



I am self-evident as I am.....

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This SNL has taken a long time in coming. Sorry about that. We offer no excuses except that we have been overloaded with work. There are poems, book reviews and there are tributes to many interesting women who have made women's history. We hope the content will keep everyone engaged till our next SNL which we hope to bring out soon.

Happy Reading!



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L TO R: Dr Charanjeet Kaur, Mr Jerry Pinto, Dr C S Lakshmi, Dr Mala Pandurang, Dr Uma Maheshwari Shankar, Dr Padma Deshmukh and Ms. Sujata Tandel.

CONTENTS

ARTICLE 06-07

Voices in the Wilderness
—*C S Lakshmi*

BOOK REVIEWS 08-20

Red River Sediments- Part 2
—*Kabir Deb*

POEMS 21-35

—*Pritika Mehta*
—*Dr Charanjeet Kaur*
—*Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhary*
—*Uma Mohan*

ACCOLADES FOR LITERATURE 36-42

The SPARROW-R THYAGARAJAN LITERARY AWARD 2024

POEMS 43

—*Saweini Laloo*

WOMEN, RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY 44-46

Andavan Pichai: The Gift of God
—*Nalini Vinayak*

WANDERING WOMEN 47-56

Amarnath Yatra: July 2025
—*Lakshmi Venkatesh*

SUPPLEMENT 1

Writers' Meet 2025

SUPPLEMENT 2

Homages

COVER PAGE: Painting by Kriti Thaker
ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: SPARROW ARCHIVES
EDITOR: Dr C S Lakshmi
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Voices in the Wilderness

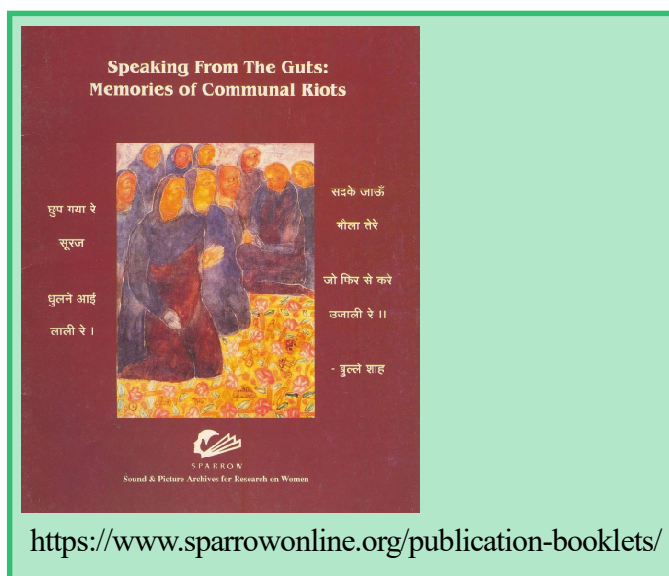
—C S Lakshmi

One has seen and heard about communal violence and war-related atrocities against women. In 1998 when SPARROW organised a workshop on communal harmony and invited two Sikh women to come and speak about their 1984 experiences, after fourteen years they still choked when they spoke about their experiences and there was not one dry eye in the audience. We found ourselves crying with them, for them, and for ourselves who sat there with impotent anger. A lot of thought-provoking pieces have been written on how women are affected by war situations in the country and in the continent. But a recent visit to Kampala in July for a conference made me realise what war means to women in certain parts of the world and it also made me realise how difficult working for peace is when all you have with you is righteous anger.

The conference had some sessions on Peace and Conflict. And outside these sessions also many discussions took place on the subject. We shared what we had heard and what we knew and often a great sense of despair engulfed us even though we were determined to do something about it. A friend narrated what she had heard a Sudanese woman speak about war experiences. The rebels entered a Sudanese woman's house and killed her son. When she was about to bury him, they told her to burn his body. She proceeded to do so afraid for her own life.

They stopped her half way to violently rape her. They told her to pick up the half burnt body of her son and cook it. And they stood there watching it and then told her to eat what she had cooked. Those of us who heard it could not believe that human beings could do this to another human being. And one after the other, similar stories came out, one worse than the other. Women from northern Uganda spoke about young women being kidnapped by rebel soldiers to cook for them and otherwise serve them and being made to walk through the jungles. The women sometimes have to carry pots kept on the fire for cooking on their heads when an attack takes place and many of them get scalded and have burnt scalps. I attended an interesting session on web casting and at the end of it three women from Congo were asked to give an impromptu talk for an unknown audience to be web cast then and there. They spoke in French and as they spoke we saw them earnestly speaking into the mike making some kind of an appeal. It was when the interpreter broke down when she

translated what they had spoken that we realised that they had spoken about war in their part of the world and were appealing to the world to bring about peace. Speaking to a faceless audience who they believed was listening to them somewhere, made them come out with their innermost feelings and fears. The session on web casting suddenly became a session on casting our voices in the wilderness for kindred souls to pick up and act upon. It



somehow made us feel that one is heard and it was a very comforting experience.

Attending one of the panel sessions as a guest was a village woman from northern Uganda on a wheel chair. With her were a six-year-old girl and a small baby. The person giving the keynote address told her story. The young woman, on her way to work in the fields, had stepped on a land mine and had lost her legs below the knee. Her husband brought another woman home and she is now dependent on charity. The woman could not understand English but when everybody began to look at her she realised that her story was being told and slowly tears began to well up in her eyes and softly she began to weep. Her little girl who was carrying the baby on her back looked at her mother a little bewildered and the little baby began to cry. She took the baby in her arms continuing to cry and her daughter stood by her. Like many others I could not accept the making of such human exhibits. A woman's sorrow has to be shared and dealt with but she cannot be presented as an exhibit. Yes, living women with burnt faces, or women with legs destroyed by land mines do become living symbols of violence in war and such symbols do speak very loudly. But the woman must tell her story in her own language to share her experience and to educate us who know so little. And she should sit on the dais telling her story and not be an illustration for a keynote address however passionate the speaker is about peace work, is what many of us felt. All that I could do was to gesture to the little girl and ask her to sit on my lap. I hugged her tight as if to tell her that I care for her and that I am just as helpless as her in this situation. As if sensing my feelings she leaned back and smiled at me.

And that was all that I could do for a little girl from a village in northern Uganda at that point of time. But maybe those who believe in peace sometimes have to act in ways which cannot bring about immediate results but which, in the long run, make such emotions yield some concrete results.

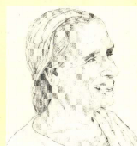
This article is one of the articles published for the column " Different Registers" that C S Lakshmi used to write for *The Hindu*. It was published on 1st September 2002. Some of the articles from the column will be republished in the forthcoming SPARROW Newsletters.



SPARROW IN AUDIO

* /sparrowinaudio

STANDING ON HER OWN FEET:
KALA SHAHANI



PRAMILA
ESTHER VICTORIA ABRAHAM



THE WORLD AS MY LABORATORY
SHANTINO GORRANI TRYST WITH SCIENCE



UAMAVANTI
REINASCED DIGNITY



Koraka
STONE AND GOLD



SPARROW IN AUDIO

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Inspiring Stories of Women by Sound & Picture Archives for Research On Women (SPARROW) Listen to inspiring stories of women, whose lives are a testament to what a dream, fuelled by will, can do.

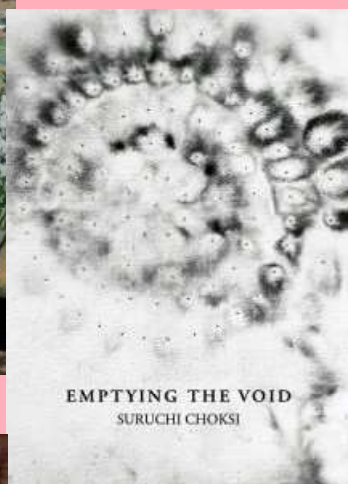
SPARROW is a non-profit committed to creating archives of oral history and visual material connected with women's lives and experiences which have remained hidden in the crevices of history, keeping their history alive through various media. It believes that positive change is possible only when we understand women's lives, history and struggles for self-respect and human dignity.

Giving below the PODCAST link of trailer launch and further details in different platforms
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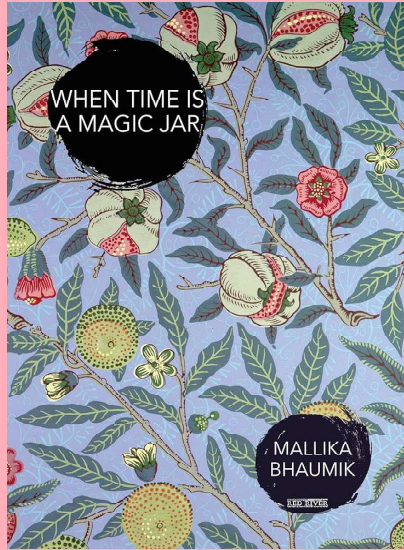
Here's the Linktree link that contains all the other links
Happy Listening!

Red River Sediments Part 2

—Kabir Deb



Title: *When Time is a Magic Jar*
Author: Mallika Bhaumik
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year: 2025
Pages: 108
Price: Rs. 270/-



THE GORGEOUSNESS OF THE GROTESQUE

In a text, writing about a wide range of subjects is necessary, but if not done well, the subjects and the book might crumble like an unsolved puzzle. For this reason, time becomes an important constraint where our emotions, the issues and the poet must become a single body with a singular motive – to provide readers the opportunity to not just read, but also to put some effort in exploring the core of the book. Mallika Bhaumik's third collection of poems *When Time is a Magic Jar*, speaks about the poet's personal journey with compassion and a subtle rage; consciousness and deliberate contradictions; humour and a stroke of sadness. Within poems which speak about the entirety of society, Mallika wisely puts forth her own identity through her tender observation.

In the poem *Jump*, Mallika makes the physical version of memory a part of the equation. Here, she draws a line between and within two dimensions of time. Its morbidity is not vulgar, but it is quite prominent and explicit. The poem hits the thought of suicide, its memory and how it affects the memory of not only a person, but also a family. Death is not

dark but the reason behind its occurrence is. The poet develops the reason profoundly and thus, undresses darkness with ease. She disturbs silence with her intention and releases an honest scream to turn a few heads. *On Emptiness*, on the other hand, speaks about a loss that affects the memory but also lifts the weight of absence. Loss is best felt when it hovers over us, and in this poem, the references of someone's loss becomes universal for the readers. The poet details the aroma and sight of a home where a person is missing and yet, memory leaves a strong imprint that keeps arriving like a ghost.

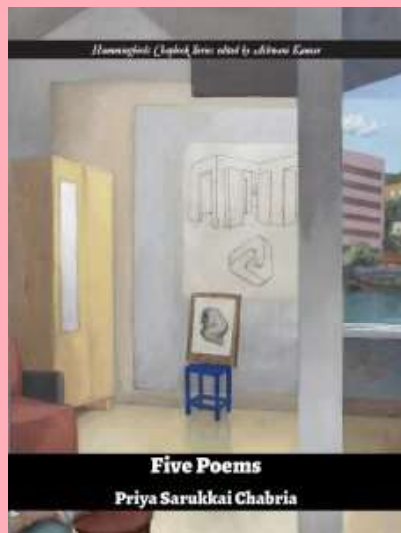
The contemporary time becomes segmented into moments for those who think about the etched bodies of time. In the poem *Reborn*, Mallika sets herself free of every unit of time – from past to present and establishes her monarchy over her own life. She becomes her very being and atomizes what she hears, listens and observes. But she does not fail to acknowledge her vulnerabilities. In her poem *Autopsy*, the poet writes about the chaos of a city, and she leads its constituents to penetrate her body to show its macabre. The gore adds the disappointment of living amidst hopelessness of city life. The poet identifies the strangeness by keeping herself as the body that has all the evidence. Her blood, tears, pus and sweat develop their own territories to lead us to the truth.

When Time is a Magic Jar is an important collection for those who can digest visuals that make us smile and doubt our own decisions, at the same time. The poet does not beautify disturbance and refrains from glorifying the consequences of multitudes of intensity. Mallika Bhaumik takes us on a journey in which a human heart can either burst like a bubble with nothing to offer except monotony or explode like an aged star holding a gravitational pull even after death. The book stands on its own land to let us have a look at its contents knowing that they are looking at us too.

◆◆◆◆◆

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Title: *Five Poems*
 Author: Priya Sarukkai Chabria
 Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
 Year: 2025
 Pages: 32
 Price: Rs. 199/-



UNDRESSING THE UNSEEN IMAGES OF THE POPULAR SKIES

When it comes to striking the chords of what is happening every day, an artist should have a strong statement, an anarchist must carry a curse, and a rebel must use a naked revolution. Life is a game of knives and saying that only daggers are going to win would be an absolute lie. The smaller ones have an equal flair to peel us and expose what is meant to be seen. The Hummingbirds Chapbook Series of Red River, edited by Ashwani Kumar, is a bold attempt to bring out a few small knives to give permanence to accuracy. *Five Poems* by Priya Sarukkai Chabria is a philosophical and haunting work where the poet dissects the inner layers of space, movement, death and life with a kind desperation. These long poems have extended arms to grab us and shake our regularity.

In the first poem *Migration*, the poet dissects the actual reality and framed reality of movement from one place to another. During migration, the displacement is noticed, but the damage it causes can be felt as an aftermath. She takes the migration of whales into concern and how they deal with their

daily life schedules vis-a-vis the rest of the world. It is not surprising that their way of moving from one place to another is not different from other species too. Human beings, during the pandemic, were forced to migrate irrespective of what they had to bear in deciding this move. The death and hunting of whales and other animals do not come in the news and remains ignored, but for human beings, death always is a tool to get views. The ecosystem of migration of elephants follows a certain cycle in which one must die to keep the other alive. Homeostasis is maintained. Yet they too have a mind to think, and Priya keeps their thoughts using an absurd medium. Readers must work hard to alter the blurry picture into a more relatable one. An effort to understand. The space must witness migration too, and the voices metamorphose into time where we should remember what can fall into the void that has no return – or we can exhibit its memory in motion.

