

Three Major Events

At the time of going to print three major events have been in the news in the last few months since we brought out the last SNL. The event that shook Mumbaikars out of their complacency regarding the city of Mumbai was the Marine Drive rape incident of April 21 where a college girl was raped by a policeman in a police chowky situated at Marine Drive. The response of the city and citizens was one of anger and outrage. The police blaming it on drunkenness and perversion of the cop and treating this as an isolated incident did not convince those who thought that this was a matter of grave concern that had to do with attitudes towards women and women's space in the public sphere. Many voices were raised against this crime and women's groups demanded that the city be made safe for women. The article in *Samana* suggesting that women invite sexual assault through provocative clothing only added to this anger. Women's groups got together at Azad Maidan immediately after the Marine Drive incident to hold an agitation to express their anger. PUKAR (Partners for Urban Knowledge Action and Research) took up a Gender and Space project and examined women's experiences in public spaces and found that women don't feel safe in public spaces unless they adhered to certain norms of dressing and had specific reasons to be outside their homes. PUKAR held a discussion on 29th April to take this discussion beyond safety to assert that all women, whatever their profession and mode of dress, have the right to access public space as citizens. Time has come to question more emphatically all kinds of ideological assumptions and notions regarding a woman's "proper place" in society. As a working woman commuter told another, "Enough is enough."

And then came the floods. Mumbai is used to heavy downpours.



14.07.2000, Asian Age

Editors' Note

Rains have assumed a whole new meaning for all of us in Mumbai after July 26, 2005. The SPARROW archives itself was not affected as we are on the second floor and the water did not enter the buildings in the Sher-e-Punjab area where we are. But it was a day of disaster all right. This issue of SNL does look soaked in water but you must realise we have very good reason for that.

We also bring you some important events and issues related to women that came up for action, comments and serious discussion.

SPARROW had its last exhibition of Maya Kamath's cartoons in Bangalore where she lived and died. We bring you some images of the exhibition. A particular cartoon seemed to us very appropriate and so we have displayed it below.

In this issue we have chosen from our Literature Leap project a Tamil writer and a Tulu writer we have enjoyed reading and talking to.

SPARROW is now open for consultation. So do visit us. You can also visit our website at www.sparrowonline.org

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Taking Maya to Bangalore.....P3
- Different lives, Different Goals.....P4
- Suneeta Shetty, A poet of Tulu nad.P6
- Read the book review of Tamil writer Bama's Short Story Collection : *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum*.....P7

It does not normally disrupt anything and rain or shine the people of Mumbai make it to their work places. But July 26 turned out to be a day unprecedented in the history of Mumbai. Panic calls started coming in around the afternoon and the news channels began to show horrifying scenes of colonies submerged in water and roads and railway tracks flooded and people walking and wading through the water to reach home. It was a disaster the city was unprepared for and not just buildings but also dreams about the city becoming a global city drowned in the floodwaters that day. The floods also brought out the best in the citizens of Mumbai. Individual citizens showed great courage and compassion. We also came to know, for the very first time, of the existence of a river in Mumbai called the Mithi river. Choked with plastic bags and garbage, the river decided to make its presence felt on that

rainy day; it was as if the final deluge had hit the city. The government has to now deal with not only mounting criticism of its disaster management but also the mounting garbage, damaged roads and collapsing buildings.

When Deputy Chief Minister and Home Minister R R Patil made a move in April to close dance bars he received both flowers and brickbats. A group of people felt that the bar dancers were being exploited in the name of entertainment and that they should be rehabilitated instead of being pushed into a profession in which they could easily drift towards prostitution. They also felt that such action was necessary to protect our culture. Some of the office bearers of the Bharatiya Bar Girls' Union thought otherwise. Avisha Kulkarni, Treasurer of the Union, said in a newspaper interview that banning women from dancing in bars without a rehabilitation programme would only push them into prostitution.



How would the government then protect and preserve its culture, she asked. She also asserted that the bar girls were not prostitutes, they were part of the entertainment industry. She argued that issues of morality should not be raised because so many immoral things were happening in big hotels and discos. It was unfair to attack only one section that was vulnerable. The law banning women from dancing in bars came into effect from the midnight of August 14, 2005. On August 20, *Majlis*, PUKAR and *Point of View* held a meeting where workers, performers, artists, academics, filmmakers, teachers, poets and citizens of Mumbai came together to protest against the law and support the struggle of the bar dancers. The meeting was to assert that Mumbai must remain a city that belonged to all its citizens and not just to those who were upper class, upper caste, powerful and often male.



