Tamil films, life is an enactment of reel life. This unlettered 'Kalaimamani,' who does not know her age (must be around 60), lives, all alone, in a nondescript tiled house in the Dalit colony of Kollangudi village in Sivaganga district, on a meagre government stipend of Rs. 500.

This under-appreciated artiste, who stunned 'Kollywood' with her 'songs of the soil' from Kollangudi, is now sick. The only solace for her is her relatives and Dalit youths of the village who 'iconise' her. "She is our pride," they say.

When she was young, fame eluded her. She and her husband struggled through as farm workers. "But we lived a contented life," whose sweet recollection brought a spark in her eyes. "My husband respected me. He never called me by my name. Instead, he used to call me 'amma'. In her teens, the young Karupayee was quick to grasp all folk songs, sung by those who worked in the fields to forget the rigours of toil.

Her voice, which was without blemish, came to her support. She became an expert in folk singing. Neighbouring villages started recognising her. "But I never went to any festival which did not honour folk songs." A team from the All-India Radio identified her and exposed her to the outside world. Since then, she became a regular singer for AIR programmes.

Then came the call from Kollywood. The first film she acted was a roaring success for which she received about Rs. 20,000. (She could not remember the exact amount.) And with that came fame and recognition. She signed a few other films too. But she was not paid as expected. "My husband and I did not insist."

Then the tragedy struck. Her husband died in a road accident before her eyes when the couple were going to Madurai for an AIR programme. "We could not live a life worth mentioning in our youth. When everything became rosy at the fag end of our life, fate played a cruel game." The shock rendered her bedridden for a long time. Her savings were spent on medical treatment.

She confined herself to her house and shunned offers. Just when she was about to overcome her 'forced obscurity', her daughter died this year in a road accident at Kollangudi. "God has plucked away all my supports." "I have been close to death. Hence it never frightens me." Those who brought her to the tinsel world never permitted her to record her voice.

Had she been permitted, she would have been ensured of a steady income.

A Madurai-based youth, who met her recently, requested her to give him ten of her songs for recording. "I gave him ten folk songs to be

recorded in a cassette as he called me ‘amma’ (mother).” He gave her a one-time payment of Rs. 5,000.

After that no one wrote anything about Kollangudi Karupayee and at 99 she died a lonely death, in obscurity, not remembered by those who hummed her songs nor honoured by the State as a folk artiste par excellence. Thus die some artistes.

—C S Lakshmi



Scholar, Public Intellectual, Community Leader: Dr Lianboi Lynn Vaiphei (1979-18 June 2025)



Many academic and tribal communities like Kuki Students’ Organisation, Delhi & NCR, Zomi Students’ Federation, Delhi Cell, Kuki-Zo Women’s Forum, Delhi & NCR, Kuki Research Forum -Delhi Chapter, Vaiphei Officers’ Forum and Manipur Tribals’ Forum, Delhi, have mourned the untimely passing of Dr

Lianboi Lynn Vaiphei, Associate Professor of Political Science at Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi. This homage is based on their condolence messages.

A brilliant scholar, fearless advocate, and compassionate mentor, Dr Lianboi Vaiphei departed this world around 1 PM on June 18, 2025, in Himachal Pradesh. Her death is an irreparable loss to the world of ideas and to the communities she so passionately served. With over 15 years of teaching and research experience, Dr Lianboi Vaiphei specialised in International Relations, Indigeneity, Gender, and Environmental Politics. Her academic contributions on multiculturalism, resistance, and sustainable development—especially in the context of the Zo people—stand as lasting testaments to her intellectual depth and moral clarity.

Beyond the classroom, she was a courageous and principled voice in the struggle for justice and dignity of the Kuki-Zomi-Hmar tribal communities. Since the eruption of ethnic violence in Manipur in May 2023, Lianboi Lynn remained steadfast in her support, offering critical insights at public forums and academic consultations as a stalwart member of the Manipur Tribal Forum Delhi (MTFD). Her work extended deeply into community upliftment, particularly in championing the rights and voices of tribal women. As a former President of Zillai, Delhi & NCR, her leadership

profoundly shaped the academic consciousness of younger generations.

Dr Lianboi Vaiphei’s legacy is one of wisdom, courage, and unyielding integrity. She leaves behind a void that words cannot fill but a path that many will continue to walk. We extend our deepest condolences to her family, colleagues, students, and community. May her legacy live on.

—Kuntal Tamang



A Morning Star Falls: Vidivelli (Mary Stella) 15 April 1947-18 June 2025)



Vidivelli is no more.

Vidivelli (Mary Stella) who wrote an important and second autobiographical book (the first one *Karukku* (Serrated Palmyra Leaf) was written by Bama) passed away on the 18th of June. Her final rites began at 9 A.M. on the 19th of June at her house in Padappai. As a fellow writer I offer my humble regards and tribute to Vidivelli aka Stella. I give below my

review written in *Hindu Tamil Thisai* for her book *Kalakal* (Stirring).

My review:

After *Karukku*, *Kalakal* was the second autobiographical novel on a Dalit woman’s life. Vidivelli had done theology. She entered a convent as a novice and with hard work rose to be its Assistant Mother general. The book reveals how many years of her life as a nun were conducted with contradictions and how she found the dawn/the morning star that she sought.

The book does not talk of great philosophies; it has no trace of propaganda. But the main thread of the novel is about politics, caste and institutionalised religion. Beginning with her naina (father) being pushed aside saying “Go to the street meant for Paraiyans” when he kneels down to Eucharistic Adoration to her finding a companion in Chandran and the moment of realisation that Dalit freedom is about those who sit in their loin cloth outside their huts the book’s core rallying cry fully occupies our minds.

Vidivelli write a book entitled *Urimai Poraattam* (Fight for Rights) and after that for many years she was in the field fighting for Dalit rights and had to lose her job and take refuge in her mother-in-law’s house. Her husband Chandran calls

this Chinnappan's daughter "A tiger's daughter". One can say that her exposing the double face and the grime of caste of the nunnery and the Catholic church is guided by this courage.

Vidivelli has carefully documented the ruthlessly suppressed voices of Dalit women in the church from the point of view of Dalit feminism. She has explained how familial relationships thrive among dominant caste women in a nunnery and how priests, nuns, those from lower income groups, less talented and those under the protection of the Bishops lose their importance in the various nunneries and monasteries. She has also elaborated how this leads to depression and physical stress among Dalit women. She says often nuns who go abroad had to routinely face abuses like, "Why do you eat like pigs?"

Vidivelli points out many incidents about how those who serve the church have to face three-point attack of rigidity of institutionalised religion, male domination and caste divisions. This continues till today with no change. A nun I met and spoke to for my book *Ariyappadatha Kiriththuvam* (Unknown Christianity) spoke about the kind of mental torture she faced from dominant caste nuns merely because she wanted to do her doctorate. Today she has left her order and has a doctorate obtained after a lot of struggles. One can say this three-point attack shattered even women like Bama, Vidivelli and the nun who has recorded it in my book. Vidivelli faced that attack boldly and honestly and chose her path and came to the field to work for Dalits holding hands with her husband Chandran.

After criticising the Vatican saying that it is raining wealth there, Vidivelli agonises about the condition of the poor people she meets, their helplessness, their ignorance as compared to the affluent churches, cardinals and the Pope who live in palatial houses. Through her personal spiritual journey, Vidivelli shows us, young girls who get caught in the web of illusion of forsaking worldly life, and suffer unable to leave it and unable to accept its rules and regulations. "Nunneries have the demonic power to distance people from the oppressed" she writes with a swing of her sword-like language.

Vidivelli also critically views with honesty women in various Orders who get alienated from their own simple folks. And she records with pain the comments of some senior nuns who grumbled that she wanted to work for the lowered castes because she was from one of them, when she proposed the idea of doing service for the oppressed. She declares her love for her mother tongue when she points out that institutionalised religion turned its congregations to half-baked English education and cut the flank, buttressing roots of Tamil. She also quotes Periyar to strengthen her

argument. She says that like Periyar protested against sacred threads worn by Brahmins and a few others, she felt the need to protest against robes worn in the church. Her extensive reading, clarity in thinking and political understanding is clearly shown when she quotes Periyar at some points and at one point, says that Periyar had said 'Money hunters and status hunters will never like an equal society' and that she could feel the sense of it within the church.

Vidivelli records with great love, the bonding and love between her parents. She points out to gestures like their sleeping within the same mosquito net and her mother placing the prayer beads on her father's table, before going to sleep, when he worked late at night. Similarly, when she introduces her companion, she says: "He was someone who allowed the grief of the oppressed to burn him. He was one who deeply believed that present history's humanity, spirituality, deep spiritual calls had to do with living for their freedom. At the same time, he had the ability to enjoy life like a child." One feels like hugging with affection this woman who desired to live with such love.

To bring out a book like this in the nineties would have been impossible but for the support of Institute of Development Education, Action and Studies (IDEAS). If voices like that of Vidivelli and Bama who was also supported by IDEAS, had gone unheard, we would have not understood the ability to struggle of a generation of Dalit women and their foremothers. After twenty years this book has been republished in an improved version by Thadagam publications. One is not able to guess how it was received at the time it was published. But it does seem that Bama's *Karukku* received much more attention when it was published around the same time which the publishers refer to.

"Private conversations and documentations point out to problems like caste divisions sexual oppression, power hunger and male domination in the church; one should not make a general statement that brothers, bishops and nuns make mistakes but bring to light what is being done against the Dalits... Will it be right to highlight personal weaknesses and contradictions?" says the late well-known writer Raj Gouthaman, the brother of Bama in his introduction. This doubt is raised as a sharp criticism of the book. However, the church cannot reflect on itself without such revelations, in the current time. What has kept this book alive is Vidivelli's honesty in criticising a religion that places as its fundamental base an individual's morality.