The second poem *Vislumbres/The Portrait*, dissects the images within images of humanity. It has always been a matter of criticism that if a group is calling a person evil, then how can the world or jury come to it as a universal decision? The definition of everything that is a human entity differs with time and conditions. She vividly describes how seeking is not just a momentary occurrence. It is how we lead life. Light, being the best seeker, gets into our apartments and illuminates what deserves enlightenment. In the poem, she negates monotony and singularity using the images and paintings that pop out of our minds. She also observes how one picture gets multiple frames with time as well as the frequency of observing them. Each image has certain desires, and we are all ready and passionate to give them what they need to sleep in peace and wake-up without any exhaustive sigh.

The third poem *Medea* deals with not only the eponymous sorceress but is also a commentary on the extremities of marriage and how men have written women in the past to give shape to patriarchy. In the institution of marriage, a woman mostly carries the brunt of character assassination, oppression, gossips etc., but when a woman brings out her own form of domination it becomes scary for a male dominated society. Thus, Nancy Friday in her book, *Women on Top* says that a man feels compelled to restrict women to not lose his pride over his sexual

vigour. The poet details the vulgar and malignant extremities of the sorceress to fertilize the thought of patriarchy. She indirectly shows the mirror and to understand the reflection, readers must look within. A poem that details the extreme moments to disturb the guts of men who are happy with ego and power.

Invoking Kali deals with how the poet herself worships the goddess and wants to inculcate her raw and unabashed visage. It becomes divinely erotic in parts alongside a feminist commentary on the desires of the poet to feed on what the goddess has to offer. Priya is in search for freedom using the limitless possibilities of Kali and her image. There is a vulnerable woman inside the poet, and she wants to come out as a newborn from the one who has eaten her own emotions to reach the state where every institution crumbles, the cosmos bends and rules fall like leaves under necrosis.

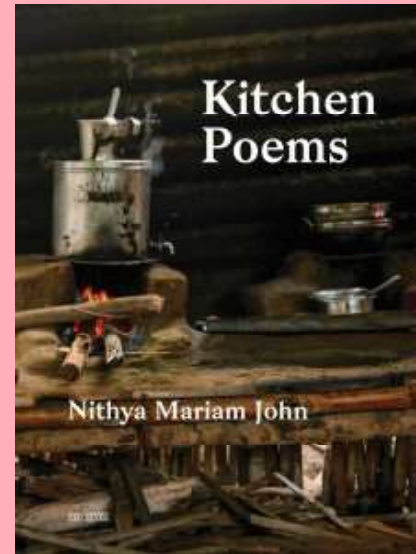
The fifth poem *Con-verse-action of Earth Love Time* has been created by Priya in collaboration with the Singaporean poet and editor Alvin Pang. It comments on building a community by keeping in mind the relationship between the planet we are living in and the communities which play a major role in keeping it alive. To ensure freedom, we need the security of a home. To understand time, we ought to cut ourselves and keep our parts in the jars of time. To focus on our breath, we need to alleviate the quality of air we are inhaling. The poet explores the importance of listening which is a rare quality in a world that is fast and afraid of having a community that is idealistic. A poem that traverses one idea to know how every idea is in a strong symbiotic relationship with the other.

Priya Sarukkai Chabria's chapbook is a necessary book to understand the expansion of poetry and how it can get into our body with a bitter taste only to tantalize our senses. A book that is thin, but a reader can take years in learning how every stanza curates an unread form of a daily philosophy. The book is going to last long like most small knives do.



Positive change is possible only when we understand women's lives, history and struggles for self-respect and human dignity.

Title: *Kitchen Poems*
Author: Nithya Mariam John
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year:
Pages: 100
Price: Rs. 270/-



LICKED FINGERS MAKE CONTROVERSIAL HOMES

Cooking is spiritual when it comes to its whole structure. It is erotic when we refer to the process. Both these extensions require our five senses to stay alive from its germination to its conclusion. In a patriarchal society, most women, between the stringent walls, enjoy the process of cooking to understand where their position stands when it comes to investing their senses in peeling out the insides and bringing what lies as secrets. *Kitchen Poems* by Nithya Mariam John is not just a cooking guide in poetry. It is also a book that leads readers to how cooking is associated with memory, the basic human emotions and the lives of women who take it both as a responsibility and as exercise. None of them nullify each other or contradict their quotes adding a darkness that doesn't disturb.

Elayada is the traditional dumpling of Kerala which is made of coconut and jaggery. After steaming the dish, it is wrapped by banana leaves dressing it up for delicacy. Nithya's eponymous poem reads like a body in motion observed by a being who is driven towards the food and how it flows towards the observer. It begins with a craving most of us have in the morning about what we prefer to have on our

tongue. On a larger picture, it also addresses the need we generally express when it comes to having what we desire. We do everything that is prohibited to internalize the thought – if we want something in this small life, we should give it a chance. In the last stanza of the poem, the act of stealing plantain root from the neighbour appears normal and a little innocent since the poet works over the entire act of stealing to achieve the desire of one beautiful morning.

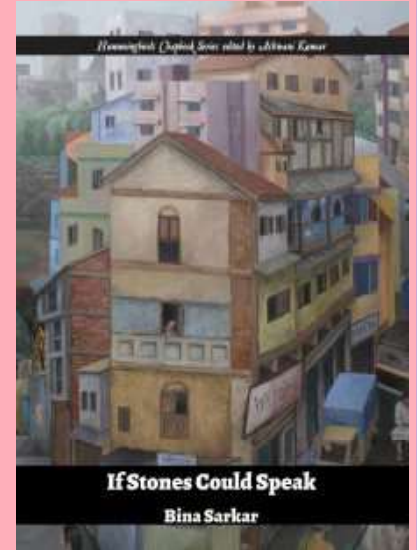
The poet becomes dark and a libertine in her poem *Seven Nights of Mourning*, which demonstrates the conflict between grief and obsession. The latter overpowers the former which human beings mostly do in times of denial. The former turns morbid using food as the elemental origin. Yet amidst darkness, the poet manages to bring the reality of familial complexities and ejects anarchy to restore balance. Here, the dark erotic verses question the conventional behaviour of a woman who is invested in culturing intensity, consciously and unconsciously. In the same poem, memory becomes one with the flesh and takes us to a situation of gore, but it is manicured by the emotion attached with most of our memories associated with our close ones. A poem that shows the poetic ability of darkness.

In the poem *Food Rider*, the poet unabashedly brings the issue of class difference and the importance of food in uniting dimensions that are believed disparate. It is disturbing but with progress, the verses draw the footprints of hope through dabbawallas, food applications; modernity and its predecessor, only to bring out a truth which is acknowledged by the body. Similarly, in *Fridge*, the poet brings out the conditions of homemakers where food is a matter of masculine ego. Women in India are always a matter of gossip where their actions are judged, their characters assassinated. But, due to social conditioning, they hide their wounds, and this poem sheds light on the process of preservation. An observation of the scars that go unnoticed.

Kitchen Poems is a collection of intimate poems on food and how it is the solution to most of our problems and yet also the reason for everything oppressive and discriminatory around us. This is an important book and Nithya Mariam John successfully serves our basic reality on our platters.



Title: *Stones Could Speak*
Author: Bina Sarkar Ellias
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Pages: 32
Price: Rs.199/-



WITNESSES ASSEMBLE AROUND EMPTINESS

Wisdom lies on the back of witnesses. It watches us and tries to thrust its thought into our minds. It crawls over us and puts a vision and a set of words which are different from the rest of the time. It prepares us either to become vocal or to absolve our being. Or to let silence in and filtrate whatever is unnecessary or redundant. With time, we are losing witnesses and diminishing the process of becoming one to conform with an inglorious crowd that exhausts us. Bina Sarkar Ellias' chapbook *If Stones Could Speak*, published by Red River in its Hummingbirds Chapbook Series, edited by Ashwani Kumar, comments about the germination of witnesses inside and around us. The book sediments the world to let us feel how it operates without draining our necessary senses. An experiential witnessing. A strange satiation of being watched. A fermented growth of thoughts.

The titular poem *If Stones Could Speak*, is about how the oldest components of Earth (pebbles and rocks) have stories which, for us, are either fantasies or a dystopian reality. Bina gives voices to the stones who know about the formation of the Earth. She tells how everything took birth in a similar way making

them entities which should remain in our thoughts without being observed as something discrete. They are mute earthly elements, but they do give clues about the past which has answers to most of our questions. In the poem *The Sly Eye*, the poet portrays an image through words where the dichotomous relationship between procrastination and passion is undressed with sincerity. Sleep is political for a woman and those who are driven towards overpowering sleep to pursue art have always carried its politics for the unaware ones. Thus, dark circles in women represent the devil of familial politics.

*sleep shuts
the lids on
my night eyes
and within
a translucent dream...*

Human beings steal beauty to compensate their tormented self. We do it to reach the peak and the exploitation does not bother us since future, for us, is not a part of the equilibrium. In the poem, *Past Midnight*, Bina addresses the basics of exploitation where the moon is a silent victim, and it gets squeezed to keep our minds fertile. We are responsible for exposing the secrets of the cosmos. The poem highlights it by saying how she thought that the moon would be protected by hook or crook, but the protector, bathed in human nature, turns into the exploiter. At the same time, in the poem *Moonlight*, the poet grows a moon that releases hope, and one has simply to savour it since the satellite has always been a giver. It does not let the night stay and keep us in discomfort.

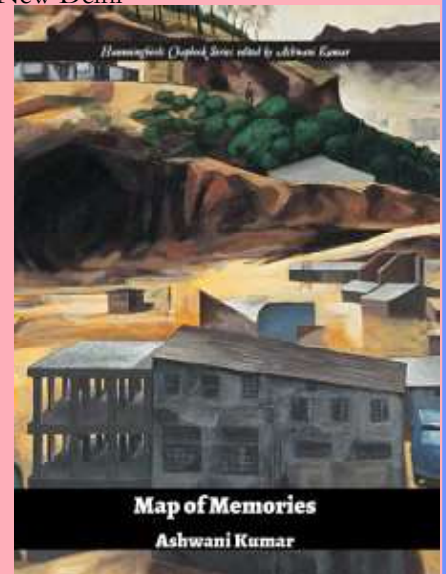
*past midnight
it was reckoned
you would guard
the moon but you too
were a thief –
stealing its light
to paint your words.*

So Quick Bright Things Come to Confusion focuses on how change is the only constant and with time, the disguises we wear fall without any prior

warning. It also speaks about how therapy and a happy community does not always lead us to happiness unless we feel it within us. While the poet crawls to another day, the activity of 'moving on' becomes prominent before the readers. *If Stones Could Speak* is a chapbook of twenty-five poems of hope and hopelessness; actions and their consequences; freedom and confinement. Bina Sarkar Ellias simplistically writes about complexities without making anything bleed or seem hurtful. A beautiful book that is going to last long.



Title: *Map of Memories*,
Author: Ashwani Kumar
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year:
Pages: 32
Price: Rs. 199/-



A CITY IS A BODY IN POST-MORTEM

Human body changes with respect to the places it has lived or is living in and vice-versa. Any change in one is significantly going to bring about a change in the other. It is not just pollution or the noise of traffic that changes our personality. Microcosms of a geographical location also have the power to influence our comfort and constancy. Ashwani Kumar's chapbook from The Hummingbirds Chapbook Series *Map of Memories*, published by Red River, takes memory into concern and how it changes within a

physical territory, thereby, conspiring against its own people. The book originates from longing and traverses the body of hatred to finally resurrect in the arms of love. The poet's imagination becomes the driving force to shake memory from sleep.

In the first poem *An Imaginary Map of My City*, the poet describes the city or his hometown using his body. Readers develop a better connection when body becomes the interface, making the human associate, personal and somatic. Ashwani's city gets affected because of the development and several changes in his body. His gustatory sense gives us an idea of the rain and how it is different from what his mouth felt like when he came in the city. Here, the poet does not shy away from writing about the horrors of childhood and how the powerless are jailed for obscure reasons. The poet finds love in the city and then witnesses the trap of the privileged. Censorship is stylized and death is a shared news. Yet the city also has less faith on the supernatural and more on its human resources. The poem refers to the age of the city and takes a larger picture into its embrace. Its culture masks the undergoing disturbances and when the time is right it speaks a real language.

*No religion exists in my city:
jobless priests live
in abandoned Kali temples.*

*I have also
moved into a crowded hospital
in Sewri.*

*Absurd it may sound,
there is no moment
of claustrophobia here:*

Ashwani in the poem *New and Old Memories of Virus* cultivates an interesting scenario where the old and new world is compared and then commented upon. From rituals to the people, the seasons of old times have their own differences with the contemporary time. Sometimes the simplicity of the lifestyle may appear toxic and cruel, but the poet peels the layers to provide readers clarity about how the rigid rules are used to shape a community. A virus is a non-living organism when it is outside the host.

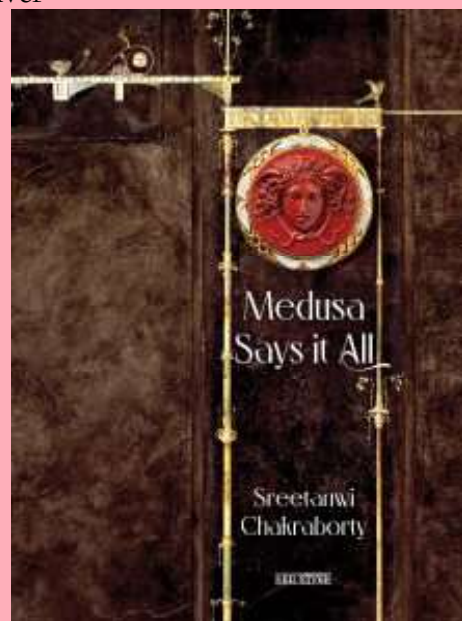
But when it gets the chance to enter the host, it does everything to keep its metabolism running, hence, becoming a living organism. Malice of humankind has always been the virus which is injected by society and then managed by its people. But there are a few who play the role of antibodies to fight the malice and others act as antigens to make cruelty an easy target for the carriers of peace. This poem addresses several issues that form a city. From patriarchy to addiction, the poet manages to speak honestly about the right and wrong of a place.