Photo Scan, Indian Express, July28, 2005

Taking Maya to Bangalore

The Maya Kamath exhibition went to Bangalore in April. The Alliance Francaise in Bangalore collaborated with SPARROW for the exhibition. When we reached the Alliance we realised that there was no gallery as such. There was an open sunken courtyard surrounded by corridors with rooms. Coffee tables and chairs lay in the sunken courtyard with students chatting and eating. A nice scene but how would we put up our exhibition? The *MADE Designers* looked unfazed. The red cemented flooring of the sunken courtyard made them happy and enthusiastic. We got the tables and chairs and the chatter of students shifted elsewhere. There was a crisscross of steel wiring above and that was utilised to hang the various objects. With sunlight from above and the red-cemented flooring below, the objects assumed new meanings. The flex sheets were hung all along the corridors. They had to be cut and folded and reshaped to allow entry into various classrooms. The framed cartoons had arrived with all glasses broken. They were taken out and arranged differently on the wall.

The exhibition was inaugurated by noted actor, filmmaker and playwright Girish Karnad who spoke warmly about Maya Kamath and her work. He also formally released *The World of Maya* and the first copy was received by Nupur Basu, noted television journalist. The Kamath family literally took over the exhibition and Amarnath Kamath, Bharati Kamath and Deepa Kamath did everything to make the exhibition a great success.

Holding the exhibition in three different cities has been an enriching experience. We are sure that with Maya SPARROW will go places.



Nupur Basu, Girish Karnad, Amarnath Kamath, C S Lakshmi, Deepa Kamath at the Gallery Alliance Francaise de Bangalore, Bangalore April 16, 2005, Photo by Mohnish

A view of the exhibition
April 16, 2005, Photo by Mohnish



Sovereignty, Citizenship and Gender



Photo by Pradeep Surve

The Indian Association for Women's Studies organised its XI National Conference on Women's Studies from 3-6 May, 2005 at the Indian International Centre, Dona Paula, Goa. The theme of the Conference was "Sovereignty, Citizenship and Gender." SPARROW also had a role to play for it had been elected as an institutional member to be part of the secretariat. Several interesting sub-themes were chosen for the conference apart from special panel discussions like the South Asia Panel and the Goa Panel. The lecture instituted in the memory of Madhuriben Shah, former vice-chancellor, SNTD and former chairperson of UGC, was delivered this year by the well-known Tamil writer Bama. She spoke eloquently about what it was to live as a Dalit, a teacher and writer. SPARROW had put up a stall managed by Aarti Pandey, Meenakshi Kondaskar and Pradeep Surve. We may not have had much of a sale but it was a good experience for all the three. The conference was well-organised but had the usual drawbacks of many conferences. The Goa Panel turned out to be a weak one and unlike Bhubaneshwar and other places the local participation was very poor. But at the end of it we carried happy memories of some interesting sessions and of the Goan landscape.



SPARROW staff putting up the stall at IAWS Conference, Goa. Photo by Pradeep Surve

One Thousand Women for Peace

A thousand women from 153 countries have been jointly nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize this year. The initiative to institute this prize was taken up in 2003 by Dr. Ruth Gaby Vermot Mangold of the Socialist Party of Switzerland who is an academic and peace activist. During her travels in conflict areas like Bosnia, she saw ordinary women doing work which went unrecognised. From these travels came the idea to nominate hundreds of women from all over the world who were making a collective effort for the cause of peace and justice. Kamla Bhasin who is regional programme advisor to the South Asian Network of Gender Activists and Trainers (SANGAT) was the South Asia Coordinator of the forum which nominated the women. And the credit for the fact that out of 1000 women nominated, 157 are from Asia and of those 91 are from India, goes to Kamla Bhasin's clear perception of women's activism and scholarship. Writing about this peace initiative in her article in *Alter Net* Kamla Bhasin quotes Pablo Neruda— "They can destroy all the flowers there are, but they cannot stop the spring coming." That many of the 91 women are part of SPARROW's audio or digital recording projects made all our work worthwhile. That one of the nominated women, Dr. Neera Desai, is our senior Trustee made all of us even more ecstatic.

