



SPARROW

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SPARROW

newsletter

SNL Number 12 & 13

March 2008

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[Editor's Note]



This SNL is a double issue that combines December and March issues. The end of 2007, as it is with the end of every year, brought with it both a sense of loss and a feeling of achievement. 2007 had opened up many areas of violence in our lives and it ended with the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. For SPARROW it had been a year of both struggle and rewards. The reward came in the form of a building of our own and the struggle was, as usual, a struggle to survive. This newsletter, in a way, reflects this mood of struggle and joy.

We shifted to our new building which we call The Nest, in January 2008. The efforts to find a place and the final shifting reminded us of the cover we had done for one of our annual reports. We have reproduced the illustration here to show how far we have come in our journey. We inaugurated the building on 23rd January 2008. It was a big day for us. We invited all our old staff also to share our joy. No VIP was invited to inaugurate the building. The SPARROW trustees lit candles which the SPARROW staff carried up the three floors. As they reached the third floor the lights came on and the SPARROW Director rang a bell and shouts of joy and laughter filled the air. The SPARROW staff had done all the packing and moving, happy that we were probably moving for the last time. They also decorated the building making a rangoli on every step,

0.2 [Editor's Note]

each step denoting how far we had climbed up from where we were. It was a joyous occasion and our senior trustee Dr. Neera Desai declared that she was happy that this gift of a building had happened in her lifetime. We include in this issue some photographs of the inauguration.

There are three books reviewed which talk about different lives in different contexts. Ambi, a young widow in the early decades of the twentieth century educated herself for she wanted to live her life with dignity and self-respect. Mayilamma also wanted to live a similar life but her struggle was not for herself but for her community and her village. And she was waging a war against an international giant like coca-cola. The third book reviewed deals with mythologies and imaginatively expands the story of a pregnant king from *Mahabharat*.

Women have been meeting and discussing many things in many parts of India. We have written about women writers' meets in two different parts of India. We have also given the profile of an eighty-year old Mizo writer, Khawlkungi, who has been a trailblazer.

Three interesting photo exhibitions took place in Mumbai and we have included some of those photographs in this special issue. On 8th March this year, women's groups organised a march from Churchgate to CST station. SPARROW photographer, Priya D'Souza, was there to catch some of those moments which we share with you here.

Film songs are a major part of our lives and in this issue we carry an article on an old Telugu film song on the rights of widows.

Whatever the odds, some women never give up their struggle to enhance the quality of women's lives. The late Veena Dhari was one such person who committed herself to work for those who were HIV positive since she herself became an innocent victim through her husband. Sheela Barthakur makes women lighten their hearts by making them tell stories. This issue includes write-ups on both of them.

In this issue of SNL we have also given the announcement for our Diary 2009. Do be a Friend of SPARROW and support Diary 2009.

In every newsletter we pay homage to women we admire who are no longer with us. This newsletter pays homage to six of them.

SPARROW newsletters will continue to come to you for that is how we share what we do with you. We now have Malsawmi Jacob, a Mizo writer, working in SPARROW and co-editing the newsletter.

Do write to us and do visit our website www.sparrowonline.org.



SPARROW staff preparing for the great day

Inauguration Images 0.3



SPARROW Trustees and the staff on the inauguration day

0.4 Profile

Khawlkungi: Writer from Mizoram



Khawlkungi turned eighty on September 14, 2007. Her zeal for literature and her sense of social responsibility remain undiminished. She's a trailblazer among Mizo writers of today. She received the Padma Shree in 1987, and the Mizoram Academy of Letters Award in

1988.

She has written more than twenty books and translated more than fifty works from English into Mizo language. She has also penned several short dramas that were staged by church groups and village youths.

One of her novels, *Zawlpala Thlantlang* (Zawlpala's Grave) is a prescribed text for Degree Course in the Vernacular subject. She wrote it in the year 1977 for a competition. As she had no type-writer at home, she used the office machine after office hours. But she wasn't allowed to stay long after dark, as night curfew was imposed due to Insurgency.

It would seem that the quiet surrounding she grew up in and the rather socially lonely childhood she had, nurtured her innate creativity and talent for writing. She was brought up on the outskirts of Aizawl town, surrounded by green forests. There were only seven families in the locality, so she had few children to play with. The three or four girls who used to play together became very close friends.

These playmates had to invent their own games. They would make up stories, write short dialogues and act it out. They would pick out places from maps and weave stories around them. They also composed songs and sang them. All these exercises must have stirred her creative talent.

Though she started school rather late because she was a shy child, she was a bright student. At Class III Public Exam, called Lower Primary, she came first in all Mizoram and won an award of Rs. 3. She spent three quarters of a rupee to buy herself a new dress. She missed the award for Middle School Board exam due to hand injury.

She could not continue schooling after that, as there was no High School within Mizoram. Her father's friend in Shillong offered to pay for her education there, but there was no money even for the travel fare. A British missionary, Dr. Katie Hughes, nicknamed 'Pi Zaii' invited her to stay in her house and train to become a teacher, bought books and made her translate them into Mizo. She never got to become a teacher, though, as the post did not fall vacant. But the one year spent with the

missionary was a valuable learning experience.

Khawlkungi loves to travel, and laments that she hasn't been able to visit many places that she'd love to. She has been to Delhi a couple of times and once to Guwahati. She is particularly keen to visit South India, especially Kerala. She claims that visiting places gives her ideas for stories and helps these to be more realistic. In an interview with Zaithangpuii, she asserts: "Travelling inspires me to write. Each of my travels have birthed at least one book."