*Wandering virus of vengeance had infected everyone
at least in the last ten-months of delusional bigotry –
shredding our habits, and memories of peaceful living.*

Map of Memories is a strong and important book to understand a place from multiple perspectives. It allows readers to play the roles they do not want to play. The poems trigger the readers to become gritty and dark; honest and unabashed. Ashwani Kumar does a fine job in writing poems where everyone is dissolved in a grey liquid and everything has visible peripheries.



Title: *Medusa Says It All*
Author: Sreetanwi Chakraborty
Publisher: Red River
Pages: 82
Year: 2025
Price: Rs.299/-



MEDUSA'S TONGUE FLOATS ON CELLULOSE EXTRACTS

Medusa has been considered a subject of curse by the Greek Gods for crossing certain rules made and developed by men. She was taken as a weapon to defeat enemies or the ones who the Gods despised by turning their breathing bodies into stone. After various interpretations, Medusa today is being read as a feminist icon and people believe she is a metaphor for feminine rage. It took more than eight-hundred centuries to understand Medusa from a philosophical and psychological lens, especially by male scholars. Sreetanwi Chakraborty's *Medusa Says It All*, is a collection where a set of eyes makes us look at the Medusas of modern times. The poems in the book plunge deep and disturb our comfortable vision to then assassinate the perspectives which are redundant.

In the poem *The Photographer's Yakshini*, the poet speaks about how every man can see his entire growth inside a woman. Yakshinis are referred to as nature spirits who bring wealth and health to an individual. The erotic theme of the poem becomes esoteric as love and lust begin to condense inside the bodies of the man and his muse. The surreal elements of the poem are not a fantasy etched in the poet's mind. Here, the poet writes down a chimera which approaches sexuality, sadness and serendipity leading readers to understand how both the characters of the poem are not full of themselves. The poet does not hold herself back from expressing what the man had to go through from his childhood to adulthood. We read a metamorphosis that can only be experienced.

*He adjusted his camera lens,
the yakshini transformed
into a Mumbai flamingo,
rubbing kewda attar into the
cleavages of picketed time.*

Poverty is the primary problem of India, and if you are a moneyless woman, then you are simply a piece of flesh for the vultures. Predation is not restricted to non-working women. Sexual predation has been a nationwide problem from the ancient era.

In the poem *The Amulet-seller in the Local Train*, Sreetanwi becomes the voice of an amulet seller who sells gems for charms and magic in a local train. In the first two stanzas, the poet focuses on the intention of her product and the attitude she holds because of her self-awareness. For a woman, who lives in a patriarchal society, hitting the rock bottom becomes easy. Thus, when the poet writes: *Nobody sees fear, no more longing in her eyes/that could once turn men into tombstones*, the poet solidifies the strength of a woman whose back has been forced to hit the wall. But in the last stanza, the poet exposes the reality by giving readers a barrage of consequences that usually happen with free-spirited and independent women.

*One January morning, the amulet-seller's frozen body
lay on the foggy fishplates, with a tattered woollen muffler
covering the nape of her neck.
her tangled hair with promises to be kept.*

Sex has always been a matter of cosmic union for those who believe in the process only after they have experienced love. Intimacy brews the good parts of sex where our bodies are not separate from our partners. They happen to become one single body with absolute knowledge of anatomy. *The Retrograde of Venus* is a politically erotic or an erotically political poem. Human body is driven by both, and in this poem, the poet cultivates desire and passion from its very root. She also establishes how the norms of society and the superstitions inscribed over its body lie under the developed constructs of physical coiling of human bodies. There cannot be an upgradation of sex since an origin of anything should not evolve to become relevant or convenient. Sreetanwi lets her surreal chemistry flow without inhibiting the visceral thoughts which can be offensive for moral policers.

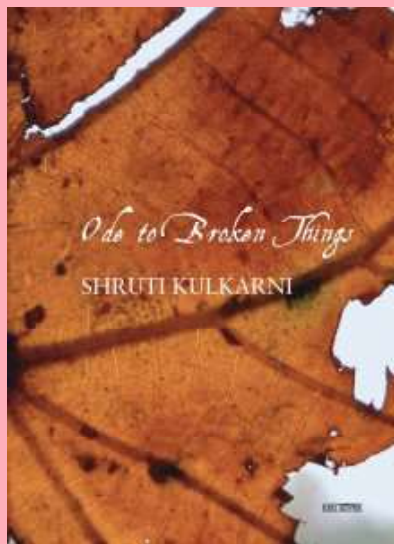
*I would slowly disrobe you under the cosmic tree,
taste the ethereal sun under your navel,
and discover
the erect, monolithic man sculpted
with elaichi and coniferous leaves.*

Medusa Says It All by Sreetanwi Chakraborty is an accumulation of a strong female voice which peels the patriarchal constructs. The exposed flesh of

patriarchy should be noticed through these poems which jump from fantasy to reality thus, not letting the society live in hibernation. It can offend those who cannot digest brave women and also upholds the capability to free those who have been living in isolation and sadness. It is an important collection which holds Medusa's head to release the serpents on the gargantuan patriarchs of the old and new generations.



Title: *Ode to Broken Things*
 Author: Shruti Kulkarni
 Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
 Year: 2025
 Pages: 94
 Price: Rs. 270/-



THE KINTSUGI OF HUMAN LIFE

Human nature is directed towards stitching the ripped pieces of cloth, healing the broken pieces of heart and tying whatever is separated in a knot. We do it to either have contentment or to cherish the complex that drives us towards being a healer – a tendency to maintain superiority unless it is adjoined with empathy. Shruti Kulkarni's poetry collection *Ode to Broken Things* is more about talking and consuming the cracks that fall on anything that can break. The collection makes readers feel the nature of human beings and how scars have always been constant reminders for us to process this identity. They allow us to evolve, grow and then work on our beautiful elements.

In the poem *We are like Handmade Paper*, the poet speaks about the little imperfections which keep everything in balance and the encouragement that leads us towards achieving whatever we can. In such moments, we tether to hope and look forward to having whatever the existence is capable of offering. To live like a quotient with monotony circulating the mass of the mind and body is something the poet despises but has the resilience to bear its weight. Everyone needs a little hope, kindness and illumination to recover. Shruti Kulkarni asks for the same in this poem thinking about its sustainability for the future generation. For those who will have to face the same situation.

*And us – weathered on the outside
 from quotidian living;
 infinite resilience within.
 Our spirit waiting to be filled
 with luminosity,
 stories of hope and loss,
 stories of love and kindness,
 that we'd live through to tell our children.*

In this competitive and aggressive society, we are afraid of the ghosts of our past. We are also scared to address the issues of people who have seen the world before us. It is also scary to observe a world where human beings have little time to come out of their comfort zone to look for what cannot be seen without an open mind. In the poem *Kind Ghosts*, the poet visits her past and digs out the ghosts which are there to breed our memory. Old tapes, warmth of wool, pickles, lost love and the music of those times are not just syndromes of age, but extensions of what we left behind. And as the poet mentions, one can find them in the process or journey of change.

*Let's go looking for lost love,
 not in cities' pubs and cafes, in a man or in a woman,
 but in the throes of this change.*

The simple things of our life rattle through our quiet and subdued moments. We do not give much credence to them since simplicity in a combination of complex people and their wishes. *Cylinder Delivery* is a poem where the journey of a gas cylinder is marked by sound, its structure and how

it is connected to the lives of people. Sound simplifies anything that can be compared without making any enormous effort, and the way it permeates sound delivers a mature voice to human mind, the exterior agency and minute technicalities of human life.

*People, situations don't have to be perfect.
How else will the music be made?
For it's from where we are broken
that true music emanates.*

In *Ode to Broken Things*, Shruti Kulkarni writes about the kintsugi of human life without putting any physical attaching agent. Through its blunt voice, the poet resurrects the broken pieces and moments to explain how important learning and unlearning is for humanity to survive.

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Title: *Big Daddy's Chair*
Author: Abha Iyengar
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year: 2025
Pages: 160
Price: Rs. 270/-



FLAGBEARERS OF HUMANITY COIL TO SHOOT POISON OR A STAR

Books must be organic and raw to let the readers savour the meat of their content, intentions and philosophies which aligns with them. Even an untitled

story could reach a position it deserves if its meat has something that projects a definite purpose. In case of short story collections, we need to think about multiple possibilities by identifying a single intent in each one of them. Abha Iyengar's short story collection, *Big Daddy's Chair*, has a distinct variety that is blunt and rooted to the flesh and pokes where tremors are required. The book has a range where personal, political and meaty issues are addressed without appropriating them by keeping social acceptance in mind.

In the titular story *Big Daddy's Chair*, the writer brings us a story that is a humane horror and focuses on the reach of patriarchy. It is driven towards putting thoughts on power dynamics which makes a strong statement on what a patriarch can do with power. It is contagious and affects those who are involved with the man. The story also puts a remark on how people, irrespective of their gender, use their body to organically manipulate one's thought. In the story, Abha gives us a comprehensive look over the process of peeling innocence without knowing that it is actually taking place. Its meat lies in desire of men and women – how both can cultivate and destroy humanity depending on the point it is coming from. A disturbing story that's sensuous but horrid.

Patriarchy salivates by devouring morality to survive without anything to worry about. In the story *Vultures*, the writer speaks about the vultures who reveal their original identity when they get to salivate for a feast of their mind. Child molestation and trafficking has always been a major issue of the country. Most parents of these children are blamed for the actions of criminals, or the police puts the entire blame on those who are getting trafficked or molested. It is not surprising because, at the end of the day, the officials working for the law grew up with a patriarchal thought in their mind. In this particular story, privileged vultures are hunted down by the writer knowing that children are trafficked as delivery gifts for those who have the money to buy them from traffickers. Money can buy everything – innocence, years of growing-up, and a life that wants to see the world.

Love, in its very raw and visceral form, can become a dagger and pierce through the fabrics that keeps the world beneath a veil. This particular dagger, if puts a scar on the skin, can testify as the touch of

love which is not violent. Rather the touch of a dagger's cold surface allows goosebumps to erupt from the core of arousal and choice. The story *The Red Flowers of a Blue Petal*, magnifies how the strength of love can break illusions and take us away from fear and guilt. One cannot easily digest the story since it haunts the interiors of complexities of any 'normal' community. The topic of live-in and its association with fear is known to most of us. What the writer keeps before us through the story is the psyche of society and how people handle the situation by deceiving those who consider the same as crime. Love is a victim of power. But it knows how to play with powerful ones without compromising for those who want to mop it out of the system.

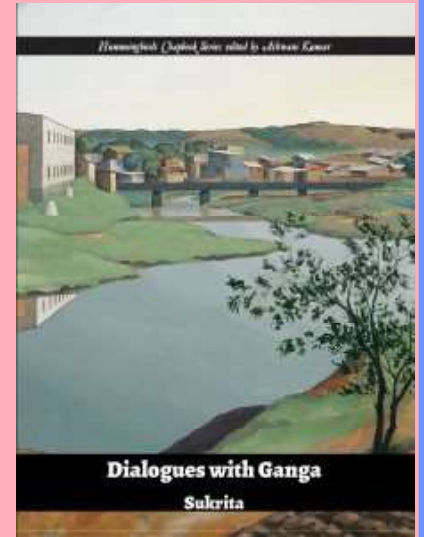
In the story *Rain*, the writer spills the idea of longing. There are various ways through which we reach out to the person we love. It is not strange that even a piece of Pepsi bottle can act as a perfect reminder to water the memory of the loved ones. From a feminist lens, longing is more than remembrance. It is also a way to cherish the absence, and it leads us to give shape to our lives. Each of us plays our own roles in our own stories and includes someone to untangle the knots that form when we are constantly muscling what protrudes out of our lives. The writer observes the minute elements which stitch our memory to give birth to a human being that is stored in our mind. The story's romance is warm, its aesthetics are visually striking, and it lives upon the images which we see every day but only observe closely when they mean something to us.

Big Daddy's Chair is an important collection of fifteen short stories which mostly deals with human identity, its various ways of expression and the darker territory of our existence. Abha Iyengar has a unique voice that evolves with every story to take us on a route that's both disturbing and liberating.



<https://www.sparrowonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/SNL-43-suppl-1-Book-Reviews-final-for-uploading-December-2024.pdf>

Title: *Dialogues with Ganga*
Author: Sukrita
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year: 2025
Pages: 32
Price: Rs. 199/-



THE VOICE OF A RIVER

Rivers offer us stories which traverse territories, their people, culture and beliefs and later, unify or divide them as per convenience. Any river brings with it the remains (dead or alive) of places we may or may not have visited. Rivers do not cut us loose. They do not deliberately break our homes. They do not flood our lives knowing how desperate we are to live this one life. *Dialogues with Ganga*, written by Sukrita Paul Kumar and a part of Hummingbirds Chapbook Series of Red River, consists of a set of conversations between the poet and Ganga. In these poems, the poet gives readers a taste of what goes in the heart of river Ganga – and how we need to think about it.

The origin of river Ganga is considered not only as holy, but also a point where different convoluted dimensions meet to simplify the earthly order. The poet's desire to dive in the depths of the river to understand and feel it is a way to let the many versions of the human heart assemble into one. The river crosses borders, states and a no man's land to reach us. To comprehend its story, the poet observes the river with the lens of seduction that's often implied in esotericism. In mythology, it is believed that Ganga came to the Earth by tearing time and space. From a

rational lens, it cannot be nullified since the river has been a witness for centuries. It has seen death, life, kingdom, modern day politics, thereby conquering time. It has been an agent to keep the monks alive and through their minds, it also traversed space and its various horizons.