The image that stands alive in my mind is where at one point in the book, Vidivelli is sitting before the organ to play and the Head Sister's secretary comes and tells her to leave, and she leaves with a turbulent heart, tears streaming down. As a woman myself, I can understand what Vidivelli, who

loved fellow human beings, would have felt in these twenty years of not being known for this book. I embrace you, my friend. Immense love.

Farewell Vidivelli. Rest in peace.

—Nivedita Louis



Flying in the Sky with Wings of Love: B Saroja Devi (7 January 1938 to 14 July 2025)



When Saroja Devi's *Nadodi Mannan* (The Vagabond King, 1958) in which she starred with M G Ramachandran was released, she was called the *Kannadathu Paingkili* (the beautiful parrot from Karnataka). The film was a big hit and her lisping of *kazhuku kukai* (Eagle Cave) as *kalugu kukai* since she could not pronounce the retroflex sound 'zha', became a lisp that endeared her to many Tamil film viewers. Her debut movie in Kannada *Mahakavi Kalidasa* (1955) in which she played a supporting role had won the national award for best feature film. Then she did a dance sequence in B R Panthulu's *Thangamalai Rahasyam* (Secret of Thangamalai, the Gold Hill, 1957) and then she was discovered by M G R who gave her the female lead in *Nadodi Mannan*. If her lisp became famous in *Nadodi Mannan*, it was her cycling, surrounded by pine and coconut trees by the riverside, and singing with her boy friend (played by Gemini Ganesan) "*Vadikkai maranthathum aeno?*" (Why did you forget the appointment?) in the film *Kalayana Parisu* (Wedding Gift) that came a year later in 1959, that made her a kind of a rage. The film became an iconic film for love and sacrifice and for its tantalising love songs in the beginning and tragic songs later. It was remade in Hindi as *Nazrana* but Vyjayanthimala did Saroja Devi's role.

Many in my generation then were school goers and that was just the age when themes of love and sacrifice attract you a great deal. We watched *Kalyana Parisu* and literally cycled with Saroja Devi and the *Kaadhal Mannan* (King of Love) as Gemini Ganesan was known. And then came, in the same year *Bhagappirivina* (1959), another film of love, endurance and sacrifice where Saroja Devi marries Sivaji Ganesan who is disabled unable to use his one arm that has become twisted due to an accident. The song "*Thangaththile oru kurai irundhalum tharathinil kuraivadhundo? ungkaL angathile oru kurai irunthaalum anpu kuraivathundo?*" (Even if gold has a

blemish, it does not reduce its quality; even though there is a lack in your body it does not reduce love) became a kind of theme song of all of us dying to sacrifice for someone like Sivaji Ganesan. *Iruvar Ullam* (Two Hearts, 1963) made her kind of a role model for young girls who had started thinking of not surrendering in love but keeping one's self-respect too. "Lakshmi" was an extremely popular writer whose novels were much sought after. She wrote *Penn Manam* (Woman's Mind), a novel serialised in 1946 which spoke about an educated girl from a poor family who is forced to marry a wayward, irresponsible person merely because he fancies her. She does not give in to him even after marriage but brings him in line with courage without giving up her pride. Reforming wayward men was another theme that appealed to young people then and if we loved "*Kaadhal siragai kaatrini virithhu*" (Flying in the Sky with Wings of Love) of *Paalum Pazhamum* (1961) we loved even more "*Idaya veenai thoongumpoathu paada mudiyumaa?*" (Can you sing when the heart strings are sleeping?) which became a kind of a song of protest where a woman refuses to yield to pressure. M Karunanidhi, the well-known Dravidian politician and writer, had written the screenplay of the film and Kannadasan, the much-loved song writer had written the songs. The film was a huge success.

Saroja Devi was honoured with many prestigious lifetime achievement awards, film awards and chaired panels of film juries and was in important positions in film related institutions and religious institutions and was known for her charitable work but three awards she got that made her a person of importance and as someone not only Karnataka but everyone will remember and respect, were the Abhinaya Saraswathi Award of Karnataka (1965) and the Padma Shri Award (1969) and the Padma Bhushan (1969).

For me personally what made Saroja Devi special apart from the fact that I was one of those teenagers in the sixties taken up by the emotions and romance of the films she acted in, was that Saroja Devi lived in a bungalow behind our house in Malleswaram. From our backyard we could see her standing in the veranda of her house many times. Opposite our house then was a huge bungalow of S S Vasan, the owner of Gemini Studios and the magazine *Anandavikatan*. Film stars came there often and once Gemini Ganesan, the King of Love, came out in a car and stopped in front of our house and asked our father the direction to Saroja Devi's house. My father did not know him from Adam but my elder sister Rajeswari and I could not contain our excitement on seeing him. Our house had a huge garden bordered with henna plants and those days there was no readymade henna paste available and many came to pluck the leaves for occasions in the family. They were ground into a paste and used to decorate

the hands. When Saroja Devi got married in 1967, imagine our surprise when someone from her house came and asked us for henna leaves. My mother was gracious enough to pluck a lot of them and send them across.

So, the death of Saroja Devi seems like the death of someone we knew for many years. Someone who was part of our phase of growing up when we feasted on black and white films. It made me nostalgic but M A Susila, a writer who also belongs to my generation, wrote in her blog in 2016 that she recalled after her death, that even now Saroja Devi occupies an important place in her heart. "Some of the things we appreciated and which held our minds in our youth, there is nothing that can stop that enjoyment even when we age, isn't it?.... Maybe because *Kalyana Parisu*, was the first film that got etched on my mind when I was growing up, that naughty young woman in the black and white film who says bye to her mother every day while going to the college signalling her lover who lives upstairs, till today, occupies the first place in the film songs I see on television."

You were my neighbour, Saroja Devi. I will remember you always. Farewell.

—C S Lakshmi with inputs from M A Susila



Grace and Geometry: Kumudini Lakhia (1930-12 April 2025)



Kumudini Lakhia was an Indian classical dance pioneer who changed the Kathak vocabulary for the modern stage. Born in 1930, she was

trained by renowned gurus and established herself as a dancer and choreographer to be envied and respected in rapid succession. Her long career of over seven decades witnessed her growing from a soloist to an ideological artist bringing group choreography to the world of Kathak, transforming its visual as well as narrative horizon.

She set up the Kadamb Centre for Dance and Music in Ahmedabad in 1967, which became a centre of excellence for learning and innovation in dance. Her extraordinary productions such as *Duvidha*, *Dhabkar*, and *Atah Kim* created new horizons for tradition and reinterpreted Kathak for the contemporary audience.

Her efforts received high honours, including the Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan, and Padma Vibhushan. She carried India's cultural heritage to the world stages as a Vice President of UNESCO's Dance Council. She also instructed a generation of dancers who continue her experimental and austere nature of work.

Kumudini Lakhia passed away on 12 April 2025 at the age of 94. Her memory will live on in the rhythms, footwork, and elegance of Kathak which she redefined for the world.

—Karen Sajan



Pillar of Care: Rekha Sapruji (22 September 1943- 6 April 2025)



Rekha Sapruji is remembered as a passionate proponent of cancer treatment in India. Her long association with Cancer Patients Aid Association (CPAA) goes back decades, and she is a much-loved figure among the health and social work departments. She was born in

1943 and devoted her life to public service.

As Honorary Joint Secretary of CPAA, she championed the development of patient-focused programs and a robust donor, hospital, and volunteer base. Her unique blend of administrative management and empathetic insight created CPAA as a model for national health care among non-profit organizations.

Rekha toiled in the background—organising camps, planning outreach, and providing emotional strength to hundreds of thousands of families. Her testament is the systems she aided to build and the human connections she developed.

She passed away on 6 April 2025, aged 81, leaving a hole that cannot be filled. But her story remains alive in all the lives that she touched with her unwavering compassion through CPAA.

—Karen Sajan



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Prominent Leader, Author and Poet: Dr Girija Vyas (8 July 1946-1 May 2025)



Senior Congress leader, former Union Minister, and noted writer Dr Girija Vyas passed away on 1 May 2025 at the age of 79 after sustaining severe burn injuries during a Gangaur puja ritual at her ancestral home in Udaipur.

Born on 8 July 1946 in Udaipur, Rajasthan, and raised in Nathdwara, she belonged to a family deeply committed to public service. Her father, Krishna Sharma, was a freedom fighter, and her mother, Jamuna Devi Vyas, was a schoolteacher and a strong advocate for women's rights. Dr Girija Vyas held a PhD in Philosophy from Delhi University, with a dissertation on a Comparative Study of Ethical Teachings in Gita and Bible (1973). She taught philosophy at Mohanlal Sukhadia University and later held a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Delaware during 1979-80.

Apart from her political journey, Dr Girija Vyas was a celebrated author and poet. Her passion for poetry and ghazals crossed political boundaries, blending intellect, emotion, and spirituality. She authored several books, including *Ehsaas Ke Par* (Urdu poems) (Wings of Realisation), *Seep, Samundar Aur Moti* (The Shell, the Ocean and the Pearl, 1991) (Hindi and Urdu poems) and *Nostalgia and Other Poems* (English verses), 1993. She also published scholarly articles in national and international journals and wrote poetry in Urdu, Hindi, and English.

Dr Girija Vyas began her political career in 1977 as the President of the Udaipur District Congress Committee. She was elected to the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly in 1985 and served as a minister until 1990. She returned briefly to state politics in 2008 and contested her final election from Udaipur City in 2018.