When asked how she perceives the general trend of contemporary Mizo literature, she replies, "Writing has become quite the fad these days and there are a lot of good books being written. But too many of them seem contrived and unrealistic.... Fiction has to be grounded in fact, it has to express what people feel in their hearts.... their desires and fears, the things they cannot express themselves.... Your story must read as though the events really occurred. And I think it's important to use Mizo language with care. So many writers today don't seem to have the command over the language that they should."

Khawlkungi has a strong sense of social responsibility as a writer and translator. She thinks that the kind of literature we produce should have a good influence, especially on the youth. She recalls an incident of going to the library. She was happy to see some young boys borrowing books. But she was shocked when she saw the books they were taking. She is concerned that such books are circulated, perhaps for shortage of better ones.

Khawlkungi is careful about what she translates too. She is upset that there's not enough good reading material available in Mizo language. "Why don't people who are educated and learned undertake translation? ... Today we have so many women who are educated and learned. ...If they wanted to, I'm sure they could translate many books. We could also translate Mizo books into English. We must make efforts."

When asked whether Mizo women lack freedom to write, she replies "Perhaps women were oppressed in the old days. I don't see this at all today.... The scarcity of women writers may be simply because they are too lazy to write. Frankly, if we truly set our hearts on writing, our families will not dare to hinder us."

Khawlkungi is getting advanced in years, if not in heart. Is any Mizo woman preparing to carry on the torch after she leaves the track?

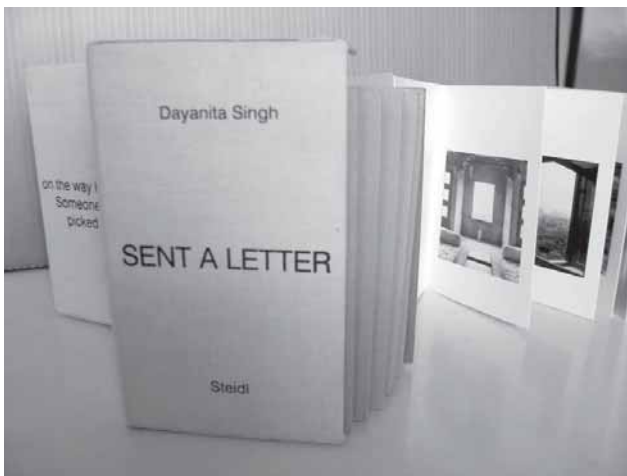
—Malsawmi Jacob

0.6 Events

There were three photography exhibitions by women held in the months of February and March in Mumbai. In February, Ketaki Seth's black and white images were featured in an exhibition "Bombay Mix" (also brought out as a book). These images of Bombay/Mumbai streets from 1989 to 2004, show the contrasts and contradictions of the city and its people. Mala Mukerjee's photographs in February at the Nehru Centre, Mumbai, are very different—these colour abstracts, could be mistaken for paintings. In her words, they are, 'a continuation for my passion for discovering texture, colour and form in the most trivial objects that surround our lives.' Both like and unlike her earlier work, these images are more vivid and intense. As part of 'The Photograph: Painted, Poised, and Of the Moment', at the NGMA Mumbai in March, the internationally known Dayanita Singh exhibited, *Sent a Letter*, a collection of seven accordion-fold books. Also part of the exhibition was 'Nony and Nixi', photographs taken by her mother Nony Singh, who photographed her husband and children growing up.



Top Left & Right: Mala Mukerjee's Photographs.
Bottom Left: Dayanita Singh's accordion-fold book.
Bottom Right: Ketaki Seth's Bombay Mix.



Events 0.7



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Under No Circumstance Can Violence Be Justified

Voices in Unison

L to R: Sharda Sathe, President, Stree Mukti Sanghatana, Sonia Gill, Mumbai District President, AIDWA, Ahalya Rangnekar, AIDWA Patron, Kalindi Deshpande, National Vice-President, AIDWA

0.8 Writers' Meet

A Women Writers' Meeting to Open Hearts and Minds

Su. Thamizselvi, a writer from Vridhachalam who has written five novels in five years and drawn the attention of the Tamil literary world, coordinated a writers' meet whose aim was to create an opportunity to share and also begin a meaningful dialogue among women writers about their writings. The meet also aimed to discuss from a feminist perspective issues like gender oppression, women's education, environment, imperialism, privatisation, media and politics.

Such meets are regularly held by Sri Lankan Tamils who have settled down in different parts of the world. But it has not been possible in all these years in Tamil Nadu to hold such a meeting. That Su. Thamizselvi made an attempt to organise a meeting of this nature deserves special mention. The meeting which took place on May 6, 2007 was the first of its kind where poets, writers and others took part. It took place in one of the largest private libraries run by Palladam Manickam. Many male writers from Vridhachalam and elsewhere also came to take part and support the meeting.

Commenting on the literary meet, Su. Thamizselvi says that what she, as a coordinator, wanted was to create a heartfelt friendship among women writers and to extend the dialogue on women's language. Su. Thamizselvi also hoped that the literary meet will not remain just that but would transform into a movement. Not all her aims were fulfilled, for not all writers who promised to come could come but the meeting got media attention. While some called it a platform for women writers, some others called it not just a literary meet but a literary festival.

In a personal letter Thamizselvi wrote that her aim was to create a space first where women can meet and then take it further to include many other issues that concern women. She said that not all her aims were achieved but that she felt that she had made a good beginning. Her effort was appreciated by the writers but there were also those who criticised such an effort as being a superfluous one lacking depth. But these criticisms have not dampened the spirit of Thamizselvi who is eager to organise more such meetings.

