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SPARROW

newsletter

SNL Number 16-17

May 2009

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SPARROW's second volume, the second in a series of five volumes, to be published with the works of eighty-seven writers from twenty-three languages, is in the press! It is a limited edition. So order your copies immediately.

Book details: *Being Carried Far Away*

No of pages: 407 / Price Rs. 350/-

[Editor's Note]

This issue of SNL is a double issue which covers the regions of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Kerala, Gujarat, West Bengal and the North East. We have reviewed books from some regions and special articles and poems cover the other regions. Kondaveethi Satyavathi who gave up a government job to edit the feminist magazine *Bhumika* has written an interesting article on Telugu women's magazines. Gujarat has been seen through the eyes of three women from three different times. The troubled North East has to be understood through peace efforts being made in the region and a report brought out by the North East Network is reviewed here to give a glimpse of the continuing struggle in the North East.

When we began work on the current issue of SNL we thought that there may not be a homage section and that we will use those pages to do more articles. Little did we know that we will be forced to set aside two pages to pay tribute to some of the best known artists, litterateurs, writers, educationists and political activists of India. The tribute section, we realise, is not just a space to pay homage to some women but a space to celebrate the lives of women we admire. We admire them when they are with us and celebrate their lives when they are no more with us. It is a way of asserting that their work and memories of their life will remain with us for ever.

Do visit our website www.sparrowonline.org in which we will be soon including some more aspects of the interesting work we are doing and do write to us.

The Autobiography of a Sex Worker

by Nalini Jameela



“Sex workers are free four respects. We don’t have to cook for a husband; we don’t have to wash his dirty clothes; we don’t have to ask for his permission to raise our kids as we deem fit; we don’t have to run after a husband claiming rights to his property,” says the author.

But, as most things in life, this “freedom” comes at a price. The book is an interesting, candid account of the author’s life experiences and her observations as a “free” woman.

The narration opens with the writer’s memory of her grandmother, ninety years old, crawling on all fours to cuddle her baby brother who bawled at her approach. Nalini was about three years old then. And at age four, she was admitted to school but was allowed to continue only up to class three. She was greatly pained at having to drop out.

Her mother used to work in a thread mill but lost her job, after which she became a non-entity, with her husband’s elder brother’s wife making all decisions in their home. Seeing this, Nalini came to realise that to be one’s boss, one has to work and earn. This realisation influenced most of the steps she took, including her decision to become a sex worker.

While still a child, Nalini began working in a clay mine to help support the family. She then went to work as a domestic help, where, at the age of thirteen, a well respected teacher tried to molest her. This snapped her faith in all men. She then went back to work in a clay mine, where she received a lot of unwelcome attention from men. Some time later, her father ordered her to leave home over serious disagreements. Having nowhere to go, she fell into a bad marriage. Then her husband died. She had two children by then.

For the support of the children, Nalini’s mother-in-law demanded a sum of money much higher than she earned. To meet this demand, she took up sex work. Her first client was a high ranking police officer, who slept with her at night and got her arrested and beaten the next day. A sub-inspector came to her rescue, offering to stop her beating if she would sleep with him. She agreed. She made it a point to always keep policemen in good humour, many of who became her clients.

There were also the moral police, ‘respectable’ men who were out to catch offenders in the act. But they too could not be trusted as far as sex was concerned. A good number of Nalini’s clients were respectable family men.

All these expose the dirty underbelly of the society. But the writer treats it all with humour, not anger.

She notes that her customers keep up a holier-than-thou attitude. “Even if you’ve been with such men a thousand times, there’s no change in their attitude: ‘I’m a respectable individual; you are a whore.’ They never arrive at a realisation that they are clients.”

Nalini’s experience with different persons is a mirror on human nature. There are different types of characters; none pure white or completely black. Some of them, including total strangers, are unexpectedly kind. Some others that she had trusted as friends readily betrayed her. She married two more times, but both husbands cheated her. Still others, like some of her customers, were out to torture, even murder, just for fun.

Her joining Jwalamukhi, an organisation that worked for the rights of sex workers, turned out to be a really good break. She was greatly helped by it. Also, with her practical intelligence she was able to make positive contributions for the welfare of sex workers and helped in improving the working of the organisation.

One thing that comes across through the narration is the strength of the author’s personality. Life as a sex worker was a hard one. It became almost impossible with a daughter to look after. And then she fell ill and was not able to work. They had no place to stay. In the midst of harsh and depressing circumstances, however, she never lost courage. All this is described in a plain, matter of fact way, with never a whining note.

Another factor highlighted through the book is the vulnerability of sex workers. They are often harassed by the police and exploited by customers. Crimes against sex workers usually go unpunished as society does not care about them. Even when they are murdered, they get no justice, and no one bothers to conduct a full investigation. The writer advocates decriminalisation of sex work to deal with this problem. She is against license, though, as this would invite a lot of red tape and further corruption.

Despite the writer’s bravado on the freedom of a sex worker, it is a fact that she often lacks the ‘freedom to refuse.’ It is clear that sex work is hardly a profession to be taken up by choice. The author herself did not wish to put her daughter into the trade, does not seem to have considered the option at all.

There is no sleaze, no indecent descriptions in the book, as may have been expected from the title. The writer maintains her dignity in that sense.

The writing style is quite unsophisticated and sometimes meandering. But it is laced with humour, honesty and practical ideas. Whether or not one agrees with the writer’s opinions, one gets to see her world and a usually hidden side of society.

The Autobiography of a Sex Worker is a translation from the Malayalam original *Nijan, Laingikatozhilali*. The translator is J. Devika, a well known writer, scholar and activist for women’s causes. In the Foreword, Devika analyses the perspective of the author, a poor, marginalised, labouring woman. She candidly remarks that

the writer, a female labourer, performs different kinds of labour—productive, reproductive and sexual. Sex work in the lives of poorest women is placed “alongside other strenuous, exploitative and demeaning work—situations quite invisible to Kerala’s educated elite.” This is a backhanded slap to the smugness of more fortunately placed members of society.