She was elected to the Lok Sabha five times, four times consecutively from Udaipur (1991, 1996, 1998, 1999) and once from Chittorgarh (2009). She held important ministerial roles, serving as Union Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting in the P V Narasimha Rao government, and later as Union Minister for Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation in the Manmohan Singh government from 2013 to 2014.

Within the Congress party, Dr Girija Vyas held several key positions, including President of the Rajasthan Pradesh Congress Committee, President of the All India Mahila Congress, and Chairperson of The All India Congress Committee (AICC) Media Department. From 2005 to 2011, she served as Chairperson of the

National Commission for Women, where she worked with compassion and unwavering commitment to advancing women's rights and increasing their participation in public life.

Her death was seriously regretted by political leaders belonging to all sections of political life. Dr Girija Vyas will be remembered as a reflective scholar, a passionate poet, and an enthusiastic public servant. Her work in literature, politics, education, and women's empowerment will forever inspire future generations.

—Namrata Lokhande



A Voice for the Voiceless, the Light of Vellilakkadu: Kariveppil Rabiya (25 February 1966-4 May 2025)



Kariveppil Rabiya, widely known as K V Rabiya, was a deeply inspiring social worker and literacy activist from Vellilakkad in Malappuram district, Kerala. Raised in a financially struggling Mappila family, her early years were marked by hardship—her father ran a small ration shop, and her schooling began at Tirurangadi High School, followed by Pocker Sahib Memorial Orphanage (PSMO) College. However, her academic journey was interrupted when she contracted polio at the age of 12, resulting in paraplegia and forcing her to discontinue formal education.

Despite her physical limitations, Rabiya educated herself and began teaching children from her wheelchair. Her commitment to learning and teaching led her, in 1990, to join Kerala's State Literacy Mission as a volunteer instructor. Even though she did not have a college degree, her hard work and leadership made her a prominent figure in the campaign, especially in empowering women from conservative backgrounds through literacy and personal motivation.

Her efforts soon extended beyond education. She set up a women's library in Vellilakkad, Malappuram, to promote literacy and empower women, and founded *Chalanam* ("movement"), a voluntary organisation. Through *Chalanam*, she established six special schools for differently-abled children, trained over 250 women in livelihood skills, and

led awareness campaigns against dowry and superstitions. She was also actively involved in the Akshaya e-literacy programme, promoting digital education.

In 2000, Rabiya was diagnosed with cancer. After a long and determined fight, she overcame the illness and returned to her social work with renewed energy. Her journey has been captured in her memoir *Mouna Nombarangal* (Silent Pains, 2006) and autobiography *Swapnangalkku Chirakukalundu* (Dreams Have Wings, 2009). A documentary titled *Rabiya Moves* (*Rabia Chalikkunnu*, 1996) was also made about her life.

Over the years, she was honoured with several prestigious awards, including the National Youth Award (1994), Kannagi Devi Stree Shakti Puraskar (2000), the Youth Volunteer Against Poverty Award from the Government of India and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Padma Shri (2022).

Rabiya passed away at the age of 59 at her home in Malappuram. Her legacy continues to inspire countless others, symbolising courage, resilience, and the transformative power of education.

—Namrata Lokhande



She Served Silently, She Inspired Deeply: Hemaben Acharya (10 August 1931-11 May 2025)



Hemaben Acharya, Gujarat's first woman minister in the non-Congress Janata Morcha government, passed away at the age of 93 in Junagadh, following a short illness. A veteran leader linked to the Jana Sangh and subsequently the BJP, she was Gujarat's Health Minister in the late 1970s and a member of the

Gujarat Legislative Assembly from the Junagadh constituency. She dedicated her life to public service at a time when very few women entered politics, making her a pioneer among Gujarat's senior political leaders.

Hemaben was born on August 10, 1933, in Halvad Mukam, Surendranagar district. She was the daughter of Jaydevbhai J. Dave, who was a school officer, and was posted to Junagadh during the early 1950s. In 1957, Hemaben married Suryakantbhai Acharya.

She began her political career in 1958 when she was elected to the Junagadh Municipality as one of six members from the Jana Sangh party. Between 1958 and 1972, she was a member

of the Working Committee of Gujarat Jana Sangh. She also led over significant local organisations, such as the School Committee and Red Cross Committee in 1959. During the 1967 municipal elections, 17 out of 25 members were elected, and she held the post of President of the Municipality till 1969. Jana Sangh municipalities were established in other Saurashtra towns like Manavadar and Botad under her.

Known for her simple lifestyle and lifelong commitment to wearing khadi, Hemaben Acharya left behind a strong legacy of hard work, leadership, and service to the people of Gujarat.

—Namrata Lokhande



In Service and Strength: Smiti Chaudhary (15 August 1976-27 June 2025)



Known for her unwavering integrity, brave leadership, and unwavering commitment to justice, Smiti Chaudhary was a distinguished member of the Indian Police Service (IPS). Her career demonstrated a deep dedication to public service, and a strong empathy for marginalised communities.

During her tenure, she bravely and clearly took on difficult tasks. Smiti was the epitome of administrative composure and ethical policing, known for her unwavering moral compass and people-first philosophy. Both the general public and her peers held her in immense regard due to her composed manner and strategic thinking.

She personally aided young police officers, significantly women, take on leadership positions in the force. Smiti's tale is found in the justice she brought about and the lives she changed, not in the parts she played or the honours she received.

Her passing symbolised the loss of a courageous heart in uniform, yet her legacy will continue to motivate those who wear the badge with honor and purpose.

—Karen Sajan



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Singing From the Age of Twelve: Ashwini Tilak (1954-6 July 2025)



Senior classical and semi-classical singer Ashwini Tilak passed away on 16th July 2025 at Pune. She had been undergoing treatment at Deenanath Mangeshkar Hospital for the past three weeks due to a brain infection. But succumbed on the 16th.

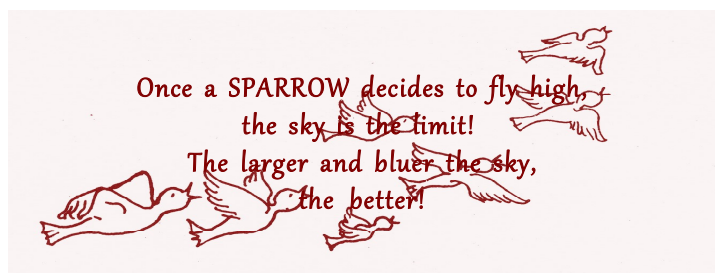
She was the senior most disciple of Guru Jayamala Shiledar for she received training in Natyasangeet from her for nearly twelve years. Hence, her rendering of Natyasangeet reminded everyone of the legendary Balgandharva style of singing.

At the age of 12, she started learning Hindustani classical music from Pt. Mukundrao Gokhale, Pt Yashwant Marathe and Pt. Vinayak Kelkar. She also got trained by Dr. Sanjeev Shende for Thumri, Dadra, Gazal, etc. and from Shri. Gajanarao Watwe and Smt. Malati Pande-Barve for Bhav Sangeet. She performed in several prestigious musical concerts such as concerts organised by Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Academy, SPIC MACAY, Shivanand Swami Sangeet Pratishthaan (Aundh, Satara), Swaranand and Sugam. She is a recognised artist by All India Radio (AIR) since 1981 and performed many a time on AIR and Television. She is a recipient of Natasamrat Balgandharva Puraskar by Bharat Gayan Samaj. She has conducted various workshops in different genres of music and continued to guide her disciples.

Atul Khandekar, a vocalist, has paid homage to her on his Facebook page on the 16th of July 2025. She was not just the senior Guru bhagini to him but he also received training in Thumri and Dadra from her. In his post he says it was a blessing for him to learn from Ashwini Tilak.

Ashwini Tilak, a versatile vocalist, performer and a teacher will be remembered by her students and the connoisseurs.

—Sharmila Sontakke



An Architect Committed to People: Tara Murali (1950-26 July 2025)



Tara Murali a brilliant architect, was known for her deep involvement in heritage conservation. Tara Murali graduated from Madras University with a Bachelor's degree in Architecture. For over 40 years, she was an Associate Architect in 'Bharath and Associates', a premier architect's firm in Chennai. She was the Secretary of Indian Institute of Architects, Tamil Nadu Chapter and Vice President of the Palani Hills Conservation Council. She was a member of the Governing Council of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage). She was a non-official member of the Madras High Court-appointed monitoring committee of CMDA (Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority). Apart from her commitment to architecture that was meaningful she was also committed to pursuing public causes and promoting civic rights, consumer protection, and environment.

Tara passed away late in the evening of 26th July at her residence. She had been ailing for a while.

Two short tributes speak volumes of how much Tara Murali was admired and respected. Sriram Venkatakrishnan, an urban historian wrote on his Facebook page:

Farewell Tara Murali—a brilliant architect, a lady who espoused social causes, a person to whom simplicity and straightforwardness were core. A dear friend and warm-hearted human. Go on Tara! Reform the heavens now!

Churumuri wrote in X: Deeply saddened by the passing of Tara Murali, the Chennai-based architect whose strong, independent mind illuminated every conversation. Tara's contrarian spirit was pure gold in the ocean of conformism the upper strata of society swim in. And her valiant defence of the underclass reflected her public spirit.

Tara's demise has not only left her husband, N Murali, Director of The Hindu Group of Publications and president of Music Academy, their son Krishna Murali, their daughter Kanta Murali, three grand-children, and her elder brother, Ramesh Pattabhiraman bereft, but also those who knew her and loved her and those who worked with her.