Women writers in Tamil Nadu work independently and don't get to meet one another. Even e-mails and cell phones have not made it possible for them to communicate with one another often for they are preoccupied with so many things concerning their career and their family. That a meeting of women writers from 9 a.m. in the morning till 8 p.m. was made possible in Vridachalam is not a mean achievement and in that sense this should be seen as a literary meet of women writers that has made history.

— C S Lakshmi



Thamizachi giving her views.

On the stage L to R: Kutti Revathi, Vennila and A Mangai



Su. Thamizselvi welcoming the participants



Pritam Chakravarthi in one of the sessions

Writers' Meet 0.9

At Northeast Writers' Forum (and those sweet Saturday evenings)

It's been three years since I left the city, but I still miss them—those monthly Saturday evening meetings of writers at Guwahati—though I was part of it only for a couple of years.

Samudragupta, a writer and journalist with a national daily who taught me during a short course in journalism, introduced me to the Forum. He gave me the phone number of Dhruva, the forum's secretary, who in his other life was the Director of Sports in the Assam government.

A little diffidently I called him, asking if I could join. He was more than welcoming. "We're meeting at Mitra Phukan's house this Saturday, 6 pm. Can you come?" he asked.

"I'd like to come, but I don't know the place."

"Okay, we can meet up at Rajgarh, in front of that hotel ..."

"How will I recognise you?"

"I'll be wearing a yellow shirt, driving a white Maruti."

He was there with a young colleague Indrani, a new writer. A short drive and we reached the house.

Having been reading Mitra Phukan's delightful *Middles in The Sentinel* since the mid-eighties, I was curious and eager to meet her. There she was, welcoming us graciously.

Introductions followed. All the faces, though not the names, were new to me except Samudragupta's. He was there with his wife Tapati, well known for her Assamese works. I had recently been through her book of poems in English *The Peace of Silence*. It was exciting to meet Arup Datta, whose story books had been fervently devoured by my children. Pradip, who taught English Literature in college, was a translator but not a writer. His translated Neruda's poems from English sounded much more beautiful in Assamese than in the English version. Perhaps that's how it is in the original Spanish? Purnima, another English lecturer, was given the task of rounding us all up by phone for the next meetings.

A few months later, the venue of the meetings changed to the house of Mrs. Barkataki, a charming, old fashioned spacious place with a verandah shaded by climbers. More young writers joined. But I never could be sure of the number of members, as those who attended kept changing except for a few regulars.

It was mostly the new, small time writers that had the privilege of reading their pieces. The big, established writers usually played the listening role. There was no competition,

no scrambling for being heard at all. Anyone who had something to read was strongly encouraged to do so, was given a truly willing audience. There was a kindly atmosphere. And so I still recall those meets with a feeling of longing.

The Guwahati Forum was actually a branch of the Northeast Writers' Forum, consisting of the old 'seven sisters' states. Sikkim was not yet included. This Forum used to meet in one of the member states after every couple of years.

I had the chance to join only one of those meets, held in Guwahati in January 2004. It was an exciting event. Participants came from Arunachal, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and of course, the hosting state Assam. Nagaland and Tripura did not participate that year, though it seems they normally do. The old timers had a lot of stories to tell about their past meets.

Specially endearing was an account of Mizo writer Padmasree James Dokhuma visiting Guwahati jail on his way to Arunachal to attend the Forum's meet some years before. Dokhuma had joined the MNF insurgents in the sixties. He was wounded and captured by the Indian Army. And he was sentenced. It was in this prison that his writing career started, that he wrote his first novel. On that occasion, he desired to visit the jail where he was incinerated for many years. He wept when he reached there.

Poets from Manipur were so beautifully united, they came in a largish group. And they distributed a small anthology of Manipuri poems translated into English. So good to see poets—of all people—working together like that! The only pity was, they were all men, no woman came along.

There were readings by poets and other creative writers from their works. There were talks given by scholars and critics. Of special interest was the reading from a non-fiction narrative by an Assamese young woman living in U.K

When the main functions were all over, the last night was pure fun. They pitched a tent and lighted a bon fire. We gathered around, some guys strumming guitars and crooning old English numbers. Dhruva the dynamic leader was busy with rolled up sleeves, roasting mutton on the open fire. His wife said he loved doing such things. Robin the poet was a good conversationalist too. Kynpham didn't talk much, he sat in a corner with a guitar. And then he treated us to some piercingly haunting Khasi tunes.

After a nice dinner we bid rueful goodbyes late in the night.

—Malsawmi Jacob

1.0 Book Review

Mayilamma: Porattamae Vazkai

By Jothibai Pariyadaththu translated by Sukumaran



Water is the source of all life. There was a village called Plachimada in Kerala where the wells were so full that people did not have to use a rope and a pot to draw the water. They could just bend down and take away the water in their pots. All this was before the setting up of the Coca Cola Company in Plachimada. Today the people of Plachimada have to walk five miles to get drinking water and their agricultural lands

have been destroyed by the chemical waste regularly unloaded on them by the company. In a matter of two years a fertile land was converted into a graveyard. The people of Plachimada realised that water was not only the source of all life but water was also their right as human beings and as citizens. The person who made everybody understand that they had to struggle against a company that had ruined them was Valliamma, an Adivasi woman. This book tells the story of her life and her struggle.