The book is very insightful and highly readable.

— Malsawmi Jacob

Book details:

The Autobiography of a Sex Worker

Translated, with foreword by J Devika

Published by Westland

Number of pages: 143

Price: Rs. 150

Hitha Suchani to Bhumika: Women’s Magazines in Telugu

Magazines and social reforms have always gone together. Most of the reforms, including reforms for women were initiated by men in the early days. Men like Veeresalingam Pantulu were social reformers who took it upon themselves to bring about changes in the society to benefit women. The need for women’s magazines arose because there was a need to reach out to women. The early women’s magazines were started by men. Whether women’s voice was given enough priority or not, these magazines certainly played an important role for what was termed at that time as “upliftment of women”. With growing readership, a quality writer base also started developing. Later women edited and published their own magazines.

Samineni Muddu Narasimhanaidu in his magazine *Hitha Suchani* raised the issue of social inequalities relating to women’s education for the first time. By the end of the first half of the 19th century, magazines from the West on women’s awakening had influenced thoughts about women. Veeresalingam’s public life started with his clash against traditional groups for the cause of women. He started *Vivekavardhani* in 1874. His *Telugu Janaana* (1893) mostly published histories of foreign women.

Women as Editors

From the early nineteenth century began a series of magazines edited by women. In 1902 Sattiraju Seetharamaiah established the magazine *Hindu Sundari* under the editorship of Mosalikanti Ramabai. This magazine motivated women to write articles. At one point as many as 84 women wrote for it. Photographs and articles

of influential women were published. Articles dwelt on the greatness of women. The magazine strengthened the struggle for women’s education. *Hindu Sundari* can be termed a revolutionary women’s magazine, as it was the first to raise questions about women’s rights.

Savithri was started by Pulugurtha Narasamamba. Almost all the articles in this magazine were written by women. It used to publish life stories of popular women and tried to improve the status of women. *Vivekavathi* (1909) was published with Rangavanam Ammal as editor. This magazine supported widow re-marriage and published statistical details of the number of child widows in the 10-15 age group.

Andhra Lakshmi (1921) was published under the editorship of Kallapalli Venkata Ramanamma. This magazine aimed to create nationalist feelings among women. It blamed the kind of education given to women as the prime cause for the disappointing state of affairs in the country. *Anasuya* was edited by Vinjamoori Venkata Ratnamma. This magazine was boldly irreverent and stated that the words of traditional elders need not be taken as sacred. It urged its readers to question opinions based on blind faith. *Mahila* magazine was published by Komarraju Acchamamba.

Gruha Lakshmi was started by K. Narahari Kesari. This magazine was committed to women’s development in a broad sense and was run till 1960. One of the purposes of this magazine was to prove

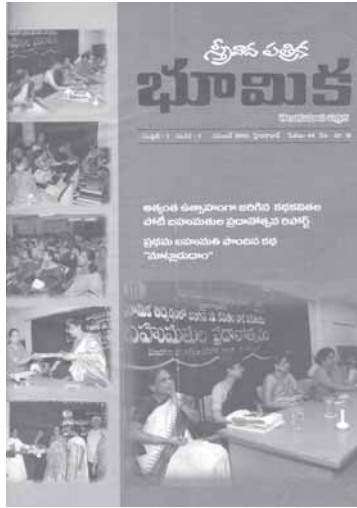
A HUNDRED YEARS HAVE ELAPSED
SINCE THE FIRST MAGAZINE RUN
BY WOMEN. BUT THE NUMBER OF
WOMEN’S MAGAZINES IS STILL
VERY FEW. DURING THESE HUNDRED
YEARS HARDLY TEN OR FIFTEEN
WOMEN’S MAGAZINES HAVE COME UP.

that women are equally strong, physically and mentally. Hence issues related to women’s health were discussed regularly. This magazine used to encourage women writers by conferring the Gruha Lakshmi Swarna Kankanam award on them.

Women Editors and Women’s Voices

As women’s magazines were established with women editors, women had a chance to voice their views. They found a platform to discuss issues and to express themselves. With the advent of printing machines more number of women writers and poets came into the limelight.

All the magazines believed that to improve their position, women needed to enhance their thinking capacities and decision making capabilities. They also maintained that education was the only means to improve their knowledge and self-confidence, and urged women to educate themselves. They have been largely successful in their endeavors. Even though these magazines did not succeed in bringing about any significant changes in the society or in the social and cultural attitudes of women themselves, they helped women to realise their identity and offered them a chance to discuss and resolve their problems. The home was at the centre of most of the concerns of these magazines or they firmly believed that an educated woman would be more efficient in household management than an illiterate woman. That women must be educated to be better home managers by being efficient wives and mothers was the generally accepted idea at this time. Urging women to change their views and grow mentally was more for household management rather than for their personal growth as individuals. Very often what these magazines viewed as freedom for women was within the confines of limited notions of tradition. Some of them even wrote that women's freedom must be guided by the activities of men.



Hundred Years After

Hundred years have elapsed since the first magazine run by women. But the number of women's magazines is still very few. During these hundred years hardly ten or fifteen women's magazines have come up. Some of the popular Telugu women's magazines that are established in recent times are *Vanitha*, *Mahila*, and *Vanitha Jyothi*. Even though these are women's magazines they are run by men.

Kondaveeti Satyavathi and Jayaprabha together started the first feminist women's bulletin named *Lohitha*. It ran for one year and stopped. The magazines brought out from Hyderabad are *Bhumika*, *Mahila Maargam*, *Choopu*, *Maatruka*, and *Maanavi*.