— SPARROW Reporter



Dr. Neera Desai



Shahajehan Appa



Mrinal Gore



Dr. Vina Mazumdar

Suneeta Shetty, A poet of Tulunad

Tulu is one of the languages spoken in coastal Karnataka. It is mainly spoken in South Canara. There are countless folk stories, songs, and legendary tales in Tulu. The legendary story of *Siri* is considered a folk epic. All of them come under oral history. Tulu does not have a script and has adopted the Kannada script.

Dr. Suneeta Shetty is a Tulu writer who has contributed a great deal to the language. She writes poems, articles and stories in Tulu. Suneeta Shetty was born and brought up in Kalavaru village in Mangalore District. After finishing middle school, she joined high school in Suratkal. She was the only girl in the vicinity who was sent to high school. Students had to cross streams and climb hillocks to reach the school. Suneeta says that she had to walk eight miles every day to go to school. She was made to walk behind a group of boys keeping a little distance from them and she was strictly instructed not to talk to the boys. A girl openly talking to boys was something that was unheard of in those parts in those days.

visiting professor at Mumbai University. Suneeta Shetty's doctoral thesis was on the women characters in Shivaram Karanth's novels.

Suneeta Shetty is a good orator and singer. She traces back her interest in literature and music to her growing up years in the village. Her father used to organise readings of epics or Yakshagana prasangas in the house. Suneeta was greatly influenced by the language of the epics, folk stories and the tradition of singing and she felt herself being drawn to both literature and music. She can keep an audience spell-bound with her singing, especially folk songs. She sometimes sings her own poems in her resonant voice to an enthralled audience.

Suneeta Shetty has three poetry collections *Pingara*, *Sankranti* and *Nagasampige* and a collection of essays entitled *Karajana* to her credit. For her contribution to Tulu literature, the *Tulu Sahitya Academy Award* and the *Rani Abakka Prashasti* award have been conferred on her. She also writes poems, articles and travelogues in Kannada. The Karnataka Government

“

Every language has its cultural context. My cultural background includes Yakshagana, Padhana, Kola, Tambila, which are special features of Tulunad. To write poems in Tulu comes to me naturally.”



“

ಪ್ರತಿ ಒಂಜಿ ಭಾಸೆಗ್ಲಾ ಒಂಜಿ ಸಂಸ್ಕೃತಿ ಉಂಡು. ಯಕ್ಷಗಾನ, ಕೋಲ, ಪಾಡ್ಡನ, ತಂಬಿಲ ಮಾತಾ ತುಳುನಾಡ್‌ಗೇ ವಿಶಿಷ್ಠವಾದಿತ್ತ್ವವೆಂಚಿನ ಒಂಜಿ ಸಾಂಸ್ಕೃತಿಕ ಪರಿಸರೊಡು ಬುಳೆದ್ ಬೈದಿನಾಲ್ ಯಾನ್. ಈ ಹಿನ್ನೆಲೆದ ಕೆದಿತೆಲೆನ್ ತುಳು ಭಾಸೆಡ್ ಬರೆಪುನೇ ಸರಿ ಎನುಂಡು...”

Suneeta Shetty belongs to the Bunts community where normally a huge dowry is demanded in marriage. Suneeta was against the dowry system and decided to continue her studies instead of marrying. She got her B.A and B.T degree from The Government College, Mangalore. Suneeta Shetty then came to Mumbai and joined as a teacher in the National Kannada Education Society School. She was determined that if she married, it would be to a person who did not demand dowry. She found such a person in Mahabala Shetty who was a follower of Gandhiji's principles of simplicity. Both Suneeta and Mahabala Shetty strongly believed that one should practise what one preached. So they got married in a simple ceremony with no ostentation. For the wedding he presented her a khaddar sari.

Suneeta did her post-graduation after marriage and joined Khalsa College. She worked for thirty-six years as lecturer at Khalsa College. She was also a

chose her recently as the recipient of its prestigious *Dana Chintamani Award* in recognition of her excellent literary contribution.

At 73, Suneeta Shetty is still full of energy. She travels widely all over the country and abroad. Her travelogue *Pravasiya Hejjegalu* has been appreciated by readers. She is also active in the *Buntara Sangha*, a community organisation. Under her guidance the women's wing of *Buntara Sangha* has founded a Women's Hostel and Old Age Home for needy women.