Valliamma was neither an educated woman nor a well-read person. She was a widow whose every day life was a struggle. But as someone whose ancestors had lived in forests and had cleared dense forests to create agricultural lands she understood the value of good soil and unpolluted ground water. Armed with nothing but righteous anger Valliamma began her struggle against a powerful company. She became the heroine of a struggle that lasted for more than five years. The battle she waged drew international attention. In the book while talking about her struggle she says:

This is not the first time that soil and water have been destroyed on this land. But people say that this is the first protest of this kind. In that case the struggle has to be completed here itself. If we win we will be happy. We will feel that our struggle has been well-rewarded. If we lose, the story of Plachimada will be a lesson to all.

Valliamma taught us this lesson in her lifetime. She died on January 6, 2007. What we need to learn from her death is the same lesson of righteous struggle for, as the author of this book says, “struggles never end.” This book is not just the story of a woman’s life but the documentation of a people’s struggle.

— C S Lakshmi

Book details:

Mayilamma: Porattamae Vazkai

(Mayilamma: Life is a Struggle)

Jothibai Pariyadaththu Translated by Sukumaran

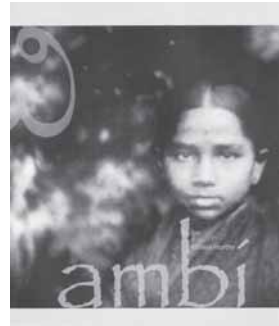
Published by Ethir Veliyeedu, Pollachi

Number of pages: 96

Price: Rs. 55

Ambi

By Vimala Murthy



Ambi is an attempt to record the life and struggles of C.Amba Bai whose happy life was rudely interrupted by the sudden death of her husband. Amba Bai was only twenty four at that time. The year was 1913. At the time of her husband’s death Ambi had two children and was pregnant with the third. She gave birth to a girl-child a few months later and named her Sumitra. It is Sumitra’s

daughter

Vimala who has, by writing this book, made an attempt to understand her grandmother and her times.

Other widows of her times may have become dependent widows and led a life of misery in families which would have cared very little for them or their children, but Ambi was made of sterner stuff. With the support of a progressive father she got educated and became a teacher. It was not an easy road to tread those days but Ambi was determined to live a life of dignity and courage. Ambi passed her Lower Secondary examination in English and later did her SSLC exams with the help of a private tutor. Once she completed her initial studies she had to move ahead to take up advanced studies which she could do only outside her hometown. And resistance came not from their relatives or Ambi’s in-laws but from unexpected quarters—from Ambi’s own mother. Ambi’s mother was an orthodox woman who had not spoken out when it was decided that Ambi would not be made to shave her head and wear the widow’s weeds. Nor had she protested when Ambi took tuitions. But sending Ambi out of her hometown Tumkur was entirely another matter. She put up a spirited resistance because she was at heart an orthodox person who feared the consequences the family may have to face if a widow was sent out to study and later allowed to take up a job. The idea of higher education followed by a job for Ambi was something she found outrageous. She threatened that she would go and jump into the well if Ambi was sent out for higher education. And Ambi quietly replied, “If you do that, I’ll follow, and jump after you with my three children.” Ambi’s quiet determination stunned her mother and others and there were no further arguments. Leaving her son with his grandparents, Ambi took her little girls along with her, to pursue her goals in education.

Ambi’s dramatic story begins this way and her life as a mother, grandmother and a working woman is a story of great courage. Vimala tells the story of this unusual woman placing her in the context of her times and looking at her objectively, admiring her for not giving up but at the same time admitting that there were grey areas she could not fully understand like,

Book Review 1.1

why did not her grandmother follow her own example in the case of her daughters? Why did she not insist that her daughters must have a sound education? Vimala could not ask her grandmother these questions for maybe these questions assumed greater importance in the course of writing this book. Very often, the questions come to us after a person's demise and some of these questions have to remain unanswered. Despite such unanswered questions, the book tells us about a woman who accepted life's challenges with determination. It is a well-designed book with interesting photographs and line drawings. One must say Vimala Murthy has done her grandmother proud by writing and publishing this book.

— C S Lakshmi

Book Details:

Ambi

Vimala Murthy

2007

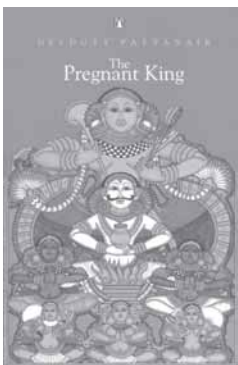
Published by Vimala Murthy, Bangalore

Number of pages: 164

Price: Rs. 200

The Pregnant King

by Devdutt Pattanaik



This unusual and complex novel is based on the story of Yuvanashva, a character from the great epic *Mahabharata*. It was normally supposed that a woman could not rule as king, and a man could not bear a child. But a king gets pregnant and a woman rules a kingdom efficiently in this work of fiction. Gender natures inter-change here, creating confusions and raising questions. The book also explores other issues such as *dharma*, personal truth versus social order, tolerance to 'abberations', and freedom.

The story opens with a backdrop of the build-up for Kurukshetra war. The Pandavas and the Kauravas prepare for the battle. The supporters of each side from the surrounding kingdoms march to the plain, their banners fluttering. But Yuvanashva, crown prince of Vallabhi, has to stay back though he wants to join. He is not allowed to rule either. All because he has not succeeded in fathering a son.

Shilavati, Yuvanashva's mother, was regent of Vallabhi. She

had been ruling ever since she was widowed at the age of sixteen. Her old father-in-law, the former king, told the regent: "Shilavati, I hear you are a good king.... The Kshatriya council respects you more than they respected me.... Men are foolish. We actually believe that just because someone has a moustache they make better kings than someone with breasts.... I wish my son had not died. But had he lived, and had confined you to the women's quarters, as he would, in foolish male pride, Vallabhi would not be what it is today..."