—C S Lakshmi

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A Transgender Woman Who Broke Stereotypes: Sarang Punekar (1995-15 January 2025)

Pune-based transgender activist died by suicide in Jaipur, Rajasthan. She was the first transgender student pursuing higher education at Savitribai Phule Pune University. Sarang had completed her Bachelors of Business Administration (BBA) finance degree from Shri Shahu Mandir Mahavidyalaya, Sahakarnagar. She was good at academics. Her education journey was not easy. She shared several painful instances of being avoided for who she was. "At that time, I had not undergone the physical transformation and the third gender was still not being recognised. So, I enrolled as a male. In 2015, she underwent a surgery. However, I was often the centre of ridicule." "If I am sitting at a table all by myself, no one comes to sit beside me, even if all the other tables are full and people don't have space to sit. No one except my friends from the department," said Sarang Punekar in 2018 for Pune *Hindustan Times* newspaper supplement.

Department of Women's Studies at the university is a completely safe zone for Sarang. Sarang joined as an intern Samyak, a Pune-based NGO that focussed on women and sexuality, and later became interested in the team and worked as a regional coordinator. Sarang handled the projects requiring coordination with government officials, doctors, and NGOs. Unlike the usual practice of transgender individuals engaging in HIV prevention work, Sarang broke stereotypes by working on abortion rights.

Sarang participated many movements: as a supporter of the Ambedkarite movement, she was vocal against the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). She was also known for her insights on caste and power dynamics. During the lockdown, she did significant work for the underprivileged in Pune. She made important contributions to gender studies during her time at Savitribai Phule Pune University. She wrote poems.

Sarang shifted to Rajasthan to work closely with the local transgender community. Her death highlights the challenges transgender individuals face despite their efforts to create meaningful change.

—Asmita Deshpande

**A Green Farewell: Varda Sharma (1970-13 February 2025)**

Varda Sharma was known for her dynamic and fearless approach to journalism. She was a journalist committed to several urban causes and former editor of the *Newsband*, a daily English Newspaper of Navi Mumbai, since 2007.

Varda completed her Master's Degree at Carleton University in 1991-1993. After completing her Master's Varda worked as a Senior Assistant Editor at *The Twin City Times* weekly Newspaper in 1998; Editor in Chief *Stree News* in 2018. She also worked as a freelancer in *The Hindu* Newspaper. Varda's contributions particularly in the area of civil issues, environmental advocacy and societal welfare across Navi Mumbai and Mumbai received much appreciation from the public. Her untiring and relentless involvement in the environment, wetland protection and urban greenery endeared her to many environmental activists. In her editorial work, Varda Sharma supported many freelance writers and interns in their careers with her encouragement. She always viewed important issues both from their positive and negative points of view.

Mangrove Conservationist Dharmesh Barai called her a 'Guardian of Green Spaces'. A heartfelt tribute was paid to her by organising a Green Farewell honouring her memory with a Tree plantation ceremony on February 16th in the presence of her husband Prateek Sharma, her daughter Dr Vaasvi Sharma, and son-in-law, Rohit Kumar.

Nothing could have been a better tribute to Varda Sharma.

—Asmita Deshpande



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

The Woman Who Made Sunderlal Bahuguna the Face of Chipko Movement: Vimla Bahuguna (1932-14 February 2025)



In SPARROW's homage to Sunderlal Bahuguna in our Newsletter SNL 41 (March 2022) it was written, "Calling Sunderlal Bahuguna as the husband of Vimla Bahuguna when she has been known only as his wife, may seem strange

to some people. But it was Vimla who steered him away from politics trained as she was as a Sarvodaya worker and as a participant in the Bhoodan Movement from 1953-55. Based on an interview and excerpts from a talk given at Bija Vidyapeeth, December 2010, Lakshmi Sarah writes in her blog beautifully about this. It is worth quoting it again here:

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

"Long before she protested Tehri Dam, Vimalaji, coming from a middle-class family was used to having people work for her. She was unaccustomed to cleaning and difficult labour in the ashram she joined. With her teacher as a role model, she says, "bit by bit we started to grow – love of labor (*shraamdaan*) became a central part. "When her family wanted her to marry, instead she went to Vinoba Bhave's ashram. She eventually returned to the mountains to assist with a campaign to end alcoholism, where she met Sunderlal Bahuguna. Before marrying, she wanted to think and was not yet ready, her father was angry and told her: "The doors of my house are closed to you. How will you ever find such a good match?"

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

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

The homage also quoted from one of Bharat Dogra's articles (Bharat Dogra, "Vimla and Sunderlal Bahuguna—Seven Decades of Together Serving Forests, Rivers and People" *Countercurrents.org*, 26 May 2021)

"Sunderlal Bahuguna at that time was a fast rising star in the political and social life of Uttarakhand. He had joined the Congress party in 1948. Vimla led a more austere life of a social activist being groomed by Sarla Behn, a senior Gandhian activist and freedom fighter. When the first talk of marriage appeared, people invariably looked at the match from the perspective of the prospective groom. Oh, they said, his political career will be further advanced by marrying such a brilliant girl with experience of working among people.

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

Vimla and Sunderlal worked together for many years. When Sunderlal and Vimla needed to attend to their health they moved to Dehradun to their daughter's house. He spent his last days there with Vimla looking after her partner helped by Madhuri. When both Vimla and Sunderlal got affected by COVID-19 both of them were admitted to the AIIMS at Dehradun. *Hindustan* newspaper reported that Vimla had only a mild cough but Sunderlal's oxygen levels began to go down and he had to be in the ICU and Vimla insisted on being with him. Both of them were admitted on 8th of May. Two weeks later Sunderlal breathed his last at the age of 94. His final rites took place at the Purvanand Ghat in Hrishikesh. Much to everyone's surprise 89-year-old Vimla arrived there in a PPT kit in her wheel chair. She bid farewell to her companion with her eyes wet with tears. *Antim sanskar mein ghat pahunchi patni Vimla Bahuguna* (Vimla Bahuguna reached the cremation ground for the final rites, 21 May 2021)

Vimla Bahuguna had done all her work quietly in the Sarvodaya way she was brought up in, so much so that when we look for her date of birth on the web, we get all the details of Sunderlal Bahuguna's date of birth. She was also extremely media-shy. Vimla Bahuguna was honoured with the Kheti Award by Indian Council of Agricultural Research

in 1975 during International Women's Year; and Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Development and welfare of Women and Children in 1995.

Vimla lived for 93 meaningful years making her life a symbol of how a woman must live her life with strong principles but not caring for fame or recognition. That is a lesson worth learning for the current media-hungry generation of women and men.

—Asmita Deshpande



A Swayamsiddha from Kolhapur: Kanchantai Parulekar (26 April 1952-26 March 2025)



In an era when women's reservation, empowerment and emancipation have become trendy terms, for more than three decades, Kanchantai Parulekar, worked quietly for women entrepreneurs, injustice avoidance; health of women in urban areas and empowered thousands of women in rural areas. This pioneering activist of the Swayamsiddha organisation in Kolhapur passed away in March 2025.

Kanchantai was born in Nitawade. Her father Balkrishan Parulekar was a tailor who had a shop called House of Fashion. He was an activist of the Harijan Sevak Sangh in the rural area. Her mother Janaki Parulekar was a homemaker. But since her father was more active in social work it was her mother who managed the shop. So, she had two teachers at home teaching her how to face life in a disciplined and courageous manner.

Dr V T Patil also known as Kakaji in Kolhapur, well-known social worker and educationist, was surprised and impressed by Kanchantai's effective speeches since childhood. Dr V T Patil and his wife Sarojini Devi adopted Kanchantai and took all the responsibility for her education so that she could carry on his legacy in Tararani University, Mauni Vidyapeeth and project of the Sarojini Devi Vishwanath Trust Board for development of girls and upliftment of women.

Kanchantai completed her Master's in English literature and earned a Diploma in education. She worked as NCC officer from 1969 to 1972. While in the NCC, she was the only woman to win two National awards, 'Best All Round Lady Cadet' and 'Best Shooter'. As a teacher in Tararani University from 1972-78, she set the foundation of the

'Kamwa Shikawa' (Earn and Learn) scheme for poor girl students which gave them financial support. Later she switched to banking, wanting better opportunities for herself. After working her way up, she became the bank manager. However, she never parted ways with her childhood dream of wanting to make a difference. She left her well-known career in 1992 to fulfill her goal of serving people with low incomes and no jobs.

The same year, she helmed Swayamsiddha, a Kolhapur-based organisation. In the last 28 years, it worked to create women entrepreneurs covering whole business range of work from bakeries to food processing units, bag manufacturing units, beauty parlours and handicrafts. Swayamsiddha had become a home for many women. Various vocational training classes were run at nominal cost. The organisation also provided training on self-help group concepts and entrepreneurial inspiration travelling to various places in Maharashtra, Goa, and Karnataka. The organisation had many unique projects. Under 'Margdipa' project, 150 poor and needy students were provided with financial assistance, scholarships, uniforms, and monthly guidance every year.

In recognition of the work of the Swayamsiddha organisation, Kanchantai received the 'Sarada Samana Sandhi' award. Kanchantai donated the award money for the work of the organisation. Kanchantai and her organisation have been honoured with various national and international awards including Swayamsiddha Mahadev Balwant Natu Seva Gaurav Award (2024) from Natu Pratishthan in Pune; Global Scholars Foundation's Bhartiya Nari Ratna Award (2023); Kusum Award and Loksatta Durga Award (2017).

Through Swayamsiddha organisation Kanchantai has shown the path of entrepreneurship to more than 4500 women entrepreneurs in rural and urban areas. Her contributions to society, women empowerment and emancipation will continue to inspire future generations.