1.
*my body must dive
into the river
from Himalayan heights
to embrace her.*

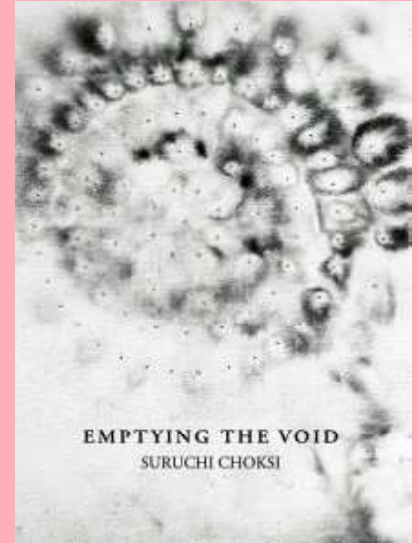
2.
*O Ganga, you move on
in time and space
rhythm and style
forever arriving
in the arms of ocean.*

Most of us have a very common perspective on the property of water – it takes the shape of the jar or glass or a bowl and gives human beings a lesson on adjustment. Osho although says that the most important property of water is how mysterious it is. It is still and calm in its depth whereas the surface carries a lot of tension. In a stanza, Sukrita Paul Kumar speaks about the same lesson by writing: *O Ganga/how does your noisy surface/with kaleidoscopic patterns/restless shapes and wobbly colours/reflect the steady flow/of your deep and long waters.* In another stanza, the poet confronts the capitalists who are constantly looking for ways the river can be kept under their control. Even its might and capabilities go unnoticed since they are involved in revolving around the body of power.

Dialogues with Ganga by Sukrita Paul Kumar captures multiple strings of a single, orchestrated symphony. Every note carries a particular objective that is different from the rest. Through this book, they find synchrony in the poet's mind where everything comes into nothing and the nothing grows onto become everything. A book that's spiritual and a perfect ode to the river which deserves not only our devotion, but also what lies beyond it.

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Title: *Emptying the Void*
Author: Suruchi Choksi
Publisher: Red River, New Delhi
Year: 2025
Pages: 140
Price: Rs. 349/-



WHEN THE COSMOS BURSTS INTO A THOUGHT

Poetry is best found when individuality meets our existential entity. Only then do we become capable of sharing what our hearts feel; how our minds react; and what helps us to live our lives. Visuals in poetry is not just about metaphors. Sometimes the pattern matters when the poet chooses to give the eyes of the readers a graph of what is happening in a piece. A feast for the heart – A feast of the bare eyes loaded in glimmer, hope and tears. Suruchi Choksi's poetry collection *Emptying the Void*, is a unique one since the poems are sharp yet tender, straight to the point yet a puzzle in their formation. It is the spiral form that gives us an idea about void. But in the void of this collection, the poet sets horizons where our inner chaos gets patterns to meet its good metaphors.

In the poem *Whispered Idioms*, the poet unlocks her inner voice, and it becomes possible after experiencing the crests and troughs of life. She candidly speaks about the necessary and unnecessary choices she made only to reach a place where she can introspect on everything. Closure is needed when one hits the rock bottom, and she does that by exploring the fullness and emptiness of every

fragment of human existence. Colours change, sadness is preserved, wounds become fertile, and finally we find a proper conclusion. Once we come to it, we exhale a loud sigh that meets the sky.

*sometimes, I brough echoes of words
that should not have been said
wounds bright red
smoke clouds announcing
my crimson departure*

We blabber when the noise in our head is louder than usual. Words do not come out of our mouths and whatever we hear has certain codes we are hesitant in listening. Suruchi's poem *50 Proof* comes out like a testimony of this condition. In the initial part of such a condition, our heart fails to forgive and forget wholeheartedly. We believe in having our roots strong, but there are places where vulnerability seeps through the cellular gaps. The poem is a voice of a broken heart and an ode to those who are getting consumed by scarred hearts. A visual delight that puts a statement without building any unnecessary melancholy. It delivers what most of us need to listen.

*eloquently incomprehensible
tenacious me steadfastly vacillating
half happy half sad
half alive half dead
i am
not*

We are vagabonds in our minds. There is a desperation inside us to run away from a place. The sense of belonging to someone keeps us rooted. Yet since we do not have wings, we fly through our words and then by immersing ourselves into something we love to do. *Unbelong* refers to the same scenario where the poet while seeking a home wants to not have one. It challenges conventionality and thereby, leads readers to know how nothing within us is really ordinary. A basic humane desire that does not get implemented. Being one with everything around us makes us immortal. We do not live someone else's life. We simply cherish the process of surrendering.

*reject not deny not
pick me up as you would a leaf*

*that embraces the blossom
accept me as you would destiny
I am tethered to it evermore.*

Suruchi Choksi puts her soul in this beautiful collection. It is personal and reaches spots where the spiritual is found. The void lies within us, and it drags us since it is hungry. This book explores the void and how experiencing and fighting it makes us more human than we will be in its absence.

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**In India Women Spoke, Women Worked,
Women Wrote, Women Acted**



**Women Chose, Women Demanded,
Women Created, Women Rebelled**



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All Under One Roof
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Colours and Sounds of a Changing life

—Pritika Mehta

Watching as,
The leaves fall off the trees, igniting bright colours,
The sound of swirling seawater reflects the blues,
Thundering rain and sparkling lines show transparency,
And white, like a blank slate to fill,
the snowflakes settle on the windowsill.

Listening to,
The Loud chatter and soft music from the coffee shop,
The small giggles and squealing of the kids playing in the park,
Blaring horns and whistles from the roadside,
Low chirpings of the birds from the trees,
But as the window is shut, the silence in the house rings,
Making the loneliness sing.

The smell of food from the shop across the house,
Strong scents of perfumes and cologne of people walking,
Dark, smoky, troubling clouds as cars speed past,
The air somehow feels like it is singing in melancholy.

Empty and unmade bed,
Rusty doors and squeaking floors,
Broken bowls and dishes lying around,
Whispering walls resonate throughout the house,
Two pairs of slippers lie at the entrance of this madhouse.

Everything is the same, except me and you,
Two coffee cups sit on the table, one filled and one empty,
One cold and one abandoned.

◆◆◆◆◆

Silence is deafening

—Pritika Mehta

In silence, no one answers,
No one hears our screams,
In silence, our tears flow,
Love runs out on us, once again,
In silence, we chase and struggle,
We live our lives,
In silence, time passes,
The end of time thrives,
In silence, we end our lives.

In silence, we suffer,
Wake up and march towards the empty goal,
In silence, we arrive at the end goal,
Exhausted and tired,
In silence, we lift ourselves at every fall,
Standing up against the waves,
In silence, we continue to live.

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My Mother's Voice and My Thoughts

—Pritika Mehta

The rotting carcass of my thoughts lies in the wake,
Decaying like the human body does in death.

My thoughts don't age like fine wine,
But wither and break apart,
like a poisonous ivy vine,
falling away, spreading like some abstract art.

My thoughts don't care about me,
They are always in wonderment of others,
Always humming in my ears like an annoying bee,
In a similar voice to my mother's!

My thoughts aren't straight, like me,
Neither are they gay, like me,
My thoughts aren't logical, like me,
All neurological, as they might say,
unlike me, they say.

They say, and say, and say,
Leaving behind a string of curses, with ends frayed,
They scream, and scream, and scream,
Till my ears bleed out the curses, words, and my self-esteem.

"I think" is an understatement,
"I ponder" is downplaying it by a lot,
I obsess! Obsess, obsess, and obsess
Over the past, present, future, current,
everything in front of me and beyond!

The rotting carcass of my thoughts lies in the wake,
Slowly fostering my hopes and dreams,
Killing me from within, decaying my mind and body.

My thoughts don't lead to daydreaming,
They are visions, hallucinations nightmares,
With me as the centre of attention, in the spotlight!

Yet they are never truly for me...always against me.
Sleepless nights, fidgeting days, restless evenings,
Where is the rest? I do not remember,
Where is the logic? I do not recall,
Where is my brain? I can't find it!

The rotting carcass of my thoughts lies in the open,
Waiting to be dissected and be driven under post-mortem,
In search of the reason for the death,
What could it possibly be?

◆◆◆◆◆

Genderfluid

—Pritika Mehta

Sometimes girly, sometimes boyish,
Sometimes in between, and sometimes nothing.

At times I love my body, at times I hate the weight on my chest,
At times I feel confused, and at times I could care less.

Sometimes I want long hair, sometimes I wish to cut it short,
Sometimes midway, and sometimes feels irrelevant.

At times I want to wear a dress, at times I want a suit,
At times I wish for jeans, at times I don't care.

Sometimes pink, sometimes blue,
Sometimes mix, sometimes black.

It is frustrating, the pace of everything changing,
It is confusing, as it gets triggered by anything,
One minute I am something,
And the other I am nothing.

Sometimes I don't know who I am,
Who I want to be,
But what I wish to know is,
If people will accept what I wish to be?

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Letter from a Daughter to a Father

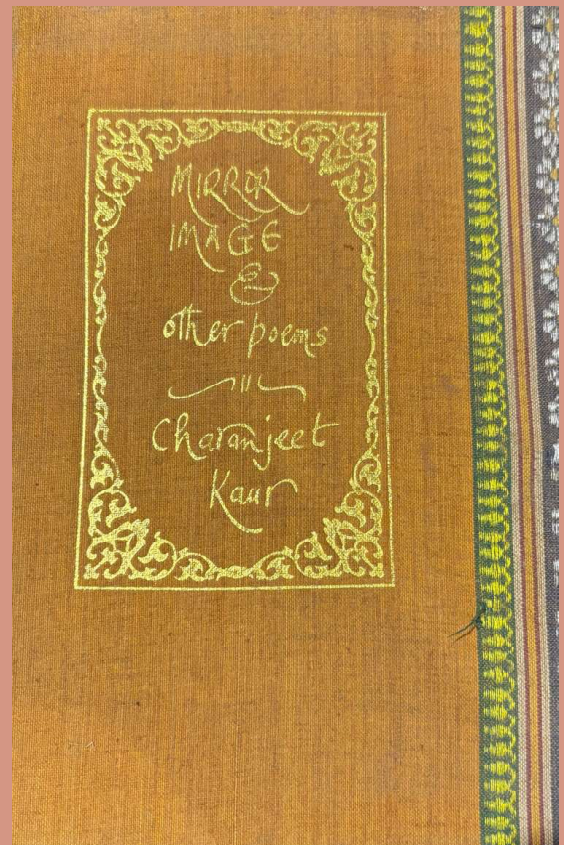
—Charanjeet Kaur

Reporting, Sir,
twenty seven years later on...
er, sorry,... *Bapuji*,
for that's how you would have liked it...

For some years now
27th of June has become a ritual
that keeps your dreams alive,
a day of reckoning that says,
yes, dreams do get fulfilled
though not exactly the way you would have thought.
The day of the annual pilgrimage,
of remembrances, thanksgiving,
lamentations, nostalgia, renewals,
The day we gather ourselves to say
that beautiful as Life has been
perhaps it was for the best
that you were no longer there.

No, don't worry. We have done well enough
though not exactly the way you would have wanted.
For, Ammi's eyes, at 76
still bear
the goatlike expression of innocence after all these years.
She's lived through so much
after she survived the way you simply went away
with hopeless, staring, guilty eyes.
Yeah, you left her deep pools of love, I presume,
which she continues to draw from, for all of us

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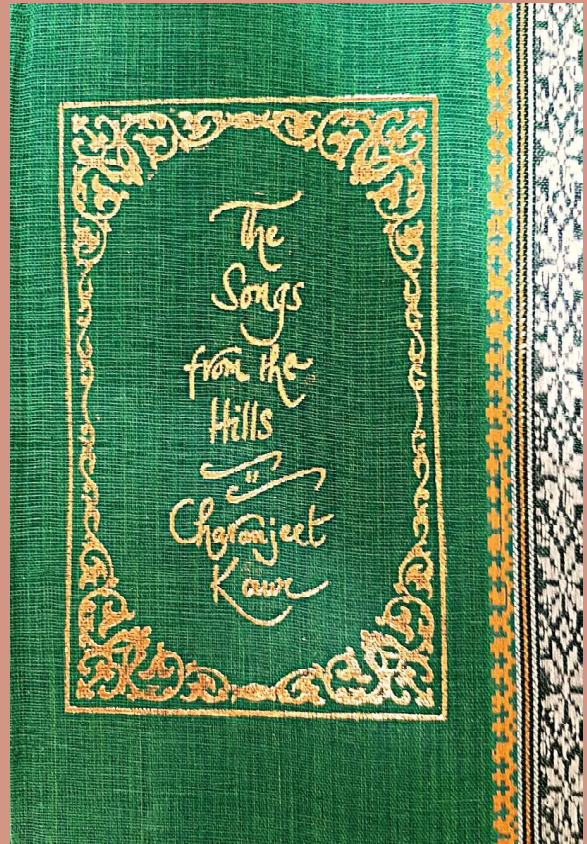
Poem from the book *Mirror Image & Other Poems*
by Dr Charanjeet Kaur
Price Rs. 150/- (Hardback) Rs. 100/- (Flexiback)
Year: 2009
Publisher: Writers Workshop, Kolkata

Absences

—Charanjeet Kaur

When you have filled your life
With absences
And all the surrounding spaces
Are alive with the sense
That you are there and yet not there
You need only to extend a hand
Raise your eyelids a bit
To look at the troubled eyes
That you are afraid to look into;
Every moment
It is so easy
To see hear touch feel and smell
To sense that absences
Are there and yet not there at all.

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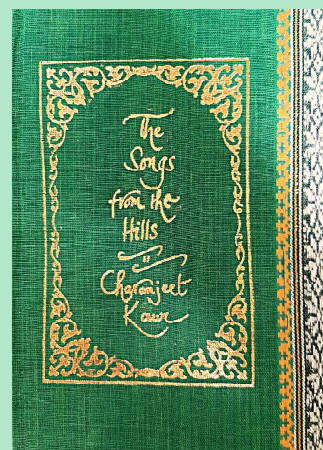


Poems from the book *The Songs from the Hill*
by Dr Charanjeet Kaur
Price Rs. 200/-
Year: 2015
Publisher: Writers Workshop, Kolkata

Paradoxes

—Charanjeet Kaur

Nothing I write is personal
and everything that I write is nothing but personal.
Out there the crowds jostle and sway
fluid anonymous faceless
changing with every slipping moment –
the eternal flux stares in the eyes
of the faces that I can fix
in a vague kind of recognition
perhaps make some sense of –
those looks I recognize,
their warmth I feel
it makes my blood warm to know
that I might have known them all
strangers all –
a sudden smile
a hand lifted in greeting
a scowl
a wrinkled brow
a hasty step
a curse muttered beneath the breath
a lilting footstep
a head tossed in defiance
cold vacuum eyes
a brow raised in question ...
I meet them like old friends
who do not even feel the need to acknowledge each other's
presence
they are there, I know
mine without being mine at all.
Everything that I write can be nothing but personal
as paradoxes mount and become the rule.