Meanwhile, the whole kingdom was anxiously waiting for a son to be born to the prince. When all attempts failed, Yuvanashva decided to perform a *yagna* to create a child. Two friends, Sumedha and Somvat, posed as a Brahmin couple, the second dressed as a new bride. They were caught and locked up. Then Somvat turned into a woman. The king, however, refused to accept it and ordered them to be burned. Their ghosts haunted him. They made him drink the potion meant for the queens. He became pregnant and gave birth to Mandhatta.

When Mandhatta was sixteen, Yuvanashva told him the truth about his birth. He rejected it. Shilavati and the elders too refused to acknowledge the fact. So Yuvanashva renounced the world and became a hermit. He attained freedom in the jungle.

The book also deals with the strange tales of Shikhandi, a woman who turned into a man. Of Arjuna the great warrior who had to masquerade as a woman. Of Illeshwara, a god on full moon days and a goddess on new moon nights. And of a prince with a man's body but with a woman's heart. The author makes the point that there are no hard and fast lines dividing the genders.

Curiously, however, an inadvertent gender bias pops up even in a book like this. The essence of being female is presented here as the *lack* of male genitals. Take that away and a man automatically turns into a woman. Besides, the female born is portrayed as having lower moral sensibility. The woman-turned-man Shikhandi practised sexual promiscuity with abandon, whereas Arjuna, originally male, was held back by *dharma* and moral considerations.

The stories are told throughout in contemporary and highly readable English.

—Malsawmi Jacob

Book details:

The Pregnant King

Devdutt Pattanaik

Published by Penguin, 2008

Number of pages: 349

Price: Rs. 295

1.2 Struggles

Veenadhari: Death, Be Not Proud



Veenadhari is no more. She lived with HIV and lived for HIV victims. The camps she used to conduct for HIV victims were said to be the first of its kind in Karnataka. The camp ‘By the HIV victims – for the HIV victims’ was regarded as a ray of hope for people suffering from the dreaded disease and the

dejection it brings.

Veenadhari was born in a family where both the parents were into social service. Her father was actively involved with P.N.Panikker’s literacy campaign in Kerala. A Gandhian, he was into rural development and converted Varkadi, where they lived, into a model village. Veena’s mother Lalitha was one of those who opened Balamandirs in villages. She was very fond of music and hand embroidery (Kasuti). She named her daughter Veenadhari while listening to the sweet notes of Veena. Later, to her mother’s delight, Veenadhari completed her music course with *Ganabhushanam* certificate from Swathi Thirunal Sangita Academy in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Then she started giving music programs for radio in Mangalore.

A simple and obedient girl from a middle class family, Veena could not defy a marriage proposal imposed on her. Then started her ordeal with a drunkard and gambler husband. He was a bank employee and was running a restaurant along with his brother.

He lost everything in the hotel business and was in heavy debt. He got transfer to Mumbai and Veena with a two year old son accompanied him in the hope of starting a new peaceful life. In Mumbai also she found solace in music. She used to give classical music recitals to small groups of music lovers in Virar, where they stayed. Her husband did not mend his ways, but kept on objecting to and harassing her for her musical activities. Many a time Veenadhari tried to end her own life. Then everyone, including her mother-in-law, advised her to return to Mangalore.

Life took one more turn for Veenadhari. She joined a school as music teacher and also continued to get training in classical singing. Her husband wanted to return to Mangalore and reconcile with her. Elders from both sides forced Veena to oblige.

Again she had to go through all those miseries related to her husband’s imprudent habits. Once again he ran away to Mumbai leaving her at the mercy of debtors. She was totally shattered and decided never ever to see his face again.

One day Veenadhari got the news of her husband’s ailment and she rushed to the hospital. She was shocked to see him in the condition he was in. With determination she nursed him. At the same time she was still repaying the debtors by selling whatever valuables she had, including a piece of land which she had inherited.

Her son was selected to perform in International Magic Show and was in Switzerland. All these had converted a vulnerable

person like Veenadhari into a strong willed woman. She was working in VALORED (Value Oriented Education), an NGO for the welfare of Women and Children. When her husband was diagnosed with AIDS and could not take any solid food, she started giving him fruits and vegetable juices and herbal extracts to which his body responded. Even in her most dreadful thoughts it would not have occurred that she was also going to experiment these on herself.

It was a devastating day for Veenadhari when she was detected with HIV. For the past seven years she had been living with it! She was inconsolable and rushed to VALORED. She feared they would throw her out. But VALORED stood by her for her courage in disclosing it. The VALORED group gave her moral support and encouraged her decision to work for HIV victims.

Veenadhari faced opposition, unkind remarks, humiliation and ‘untouchable’ attitude from the society. At this point Veenadhari decided to fight against not only the dreaded disease but the ignorance and denial by society. Propaganda on HIV and AIDS was so malicious, a fear had developed among the people. Veenadhari provided an outlet to this constrained fear and worked to bring awareness about HIV. She gave voice to HIV victims. There were heart rending stories, especially about women from rural areas. HIV infected women were left to miserable and slow death. Non availability of treatment and expensive medicines were the main reason for this.

Day and night Veenadhari studied about HIV and remedies. She grew a herbal garden in her courtyard and consumed herbal juices as a part of treatment. Besides this, she also followed a disciplined way of life, a low fat diet, regular exercise and body massage also. She worked at developing body resistance without taking anti-retroviral drugs. All these points she imparted to others who came to her. With her bright smile, lively talk and positive attitude towards life, she inspired a number of people across the country. She started organizing camps for HIV victims which were received with overwhelming response.