—Asmita Deshpande



A Lifelong Commitment to People: V Vasanthi Devi (4 August 1938-1 August 2025)



An educationist, acclaimed academic with very clear views on what education entailed, Vasanthi Devi was a delight to talk to. SPARROW had the opportunity to interview her on 16 and 17 April 2002. Till

the last she fought hard to protect government schools for she strongly believed that education was the axis of today's world and that the present age was an age of knowledge and that more than any other time education was now the basic factor that determined social development and power structure. She was the president of the Association of India's Development and a trustee of the Madras Institute of Development Studies. She was the second Vice-Chancellor of Manonmaniam Sundaranar University between 1992-998. After her retirement, she was a member of the State Planning Commission (SPC) before being appointed as the Chairperson of the Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women (TNSCW) in 2002 remained the chairperson between 2002 and 2005. No interview of hers or articles on her mention her husband Dr K S Subramanian, whom she married in 1960, who was with Asian Development Bank in Manila, Philippines, and retired as its director. He held a PhD from the University of the Philippines. In later years, he was also an eminent translator who had won many awards for his translations. He had translated more than 30 Tamil literary works of different genre into English and his translations were published by many leading reputed publishers of India. Vasanthi Devi got her doctorate degree from the University of Philippines in 1980. After her daughter and son had settled abroad, Vasanthi Devi and her husband got divorced in the year 2002, on mutual agreement that they were no more compatible. But they remained friends.

Vasanthi Devi was born in 1938 in Dindigul. Her father Ponnuswamy Venkatarama Das, or P V Das as he was known, was municipal chairman. Her mother Janaki had studied English literature and was trained as a teacher. Her mother's father was Vengal Chakkarai Chettiar, a freedom fighter and trade union activist. He was born into an ardent Hindu family which held views of Advaita philosophy. But he lost his father early in life and studied in Christian missionary schools and later in Madras Christian College and converted to Christianity and became an avid Christian theologian. There were only 14 people who had taken part in the final funeral journey of national poet Bharathiyar and Chakkarai Chettiar was one of

them. Vasanthi's mother Janaki, although brought up as a Christian, married a Hindu with no conversions involved. According to the interview she gave Uma Mohan for the *Vasagasalai* web magazine, for her *Adiyalam* column series, published in its April 21, 2020 issue, Vasanthi Devi did not go to school till the age of 8. She was taught by her mother and directly joined third standard and then got double promotion and went to 5th standard. Her parents used to get English books to read even in those days. She grew up listening to stories about freedom fighters from her father. In fact, Chittaranjan Das, also known as Deshbandhu, the prominent Indian freedom fighter, lawyer, and political activist during the Indian Independence Movement, and a key figure in the Indian National Congress and mentor of Subhas Chandra Bose, was her father's hero. She was named Vasanthi Devi after Chittaranjan Das's wife Basanti Devi, which he Tamilised as Vasanthi Devi. It was a family that celebrated Independence Day as a festival, with new clothes and nationalist doll decoration like people did for Diwali and Navaratri. Much of the details that follow in this homage, about her life and how she viewed life, are taken from this interview given to Uma Mohan just five years ago.

While recalling about her father, she told Uma Mohan, "Till I came to Chennai after completing school in Dindigul, my political world was one seen through the eyes of my father. His likes and dislikes, criticisms, leanings, oppositions, mostly determined my standpoints. My father's influence has been great on me generally. I can state many things like concern for the downtrodden, belief that the first political duty was removal of poverty and so on in this regard. Her father lived all his life committed to the welfare of sweepers, and support of horse cart drivers. In later years when houses were built for sweepers in Dindigul it was named P V Das Colony, in his memory. Vasanthi Devi chose to study history in Queen Mary's College where she did her B A (Honours) and became a lecturer later.

Although her father was also interested in communism and social reform, he was deeply spiritual too. He lived all his life devoted to Lord Murugan and reciting Kamba Ramayanam. But the one photograph that was hung in his room was that of Periyar. He was deeply interested in Tamil as a language and had faith in the Dravidian culture. Vasanthi Devi, however, got drawn to Marxism in her Presidency College days. Many of her friends then were deep into communism. Reading about Marxism and understanding its concepts began to be a regular activity. In the world scene Soviet Union was rising as a great force along with Red China, Cuba, Vietnam and these occupied the minds of young communists then. In Indian politics too left movement began to offer more hope than others.

When E M S Namboodiripad's ministry in Kerala, the first democratically elected communist government in Kerala, was dismissed in 1959, by the central government headed by Nehru, using Article 356 of the constitution, there was a lot of anger and resentment all around. Vasanthi Devi recalled that a big crowd had gathered at Marina beach in Madras. The famous singer M B Srinivasan sang in his resonating voice, "*Pandavar thotraar, Kauravar vendraar Bharathak kudiyarasil...*" (The Pandavas lost and Kauravas won in the Republic of Bharat). "Those days following the Vietnam war and discussing it with friends were every day activities," she said. She added that belief in Marxism has been both an intellectual social philosophy and something close to her heart all her life and has been unifying all her functioning in life. When M. B. Srinivasan formed the Madras Youth Choir in 1970, Vasanthi Devi was part of it. She sang in the choir for nearly two years. Her experience of reluctantly learning Carnatic music as a young girl and later learning it out of interest, came useful. A song they used to sing in the early days was: "*Veesukindra theeyidaiyil viiznthum, nii vaevathillai saavathillai, Vietnam, paasaraiyae viidaaka ninaiththaay, viduthalai paattisiyaay kaatrnil nirainthaay*".

(Although fallen in the raging fire
You don't get burnt, you don't die
Vietnam, you consider barracks
As your home
You fill the air
As the song of freedom)

Vasanthi Devi used to get emotional singing this song and M B Srinivasan used to tease her. In the late eighties when she went to Vietnam, she was much disappointed though. The changes that had come about saddened and disappointed her. "People must never forget their historical wounds," she told Uma Mohan. Summarising the political struggles she had waged, she said, "From the time I became a teacher, I have been against the system. I achieved the goals I had chosen to create a new world, by being within the system, through the system, and being outside it and continuing to break it from outside. Although I had to face disappointments these efforts also gave me hope at least, not to completely lose heart..."

She gave a long interview to *Decan Chronicle* which appeared on 25 April, 2016, when she contested from the RK Nagar Assembly constituency taking on Chief Minister and AIADMK general secretary Jayalalithaa, as a common candidate of People's Welfare Alliance, in which VCK (Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi) was an alliance partner. When from the alliance partners, VCK leader Thol Thirumavalavan, had asked her first, she had hesitated but was convinced by them. She stated in the interview, "I am not contesting against

Jayalalithaa but against all the other candidates. It is not just a fight against someone. It is a fight for certain things. Particularly against a kind of system that is steeped in utter corruption and this corruption has sucked the life out of every sector of social life and economic possibility.”

In her later years, Vasanthi Devi was in command of the *Palli Kalvi Pathukappu Iyakkam* (School Education Protection Movement), which urged the Tamil Nadu government to rally public support to pressurise the Union Government to release the Samagra Shiksha scheme funds that it was withholding.

Mohana Somasundaram, who is called The Iron Lady by all, has written in her tribute on Facebook page on 2 August 2025, about how Vasanthi Devi led the 1987 Teachers' Strike of college teachers in Tamil Nadu as a part of MUTA (Madras University Teachers' Association). Mohana and many others were in the same prison as Vasanthi Devi. They were together for 18 days. She taught them many songs and shared with them many memories of Independence Movement. In the evenings she gathered them all to discuss many issues. When Mohana met her later when Vasanthi Devi was the Vice-Chancellor of Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, she told Mohana, "Mohana, the experiences I gained when we were in prison have helped me to face problems as a Vice-Chancellor."

In 2016, VCK awarded her the Periyar Oli (Lamp of Periyar) award. Her outstanding contributions were honoured when she was announced as the winner of The Hindu World of Women Lifetime Achievement Award in 2023.

They say it is not how long you live, but how you live it, that matters. Years are only numbers. Those associated with her work and her life, can proudly say that Vasanthi Devi lived 87 meaningful years (she would have been 87 three days later on the 4th of August) where empathy and concern for others ruled her life. When someone like that passes on, it becomes a celebration of life itself.

—C S Lakshmi



REMEMBERING WOMEN FROM DIFFERENT WALKS OF LIFE FROM SPARROW ARCHIVES

—Bhavyata Bhatt

The Voice of Namboodiri Women: K B Sreedevi (1 May 1940-16 January 2024)



K B Sreedevi was a writer who contributed significantly to Malayalam literature through short-stories, novels, plays etc. Sreedevi was one of the very few Namboodiri women who indulged in writing and literature and became an inside source as she wrote

extensively about the conservative traditions, expectations, and lifestyle of Namboodiri families.

She wrote her first story when she was 13. Her initial works found their inspiration in the teenager's agony of not being able to continue higher education due to communal disposition at the time. Sreedevi studied up to 10th class and was married at the age of 16. Later, she pursued her higher education in Sanskrit. Her notable works include *Moonnaam Thalamura* (Third Generation), *Yajnam* (Sacred Fire Ritual), *Chaanakkallu* (Touchstone), *Mukhathodu Mukham* (Face to Face), *Thiri Uzhichil* (Flame Dance Ritual). *Yajnam* was adapted into a film by Sreedevi's granddaughter K Ranjana under the same title.

Sreedevi founded Mahila Samaj in 1960 for upliftment and liberation of women. The group had more than 100 members. The group organised educational classes, cultural activities, and job training for women. Sreedevi's writing career became active when she moved to Thrissur for her children's education. Her frequent visits to the Sahitya Akademi and meeting important literary figures helped Sreedevi find ground for her writing.