Mahila Maargam has been run by women for the last eighteen years. Initially, M Vishnupriya and now P Pavana are the editors. The magazine publishes the views of women, articles on women's issues and covers the news regarding various movements in the society. It also has a literary section where it publishes stories and poetry by women. Another magazine that is run by women is *Maatruka* comes under the editorship of K. Rama. Kaatyayani was the editor of *Choopu*. This magazine dealt with many current social and political issues, but is now defunct due to financial problems.

Maanavi is another magazine totally managed by women. It is published by AIDWA (All India Democratic Women's Association)

and S Punyavathi is the editor. A few years ago a good literary magazine called *Aahwanam* was published from Vijayawada with Lakshmi as its editor. This magazine also had to close up due to financial hurdles.

Navodayam magazine is published from Chittoor district. This started under the 'Velugu' programme for the benefit of rural women. This magazine is unique in that it is totally written and published by rural women about their activities and issues. This is probably the only women's magazine published from this area where the editor and the contributing journalists are rural women.



Among these, *Bhumika*, the feminist magazine, was started in January 1993. For the last sixteen years it has struggled to sustain itself and evolve into a serious and alternative magazine for women's causes. This is one of the trail-blazing feminist magazines in publication in South India.

In the early eighties ideas of feminism flooded Telugu literature and influenced all forms of literature. In fact, due to this impact, newspapers had to add special pages for the women's section. These pages were filled with feminist poetry and articles. Concepts of feminism were discussed with great intensity. There were serious and intense feminist movements, spread of feminist ideology, and great changes happening in literature by women. Many of the women who were part of the feminist movements felt that although the issues concerning women highlighted in the popular media brought attention to certain issues these efforts remained within the limitations of patriarchy. They felt that there was a great need to document the real problems of women and to analyse women's issues from a feminist perspective. The time was ripe for a feminist magazine which would be a complete women's journal. *Bhumika* was launched with this purpose in mind. Apart from providing a platform for women to express themselves, *Bhumika* aims to cover a wide range of issues concerning women, especially from the marginalised communities.

During the last 16 years *Bhumika* has brought out special issues on various topics like the agriculture sector crisis, impact of globalisation, problems of dalit women, the handloom crisis, children's special, women's political partnership, Telengana issue, writers' special, women and mental health, HIV/AIDS and social movements in northern Andhra. It has also brought out a special issue to celebrate a decade of publication.

Initially *Bhumika* was started with a group of women who have since taken up different pursuits in life. Currently *Bhumika* has an all women team which works on a voluntary basis.

— Kondaveeti Satyavathi, Editor, *Bhumika*

A Letter From An Old Age Home



Dr. Kamala Jaya Rao retired as Deputy Director, National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad. She has done some excellent work relating to her field and Mira Shiva has commented in a letter to *Medical Friends Circle Bulletin (mfc bulletin, August-September 2008)* that her piece on "Tonics, How much an economic waste" in *mfc bulletin* "was one of the first pieces related to the rationality, actually lack of it, in early 80s." She added that "her academic activism in what we valued is very important." We reproduce below a poem written by her, published in *mfc bulletin, August-September 2008 issue*.

I am Fine Thank You

Dear Chinu,
 You wanted me to write something. And, this is it.
 Do whatever you want with it. Kamala Jaya Rao,
 c/o, Home For the Aged, C R Foundation,
 Kondapur, Hyderabad 500032, Ph: (040) 2311017

There's nothing the matter with me,
 I'm as healthy as I can be.
 I have arthritis in both my knees,
 And when I talk, I talk with a wheeze,
 My pulse is weak, and my blood is thin,
 But I'm awfully well for the shape I am in.
 I have arch supports for both my feet
 Or I wouldn't be able to be on the street.
 Sleep is denied me night after night,
 And in the morning I am just a sight!
 My memory's failing, my head's in a spin,
 But I'm awfully well for the shape I'm in.
 I think my liver is out of whack,
 And a terrible pain is in my back
 My hearing is poor, my sight is dim,
 Most everything seems to be out of trim.
 I'm peacefully living on aspirin,
 But I'm awfully well for the shape I'm in.
 The moral is this, as my tale I unfold,
 That for you and me who are growing old,
 It's better to say, 'I'm fine' with a grin,
 Than to let people know the shape we are in.
 How do I know that my youth is all spent?
 Well, my 'get up and go' has got up and went.
 But I really don't mind when I think with a grin
 Of all the grand places my 'get up' has been.
 Old age is golden, I've heard it said,
 But sometimes I wonder as I get into bed,
 With my ears in a drawer, my teeth in a cup,
 My eyes on the table until I wake up,

Ere sleep overtakes me I say to myself,
 Is there anything else I could lay on the shelf?
 When I was young my slippers were red
 I could kick my heels over my head.
 When I was older my slippers were blue
 But I still could dance the whole night through.
 Now that I'm old my slippers are black,
 I can walk to the store but pull my way back.
 I get up each morning and dust off my wits,
 I pick up the paper and read the 'obits'.
 If my name is still missing I know I'm not dead,
 So I have a good breakfast and go back to bed.

The SPARROW Team
 Congratulates
 Dr. C S Lakshmi on
 receiving the *Lifetime
 Literary Achievement
 Award (Iyal Viruthu
 2008)* from The Tamil
 Literary Garden, Toronto.
 We are proud of you,
 Dr. Lakshmi



Tales from Gujarat

Three interesting books have come out in the last decade, two of which tell the story of working in the public sphere for women in Gujarat. The first book is on Soonamai Desai of Navsari who was a well-known social worker of her times. The second is the book by Ila Bhatt which tells the story of SEWA

which is actually the story of some 700,000 women in Gujarat. The third book is an attempt to discover Gujarat through poetry, to “document unusual voices in unusual times, unusual acts and unusual silences” as the author Ayesha Khan puts it in the introduction. From the three books arises a picture of Gujarat we need to understand.