Veenadhari was one of the first HIV victims to openly admit it. She joined Karavali Positive Women and Children Network (KPWCN). For the past several years she had been into creating awareness on HIV/AIDS and building confidence in the victims. With sincerity and determination she created space for herself and for HIV positives. People started taking interest in her mission and volunteered to help.

Veenadhari took part in World HIV Victims Conference in Bangkok. She was invited to National and International seminars to give talk on HIV and AIDS. Recognizing her work as a social activist, Karnataka Government conferred Rajyotsava Award on Veenadhari. Unmoved by honours and felicitations, she continued with her mission. Her autobiography *H.I.V Mathu Naanu* (H.I.V and Me) and a collection of columns *Nimma Prashne – Nanna Uttara* (Your Query – My Answer) have been published.

Overwork, constant travel and difficulty in following strict diet took its toll on Veenadhari. She succumbed to brain hemorrhage on November 2, 2007. Till her last she was on the move for her camps.

Now Veena is silent but the melody lingers on.

—Tulasi Venugopal

Awards 1.3

A Silent Cultural Revolution

Sheela Barthakur is one of the Padma Shri awardees for this year 2008. The seventy-three year old is naturally glad that the country has recognised her efforts in promoting literature and working for social change. She has worked long and hard to realise her dreams.

Her one big achievement is the formation of Sadau Asom Lekhika Samaroh Samiti (SALSS) which means All Assam Women Writers' Convention Committee, in 1974. The group has not only brought out a new generation of women writers in Assamese, but has also given a new meaning to womanhood in changing times.

Assamese language boasts of many well known writers like Indira Goswami, Phul Goswami, Arupa Patangia and Mitra Phukan. Directly or indirectly, they must have been inspired by Barthakur's pioneering work. She told Samudra Gupta of *The Indian Express* who interviewed her on her winning the award, "My aim was to motivate women to write and turn it into a movement for asserting their right to expression. Every woman has a story of suffering to tell. But it is very difficult to convert her into a writer, as she prefers to suffer silently. However, things are changing... Our members came up with eighty new books during the annual convention held earlier this month. The new breed of Assamese women are writing not just about their sufferings but their dreams as well."

Sheela Barthakur was born in 1935 at Charingia village of Jorhat district. Her father, Nabin Sharma, was an inspector of the tea expansion board. He was sent to Dhaka, now in Bangladesh, in order to popularise the brew. The family stayed there for some years. Thus Sheela spent part of her childhood years in Dhaka, of which she cherishes fond memories. She sang Assamese songs at the convocation of Dhaka University, and used to dance to Narulgeeti and Rabindrasangeet

As a young girl, Sheela loved songs, dance and play. She acted in Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwal's famous play *Sonit Konwari* when she was a college student, despite opposition from her family members. She also qualified at an audition held by All India Radio. She had to travel to Guwahati for recording, which was disapproved by her family members. She protested and went anyway.

The spirited woman went on to study after her marriage. She completed her masters and then her PhD on 'Social Change in Assam since Independence with special reference to Sonitpur district.' She retired as a lecturer of Philosophy. She also holds two degrees in classical music from Lucknow and Shantiniketan.

Besides, Barthakur is a poet and writer. She wrote her first poem when she was a primary school student. She has authored eight books ranging from fiction to travelogues. She has also compiled twelve volumes of the

complete works of three eminent women writers—Nalinibala Devi, Dharmeswari Devi Baruani and Sneha Devi. This is no easy task, considering that till the nineteenth, and even the twentieth century, people of the region did not think it worthwhile to preserve the works of women writers.

Barthakur has succeeded well with her aim. She has spearheaded a 'silent cultural revolution' among women. She believes that a writer cannot be created but an atmosphere for intellectual development can be. That is just what she has done through SALSS. The Samiti that she started with only a few members now has more than ten thousand in three hundred branches, not only in different parts of Assam but in Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai too. Not all the members pen poems or stories, but are interested in literary activities. And from the time it started, the Samiti has been contributing to the promotion of Assamese language and literature as well as other socio-cultural activities.

When Barthakur started the Samiti over three decades ago, few people understood what it was all about. She recalls an incident in the early Seventies during the Assam Sahitya Sabha. She had asked for a few hours slot for women and was refused. But now, the Samiti has a long list of accomplishments to its credit. It has become a powerful forum that upholds the creative instinct in women. *Lekhika*, the mouthpiece of the Samiti, has helped create many women writers. Fifteen editions of the journal were edited by Barthakur herself. *Lekhika* has also carried the biographies of women writers who had been almost forgotten. The Samiti has carried out several notable projects. One of them is documenting of the lives and literary contributions of three hundred women writers of Assam. The documentation begins with Ai Padmapriya, a Sixteenth Century Vaishnavite poet, followed by Elisa Whitney Brown, wife of Nathan Brown, an American Baptist missionary who co-founded the first Assamese journal *Orunodoi* in 1845. The work is published in four volumes.

Today, almost all of the three hundred branches of the Samiti are regularly publishing periodicals, magazines and other literary works. Most of them are also involved with various social works.

SALSS has also started getting Assamese literary works translated to other languages. The works of four noted women writers have been translated into Bengali. It also plans to translate more books to English and other languages.