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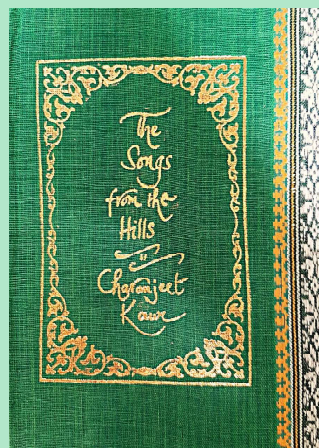
Still

—Charanjeet Kaur

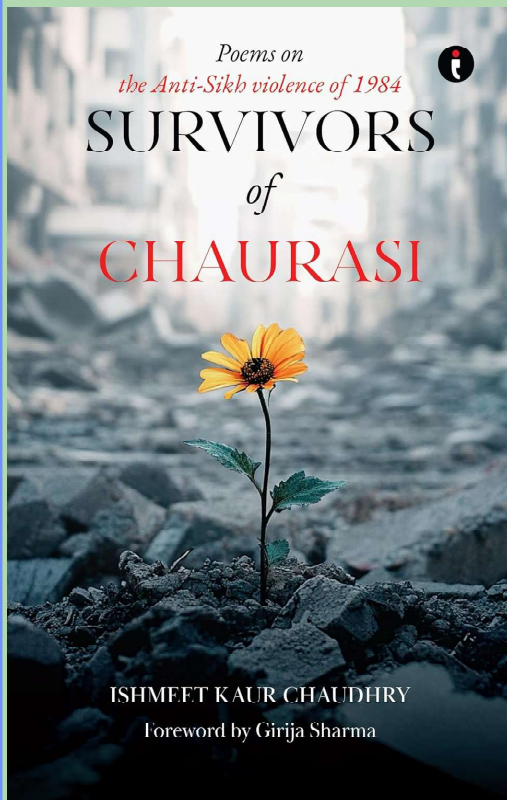
It is a lease of life.

Maybe the mind resounds only with its own voice
which may drown in the traffic of the day;
Maybe the breezes whisper only to themselves
and the leaves on the branches in rhythm,
sway to messages that do not mean a things;
Maybe the shore is sand-deaf
to the music that quivers at the heart of the sea;
Maybe the hills enclose themselves tightly
to shut out the sweet sorrows that the papiha sings;
Maybe the clouds hang fortress-heavy
to hold back the showers from falling to the Earth;
Maybe the flowers know that they will not bloom
not as yet, nor maybe ever again.

Even then, it is a lease of life
it is a lease of life
now, and
every time,
still ...



Poems from the book *The Songs from the Hill*
by Dr Charanjeet Kaur
Price Rs. 200/
Year: 2015
Publisher: Writers Workshop, Kolkata



Poems from the book *Poems on the Anti-Sikh Violence of 1984: Survivors of Chaurasi* (Indie Press, Bangalore, 2025) by Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhary

Secrets of the Past

—*Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhary*

Diwali night brings with it secrets of the past

Candles and lamps mark the festival of lights;
their glare blinds me
reminds me of that dark night
forty-years back....

The celebrations were not yet over

That time crackers burnt our houses
burning our men too...
white powder, kerosene oil and inflamed tyres
replaced the crackers.

The sounds of crackers

accompanied by
the screams of mothers
trying to protect the honour
of their daughters...

necks garlanded with burning tyres

turbans disrespected
beards razed
hair cut
cigarettes forced into their mouths...

screaming for mercy

with folded hands
helpless faces
tearful eyes...
shocked and muted, they breathed their last.

Diwali night brings with it secrets of the past

The sounds of crackers and the night brings with it
the era(z)ed memories of thousands of bodies...
the crackers—reminders of bursting gas cylinders
of fuming houses and mounds of ashes lying everywhere.

The festival is not welcome this year...nor any year ever since

no lamps and candles to be lit
for nothing can light up
the darkened faces and
the broken hearts.

(*In 1984, Diwali was on 24th October, and Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated on 31st October. During interviews, many children, belonging to families who experienced Chaurasi, stated that they have never celebrated Diwali since 1984.)



My Little Mind Could Not Reason Well: A Prose Poem

—*Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhary*

That winter night,
as we watched from the window
we heard the slogan:

*“Khoon ke badle khoon.”
“Kuchal dalo sanpoon ko.”*

Tension was in the air
as we anticipated the coming of the mob
knowing they would arrive

Mother forbade us from going outside to play
grandfather, father, and brother stuck to television, watching
the news;
nothing was telecast

Just that some mournful music was playing throughout on the TV

I had never had such a boring
a holiday without reason;
I was bored.
Oblivious
that the reason could not be understood
by my little six-year-old brain.

...But I knew we were in danger

Our Hindu neighbour assured, “You will be safe Sardarji, don’t worry”
he said, “No one will be able to touch you, Darji”
“We are here, dare anyone come in!”

The day was silent like the dead
The night shadowed us
and there was the mob

We switched off the lights

We peeped through the window and saw that

a mob stoned the Gurudwara opposite our house
a historical Gurdwara made by Maharaja of Patiala in his estate
Nabha House

I, a six-year-old girl,
always fearless,
yelled abuses at the stone throwers

when suddenly, my brother shut my mouth

with his trembling hands;
I was suffocated
gasping for breath

he pressed my mouth so tight
I thought he was choking me
and he would kill me

I forgot about all that was happening outside

and I boxed my brother on his face
kicked him and
pushed him backward

He imprisoned me in his arms.
holding me tightly,
not allowing me to move an inch.

Then I gave up and settled in his tight clutches

Still in his clutches, I lifted my head
and looked out of the window
He whispered in my ears "If you shout this mob may come
and hurt us...be quiet"

I realised that my brother was saving us
and not attempting to choke me to death;
surprised and scared I became a mute witness to the scene
outside.

Our Hindu neighbour shouted at the mob

Three more Hindu men from our building joined him.
They asked the mob to return and
stoned them.

The mob was diverted.

The *Bhaiji* at Gurudwara was hurt.
His forehead was bleeding.

He was a gentle man

He had the most melodious voice.
He sang *kirtan* day and night.
Why did they beat him?

I wondered
I never understood
I could not understand

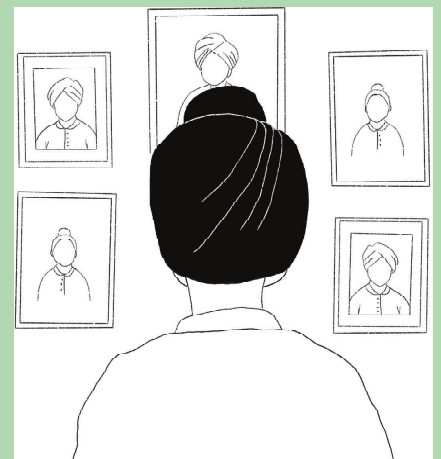
My little mind could not reason well.

Just because two men had killed Indira Gandhi and they were
Sikhs and wore turbans?
that is why we had a holiday and
was that the reason father and mother didn't go for work?

...but why did they beat *Bhaiji* who always sang
Ram, Ram bol, Ram, Ram....
And all my friends, whether Hindu or Sikh, always sang with
him?

My little mind could not reason well
My little mind could not reason well

Blood for blood /# Kill the snakes



Untitled Poems

—Uma Mohan

Poem 1

When seen upon return,
 without being able to say for sure
 if this is the place,
 everything changes.
 On the days
 when it is safe
 to cover distances,
 a ruined structure
 is of no value.
 The lone hibiscus plant
 smiling in dreams too
 had indeed taught what heaviness was.
 There is no soil for the hibiscus
 at places with the new look.

Poem 2

Men are
 working here.
 That route
 is clogged.
 Learn to warn
 like this, oh, Father.
 To say every time
 that this too shall pass,
 a repeat,
 is not befitting of God.

Poem 3

It was
 astonishing
 upon going
 for the first time
 to a house
 without
 a rear entrance.
 Through
 one entrance itself
 one can go
 and come.
 But
 when the mind
 brims over and spills,
 where can a person
 relax and calm down
 in a house without
 steps at the rear entrance
 or a block of stone
 to wash clothes?
 I chose a location
 where a rear entrance
 could have been
 and placed a chair there.
 To those of us
 wedded to houses
 without
 convenient windows,
 backyard with water well,
 not even a single banana plant
 to speak with while watering it,
 our shelters are also
 required to be
 caught only by playing
 musical chairs.

Your Rain and Our Rain

—Uma Mohan

They mention that yesterday, ten centimeters of rain was recorded right here.
All of you and all of us are in the very same town.

Your rain
held the fragrant tea
that sought shoulders
to embrace
and reminded of kisses,
or snacks filled with
crispness and warmth,
or, why,
even ice cream with
cold vapours rising.

It was a rain
that spilled outside
window bars
or tightly closed
glass panes.

Our rain
was one
which poured
into houses
through the holes
in the roof.

After securing pushcarts,
abandoning clutches of saplings
and mortar-carrying iron bowls
When one turned
it flowed through the
cellophane sheet used to cover things
and put out the stoves.

Your rain poems
may always be kept ready
like the biographical note
of an aged and ailing
prominent personality.

Our prayers
are more with the seed paddy
rather than the sickle.
If news of crops being
waterlogged is received,
does one normally add things like
jewellery and house along with it?

The answer is no, right?
That is why I say
your rain and our rain
are not the same.

Translated by Sri. N Srivatsa. This poem was featured in the July-September 2015 issue of the magazine *Natrinai*.



Untitled Poems

—Uma Mohan

Poem 4

The main doorframe
began to hit
till the top of the head got
cracked away every time.
“Bend down! Bend down!”
Nowadays,
I have been saying it aloud
apparently.
Has anyone of you
gone past a doorframe
which lowers down,
hits with a bang and
sits like a smart kid?

Poem 5

The ticklish feeling that
forgetting is a mistake
and the confusion that
memory weighs heavy.
Even when one introduces memory to
forgetfulness
and the face of forgetfulness
to memory,
time winks
as a nameless something
between the two.
My water-filled pot
under the tap
is indeed to be
moved
and carried.

Translated by Sri. N Srivatsa

SPARROW-R THYAGARAJAN LITERARY AWARD 2024

The genre chosen for this year's SPARROW-R THYAGARAJAN Literary Award 2024 is translation. The panel of judges decided to prioritise this year, not only translation from one Indian language to another but also translations from endangered and marginalised languages into Tamil. The SPARROW Literary Awards are normally given to a woman and a man writing in Tamil and either a woman or a man for the non-Tamil language category. The SPARROW panel of judges this year were D I Aravindan, T Parameswari and Ambai for Tamil and our language consultant this year for translation into Assamese was Dibyajyoti Sarma. Our award consultant as always, was poet and writer, Sukumaran. The final decision regarding the awards were taken by the three judges on the panel, D I Aravindan, T Parameswari and Ambai.

The translators chosen this year for the award are Dr R Karthick Narayanan and K Vasamalli for their translation from Toda language into Tamil and Dr B Vijaykumar for his translation from Tamil to Assamese and Assamese to Tamil.

All the writers have honoured SPARROW and the panel of judges by accepting the awards.

The award citation for DR R KARTHICK NARAYANAN:

In appreciation and recognition of his passionate commitment to safeguarding linguistic diversity and harnessing digital tools to protect and promote traditional practices and knowledge systems, and his book *Marum Ulagil Maraya Oligal* (Sounds that Remain in a Changing World, Sahitya Akademi, 2017), co-authored with K Vasamalli, documenting Toda songs and narratives with a view to archive Toda oral arts, SPARROW has great pleasure in conferring on Dr Karthick R Narayanan the SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary Award 2024.

The award citation for VASAMALLI KURTAN:

In appreciation and recognition of her functioning as a Toda language expert and a collector of Toda songs and stories and for her book *Marum Ulakil Maraya Oligal* (Sounds that Remain in a Changing World, Sahitya Akademi, 2017), co-authored with Dr Karthick R Narayanan, documenting Toda songs and narratives with a view to archive Toda oral arts, SPARROW has great pleasure in conferring on Vasamalli Kurtan the SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary Award 2024.

The award citation for DR B VIJAYKUMAR:

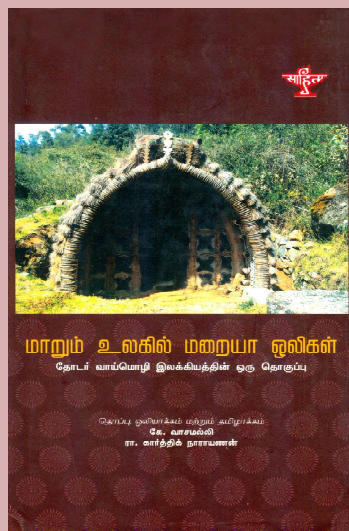
In appreciation and recognition of his monumental literary efforts in translating Tamil literary works into Assamese language and translating Assamese literary works into Tamil to bridge the literary gap between the North East region of India and Tamil Nadu, SPARROW has great pleasure in conferring on Dr B Vijayakumar the SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary Award 2024.



Dr R Karthick Narayanan is a passionate linguist and dedicated archivist with a profound commitment to preserving the linguistic diversity of India. With a wealth of experience in documenting and revitalising lesser-known languages, Dr Karthick's work bridges the gap between academic research and community-driven language preservation. He holds a PhD in Linguistics from Jawaharlal Nehru University and specialises in Sociolinguistics, Language Documentation and Digital Archiving. He researches linguistic diversity, multilinguality, language use, and documents and archives linguistic resources of tribal and indigenous languages in India.