“I HAVE HATED being a woman almost throughout my life. It has laid too many restrictions on me.”

Soonamai Desai’s remarkable life spanned a century and the desire to play a purposeful role in changing the lives of people in her area was there throughout her life. Her autobiography written in Gujarati when she was 98 and her conversations with her daughter-in-law Vera Desai have been combined to make this interesting book by Aban Mukherji. Recounting her life, Soonamai says, “I have hated being a woman almost throughout my life. It has laid too many restrictions on me.” In her account of the social work she did she talks about how at every point she had to deal with the fact of being a woman, of struggling to be heard and acting despite oppositions.

Soonamai married Bomanji Desai who taught at S C J N Z Madresa High School in Navsari at the age of 21. Her entry into public life was preceded by an interesting trip to Europe which she made with her son who had finished his studies abroad. While in Paris, Soonamai wanted very much to meet Madame Cama. She wrote her a note in Gujarati and Madame Cama not only agreed to meet her but praised her for being what she was. On returning from Paris, Soonamai found that her life had reached a turning point. Bai Ratanbai Edulji Bamji, sister of J N Tata, the founder of the Tata empire, was a great philanthropist and she decided to build a place to help the women of Navsari. Bomanji, who was asked to take the responsibility, involved Soonamai in building what

came to be known as the Mahila Vishram and very soon Soonamai became the spirit behind the Mahila Vishram.

Later Soonamai became a member of the Municipal Corporation of Navsari. When she was nominated she asked a friend of theirs what his reaction would be if his wife were to be nominated. He promptly replied: “I’d throw her out of the window.” Soonamai was finally persuaded to accept the nomination but they nominated one more person—a fourteen year old married girl—to give her company. Soonamai says that in her two years of membership the girl uttered not a single word in the meetings and took leave of absence twice to give birth to children. Finally Soonamai became the sole member in the Corporation. Soonamai managed to incorporate in the Constitution of the Municipality that voting would be through ballot. Another important change she suggested was that women’s organizations must have women members on their trust boards. This was vehemently opposed and they literally had to go to court to get consent for this as it was considered far too radical.

Soonamai narrates an interesting incident when she was the Chairman of the Sanitary Committee. A public refuse bin brought about tension between the Hindus and the Muslims. The Muslims said it was too close to the mosque in the locality and the Hindus said that the alternative place suggested was too close to their children’s school. Soonamai said that a visit was needed to the area and her colleagues vetoed it saying that a woman cannot go into a disturbed area. Soonamai reached the area much to the astonishment of both the communities and when she told them to decide among themselves where the bin should be placed they came up with a solution which she accepted. Soonamai, thus, became the heroine of the day.

Soonamai’s life is an amazing account of how much a woman can do if only she wants to. From a Parsi woman in Navsari we come to Ila Bhatt, who admired Ramesh, a fellow university student from an impoverished family and who was collecting primary data from slum families for independent India’s first census of 1951. She knew that her parents would disapprove of their daughter “wandering in dirty neighbourhoods with a young man whose family one knew nothing about.” And yet she took that first step. From

“WORK is a great leveller. After the madness, no matter what one’s religion, there is still the need to make a living, to pay off debts and to find a new shelter.”

Scattered Voices

there to the legal department of the Textile Labour Association (TLA) and later marriage to Ramesh Bhatt and then setting up of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) seems like the logical course of her life. As she says, SEWA was born among the urban poor with the lowliest of workers—the rag pickers—and their attempt to change their working conditions. With that SEWA began the process of union building among home-based workers and other kinds of workers among the urban poor. But the fight was not just for union building but also for forging an identity for self-employed women as workers. SEWA later extended its activities into rural areas from where the urban poor came. Today the rural members in SEWA far outnumber their urban sisters. Ila Bhatt says that she found the heart of India in the rural women. The dry deserts of Gujarat, she says, are home to some of the most resilient women who work as embroidery workers, marginal farmers, gum pickers and salt farmers.

Ila Bhatt talks about a third of SEWA's members being Muslim and how they had become the primary targets of a systematic and vicious attack involving rape, assault, murder, arson and plunder. Ila describes them as dark days when Rahimas and Ramilas, Jetuns and Jayas, Sharadas and Salmas who had all worked and laughed and sung together were being pulled by their communities in different directions. And yet, they acted bravely to restore peace. SEWA was faced with the task of rebuilding the lives of many women but as she says, "Work is a great leveller. After the madness, no matter what one's religion, there is still the need to make a living, to pay off debts and to find a new shelter." She also says that such man-made disasters force organisations like SEWA to take up relief operations primarily when they have to be doing development work. The broader issues of poverty get drowned in continued division of people by caste or religious ideologies. Ila Bhatt feels that the issue of poverty must be faced head on and argues that when they are placed at the centre of economic reform women can initiate a process of change in our society and environment in a healthy, respectful, non-violent and sustainable way.