Suneeta Shetty insists that Mumbai's Tulu and Kannada speaking people must teach the mother tongue to their children. According to her, culture and language are what bind people to their roots. With all this work she has done for Tulu and its region it is not surprising that Suneeta Shetty is considered the Cultural Ambassador of Tulunad.

— Tulasi Venugopal

Different lives, Different Goals



Homai Vyarawalla, born in 1913 into a priestly family in Navsari, Gujarat, was the first woman photo journalist in the country. Beginning her career as a photographer with the *Bombay Chronicle* and later the *Far Eastern Bureau* of the British Information Services, she soon came to be known for her compelling photographic images taken both before and after independence. She has a rare collection of interesting pictures of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. Radhakrishnan and Mahatma Gandhi. She freelanced for *SPAN*, *Life* and many international publications and finally gave up photography in 1970. She was married to Maneckshaw Vyarawalla who was himself a photographer. In our first newsletter we had written about an audio recording we had done with her. This recording prompted us to make a film on her. Sabeena Gadihoke, a professional photographer, spoke to Homai Vyarawalla about her life and work. Talking about photography in those days, she says something very interesting about how she learnt photography: "We always did all the processing ourselves and we learnt photography by trial and error method. We would take pictures of ourselves, try out different things, different angles, different exposures and all that..." Homai currently lives in Baroda, surrounded by her photographs.

In the **Global Feminisms** project—an ongoing collaboration with the University of Michigan and SPARROW—we have completed work on two more films. Aruna Burte, an activist, spoke to Lata Pratibha Madhukar. Lata was born in Nagpur. She was an active participant in various campaigns and discussions. She worked as a lecturer and later as an anchorperson for the radio in Wardha, Maharashtra. She also worked as a research assistant in the Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai. Later she joined the Women's Centre, (Nari Kendra) Mumbai, and was with the Centre for seven years during which time she was active in the women's rights movement. Lata joined the Narmada Bachao Andolan, an environmental movement, as a co-ordinator, organising protests, and mobilising support. In the film, she talks about a workshop she attended in Delhi with participants from all over South Asia. "I remember we took a pledge that one day we will go to all national borders. Women from either side of the borders will meet at the borders and bring down all those wires, lines and fences and there will be no boundaries for women. So this was a dream that we shared." Lata lives and functions from Wardha.



In the next film Dr. C S Lakshmi, a Tamil writer, researcher in Women's Studies and currently Director of SPARROW, spoke to D Sharifa. Sharifa is a much talked about person in Tamil Nadu and among activists because of the stand she has taken on Muslim women's rights. She runs an organisation called STEPS at Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu. The organisation was started because Sharifa strongly felt that there was a need to make women aware of their rights. Her initial action-based programmes dealt with problems that arose from the politics of everyday life. After a research project she did in 1995, Sharifa decided to concentrate on the needs of Muslim women because she felt that this was a much neglected area. Talking about how she started thinking of a centre for women she says, "We need space for ourselves; we need a place of our own. This is the minimum requirement. If you see in our country, there are many working women's hostels. There are many destitute women's centres. But there is no space for women to sit, to talk, to think, to share. So I thought of this centre." For the past few years Sharifa has been fighting to build a mosque for Muslim women that would provide a space for them to both pray and discuss the issues of their life and act as a community centre. Sharifa has received several national awards for her work among women.

— Panna Roy Choudhury

Short Story Collection : *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum*



One writer who has received the attention she deserves is Bama who writes in Tamil. Bama became a writer not with intention but by accident. After coming out of a convent where she was a nun for some years, Bama felt lonely, defeated and angry. A priest friend suggested that she should write her experience and it became her first novel *Karukku*. The title *Karukku* means the sharp thorny edge of the palm leaf which can leave deep gashes on the hand if not handled carefully. *Karukku* was what her life was about. *Karukku* was followed by *Sangati* (News) and a third novel entitled *Vanmam* (Malice). All the three novels deal with the pangs and pains of being a Dalit, being marginalised, being ignored. Her latest short-story collection entitled *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum* has

many stories which have to do with being women. Each story seems to be built on a personal experience. Some of these stories remain etched in one's memory. The little girl whose unformed breast is bitten by a pig and who grows up to be called the one-breasted woman; the woman who wants to offer her condolences to an upper caste woman; the little girl who declares she will not drink water from a pump outside a Dalit colony; a baby girl born

evolved into a story-telling style where the words are precise, rough-hewn, hitting the reader like a rain of sharp-edged stones. It is difficult to escape untouched or unhurt. And one learns to accept that experience as a part of contemporary literary history.