Currently, he serves as the Chief Community and Data Officer at UnReal-TecE LLP. Previously, he was a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Moturi Satyanarayana Centre for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences at Krea University, where his research focused on language endangerment within the multilingual communities of the Nilgiris. His forthcoming monograph, *Multilinguality, Vitality, and Endangerment: Insights from the Lived Experiences of Multilingual India*, informed by both his doctoral and postdoctoral research, is expected to be published by Cambridge Scholars Press in 2024.

Dr Karthick has previously held research positions at esteemed institutions such as the Central Institute for Indian Languages, Sahitya Akademi, and Sikkim University. He is the co-author (with K Vasamalli) of *Marum Ulagil Maraya Oligal* (Sounds that Remain in a Changing World, Sahitya Akademi, 2017), documenting Toda songs and narratives, dedicated to documenting Toda oral arts. He played a pivotal role in developing India's first endangered language archives, SiDHELA (Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalayas Endangered Language Archive), and is a valued language archiving consultant for Basha Sanchika, the Language Repository of India hosted at the Central Institute for Indian Languages. Dr Karthick is passionately committed to safeguarding linguistic diversity and harnessing digital tools to protect and promote traditional practices and knowledge systems.





K Vasamalli (Vasamalli Kurtaz) who is the first graduate of her community, is a social activist and a Toda language expert and a collector of Toda songs and stories. She is a Toda Community Coordinator, State Tribal Welfare Board Member (2008) and now District Tribal Welfare Committee Member. Till 2021, she was a member of the State Board for Wildlife (SBWL). She has co-authored with Dr Karthick Narayanan a book documenting Toda oral narrative entitled *Marum Ulagil Maraya Oligal* (Sounds that Remain in a Changing World) published by Sahitya Akademi in 2017. She coordinates with Tribal women self-help groups to facilitate their development and empowerment. She is currently working on a Toda Dictionary and planning to bring out a book of stories, songs and culture of Todas.



Dr B Vijayakumar is an Assistant Professor of Tamil Language in the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, Gauhati University Assam. He has done MA (Tamil), MA (Linguistics), a PhD in Linguistics and has a Diploma in Assamese and Hindi. Prior to joining Gauhati University, he was working as a lecturer cum Junior Resource Person at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (Govt. of India), Mysore. Since 2014, he has been teaching Tamil to the students of North East India. Three research scholars from the same region have completed their research under his supervision, and four scholars are currently doing their research. He has authored books, dictionaries, second language learning materials, translation works and several academic articles. His translation of Tirukkural, and his scholarly articles comparing Assamese literature, drama tradition and cultural aspects with Tamil culture and his work in lexicology have been much appreciated. In recognition of his contributions, he has received several prestigious awards, including Dr Radhakrishnan Award, and Tamil Sudar Award from the Government of Tamil Nadu and Tirukkural Academy from Malaysia, to mention a few. In October 2023, he was honoured with the 'Tirumarai Tirumagan Award' by the Hon'ble Governor of Tamil Nadu for his efforts in translating Tamil literary works into languages of the Northeast region of India.

ACCEPTANCE NOTE DR R KARTHICK NARAYANAN

I am deeply honoured and humbled to receive the SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary Award 2024 along with Mrs Vasamalli for our work *Marum Ulagil Maraya Oligal* (2017), translating Toda oral art into Tamil. This award recognises my effort to document the rich oral traditions of the Toda language, and my commitment to conserve marginalized languages like Toda.

Marum Ulagil Maraya Oligal, published by Sahitya Akademi, is a fieldwork-based compilation of Toda songs and stories. It features Toda text in Roman script alongside Tamil translations, marking the first Tamil translation of Toda oral art. It represents a significant milestone in our ongoing effort to bring Toda oral traditions to a wider audience.

This endeavour transcends documentation, fostering a collaborative process that redefines the relationship between linguist and indigenous community. By blurring the roles of researcher and researched, it establishes shared authority and mutual responsibility in shaping the Toda oral art collection. The participatory, community-driven approach aims to restore parity in knowledge production between indigenous communities and researchers.

I am deeply grateful to the esteemed panel of jury for recognising this effort in documenting and translating Toda Oral Arts. It stands as a testament to the power of collaboration and the importance of amplifying indigenous voices.

On this occasion, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all my Toda collaborators who dedicated their time and effort to enrich our Toda Oral Art Collection. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to Prof. Anvita Abbi, Director of the Centre for Oral and Tribal Literature, Sahitya Akademi, and to the Sahitya Akademi Delhi office, who supported us in the publication of this work.

This award is not just a personal recognition; it acknowledges Mrs. Vasamalli's longstanding commitment to preserving Toda oral art and knowledge systems. It also honours the values of the Toda language and elevates its cultural prestige,

offering encouragement to continue efforts in documenting and celebrating India's indigenous languages.

Toda, like many Indian languages, is an "othered" language, unnamed and unrecognised by the State's decadal enumeration exercises. These indigenous languages hold vast reservoirs of knowledge that remain untapped in enriching Indian society. It is unfortunate that such invaluable languages remain overlooked. This award is an urgent reminder for more initiatives to promote these languages. Every effort, large or small, helps transform these languages from marginalised status to valued sources of enrichment for our shared culture and collective heritage.

This recognition reinforces my commitment to supporting the documentation of indigenous oral traditions, preserving their vitality, and ensuring their legacy for future generations.



**SPARROW Virtual Archives
SPREADING THE WORD TAKING
THE DIGITAL ROUTE**

SPARROW VIRTUAL WALK

<https://www.sparrowonline.org/virtual-archives/>
<https://youtu.be/vZn6asJ72Zo>

ACCEPTANCE NOTE K VASAMALLI

I am deeply honoured to receive the SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary Award 2024 for my lifelong work as a Toda language expert and a collector of Toda songs and stories and for the book *Marum Ulagil Maraya Oligal* (Sounds that Remain in a Changing World, Sahitya Akademi, 2017), which I co-authored with Dr Karthick R Narayanan, documenting Toda songs and narratives. The book was the outcome of my desire to keep Toda oral arts alive and it was the first time that any such book has been bought out.

I am grateful that this effort has been recognised. I would like to express my deep gratitude, on this occasion, to all the Toda collaborators who dedicated their time and effort to enrich the collection in the book. My thanks are also due to Prof. Anvita Abbi, Director of the Centre for Oral and Tribal Literature, Sahitya Akademi, and to the Sahitya Akademi Delhi office, who supported us in the publication of this work.

This award in appreciation of my long-standing commitment to preserve Toda oral practices and knowledge systems will go a long way in continued efforts to document and honour marginalised languages like the Toda language.

This award further strengthens my commitment to document the life and language of the Todas and their oral traditions so that they remain as a legacy not only to the younger generation of Todas but also to the younger generation in the rest of the country.



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You can download from
[www. http://www.sparrowonline.org/newsletters.htm](http://www.sparrowonline.org/newsletters.htm)



ACCEPTANCE NOTE DR B VIJAYAKUMAR

Greetings to the respected Director of SPARROW and the panel of judges.

I am truly honoured to receive the SPARROW-R Thyagarajan Literary Award 2024. It is a privilege to be recognised for my work in translating between Tamil and Assamese and for contributing to the cross-cultural understanding between the regions through lexicology, comparative studies, and translation. I sincerely thank you all for this recognition.

I am delighted to accept the award. This award encourages me to continue my efforts and serves as a testament to the importance of bridging languages and cultures. Thanks to SPARROW for this honour, and to all those who support the work of translation and cultural preservation. This recognition for my work in translating Tamil literary treasures into Assamese fills me with a deep sense of fulfilment and responsibility.

First and foremost, I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to SPARROW for bestowing this honour upon me. This award is not just a testimony to my efforts but also a celebration of the linguistic and cultural diversity that binds us as a nation. It is an acknowledgment of the power of translation in bridging cultures, connecting histories, and building dialogues across communities.

Tamil and Assamese, though separated by geography and spoken by distinct communities, share a wealth of emotional, intellectual, and cultural resonance. Tamil, a classical language with a history stretching back millennia, offers a treasure trove of literature that speaks of human emotions, ethical dilemmas, and timeless truths. Assamese, one of the vibrant languages of the Northeast, carries its own legacy of resilience, beauty, and lyrical expression. Bringing these two linguistic worlds together has been both a challenge and a joy.

Translation is often described as an act of love, and learning. For me, it was an attempt to capture the soul of Tamil literature and make it accessible to the Assamese-speaking community. Each work I translated—be it a classical text, a sangam poem, or a short story—demanded an intimate understanding of not only the text but also the cultural and

emotional undertones. It required me to immerse myself in the nuances of Tamil ethos while ensuring that the Assamese rendition resonated authentically with its readers. Every word chosen was a bridge, every phrase crafted was a handshake between cultures. This journey taught me that translation is not merely about linguistic accuracy; it is about interpreting and reimagining a world for a new audience.

This accomplishment is not mine alone. I owe a debt of gratitude to countless individuals and institutions who made this journey possible.

- To the Tamil authors whose works I had the privilege to translate—your words inspired me, and your trust encouraged me to undertake this endeavour.

- To the Assamese readers who embraced these works with open hearts—you reaffirmed my belief in the unifying power of literature.

- To my family, mentors, and friends—your unwavering support gave me the strength to persevere.

- Lastly, to the Tamil and Assamese languages themselves—thank you for being my companions in this beautiful journey.

Through my work, I hope to encourage more translators to take up the mantle of cultural exchange. There are countless stories waiting to be told, waiting to transcend the boundaries of language. Let us nurture these stories and bring them to the world stage. This award is not the culmination of my journey but a milestone that motivates me to explore new horizons. It challenges me to delve deeper into the literary landscapes of Tamil and Assamese, and to continue my efforts in building bridges of understanding.

As I conclude, I wish to share a quote that has guided me throughout this journey:

‘Literature is not an escape but a way to embrace life in all its diversity and richness.’

Thank you once again for this honour. May we continue to celebrate the transformative power of words, the beauty of languages, and the spirit of humanity they represent. Once again, I am grateful to SPARROW for supporting and celebrating the work of translators and scholars across India.

Thank You.



SPARROW'S Latest PUBLICATION is out!



Oor Aikkiya Kutumpac Carittiram
Family History (Tamil Edition)

Author: V.S. Visalakshiammal

Translated by: C S Lakshmi and Malathi Ramanathan

Website Link: <https://books.kalachuvadu.com>

Buy on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.in/dp/BoD9BRQRNG?>

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Houseplant

I have been sick for months
Eyelids heavy with saltwater
My limbs rusted under covers
The mattress has sunk deeper
I stay lodged between the layers
The light and dark of the sky
The only keepers of time.
My plant watches over me
It has grown over the pot
And climbed the window sill
I have not watered it as I should
Maybe it will give up on me too
It should.
I have waited for its leaves to become yellow
For the roots to dry up
The soil has started to turn a flaky grey in some parts
But there are no signs of early death
It grows steadily and surely
Cleansing the air
Its green slicing through the grey
And dances when the light caresses it
It waits on me, patiently
Soon, soon, I whisper to it.

—*Saweini Laloo*

—*Saweini Laloo*

A White Cat

A white cat
Jumps off a wall
Opens its wings
And flies away



ANDAVAN PICHAI CHARITRAM

Andavan Pichai: The Gift of God

—*Nalini Vinayak*

Sri. Andavan Pichai was a Saint and Composer, whose songs, sayings, shlokas, have been sung by many, discoursed by many and inspired many. At the tender age of ten, she was divinely inspired to sing in praise of Lord Muruga (Kartikeya). Even though she never went to school and was taught only Tamil at home, the songs that poured out of her were in Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada.

Andavan Pichai, named Maragathavalli at birth, was a simple, gentle, serene soul, who lived life with detached attachment, the ideal expressed in Hindu scriptures,. She touched everyone who came into her presence and they were deeply influenced by her

simplicity and divinity. Even after her Samadhi in 1990, her devotion to God expressed in her songs continues to touch many.

BIRTH

Born in the year 1899 on September 6th in Chennai, India, her birth was considered auspicious by her uncle Venkatasubbiyer and father Sankaranarayana Sastri. Both brothers were lawyers of very high standing and devoutly religious and scholarly. At the time of her birth, Venkatasubbiyer received an emerald idol of Devi Maragathavalli from the Venkatagiri Raja. Having a premonition, he named the little girl Maragathavalli. It was not surprising therefore, that she had an abundance of Devi Kataksham (Blessings) in the form of Kalpagavalli, Sharada and Rajarajeshwari and sang their praises in a state of trance.

CHILDHOOD

Valli was tutored along with her other siblings at home. Valli would often slip away and gaze with forlorn hope at she knew not what. She was dubbed affectionately with the appellation 'Nirakshara Kukshi', meaning a soul without knowledge of even the alphabets, by her father.

Nearing 10, made an object of ridicule by her kith and kin, for she spoke with a lisp, the child Valli looked in mute desperation at her father – (a well-renowned national poet, famous for such poetic gems as 'Vande Mataram Ambikam Bhagavatim' and other scholarly works like Bhoja Charitram, The Age of Sankara etc.) - trying to express the emotions churning in her heart.

One night, Valli went to bed, an aching prayer in her heart. The next morning, she got up with great purpose and went to stand beside her father. Surprised, he asked her gently, "Do you want to tell me something?" Valli nodded, closed her eyes and recited a poem, the gist of which went: "The One did become many; Creates, preserves, and annihilates; That which is beyond the reach of the Vedas, and stands Alone, such Parabrahman do I, Maragathavalli bow down to with both hands joined together in prayer that my speech may become poetry singing His praises."

Sankaranarayana Sastri gazed in thunderstruck amazement at her rhetoric and knowledge. "Where did you come by this knowledge?" he asked. She recounted how Payyan (Lord Muruga) came to her and asked her to put out her tongue and wrote OM upon it with His Vel (spear). He then sat beside her and blessed her with divine knowledge enabling her to find the nectar of wisdom. She lost her baby-like lisp and was able to sing His praises. A simple rendering of what she divined from one of her songs:

"Diving in the deep sea with much trouble a pearl is found,
Diving in the sea of wisdom, I found a pearl named Muruga.
Will the five senses surround me and take him away?