Carrying the words of Ila Bhatt when we come to the scattered voices collected by Ayesha Khan we get a full picture of what lies ahead and what needs to be done. In her introduction Ayesha Khan says that during the days of the compilation exercise, she traversed across cities and countryside, and discovered a new Gujarat in unheard poetry, true in its love and passion for the land and its cultural milieu. In a way, for her, this Gujarat went beyond its Kutchi deserts, Narmada waters, Gir Lions, Navratri nights or even Gandhi's non-violence, Jain/Vaishnava vegetarianism and abstinence. She discovered places and people which helped her, a tired and angry woman, occasionally frightened, realise that she was a Muslim more in political and social terms than in religious ones. And as she discovered Gujarat she came to find peace with

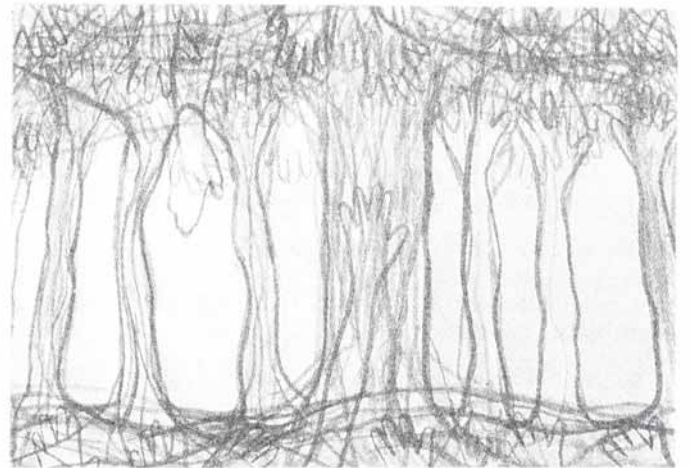
herself and the scarred landscape and social terrain around her. The scattered voices she collected made Ayesha discover places and people that help quietly build up strength for larger looming battles, of identity and also personal demons. And Ayesha herself turns to poetry during the course of the travels and writes:

*...I am still alive and unharmed.
My home is yet not looted or burnt.
Nor am I raped or roasted alive.
My family is still around.*

*My friends haven't written the obituary yet.
I have no right to fear and tears now.
I have to laugh and smile.
Birthday celebrations, cakes 'n cream...*

— C S Lakshmi

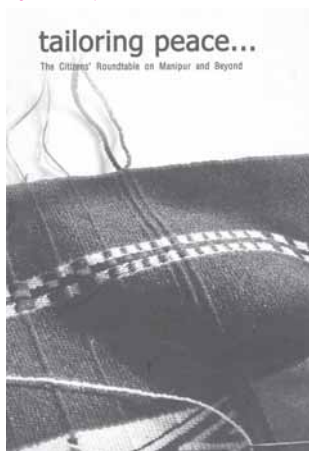
We Are Poor but So Many



*The Story of Self-Employed
Women in India*

Tailoring Peace: The Citizens' Roundtable on Manipur and Beyond

By Gunjan Veda



The book is a report on the discussion on the political problems of the state of Manipur in an attempt to find solutions, held by the Citizens' Roundtable on Manipur and Beyond. North East Network (NEN) facilitated the discussion in response to the protests by the people of Manipur to army oppression. The meeting held in Imphal from November 18-20, 2004, provided a platform for the people of the state to come

together and work out strategies to deal with the problems facing the state. It also served as a means of acquainting people in other parts of the country with the situation there.

Topmost in the discussion was the much hated Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, commonly known as AFSPA, imposed since 1958. This Act gives security forces the powers to search, arrest and even kill any person on suspicion. Under this Act, no action can be taken against the security forces personnel except with the prior sanction of the central government.

Protected by this Act, the armed forces have committed numerous atrocities in the disturbed state. Protests had not brought results. And in July 2004, Manorama Devi died in custody, allegedly raped and killed. On July 15, members of the *Meira Paibis* or 'torch bearers', a women's group, stripped down to the skin in front of the Assam Rifles camp in a desperate, anguished protest. This was followed by intense political agitation. It was in this context that the Citizens' Roundtable was organised.

Over 65 journalists, academicians, human rights activists, lawyers and students from different parts of the country participated in the conference. Nearly 80 per cent of the delegates were from within Manipur's multi ethnic communities. The organisers considered it necessary to include the different ethnic groups in chalking out a roadmap to peace.

Shubhra Devi welcomed the delegates. She remarked that about 90 percent of the state are hill areas inhabited by tribes like Nagas, Kukis, Paites and others, while Meiteis are the main inhabitants of the valley.

To better acquaint the reader with the state, the book starts with an introduction of the place and people, its geography and history.

The Meiteis were originally animists, but in the early eighteenth century, they were forcibly converted by King Pamheiba, also known as Garib Niwas, who declared Hinduism as the state religion. He acted under the influence of a preacher

from Sylhet, now in Bangladesh. Even the *Meitei Mayek*, the original script of the Meiteis, was replaced by the Bengali script. This is a point of contention at present, with the new generation wishing to revive the original script.

Before the British came, Manipur was a sovereign state. It came under British control after 1891. There were two important women's movements during the British period. One, in 1904, the women strongly protested the policy of sending the men to Burma to fetch wood for rebuilding the house of a British employee. Next, in 1939, they demanded the suspension of rice exports when Manipur faced food scarcity. Both the movements were highly successful.

The Manipuri women play a vital role in the economic and social life in the present time as well. A remarkable feature of Manipur is the *Ima Keithel*, one of the biggest markets in Asia, run exclusively by women. The state has a healthy sex ratio of 1007 females per 1000 males. Women's literacy according to the provisional census of 2001 is 59.7 percent.

The *Meira Paibis*, who were notable for their socio political activism, actively participated in the Roundtable. They stated that the Army often arrested and tortured innocent people. This forced young people to join the Underground. They asserted that unless AFSPA is removed, more people will continue to join the militants and peace will never be restored. They requested the outstation delegates to acquaint the people in other parts of the country with the situation in Manipur. When *Meira Paibis* pleaded for support from educated youth, they received no reply or assurances. And there is no sign yet of their being included in decision making in the political realm.

While the Conference was going on, two important incidents took place in the political life of Manipur.