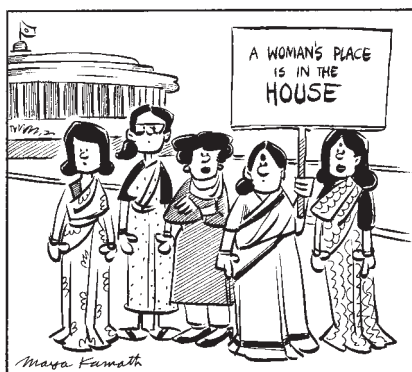
Barthakur, the multi-faceted personality, is an excellent organiser as well. She has motivated the women in different branches of the Samiti to publish their books from local financial support. They sell these from door to door.

Today, she is still as full of energy and childlike enthusiasm as when she initiated the organisation more than three decades ago. She is still pushing ahead with intensity and single-mindedness of purpose. This visionary is out on a mission to encourage women at the grassroots level to wield the mighty pen.

— Malsawmi Jacob

1.4 DIARY/Daily Planner 2009

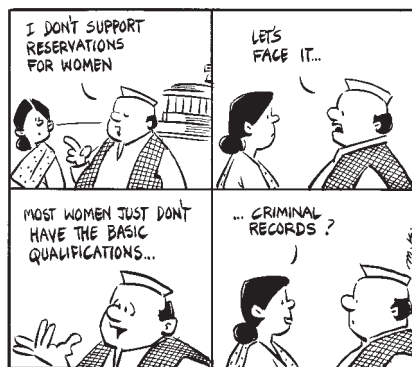
Positive change is possible only when we understand women's lives, history and struggles for self-respect and human dignity.



Diary 2008 that SPARROW brought out has been very well received and so we are now planning **Diary 2009**.

SPARROW is much more than an archive. In addition to collecting material on women's history and lives, SPARROW generates its own archival material through oral history recordings and video documentaries, and reaches out to schools, colleges and women's groups. SPARROW believes that recording, reviewing, recollecting and reflecting on women's history and life and communicating this information in various ways is an important activity in development. Kindly visit our website which will give you an idea of the work we are doing.

To develop a Corpus Fund for the archive, we are publishing a diary/daily planner celebrating days that are important to the FRIENDS OF SPARROW. We are asking you, in exchange for a donation of Rs.10, 000, to choose a date you would like to celebrate: your mother's (or father's or sister's or any one in your family) birthday or wedding anniversary; a date in national or social history which you feel is important for you as a person or as an organisation; a graduation date – you choose. Once you have chosen a date (or dates) send us the information you would like us to include: name and details of the person you are honouring, a photograph, a quotation or a poem or a few personal words. Please visit our website www.sparrowonline.org and download the forms to send your contributions.



This exclusive diary will be published in 2009 also for FRIENDS OF SPARROW. We will print some extra copies to be sold at cost price to the same friends of SPARROW in case they need to gift some to others. Hundred copies of this exclusive diary will be sent to hundred important people in India from the corporate, academic, art and communications fields. This exclusive diary is not for sale to the general public.

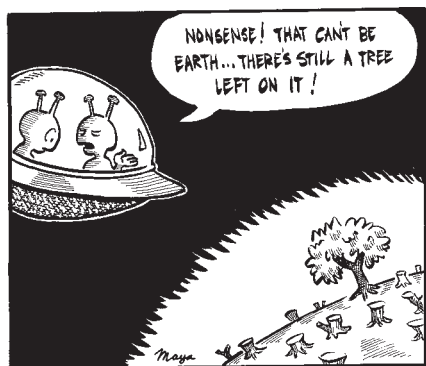
For the year 2009 SPARROW will be using cartoons of the late Maya Kamath, whose cartoons continue to be thought-provoking and relevant even today. SPARROW has the honour of archiving more than 8000 of her cartoons and has held three exhibitions of her cartoons. Along with Diary 2009 a free copy of *The World of Maya*, a book containing more than a thousand cartoons of Maya Kamath will be given to friends who sponsor the pages.



For just Rs.10, 000 (US\$ 250 or Euro 160) every year you will have an exclusive diary with one page carrying your/your organisation's name. This amount donated to the Corpus Fund of SPARROW will trickle into our building fund or contribute in a small way to support any one of our projects on oral history, photography, video documentation, book collection, publication, translation, interactive workshops with children and young people, or help meet some of our infrastructure expenses.

What you contribute will enable us to dare to dream about a different knowledge, a different kind of education, a different kind of history which will make development not a dream, but a possibility.

We hope you will be a Friend of SPARROW for a long time to come. We look forward to your support for Diary 2009 and the future exclusive diaries for FRIENDS OF SPARROW.



Homage 1.5

Qurratulain Hyder: A Trendsetter in Urdu Fiction



Born in 1927 Qurratulain Hyder, an extraordinary writer of our times, passed away on August 21, 2007 in a hospital at Noida at the age of 80. She began writing at a time Urdu literature was known only for its poetry. With Qurratulain, the novel was established as a serious genre in Urdu literature. *Aag ka Darya* (translated as *River of*

Fire and published by Kali for Women) was her greatest novel which completely changed the trend of Urdu fiction and took it to heights it had not reached before. There has not been a novel to equal this in Urdu fiction.

A prolific writer, she has to her credit some twelve novels and novellas, four collections of short stories and many travelogues and she has also done a significant amount of translation of classics. She received the Jnanpith Award in 1989 based on her later novel, *Aakhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar* (Travellers unto the Night).

Her life and writing will continue to inspire for many more years to come, women who believe in freedom and expression.

— C S Lakshmi

Bina Srinivasan: A Comrade and A Friend



Bina Srinivasan, comrade and friend to many within the Indian women's movement, passed away on August 13, 2007, in Vadodara, her hometown, from complications from pneumonia.