Will the illusion of life, the big stealer take him away?
Will the destructive ego snatch at him while no one is watching?
Will the uncontrolled mind snap at him and take him away?
Let that Murugan himself come and guard this pearl I have found.
Just like jewels are locked in a box
So should this Murugan be locked within me."

This set Maragathavalli on a path of inspired writing about her devotion to God in His various forms: Krishna, Shiva, Devi, Muruga and so on. Nothing could stem the flow of this tide once started – not marital status, nor children, nor household bonds. The quintessence of the above poem ruled the way she lived. She performed her karmas, but always kept a part of herself away, in a detached corner, reserved for her devotion to God.

HOW MARAGATHAVALLI BECAME ANDAVAN PICHAI

Maragathavalli (affectionately called Maththa), got married at a very tender age. She went to her husband, Sri Narasimha Sastry's house when she was older as was the norm in those days. She performed all her duties diligently, but the inner core of her was always dedicated to Lord Muruga. She would fall in a trance every now and then, and forget the whole world as she sang in praise Lord Muruga. She was asked by the elders in the house to desist from singing the Lord's praises at all odd hours, for it could bring nothing but denigration for the family. In the world she lived in, a woman was always in the background. Since she showed a marked inclination towards spirituality, there were many who soon became her followers, which did not accord well with the conservative ideas of the time. Valli gave the requisite promise not to sing Murugan's praises to the elders, but was miserable within. Lord Muruga came to her in her dream and promised her that a day would come when he would free her personally from her promise and she would be able to sing his praises again.

She continued to compose spiritual songs in her mind, but kept her promise to not sing. Twenty four

years later, she was freed of the promise she made to the elders by a near-death experience, when she suffered a heart attack in 1948. In her own words in 'Charitram', she wrote that Lord Muruga and Lord Ganapathy themselves came to free her from her dilemma. Lord Muruga assured her that it was His wish that she should sing his praises again. Even though the elders to whom she had given the promise were gone, she expressed concern that to break that promise might bring harm to the family. The Lord assured her that as promised to her 24 years ago, he had made everything alright and that He was eager to hear her, Maragathavalli, sing his praises again. He called her 'Pichi', one who is mad for love of him. After nearly dying, she had been granted a new lease on life and her spirit could soar again singing about Lord Muruga. That day she became 'Andavan Pichi' later 'Pichai' meaning a gift from God to her followers.

She faced an even more uphill battle to make people in her orbit accept her wish to escape from the mundane world to the world of Spirituality. But now she was able to face everything with the blessings of Lord Muruga. It was during this time that in 1952 she sang 'Ullam Uruguthada" in Kalikamba Temple, Chennai, where it is engraved for eternity in her Murugan Sannidhi. Even as the family was growing, a part of her was receptive to Lord Muruga and she not only sang in his praise, but was inspired to sing on Shiva, Devi, Krishna, Narayana and other deities also. Andavan Pichai's legacy will live on forever.

Republished from the link <https://www.nalinivinayak.com/mataji-andavan-pichai>

Official Site for Sri. Andavan Pichai

<https://www.andavanpichai.com/>

A story incomplete without her daughter Kamakshi Kuppaswamy. This website has been created by Andavan Pichai's grandchildren.

Do write to us if you get to know about a life, a book, a visual, a film or a song which you think must be DOCUMENTED in SPARROW.

For REVIEWS please send two copies of the book.



Solvanam - Tamil Arts and Literature

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

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

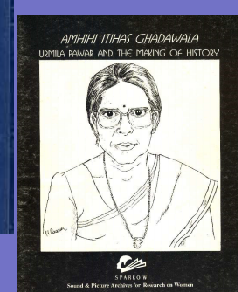
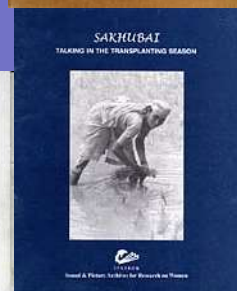
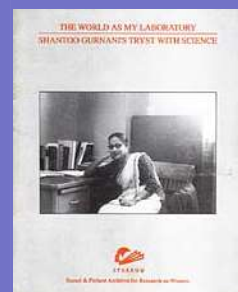
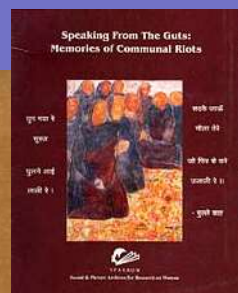
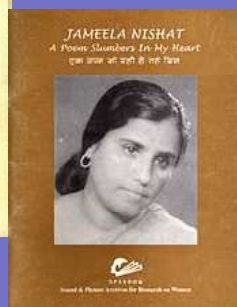
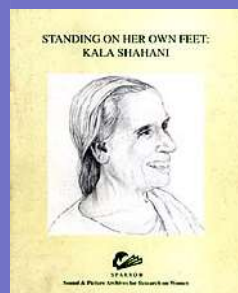
Standing on her own feet: Kala Shahani November, 1997.
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Lakshmi Venkatesh Goes on A Pilgrimage



**Amarnath Yatra
July 2025**

One of my office colleagues, Suchitra, had gone to Amarnath Yatra in 2024 by helicopter from Sonmarg. For those who are not aware, Amarnath Temple located in Kashmir in a cave at 12,750 feet is one of the most sacred Hindu pilgrimages. Amar means immortal and Nath means Lord. It is believed that this is where Lord Shiva revealed the secret of life and death to his wife Goddess Parvati. The cave houses a stalagmite Shiva lingam formed due to freezing of water drops falling from the roof of the cave. The temple is open for approximately 40 days in July-August but can be even shorter depending on the ice lingam formation.

Suchitra promised that she would take me along the following year along with a few of my other colleagues who were also interested in making the pilgrimage. In December 2024 we started planning for the trip through an agency opting to take the helicopter route that would save time and effort. More people wanted to join and it grew to a total of 14 persons. The first requirement is to get a medical certificate from an authorised government hospital approved by the Amarnath shrine board. In March the shrine declared that the Yatra would start from 3 July. That's when we booked our flight tickets from Mumbai to Srinagar in Kashmir planning to go to Amarnath on 6 July which was a Sunday. Since the weather was unpredictable the plan was to keep 7 July also available and return to Mumbai on 8 July. We booked the helicopter ride as well.

Then suddenly on 22 April 2025, militants attacked tourists in Pahalgam, about 100 km from Srinagar, targeting 26 tourists mainly Hindus. In retaliation, the Indian government launched Operation Sindoor on 9 May, carrying out air strikes targeting several terrorist locations along the India Pakistan border. This sent jitters amongst all of us and we hoped peace would return by the time the yatra started. In June we got the message that the helicopter services were cancelled as the area was declared a No-Fly zone.

The option we had was to go proceed by road—either on palkis where four men carry you on a chair hoisted on sticks, or on horses or by foot. None of us

felt up to it. When we looked to cancel our bookings, the hotels refused to refund the advance, and we stood to lose most of the airline ticket spend as well. Under the circumstances we decided to wait and watch and take the call to go on the yatra after we reached Srinagar. We completed the registration formalities keeping our options open to what was God's will.

5 July 2025



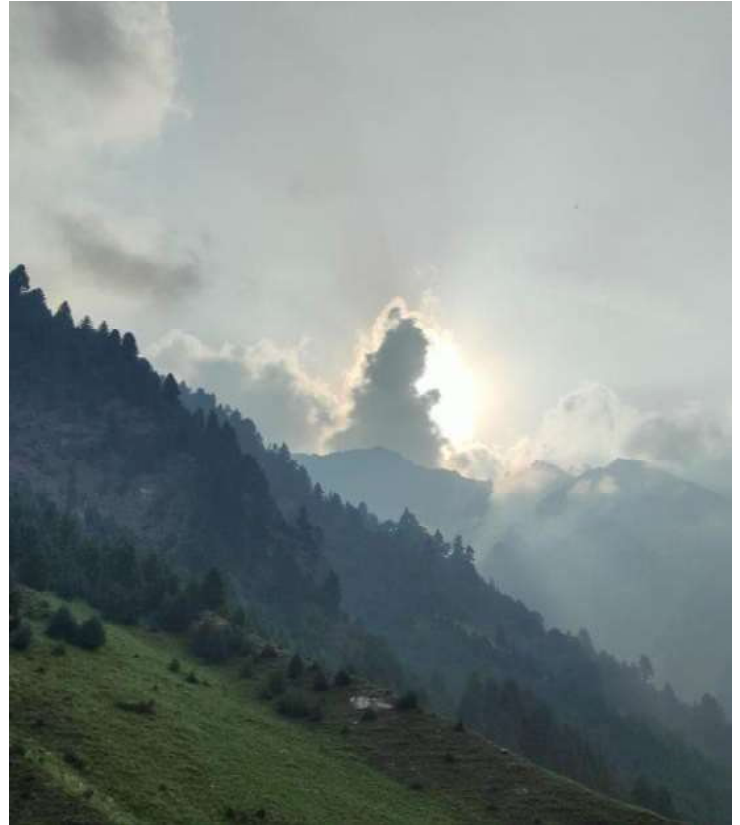
It was with a lot of trepidation that I along with my friend Geetanjali, boarded an early morning flight from Mumbai to Srinagar.

We had packed thermals, sweaters, coats, gloves and raincoats anticipating very cold weather at Amarnath. Most of the other members of the group had travelled a day earlier and were already in Srinagar. It was extremely hot, almost 35 Deg C in Srinagar, contrary to my expectations. A van picked us up at the Srinagar airport and took us to a restaurant where the others were waiting for us. We had a quick coffee and sandwich and took the route to Sonamarg that was about 80km away. The route



was scenic and what struck me was the presence of the army every 500 m. Every effort was being made to ensure security to the Amarnath yatris.

We passed the recently constructed Sonamarg tunnel, an initiative by the Indian government to provide access to the border areas. The tunnel is 6.5 km long and made to world class standards. We reached the hotel in the afternoon, enjoyed a good lunch and moved into our rooms that offered a fantastic view of the mountains.



Cloud with Lord Shiva's likeness



Sonmarg Tunnel entry



Relaxing in the hotel premises

We decided to go to the Yatra registration centre at the Baltal base camp and get our RFID card (Radio-frequency identification is a wireless technology that uses radio waves to identify and track tags attached to objects. It's a form of automatic identification that allows for the tracking of assets, inventory, and even people without requiring physical contact or line of sight.) which is mandatory for each pilgrim to track their movements during the yatra. This would save us time the next day when we set out on the trek. Everything was well organised and we got our RFID cards and returned to the hotel. The first step for the yatra was completed!

That evening we walked across to the road, overlooking the Thajiwas Glacier. We clicked some photos, the more adventurous amongst us made reels.

We had dinner and went to bed early since it would be a long day tomorrow.

6 July 2025

All of us assembled at the hotel lobby by 3:30 am and left for the Baltal base camp. The weather was warm, thermals and woollen clothing seemed unnecessary. I took only a light coat and a raincoat with me. The hotel gave us packed breakfast and we left for our pilgrimage while it was still dark.

A little bit about the routes to Amarnath cave, there are 2 ways to reach, one from Pahalgam which is longer (32 km) but less steep and the other was the one we had selected, from Baltal, shorter (14 km) but far steeper. If we had taken the helicopter it would have dropped us at Panchtarni. We had decided to take the Baltal route so that we could complete the yatra in one day.

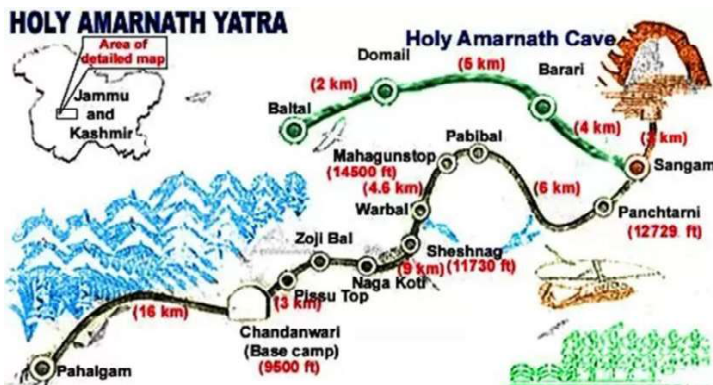
The start was not too auspicious; our van was stopped on the way to the base camp by the security forces. There was a roadblock that could take hours to clear. We got out of the van and started to walk to Baltal base camp along with several others along the route. We must have walked 3 km to the location, our RFID badges dangling around our necks. We booked our horses that would carry



On the way to registration



Girl gang



us through the mountains to our destination. Our RFID's were scanned at the entrance at Domail Check point and we started the pilgrimage with prayers for a safe journey and a good darshan.



All set!



The muddy path beyond Domail was about 8-10 feet wide, strewn with stones and uneven. On this road were pilgrims on foot, on horses and on palkis lifted by four men. Added to this, the route served both those going to Amarnath and those coming in the opposite direction to Baltal. The horses kicked up fine white dust, that settled on our clothes, hair and bodies. I pitied the men carrying the palkis and those walking along with the horses, they would be encountering this route daily with only a piece of cloth around their faces for dust protection.

We were not aware that the day was Ekadasi, considered a very auspicious time, which added to the number of pilgrims. The administration is supposed to limit the number of pilgrims per day to 15,000. The journey was very slow, as we had to stop to allow the traffic on the opposite side to descend at every turning. The route offered beautiful views of mountains with glaciers, waterfalls and gushing river but had some extremely steep locations that were prone to slippage and hence very dangerous. We could not really enjoy the scenic beauty. Our focus was on staying upright on the saddle, bending forward when going uphill and leaning back during descent. Two continuous days with less than five hours sleep, made me drop off to sleep, a sudden jolt waking me up. The horse keeper yelled at me, asking me to wash my eyes with water to keep awake. Not only was my life in danger if I slipped off the horse, but the horse could also be injured, something the horse keeper could not afford.