One was the handover of the Kangla Fort which had been occupied by Assam Rifles for decades. According to folklore, Kangla was the place where dry land first appeared. It is believed that King Pakhangba ruled Manipur from here in 33 AD, and established the kingdom. It remained the capital of the kings of Manipur until the British took it in 1891. It later passed into the hands of the Assam Rifles in 1915. The people of Manipur had been demanding that the Army vacate their historic place. And finally on 20 November, 2004, it happened. This was one of the most significant events in the history of the state.

Around the same time, the Central Government announced that a Review Committee on AFSPA was formed. The Committee would submit its report in six months. The Roundtable started the strategy planning session in the light of this announcement.

Reading through the book, one begins to see the complexity of the social and political situation of Manipur. The state is riddled with problems. The citizens suffer violence from both the Underground and the Armed Forces. Ethnic conflicts, drug

addiction and the spread of AIDS are other consuming problems. The book is an eye opener to Manipur's great need for peace. It also carries relevant, interesting photographs.

— Malsawmi Jacob

Book details:

Tailoring Peace: The Citizens' Roundtable on Manipur and Beyond

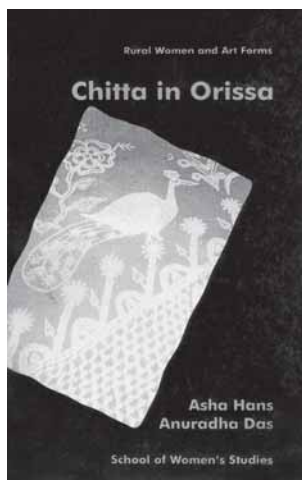
Publisher: NEN (North East Network), Guwahati, April 2005.

No. of pages: 86

Price: (Suggested Contribution) Rs.100/-

Chitta in Orissa

By Asha Hans and Anuradha Das



This book describes *Chitta* art in the state of Orissa. It also explains the use and meaning of this art form, which has lived in the religious heartland of Orissa for ages. Though different, it is linked to similar rural art forms in the rest of the country through religion.

The word *Chitta* is derived from the Sanskrit word 'chit' meaning 'eye'. As the paintings attract the eye, they are called *Chitta*. This type of rural art is found all over India under different names like *Rangoli*, *Alpana* or *Kolam*.

Chitta is a mural painted with wet rice floor paste on mud washed walls and floors. The painting is done with fingers, mostly the three middle fingers. No brush or other tools are used. The women artists dip their fingers into the rice paste and draw the designs. Many of the design motifs are flowers, trees, plants, birds, and animals. It is an art form based on ritual, but also a competition as well as an artistic realisation. It is practised solely by women. This art is specific to region and occasion.

The paintings are connected with Lord Jagannath, the reigning deity of Orissa, and his wife Lakshmi. According to legends, the goddess asked his permission to visit earth on a day humans were observing a fast in her honour. She reached a village where lived an untouchable woman named Chandaluni Shriya. On the last Thursday of the month of *Margashrira*, Shriya got up early in the morning and drew a lotus picture with sixteen petals using rice paste and worshipped Lakshmi. The goddess, well pleased, stopped at Shriya's doorstep and blessed her. When she went

back home, Jagannath, who had heard that his wife had stopped at the house of an untouchable, refused her entry. The goddess left in a fit of annoyance, cursing him. He was reduced to penury in her absence.

Goddess Lakshmi is considered as the bringer of wealth. Thus in the region of Puri District, the abode of Lord Jagannath, in the month of *Margashrira* beautiful paintings made with rice flour paste can be seen on mud houses. The people pray to Lakshmi to forgive Jagannath. They draw designs of the goddess' feet entering their homes. The goddess is depicted as using a lotus flower as her seat. Around the feet, they draw the lotus and other patterns from nature.

The *Chitta* art is in danger of being lost in the upheaval of changes. Houses are changing from mud and thatch to brick, cement and concrete. So the old traditional painting done on mud walls and floors faces the threat of dying.

To counter this, the Centre for Women's Studies of Utkal University has set up an extension programme with help from UNESCO. Here, young women are taught to reproduce *Chitta* art on materials like paper and cloth. The Centre also aims to give the women and girls a sense of the art's worth and an income generating capacity. These are from families which would be helped by income from the sale of *Chitta* artefacts.

A chapter titled 'The artists speak out' is included in the book. Here, the Centre organisers ask questions to the girls who had joined the programme. They also spoke to their mothers and grandmothers. The women revealed, through the conversations, that they had personal dreams and desires which were mostly checked by the demands of society. Some of them had the revolutionary spirit, they were rebels for a cause.

The girls, belonging to a new generation, were beginning to question tradition. The weight of tradition often subdued the spirit. These girls expressed their opinions and feelings regarding this. They spoke of their dreams, desires and aspirations. Several of them voiced a wish to get educated and become independent.

The book also contains pictures of beautiful *Chitta* paintings, a feast to the eyes. It has done a good work of highlighting the rural art form that is practised only by women.

— Malsawmi Jacob

Book details:

Chitta in Orissa

Publisher: School of Women's Studies, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, 2000