When her work *Nirmala* was adapted into a film, Sreedevi wrote the screenplay herself and was awarded with Kerala State Film Award in 1975 for the same. Other than this, she

received many accolades including Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for Overall Contributions, Kumkumam Award in 1974, for the novel, *Yajnam*, Amritakeerti Puraskar in 2018 etc.

K B Sreedevi wrote about the world the way she saw it for women but at the same time, wrote for children in an attempt to contribute whatever she could into building a world they actually deserve. Her legacy is one of dedication and perseverance that continues to inspire people consistently.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



Death and Life of an Underutilised Actor: Sreela Majumdar (1958/1959-27 January 2024)



Sreela Majumdar, a Bengali actor known to be the favourite actor of serious directors such as Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal passed away on 27 January 2024 after a three-year-long battle with cancer. Sreela began her career as Alhadi in Mrinal Sen's *Parshuram* (1980) but her first released film was *Ekdin Pratidin* (One Day, Everyday, 1980) by the same director. Over the course of her four decade long career, she acted in over 43 films.

Sreela contributed to critically acclaimed award-winning masterpieces such as *Kharji* (The Case is Closed, 1982), *Akaler Sandhane* (In Search of Famine, 1981) etc. Other than this, she acted alongside prominent actors such as Shabana

Azmi and Smita Patil in Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* (Market, 1983) and dubbed for Aishwarya Rai's voice in Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* (*Sand in the Eye*, 2003). Her last film was Gandopadhyay's *Palan* (*Upbringing*, 2023), a sequel of *Ekdin Pratidin* which made Sreela's career come to a full circle.

However, even after showing such great zeal and delivering one brilliant performance after the other, Sreela was not given nearly enough credit or recognition for her work and many consider it neglect of great potential. Rituparna Sengupta, her co-star in many films said, "She had delivered so many memorable performances under the direction of filmmakers like Mrinal Sen and others. She could have been utilised more by the industry."

The story of Sreela Majumdar is one of sheer dedication and great talent. It is a story that demands to be acknowledged.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



A Colourful Face of Feminism: Gogi Saroj Pal (3 October 1945-27 January 2024)



Gogi Saroj Pal was a woman-centric Indian artist who passed away on 27 January 2024 at the age of 79. Gogi Saroj Pal was born in 1945 in Neoli, Uttar Pradesh, though her family belonged to Kangra, Himachal Pradesh. Gogi Saroj Pal's father, Dharam Pal was a freedom fighter and she was raised

primarily by her grandmother Prem Devi, one of the few salaried women over a century ago. Growing up among such strong and fierce faces helped build a foundation for Pal's view of the world.

She grew up in the shadow of her uncle Yash Pal, a famous writer which gave her exposure to the literature and arts in general. Her family was skeptical about her becoming an artist for it was rare for people to take up art as a profession and even rarer for a woman to do so. Defying the norms, Gogi Saroj Pal studied at the College of Art in Banasthali, Rajasthan from 1961-1962 after which she obtained a Diploma in Painting from the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Lucknow in 1962-1967. She also pursued a Postgraduate in painting from the College of Art in Delhi in 1968.

Her initial works were more realistic in nature but with time, she developed her own unique style. Noor Anand

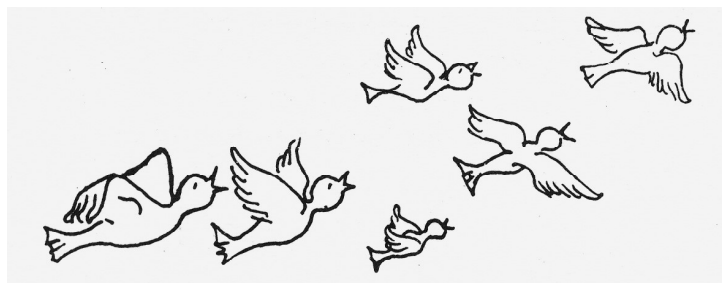
Chawla, in her tribute to Gogi Saroj Pal, in the Open magazine dated 12 April, 2024, has captured the essence of Gogi's art when she says, "Much of her work over the years focussed on showing the varying aspects of womanhood—from freedom to sexual desire, agency to power. She did it all through her unique characters whose origins often lay in ancient myths. There were nayikas, kinnaris, Kamdhenus and dancing horses among other creatures, but there were also regular women." Other than this, she also taught art in her Alma Mater College of Art in Delhi for a year in 1975-1976. after this, she taught art in Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi in 1979-1980 and 1982-1983.

Gogi Saroj Pal was awarded with different accolades including but not limited to Sanskriti Award, New Delhi (1980), Fellowship of Lalit Kala Akademi, Garhi Artists' Studios, New Delhi (1981-1982), Fellowship, Department of Culture, New Delhi (1986-1988), National Award, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi (1990) etc.

She suffered from a series of illnesses including a hip-joint replacement. However, her muscles could not cope with the replacement for a very long time which left her in extreme pain. Persevering through all this, Gogi said in an interview that her art is what helped her through difficult times like these.

Gogi Saroj Pal's art was both gentle and fierce simultaneously, asking every uncomfortable question about womanhood that people try to skillfully avoid—and she asked them gracefully with beautiful colours.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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

A Prominent Pioneer of History Scholarship in India: Rangachari Champakalakshmi (15 December 1932-28 January 2024)



Rangachari Champakalakshmi was an Indian Historian and Social Scientist whose main area of work revolved around early and pre-modern South Asian history. She passed away on 28 January 2024 at the age of 91.

Champakalakshmi began her academic career at the University of Madras where she taught from 1959 to 1972. After this, she served as a professor at the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi where she taught for 25 years until her retirement in 1997. Initially, her research comprised of study on religion—specifically Jainism and Vaishnavism in ancient South India. Her research work related to that including evidence from Tamil Sangam literature, the Bhakti movement of the Alvars, and the Agama traditions was published in a book called “Vaishnava Iconography” in 1981.

She later broadened her field of research to include trade, economy, and the emergence of urban centres in pre-medieval South India. Her exemplary research was published into two extraordinarily erudite books, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization: South India 300 BC to AD 1300* published in 1999 and *Religion, Tradition, and Ideology: Pre-Colonial South India* published in 2011. Other than this, she was the president of the Indian History Congress. She was also a script consultant for *Bharat Ek Khoj*, a 1980s show based on Jawaharlal Nehru’s book: *The Discovery of India*.

Every now and then, during her time at JNU, she would invite students over to her residence for a cup of coffee and hold discussions on a myriad of topics. She consistently expressed unwavering support for her students, conscientiously correcting their works. The way Champakalakshmi voiced her opinions and beliefs gently but firmly is what her former students and future scholars are going to miss and aspire to learn.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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The Forest Dwellers Lose Their Mother: Sunandatai Patwardhan (1939/40-2024)



Sunandatai Patwardhan was a social activist who mainly worked for the all-round development of the forest dwellers in Thane and Palghar—especially remote and backward areas such as Jawhar-Mokhada. Seeing the living condition of the forest dwellers, Sunandatai and other dedicated volunteers such as Late. Damuanna Tokekar, Late Madhavrao

Kane, Late Vasant Rao Kane, Late Nana Joshi and others had made the movement their life’s goal.

“Pragati Pratishthan” is an institution in Jawhar that was created for the development of forest dwellers. The institution was originally established because of Sunandatai’s husband, Vasant Rao Patwardhan’s vision. Associated with BJP, he thought that if the party is going to expand to such remote areas, it must be linked to development. However, post-establishment, all the credit for keeping the movement going goes to Sunandatai. As Vasant Rao got busier with party’s work, all the responsibilities slowly went to Sunandatai and she stepped up like a true leader—steady, determined, fierce.

The speed with which she expanded the movement was surprising. At the time that she was working, as a woman, for the people while taking care of her family and other worldly responsibilities, it bothered many people and it was frowned upon. However, none of it ever fazed Sunandatai. She went on to work consistently, covering as many areas as possible including but not limited to economic, social, education, health etc. She believed in working in areas that actually required work instead of what the donors wanted.

Jawhar-Mokhada is still an extremely backward and neglected area where people are struggling for basic necessities such as water and electricity but the Pratishthan has succeeded in getting clean water to more than 140 villages in these two Talukas and solar powered electricity in more than a hundred villages.

Sunandatai was a perfect blend of boldness and nurturing as she was firm and disciplined when it came to the administration and management aspects of her work but she was also very empathetic towards the forest dwellers. She was awarded with 24 prestigious awards throughout her career but the achievement that she held dearest like a badge of honour was being a sister and a mother to the forest dwellers.

—Bhavyata Bhatt

A Legend of West-Bengal: Asima Bhattacharya (7 October 1937 -20 February 2024)

Born on 7 October 1937, Asima Bhattacharya was the youngest of five siblings. Music was an important part of her life from the very beginning since she started learning music at the age of 2 from her mother and sisters. Finding her ground in a male dominated field, Asima challenged the convention and norms and made her name as a singer, composer, producer, and distributor. Asima had been

suffering from Parkinson's disease for quite some time and passed away after a heart attack on 20 February 2024 at the age of 86.

Asima, along with her husband Partho Mukherjee, established a production house called Pompy Films. Some of her most prominent works include films such as *Chowringhee* (Crossroads, 1968), *Mem Saheb* (1972), and *Bagh Bondi Khela* (The Caged Tiger Game, 1975) which won her numerous awards for their music. Her first film as a producer and a playback singer was *Dolna* (Swing, 1965). *Dolna* did not do too well at the box office even though it had a progressive storyline where an unmarried woman faces backlash and pressure from the society for adopting an abandoned baby. Perhaps that was the reason why it did not do so well. It's a shame that there are no traceable prints of *Dolna* left behind for the future generation to understand the kind of work that was the foundation of Asima's legacy.