Bina was a feminist writer and researcher and an active member of People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Vadodara. After completing college, she worked for several years with Swashraya, an organisation that worked with women in the slums of Vadodara, which gave her insights into issues of displacement and their specific impact on women, a theme she returned to again and again in her research and activism, whether she was involved with issues of violence against women, the violence of Narmada and other big development projects, or the impact of conflict and fundamentalism on women.

She travelled extensively and was also part of the Co-ordination Group of the Feminist Dialogues—a meeting of transnational feminists that usually takes place before the World Social Forum. More recently she was engaged in looking at

issues of women who have been internally displaced due to conflict.

Bina was one of those rare activists who saw the importance of culture to struggles of the marginalised. Apart from several booklets and a major book of collected essays on women's issues, she also translated a play by Bhupen Khakkar.

Bina loved a good laugh as much as she loved a good argument. She will always be with us in our thoughts and of course, in our struggles for a better world for women.

— Nandini Manjrekar

Prema Karanth: A Dedicated Life



Well-known theatre person and the first ever woman film director of Kannada cinema, Prema Karanth, passed away on October 29, 2007. She was 71.

A graduate of the National School of Drama, Prema totally involved herself in theatre. Her film career

began with G.V.Iyer's Kannada film *Hamsageethe* for which she designed the costumes. *Phaniyamma* was her first directorial venture which won her many awards. Later she directed films like *Nakkala Rajkumari*, *Lakshmi Kataksha*, *Bandh Zaroke* etc. She also directed several documentary films which were acclaimed.

Prema Karanth's first love, however, was Children's Theatre. She founded a Children's Theatre Centre as a part of *Benaka*, a prestigious theatre group in Bangalore. After her husband B.V.Karanth's death in 2002, Prema founded *Karanth Rangamane*, a museum to display stage costumes, masks, accessories and other things used in their plays. Prema has left a great legacy behind for the Children's Theatre Centre.

— Tulasi Venugopal

Vanmala: Sharbati Aankhen



Vanmala, the actress of yester years, passed away in May 2007 at her ancestral home in Gwalior. Vanmala (Susheeladevi Pawar) was the immensely popular heroine of Hindi and Marathi films such as *Sikander* (with Prithviraj Kapoor as the hero), *Vasantsena*, *Sharbati Aankhen*, *Shyamchi Aai* (for which she won the President's Gold Medal).

1.6 Homage

She was in the freedom movement along with stalwarts like Aruna Asaf Ali and Achyut Patwardhan. At the age of 90 she was running The Haridas Kala Sansthan a school to train children in traditional Indian arts and culture. She was deeply involved in several social causes and was a member of the Chhatrapati Shivaji National Memorial Committee, New Delhi.

Hers was an extraordinary life, lived with courage and determination. Artists like her who have inspired generations that came later would remain a part of our collective memory for a long time to come.

— C S Lakshmi

Manorama:



Comedienne Manorama, who had excelled in comic and vampish roles in the seventies and eighties died on 15 February 2008 in Mumbai. She is remembered as Bhagwan's wife in *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje* and as the scheming aunt of Hema Malini in

Seeta Aur Geeta. She along with her husband Rajan Haksar got into film production but they were not successful. They became bankrupt and Haksar died of cancer. She was not to be seen for quite some years but later re-surfaced in some T.V serials. She had no house of her own and was sleeping in parks until until another character actor, Ram Mohan saw her and began helping her. Deepa Mehta, who cast her in her *Water* got her a flat in Charkop.

When she died, there were hardly five people at the funeral. The Bombay film industry with its 'winner takes it all' attitude has no time for has-beens. But little do they realise that they might be walking down the same path one day, unsung and unwept.

— Rajeswari Thiagarajan

Sarasu: In the Footsteps of Periyar

Sarasu, mother of famous lawyer Arulmozhi, died on 26 January 2008 of systemic sclerosis. She was a staunch follower of Periyar although she was born to god-fearing parents who would invoke the names of gods Muruga and Shiva with every breath. Her marriage to Pulavar Annamalai was a turning point because her husband was an ardent follower

of Periyar, the father of Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu. But her becoming an admirer of Periyar was not a wifely act but an independent decision she took after understanding Periyar.

She read Periyar's *Penn En Adimaiyanal?* (Why Did Woman Become A Slave?), and attended meetings addressed by Periyar. Periyar was an atheist and an advocate of a casteless society. All this struck a chord in her and she also became an apostle of Periyar.

She put what she believed into practice in her own life. She never looked for auspicious days to celebrate the weddings of her children but she chose holidays so that everyone could attend the function. She would read out Bharathidasan's songs, where he made fun of people who apply kumkum to stones and call them gods.

Sarasu's children imbibed her principles. She brought them up to love humanity, to be duty-conscious and to help the poor and needy. She was not just Arulmozhi's mother but her mentor.

— Rajeswari Thiagarajan

A Well Deserved Award



Purobi Bormudoi is an eminent Assamese writer and her forte is the short story. Her writings have appeared in literary journals and anthologies and she is regarded as one of the most widely read contemporary fiction writers. SPARROW congratulates her for

winning the Sahitya Akademi award this year.

An Apology

Gandhi's Daughter-in-law



The photograph we had published of Nirmala Gandhi in our October 2006 issue is actually that of Nirmala Rangnekar, the sister of Manju Gandhi. We apologise for the mistake. The photograph given here is that of Nirmala Gandhi, the daughter-in-law of Mahatma Gandhi.