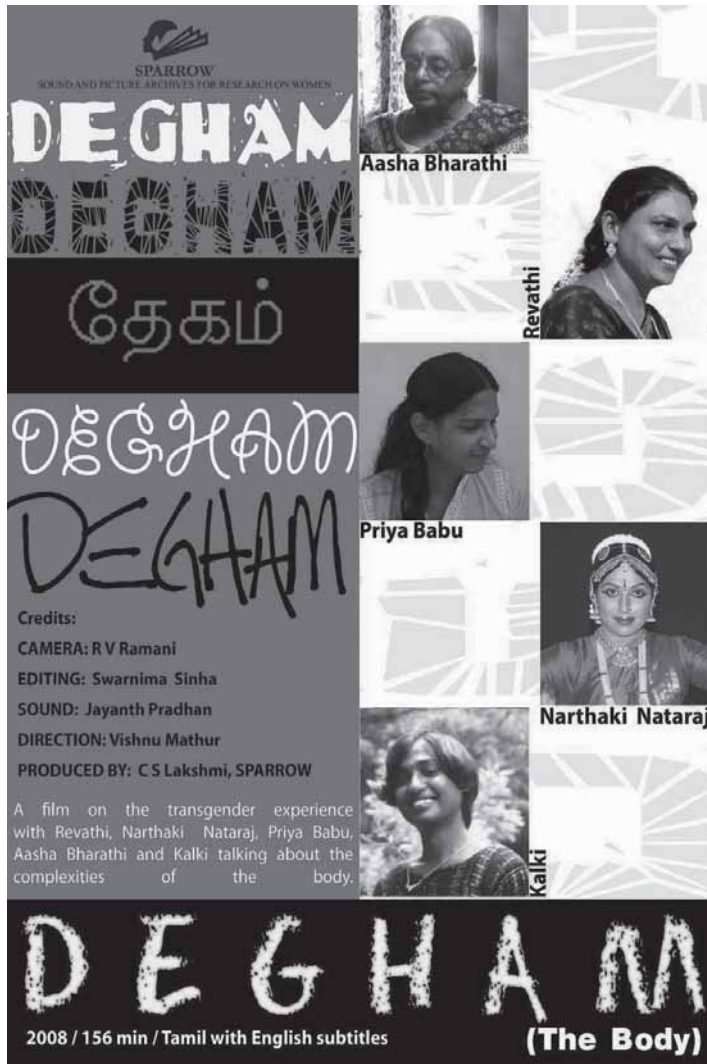
Number of pages: Not numbered

Price: Not given

SPARROW's film *Degham* (The Body), based on the lives of five transgenders was completed sometime last year. SNL in its previous issues has carried news about the making of the film and the challenges involved in executing a project of this nature. After completion of the film (which took a while because of many functional problems with regard to editing) we felt that the first to see the film must be those who have told their stories in the film. The Director of L V Prasad Film & T V Academy in Chennai, K Hariharan, collaborated with SPARROW in screening the film in the

the transgender participants in the film came for the screening and answered some of the questions of the audience. A small but discerning audience attended the screening and raised several interesting questions with regard to the growing need for understanding lives which are regarded as marginal.

The screening of *Degham* on 25th November 2008 was in Nagercoil at the residence of Kannan, the editor of *Kalachuvadu*, a Tamil literary journal, and a great supporter of SPARROW and its activities for several years now. The screening was organised in the large hall and a discerning



Taking the Body Around

Screening of *Degham* and other films and responses

auditorium of the institute on 22nd November 2008. Priya Babu and Kalki, two persons who narrated their experiences in the film, came for the screening which was inaugurated by Hariharan. Priya and Kalki brought their friends along and there was also a select audience from the institute and outside. There was a general and informal discussion following the screening.

The next screening outside Mumbai was organised in collaboration with the Campaign for Sex Workers and Sexual Minorities Rights, Pedestrian Pictures and Alternative Lawyers' Forum in Bangalore on 20th December 2008. Revathi, one of

audience who were familiar with the issues of transgender existence attended the screening. A lively discussion followed the screening and went on till late in the evening. Any reservations anyone may have had with regard to the length of the film which is 156 minutes, were completely gone after the screening. The general consensus was that time did not matter as the film was exploring the complex subject of the body. Some in the audience felt that the play at the end of the film could have been shorter.

The screening that followed took place in the Department



Audience at the screening of
DEGHAM & K R Ambika



Audience discussing after the screening of
DEGHAM & K R Ambika

of Women's Studies in the University of Kerala, Trivandrum. Jayashree, the head of the department, organised the screening for a group of students and teachers on 27th November 2008. The audience watched the long film with interest and the screening was followed by an interactive session with several questions with regard to the existence of transgenders in the Indian society and the lack of understanding regarding their lives and how the film successfully filled this lacuna.

Fatima College in Madurai organised a one-day workshop of screening of three SPARROW films on K R Ambika, D Sharifa and on the transgender experience for their students and teachers on 24th January 2009. Although the screening clashed with preparations for another important function to be held the next day, the student audience turnout was very encouraging. It is possible that the students felt like a captive audience initially for it was a Saturday and not a day when they have regular classes. But one could see the audience slowly getting captivated by the three different subjects of the films. While the other two films were appreciated for talking about the theatre experience and about active work among Muslim women, *Degham* generated a whole range of questions from the students about the body, understanding the body, about family and society and the discussion then veered on to being young and vulnerable, and non-communication between parents and children in the family.

The screening in February was in Thanjavur at the residence of Sugan, a teacher and editor of the literary journal *Sundara Sugan*, on 8th February 2009. The screening was innovatively organised in the garden with a select audience. Two films of SPARROW were screened. The film on K R Ambika, the theatre artiste from Tamil Nadu drew a lot of appreciation. But *Degham*

moved the audience to tears. Many of them felt that while the first film transported them to a world of theatre and life in the theatre, the second film touched a raw nerve in them and brought them down to hard realities of existence.

In Mumbai *Degham* was shown to an extremely appreciative audience on 18th February 2009 at the Research Centre for Women's Studies. All these screenings at various places to different audiences brought very good feedback and a sense of satisfaction that all the hard work we have done in the last eleven years to make so many oral history documentaries were worth all the trouble. The films had meant a lot of work time and effort and coordination in so many different areas apart from the main archiving work we were doing on a regular basis. But the film festival in 2007 and the screenings last year and this year have more than made up for the struggle we had to put up to make these films. That all efforts at oral history video documentation culminated at the human body and its complexities at this point of time, is also significant for the body is in a way, at the centre of all the material we have archived.