Some of her other films as a composer were *Ajker Nayak* (Today's Hero, 1972), *Tanaya* (1983), *Nishantay* (The Dawn, 1985), *Abasheyshey* (At Last, 1985). For *Chowringhee*, she wanted S D Burman to compose the music. When that did not work out, she decided to take up the challenge herself and delivered two timeless classics – *Boro eka laage ei andhaare* sung by Manna Dey and *Kachhe robe* by Hemanta Kumar along with sweet humming by Asima herself.

Unfortunately, Asima left no autobiographies or memoirs behind her and many of her compositions are not even accessible or available on public domains. With her passing, West Bengal has lost a special kind of talent and one can only hope the legacy of Asima Bhattacharya endures.

—Bhavyata Bhatt

**Secunderabad Loses a Leader in Making: G Lasya Nanditha (1986-23 February 2024)**

G Lasya Nanditha was a Bharat Rashtriya Samithi (BRS) MLA who passed away on 23 February 2024 in a road accident when her driver lost control over the vehicle and collided into the metal barrier on the side of the road. Nanditha had escaped a similar near-fatal experience on 13 February when a drunk driver rammed into her car while she was returning to Hyderabad after a public rally.

Starting her political career almost a decade before her death, Nanditha had served as a Greater Hyderabad Municipal corporator from Kavadi Guda since 2016. She was elected from the Secunderabad Cantonment in the assembly elections in November 2023. She got the BRS (Bharat Rashtra Samithi) ticket from the Secunderabad Cantonment after the death of her father Sayanna, a five-time MLA from the constituency. Co-incidentally, her father passed away in the same month one year before her. Nanditha stood victorious in the 2023 Telangana assembly elections by defeating BJP's Ganesh N by 17,169 votes.

Nanditha was rushed to the hospital right after the incident but was pronounced dead upon arrival. Many prominent politicians expressed their grief—Telangana CM Revanth Reddy wrote on X, "The untimely death of legislator Lasya Nanditha left me deeply shocked. I had a close relationship with Nanditha's father Swargiya Sayanna. He passed away in the same month last year... It is very sad that Nanditha also died suddenly in the same month. My deepest condolences to their family...I pray to God to rest her soul in peace"

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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The Fierce Journalist Who Died With Her Boots On: Sujata Anandan (1958/59-29 February 2024)



At 9pm on 28 February 2024, Sujata Anandan submitted the report that she was working on. That night, she suffered a cardiac arrest and passed away on 29 February. However grief-struck, none of her friends or colleagues was surprised that she was working until the very end.

Even when admitted in the hospital—the last trip being only a few weeks prior to the incident—she would still manage to work.

In her three-decade long career, Sujata worked with different publications and was ultimately the consulting editor at National Herald. From criticising political personalities and decisions to looking out for footpath and slum dwellers, she never hesitated in writing about anything she deemed important. She was a staunch Congress supporter and often talked about her meetings with Indra Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, and Rahul Gandhi and how she was taken by surprise over them not avoiding her sharp questions. However, she was strictly objective in her writing and never let personal affiliations affect her work and believed in presenting the truth as it is.

Apart from work, it is worth mentioning that she was also a kind human being, always helping people in any way possible, from getting difficult hospital appointments to helping fellow journalists with their stories by getting them leads.

The industry collectively mourned Sujata's death. Journalist and former colleague Geeta Seshu condoled her death by tweeting, "RIP, @sujataanandan. You left too early, like a true journalist, with your boots on. Such a great loss to journalism and to so many of us, personally, as colleagues for decades. You brought such clarity and perspective in your recap of political history and perspective."

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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The Educationalist Who Played More by Instinct Than Intellect: Meena Chandavarkar (1930/31-16 April 2024)



Meena Chandavarkar was a Pune based educationalist and the former principal of Abhinav Vidyalaya. She was known for her innovative reforms in children's education. She passed away at the age of 94 after prolonged illness.

Before becoming Meena Teacher, as her students would fondly call her,

Meena worked across different spaces such as Hindustan Lever and Times of India. Even though she was not a journalist by profile, she sometimes wrote for the women and children page of Navbharat Times and occasionally contributed to *Dharmayog*—a Hindi weekly.

While talking about the innovations in education, Meena refrained from using the pronouns "I" or "me". According to her, everything they did was teamwork. In an interview, she talked about these innovations and said, "I must mention that almost each initiative and programme that we engaged in had a solid basic driving principle behind it. Maybe I chanced upon it after it's rolling in well and proper! Therefore, I mentioned that I play a little more by instinct than intellect."

People often said that Meena undertook a lot of experiments but she rejected and even despised that notion saying that using the word "experiment" implies that she would use children like guinea pigs and that it was unacceptable. She was devoted in her work in making child education better. Any idea that she had was discussed with the team before being implemented.

Here are some of the initiatives taken by her and the team for overall development of children in a safe and comfortable environment: No donations, no Interviews for students until 2nd standard, instead of being interviewed themselves, parents interview the teachers and the principal in an effort to find out whether the teachers in the school understand young children, their psyche, and their problems. Surprisingly, there are no exams, ranks or numbers in Preschool and Kindergarten.

The love that she received from her children is what Meena considered her biggest achievement, "The 'Meena Teacher! Meena Teacher!' chants of all the little children as I arrived in school moves me to tears even now as it did with onlookers and parents. This is my greatest reward, award, achievement, success, happiness and fulfillment!"

This is the legacy one would aspire to leave behind—to be remembered as fondly as Meena Teacher is.

—Bhavyata Bhatt

Kamala Beniwal: The Ultimate Force of Nature (12 January 1927-15 May 2024)



Having participated in the independence movement at the age of 11, Kamala Beniwal was the first woman minister of Rajasthan who held cabinet ministerial positions in Rajasthan between 1980 and 2003 as a member of the Indian National Congress. She passed away on 15 May 2024 from a brief illness at the age of 97.

Born in 1927 in Gorir village, Jhunjhunu district of Rajasthan, she completed her BA from Banasthali Vidyapeeth and MA (History) from Maharaja College, Jaipur. Influenced by her father's participation in the freedom struggle, she joined the INC (Indian National Congress) at the age of 15 and participated actively in the Quit India Movement.

Kamala Beniwal was one of the most prominent women politicians who served as the minister for the government of Rajasthan for five decades. She was also the governor of Tripura, Gujarat, and Mizoram between 2009 and 2014 making her the first woman governor of a Northeastern state. She was honoured with Tamra Patra by the former Prime Minister Indra Gandhi.

Kamal Beniwal's tenure as a minister began at the age of 27 when she served as the state minister under the Congress government. She served as state cabinet minister under various governments such as Shiv Charan Mathur, Hari Dev Joshi, Hari Lal Devpura, and Ashok Gehlot between 1980 and 2003. She held various portfolios under cabinet ministerships such as Revenue, Tourism, Agriculture, Colonization, Indira Gandhi Canal Project, Energy, Sanskrit Education, Urban Development, etc. After serving as cabinet minister for almost two decades, she took the position of deputy chief minister of Rajasthan in 2003, becoming the first woman deputy chief minister of the state.

Kamala Beniwal was a powerful leader who was not afraid of speaking her mind. She was stern about her beliefs and ethics and did not hesitate to question even higher authorities including the now Prime Minister of India. She has left behind a legacy that shall inspire women in politics in the future.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



'Malwa ki Meera': Homage to Malti Joshi (04 June 1934-15 May 2024)



Awarded the Padma Shri for her contribution to Indian Literature, writer Malti Joshi passed away on 15 May 2024 from cancer at the age of 90. Malti Joshi began her journey in literature as a teenager by writing poems and short stories for children's magazines such as *Parag*. Her works were published

extensively in several prominent publications such as *Saptahik Hindustan*, *Manorama*, *Kadambini*, and *Sarika*. Other than this, she indulged in the *Kathakathan* (oral recitation) where she performed her poems and stories in front of a live audience. She also launched a magazine called, *Shubh Sankalp*.

Malti Joshi was officially educated in Hindi but her family exclusively communicated in Marathi at home. Due to this, even though she wrote primarily in Hindi, she also published 11 books in Marathi. Her writing has also been translated into many languages such as Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Punjabi, Bengali, Malayalam, English, Japanese, and Russian.

A few of her stories were adapted by Doordarshan into two TV shows—*Saat Phere* produced by Jaya Bachchan and *Kirdaar* produced by Gulzar. She was influenced and inspired by writers such as Sharad Joshi and P L Deshpande which was evident in her writing which was prominent in themes such as the spectrum of womanhood and the Indian middle-class social life.

Other than Padma Shri (2018), she was also rewarded with Bhavbhuti Alankaran in 1999, Shikhar Samman in 2006, Dushyant Kumar Sahitya Samman in 2011, Rashtriya Maithilisharan Gupta Samman in 2013-14 along with many others.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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Remembering a Feminist Pillar of Kannada Literature: Kamala Hampana (28 October 1935-22 June 2024)



Born in Devanahalli, Karnataka, Kamala Hampana was an Indian writer who wrote in Kannada. Her foundation for a career in literature was built on poetry and fiction writing but she later chose to take up research on ancient Kannada literature. Being a staunch feminist, she wrote extensively about female perception in

ancient literary texts.

Her inter-religious marriage to fellow litterateur Prof Nagarajaiah caught the eye of the public but with their shared passion for literature, the couple brought out notable works together including research on Jainology and Prakrit studies.