We stopped at Barari Marg at an elevation of 11,730 feet, where I had some hot and sweet Kahwa to drink while the horse keepers had tea and bread. The horse keepers and palki bearers were all Muslims, some of them well educated but lacking any employment opportunities and forced to take on any work that came their way.

Endless train of horses and people

It took us close to six hours to reach temple base at 13,500 feet by which time most of us had aching bottoms sitting on the hard saddles and aching backs due to the jolts along the route. It was a relief to get off the horses, our feet finding it difficult to balance upright. All around us were thousands of pilgrims from all over the country and hundreds of horses filled the slopes. A remarkable experience was the Bhandaras and Langars that offer free food and refreshments to all the pilgrims. These are managed by volunteers who work tirelessly to ensure every devotee is fed as a service to God. We got down at one managed by a Maharashtrian where we kept our bags and had something to eat. It was already 1 pm.



End of horse ride...notice the number of horses on the slope

I started on foot with the youngest boy in our group, Shree, to cover the last stretch and climb the steps to the cave. Many of the others opted for the palki, since they were already in a bad shape after the long horse ride.

The crowd was humungous, wave upon wave of people walking with single minded devotion. We deposited our shoes and went to the gate. Looking at my grey hair, I was asked to go ahead, but they did not let Shree in. They didn't allow me to wait for him either, leaving me with no option but to proceed, hoping I could locate him later in the sea of humans.



The holy Amarnath cave in sight

I finally neared the linga, and though I pride myself as being a very strong woman, mentally and physically, tears flowed involuntarily. Was it just physical exhaustion and the fact that the goal was achieved, or was it the sense of a greater power, I cannot tell. All I know is that the tears kept streaming all through the time I saw the ice lingam with the trishool perched on it. I collected the prasad and reached the Nandi statue below. I came to my senses then, realising that I was still clutching the money that I should have deposited in the hundi. Fortunately there was one near the Nandi and I calmed down, returned to normal and started to climb down the steps.

Now more mundane thoughts occupied me; how would I ever locate Shree in this crowd? I scanned the steps, hoping to see him but he was nowhere to be seen. I descended, and made my way to the spot where we had left our shoes and there he was holding both his and my shoes in his hands. A sense of relief flooded through me. Now I would not leave him out of sight. We waited to see if his parents were around while I had tea and biscuits from a Bhandara. We decided to go back to the Maharashtrian Bhandara where we had left the bags since the weather had started changing. Dark clouds drifted in, with a few drops of rain. Loudspeaker announcements started asking all pilgrims to leave since nobody would be allowed to stay at Amarnath overnight.



All smiles post darshan...

Some people in the group opted to go by palki, others by horses. Though the horse ride charges are mandated by the Amarnath board, the horse



keepers decided to take advantage of the situation and hiked up the rates knowing that the pilgrims had no option but to give in to their demands.

It was 5:30 pm by the time we started the journey back to Baltal. The return journey took less time, being downhill for most part. We were back at Domail by 9:30 pm but since we had all started at different times it was difficult to locate everyone. Compounding the problem was the fact that not all telecom services were operational in the area so we were really handicapped to contact everyone via our mobiles.

Another problem was that our van was parked in the Baltal parking lot so we still had another 3 km to get to that location from Domail. A few of us got into a free electric 3 wheeler service, others hitched rides and some others walked part of the way. Finally we were all assembled at the car park and drove back to the hotel in Sonmarg. The police checking was very strict; we were stopped and our hotel reservations checked before we were let off. It was 11:30 pm when we reached the hotel.

I went to have a bath immediately on arrival, I was coated with fine white dust, my hair was stiff with grime. It was a relief to pour hot water, cleaning the dust and providing some relief to the aching feet and hands (from holding on to the support on the horse so you did not fall down).

We all had dinner and I fell into a deep sleep-relieved that we had accomplished the daunting trek without any mishap. There was no rain during the trip that would have made the journey more challenging. We were truly blessed!

7 July 2025

We woke up leisurely, now that our main mission was accomplished. Though our bodies still ached, our mind was at peace.

We packed our bags and after breakfast left for Srinagar. The roads were all clean, there was no plastic to be seen anywhere. Whether this was because of the presence of the army or this is always so in Kashmir, I am not certain. The journey passed smoothly, we chatted with our travel companions who had become friends.

We reached Srinagar and went to Lal Chowk, a scene of separatist activity till recently. The area was refurbished in 2023, when the clock tower was



Beautified Lal Chowk in Srinagar

restored and the area around it was converted into an open space where people could come to play at the fountains and enjoy the view from the benches. A far cry from the separatist sponsored morchas and stone pelting that were a regular feature earlier.

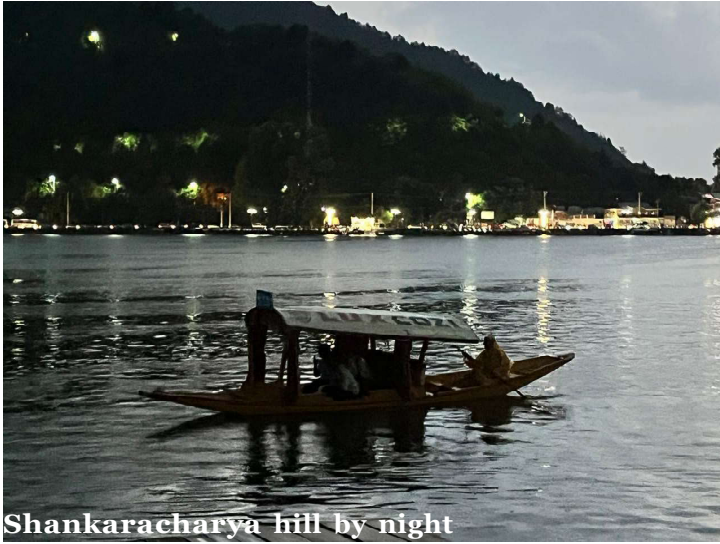
We had lunch and left for the Shankaracharya temple that was built by Shankaracharya in the 9th century on the top of a hill. I had been to Kaladi in Kerala in December 2024 which was Shankaracharya's birthplace. Shankaracharya had walked this distance of close to 4000 km!



Shankaracharya Temple

The van came part of the way, then we took electric 3 wheelers to the ticket counter. From there we climbed 243 steps to reach the temple that housed a linga. We also visited the cave where Shankaracharya meditated. The weather was extremely hot, making us wonder if we were in Srinagar or in Chennai.

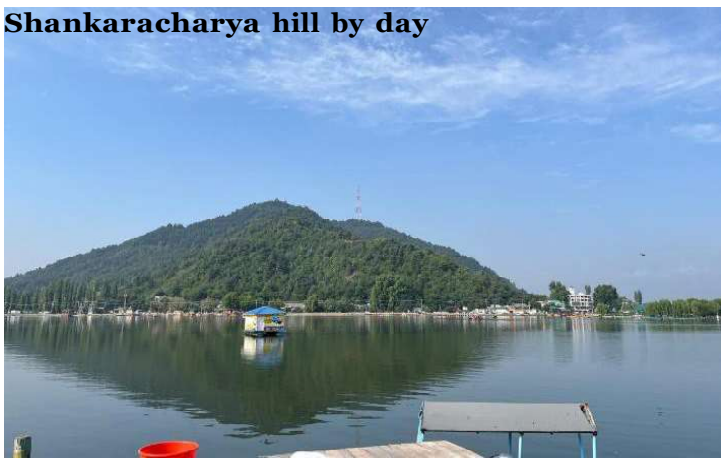
We climbed down the mountain and went to the Dal Lake where we would be staying in a house boat. We got into a small boat or shikara that would take us across the waters to the house boat, when it started drizzling. We were glad as the weather would cool down. We reached our house boat and settled into our rooms when the rain became very heavy,



Shankaracharya hill by night

pelting down so we could hear the drumming as it hit the roof of the house boat.

We had dinner and went to sleep. Unfortunately, the rain, though welcome for cooling the area, resulted in the power being interrupted as a cable was cut due to tree fall. We were without power for the night. I had a very disturbed sleep, my head started to ache since it was very stuffy in the room.



Shankaracharya hill by day

8 July 2025

I woke up to a pounding headache that did not reduce in intensity despite taking medication. This was when I truly appreciated the company of my co-travellers. One of them proceeded to give me an acupressure massage on my palms and feet, while another got a pain balm and a third provided

Boat House View



a remedy against the negative effects of the evil eye. I was overwhelmed by the generosity and concern by people who I had known only for the past couple of days.

We had breakfast and left the house boat for shopping. Everyone was enamoured by the embroidered garments in a typical Kashmiri style and shopped for their family members.





We also went to a Hanuman mandir in Lal Chowk area that was heavily guarded by the army. There was very little indication of there being a temple, it was a very pedestrian building-like appearance but led

into a spacious temple. I recited the Hnauuman Chalisa, the temple had an idol of Saint Tulsidas who had composed the prayer in praise of Hanuman.

Our next stop was at the Mughal gardens opposite the Dal Lake. Some of the women dressed up in Kashmiri costumes and got their pictures clicked. It



was very hot, the rain had done little to reduce the temperatures.

We had lunch and then proceeded to the Hari Parbhat Fort, an ancient fort that dates back to the days of Mughals. The fort was built by Emperor Akbar in the 18th century and later occupied by the Sikh emperor, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. We could see



temples, gurudwaras and mosques from the top, showing how all religions co-existed in Kashmir.

The fort had the Sharika Devi Temple. We debated whether we should go, since we had done quite a lot of climbing and had to leave for the airport.

This trip had been a pilgrimage, and it was appropriate that we end it with devi darshan so we quickly made our way to the temple. The idol was very different and to my



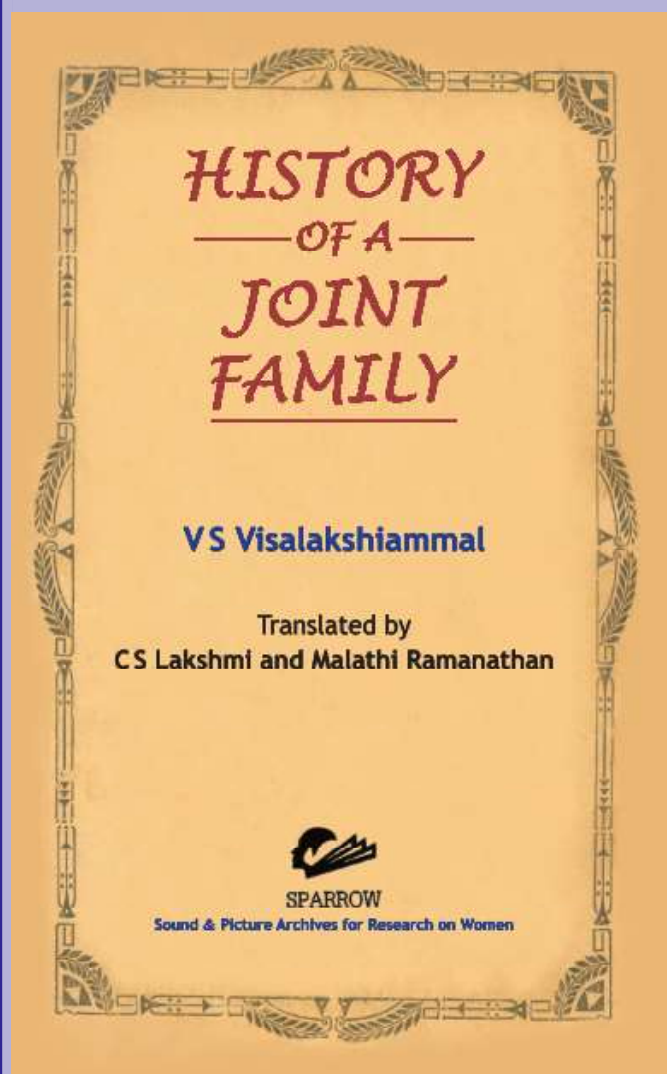
surprise there were a lot of pilgrims from Andhra and Karnataka.

Our pilgrimage had come to an end. We left for the airport where the checking was very onerous. All our bags had to be scanned before we entered the airport and then again at the check in as per the normal procedure.

The flight was on time, there was no rain when we landed in Mumbai. The trip was truly blessed by the gods.

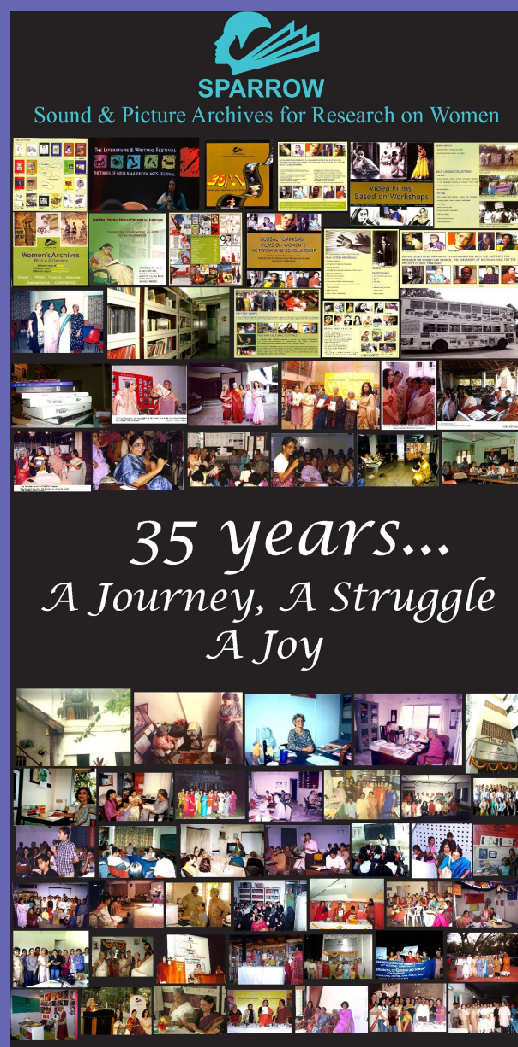


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