— C S Lakshmi

“Bama's stories are simple, sharply told tales which have no stylistic jugglery. She has no time for that. She has a lot of stories to share and likes to tell a story and move on.”

in a bus, whose relatives feel relieved that they did not waste money on a taxi to take the pregnant woman to hospital; a working woman who remembers her mother who worked as an agricultural labourer to bring up her children—all these characters stay with you as if they were part of your life. This attitude of hers has

Book Details: *Oru Thathavum Erumaiyum*,
Vitiyal Pathippagam,
Coimbatore, December 2003
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Price : Rs. 80/-



Avabai Wadia: The Light is Ours



There are those who listen to the sound of a distant drum—they refuse to march in step with the rest. Avabai Wadia was one of those. She trod her own path, paved a new way.

She has lived through history and though she was too modest to have made such a claim, she has created history as well. Born on September 18, 1913, Avabai passed away this year, a few months before her 92nd birthday. A pioneer of the Family Planning Movement in India and abroad, president of the International Planned Parenthood Federation for two terms, the first woman lawyer of erstwhile Ceylon (her birthplace), recipient of the Padma Shri and the Padma Bhushan, author at 89 of a 700 page memoir, *The Light is Ours: Memoirs and Movements*, the catalogue of achievements is as endless as it is impressive.

Avabai has interacted with pioneering women like Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu; but she was never intimidating. That must surely be because of a lifetime commitment to common, humble people. "I treasure these contacts, their innate courtesy and culture" she told us at a SPARROW interview. "I never ever thought of these people as being uneducated even though they might have been illiterate."

Here was a woman whose warmth of spirit and brightness of mind shed a certain glow over all who listened to her. The Light was Ours indeed.

Alice Thorner: A Life Committed to Women's Studies



Alice Thorner, the well-known scholar, passed away on August 24, 2005 in Paris. Alice Thorner had spent nearly 65 years of her life studying and researching and teaching the economic and social history of South Asia. She worked initially with her late husband Daniel Thorner. She has

worked with scholars like Dr. Neera Desai, Dr. Maithreyi Krishna Raj and Dr. Sujata Patel in India on a variety of themes ranging from working class women to urban history. Alice Thorner was a regular visitor to India and inspired many scholars young and old, who were researchers in Women's Studies.

Girija Yadav: Death of an Artist



Girija Yadav, one of the finest artists of Mangalore, passed away recently. She was 71. SPARROW was fortunate to meet and talk to Girija Yadav and include her in its oral history recording project.

Girija was born in 1934 in Mangalore. She was fascinated by drawing and painting from her childhood.

Girija Yadav was one of the few women artists who got a G D Art degree from Chamarajendra Technical School. Later, she got special training at B G M Art School, Mangalore, and Kala Niketan, Mysore, in watercolour and sketching. Girija preferred to do Indian style of painting with watercolour and charcoal as her medium. She enjoyed doing landscapes and sketching female forms.

Girija Yadav was an art teacher in Canara Girls High School for thirty-two years. She inspired many girls to take up art as a profession. She was the founder member of Artists Combine, an art organisation in Mangalore. Girija Yadav broke the conventions of her times to pursue her art professionally and has showed great versatility in her creativity.

Standing On Her Own Feet: Kala Shahani



SPARROW's very first oral history workshop on July 27, 1997 was with Kala Shahani as a special guest. A shy and modest person, she was hesitant to speak of her life but her quiet presence and simple manner of speaking won everybody's heart. A Gandhian by conviction, Kala

Shahani spoke about her life, her faith in humanistic values and about her participation in the freedom movement, all of which have been recorded in our SPARROW booklet. Kala Shahani passed away on September 26, 2005 as quietly and peacefully as she had lived. Her gentle presence remains with us; at SPARROW hangs her portrait reminding us constantly of this simple woman who lived her life with conviction and courage. On her deathbed she held her daughter in-law's hand and told her—"My hand is too weak to hold yours. But I shall hold you in my heart." Kala—we want to tell you—"We will always hold you in ours."

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