Kamala Hampana published more than 50 books including literary criticism, poetry, fiction, biographies etc. She also participated in the Dalit movement and the women's movement in Karnataka. For a major part of her career, she was also a lecturer at various institutions. After retiring from government services, she worked as a Professor in the Department of Jainology and Prakrit, Mysore University and President and Visiting Professor of Hampi University.

She received many accolades for her works including but not limited to Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award, Karnataka Government's Kitturu Raani Channamma Award (2019), Daana Chintamani Attimabbe Award in 1998 by Karnataka Government, Rajyotsava Prashasti from Karnataka Government, Baba Amte Award, Chavundaraya Award from Kannada Sahitya Parishat (2012), Anupama Niranjana Award (2003), Siddanthakeerthi Vidvath Award (2013) etc.

She wrote about the essence of femininity as seen in ancient Kannada literature with great sensitivity and made these stories accessible by writing them in her own inimitable style.

A dialogue with Kamala Hampana in Bangalore, under SPARROW'S OHRP Project was conducted by Tulasi Venugopal on 21st April, 2005, has been archived in SPARROW.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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Lore of a Legend: Smriti Biswas Narang (17 February 1924-3 July 2024)



The film industry is perhaps the biggest gamble of this country. Many would testify that it has been extremely kind to them but at the same time terrifyingly cruel to others. This is a story of the latter—a talented and hard-working actor who gave everything to cinema but

ended up living a life of poverty.

Beginning her career as a child actor in *Sandhya* (Twilight, 1930), Smriti Biswas worked extensively in both Bengali and Hindi films with important filmmakers such as Mrinal Sen and Gurudutt among others. However, after a marvellous career spanning for almost three decades, Smriti left the world of cinema after marrying filmmaker S D Narang.

Having worked in well over 50 movies, some of Smriti's works included Mrinal Sen's *Neel Akasher Neeche* (Under the Sky, 1959), Bimal Roy's *Pehla Aadmi* (First Man, 1950), Gurudutt's *Sailaab* (Flood, 1956) alongside Geeta Bali, Bhagwan Dada's *Baap Re Baap* (1955), A N Banerjee's *Humsafar* (Companion, 1953) with Dev Anand, A R Kardar's *Bhaagam Bhaag* (Hustle and Bustle, 1956) with Kishore Kumar, and B R Chopra's *Chandni Chowk* (1954) alongside Meena Kumari. Her last performance was a guest appearance in S D Narang's *Modern Girl* (1961).

After spending her life in Mumbai, she moved to Nashik to live under her sister's care at the age of 72 and lived with her for almost three decades and passed away peacefully at the age of 100. On record, Smriti was a legendary actor but in reality, she was never given the respect and credit she deserved for her contribution to cinema. Hopefully time would be kinder to her than the industry and her legacy would live on through memories shared by an audience that had once enjoyed watching her on screen.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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**Organic Farming Agriculturist: Kamala Pujari
(1948-20 July 2024)**

Born in Partapur village of Kalahandi region of Odisha, organic farmer and activist Kamala Pujari passed away at the age of 76 from a cardiac arrest and age related ailments.

Kamala was known for her work in organic farming, especially in preserving and growing over a hundred different varieties of rice.

Growing up in a poor tribal family, Kamala could always see the problems related to food as the tribes that thrived in monsoon as they cultivated millets and rice struggled in summer and winter because of the lack of winter crops and had to rely completely on the surrounding forests for sustenance. The tribes indulged in gathering fruits, vegetables, roots, and flowers etc. of numerous varieties from the forests and it was while accompanying her mother to the forest that Kamala discovered the different kinds of rice that were there. Her mother taught her to preserve them in earthen pots from a very young age.

Apart from cultivating these crops in her own land, she actively encouraged the other tribal women to do the same. Soon, the village that was consistently under famine conditions became the rice bowl of Odisha.

With the help of Bharat Ratna MS Swaminathan's research foundation, a small research centre was established in Kalahandi in 1994 and with combined efforts, Pujari and the agricultural scientists developed a high-yielding rice variety called *kala jira* (black cumin). This variety, which had been cultivated in Kalahandi for thousands of years, had never yielded more than two and a half to three quintals per acre before.

In 2022, Kamala was awarded with India's fourth highest civilian award, the Padma Shri. Kamala Pujari has left behind not only a name but also a movement and a promise that her homeland shall never face famine again the way it did before.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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**Gandhian Activist: Shobhana Ranade
(26 October 1924-4 August 2024)**

Affectionately addressed as 'Shobhaniya' by Vinoba Bhave, Shobhana Ranade was a Gandhian activist and social worker who dedicated her life towards working for the betterment of destitute women and children as well as promoting Gandhi's ideals.

Her life found a direction when she met Gandhi at the age of 18. Her social career took a turn in 1955, when she went to North Lakhimpur, Assam, joining a *padyatra* with Vinobha Bhave and helped setting up the Maitreyee Ashram and a Shishu Niketan, the first child welfare centre in the region. She also started the campaign, Adim Jaati Seva Sangh, a programme for training Naga women in charkha weaving.

Under the guidance and support of Gandhi National Memorial Society, Ranade established the Kasturba Mahila Khadi Gramodyog Vidyalaya in 1998 to train women in village trade and skills.

She also ran the Balgraha and Balsadan as a part of her children welfare project in Pune. These centres provide home to over 60 girls. She was also a part of the Save Ganga Movement, a drive to save the Ganges from pollution through Gandhi National Memorial Society.

She was awarded with India's third highest civilian award, the Padma Bhushan in 2010, Jamnalal Bajaj Award in 2011, Rabindranath Tagore Prize, Rajeev Gandhi Manav Sewa Award in 2007 among others.

Shobhana Ranade was a force who worked for the welfare of the society throughout her life.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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Doyenne of Contemporary Indian Art: Sara Abraham (-4 August 2024)



Known for her significant contribution in promoting Indian art, Sara Abraham was an artist and an art connoisseur who passed away in the early hours of 4 August 2024.

Born in Kerala, Sara Abraham was set to become an artist from a young age. Having received training from the Government School of Arts, she went on to finesse her skills under acclaimed mentors. It was during her time living in Mumbai that she understood the need to promote Indian art.

Sara Abraham played a vital role in changing the art scene in the country in the 70s. Her *Kala-yatra* was a movement on its own—it was a travelling art exhibition that stopped in various cities in order to showcase and promote different art styles. This *yatra* included works of prominent artists such as MF Hussain, Bikash Bhattacharjee, and KG Subramanyan.

Sara Abraham was known for her innovative approach to art as she blended the traditional forms with more modern ones. She often used mixed media such as photography, installation art, and painting to explore themes such as identity and memory. Her work was often a form of social commentary on issues such as gender and migration from rural to urban life.

Sarah Abraham will be remembered fondly for her relentless efforts and work to make sure that art remains accessible to the masses.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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

In Remembrance of the Senior Marathi Actress: Suhasini Deshpande (1944-27 August 2024)



Debuting at the age of 12, Suhasini Deshpande had a splendid career in which she worked in over 100 films over the span of seven decades and left a significant mark in Hindi cinema as well as Marathi cinema through her versatile career as an actor. The death of Suhasini Deshpande has brought a deep sense of loss to both Hindi and Marathi film industry. She passed away on 27 August 2024 in Pune.

Some of her works include *Katha* (The Story, 1983), *Manacha Kunku* (Respectful Vermilion, 1981), *Aai Shappath..!* (I Swear On My Mother, 2006), *Aaj Jhale Mukti Mi* (Today I Became Free, 1986), *Ranragini* (Valiant Woman, 2004), *Amhi Dhoge Raja Rani* (We Both Are King And Queen) 1986), *Dalimbi* (1982) and *Chiranjeev* (Immortal, 2016). Her last appearance in a Hindi film was in *Singham* (Lion, 2011).

In 2015, she was honoured with the Jayant Rao Tilak Smriti Jeevangaurav award by the Pune Akhil Bharatiya Marathi Natya Parishad for her lifetime achievement in cinema and drama.

Suhasini Deshpande has left behind a grand legacy for a whole new generation of artists to be inspired and learn from and one hopes her legacy is kept alive in her memory.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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The Mother of Asian Cinema: Aruna Vasudev (1 November 1936-5 September 2024)



Considered the mother of Asian cinema, Aruna Vasudev was a film critic, artist, author, editor, and a documentary filmmaker who was also a distinguished scholar of Asian cinema. She passed away on 5 September 2024 at the age of 88 after struggling with Alzheimer's and other age related ailments.

She attended film classes in the 1960s in New York where her father was working at the time. Having finished her PhD from the University of Paris on Cinema and Censorship, her thesis was published as a book titled *Liberty and License in the Indian Cinema* in 1979.

Having a splendid and expansive career, she was the founding editor of *Cinemaya*—a prominent cinema journal in 1988, worked in broadcasting television in its initial years, founded NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema), a non-profit network committed to the circulation and recognition of films from across the continent.

Aruna was the founder of the Osian's Cinefan Festival which screened movies from the subcontinent as well as Arab countries. It instantly became a prominent part of Delhi's cultural life as we know it today. The festival was discontinued in 2012. She also served on the juries of film festivals such as Cannes and Locarno.

Her works as a writer include but are not limited to *Being and Becoming: The Cinemas of Asia*, (2001) and *Indian Cinema Superbazaar* (1983).

Throughout her career, Aruna received numerous awards such as the Korean Cinema Award at the Pusan Film Festival in 1997 and Lifetime Achievement Award at the Cinemanila International Film Festival in 2006. Other than this, the Tripoli Film Festival has named its award for Best Writing on Cinema as the Aruna Vasudev Award.

Here's to Aruna Vasudev—a force of nature whose legacy demands to be remembered and respected.

—Bhavyata Bhatt



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