— C S Lakshmi

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

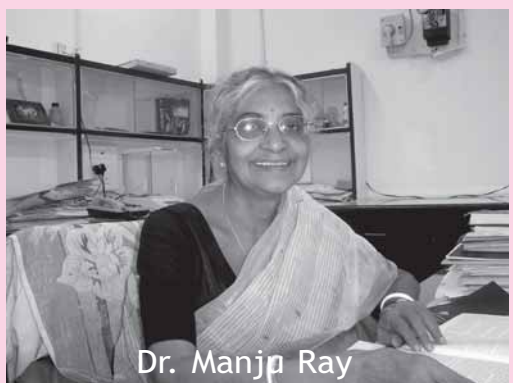
For reviews please send two copies of the book.



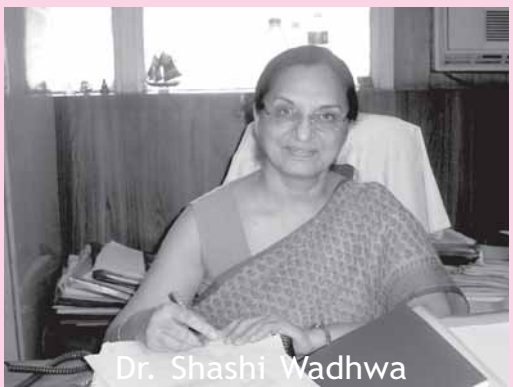
Dr. Rama Goindrajan



Dr. Kasturi Dutta



Dr. Manjira Ray



Dr. Shashi Wadhwa

When Science Becomes Life

The Task Force on Women in Science set up by the Department of Science and Technology, in its meeting in Jaipur on 2nd and 3rd November 2006, deliberated in detail about the methods by which more girl students would be encouraged to take up the science stream. Among many plans and strategies discussed there was a general feeling that some motivational material was the need of the day. It was strongly felt that in order to provide motivation to young women to take up careers in science a well-designed and well-written compendium giving the life stories, career and achievements of twenty women scientists should be brought out. The Task Force on Women in Science discussed in detail the content and form of the compendium. Based on the discussion of the Task Force SPARROW was invited to submit a proposal for the compendium.

SPARROW has begun work on this interesting compendium. This project will make an attempt to record the lives of twenty women scientists and prepare a text written in an easily accessible style meant for young people who are at the age when career decisions have to be taken. The idea is to encourage young girls to take up science as a career option and not think of it as something inaccessible to them. The Task Force during its deliberations laid out certain guidelines for choosing the women scientists. The criteria to be followed for choosing the scientists was to be on the basis of awards received, recognition of their work and appreciation of their work by other scientists. SPARROW began by interviewing the Bhatnagar awardees and has already met more than 35 women scientists from different fields of science. The others have been chosen on the basis of challenges they have faced, determination in pursuing a career in science and recognition other than the Bhatnagar award. Those not included in the compendium meant for DST will be included in the book to be published by SPARROW later.

SPARROW began the project with a clear understanding of how science is gendered. Apart from the pioneering work done by Dr. Maithreyi Krishna Raj on women and science in her book of essays on women and science, there have also been reports and articles which deal with subject of gendering of science. *Lilavathi's Daughters* edited by Rohini Godbole and Ram Ramaswamy and published by Indian Academy of Sciences, Bangalore has also wonderfully brought out the experiences of many women scientists. In India generally girls are not encouraged to take up the science stream for boys are considered more suitable to pursue science as a subject. There is also the sociological aspect of girls being expected to take up subjects which will allow them to be good wives and mothers. Careers in science are not considered suitable for girls who are supposed to take up the responsibility of running a family. Since marriage and family are seen as the primary needs of a woman, pursuing a career in science is not seen as a priority in her life.

SPARROW
 began by interviewing the
 Bhatnagar awardees
 and has already met more than
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 of science.

From the initial material we have gathered from the narration of the scientists we met, we found that even if girls take up science the chances of their pursuing it as a career may not be bright if the necessary support does not come from several quarters including the family. The workplace must also be conducive to a woman working and excelling in science. We felt that there is still a need to create awareness regarding science as a subject suited to both women and men for career options. Publications which stress the fact that there is a possibility of combining a science career with home like any other career and also stress the fact that a woman has the option to combine marriage and career or the option to remain single to pursue a career not just in science but in any other subject are needed to create this awareness. The book SPARROW is planning will not only stress the fact that science as a subject does not pose any special hurdle for a young girl taking a decision about her future but will also talk about the joy and excitement of science through personal stories narrated by the scientists and through visual images that will open up the world of science. SPARROW is hoping to make this publication the first of its kind.

In this first phase of the project, meeting women scientists and talking to them on subjects ranging from hematology to brain research has been extremely exciting and it has been a great experience doing home work on the scientists before meeting them. We began with the mathematician Sujata Ramadorai, a Bhatnagar awardee, with some trepidation but she made mathematics seem like a great adventure. After that we got the courage to meet other scientists. Sitting with them in their office or homes and listening to them talk about their life and their work in science opened up not only a whole new world of science but a new world where women made different choices and lived with them. In their easy and unassuming way they could take us from Antarctica to genetic research and bone marrow transplant.

— C S Lakshmi



Dr. Sujatha Ramadorai



Dr. Vijaya Lakshmi Ravindranath



Dr. Sudipta Sengupta



Dr. Rohini Godbole

Mallika Sen Gupta

*...mad rantings of the helpless girl, that's how my poetry goes
in the burnt ruins of Iraq, my poetry's red red rose
Shab Bano to the Ganga, Medha Patkar, that's my poetry
my poetry is the will to live, destroyer of symmetry
my poetry stalks the world like a panther on main street
living in the Sunderbans, will my poetry be tiger meat?
my poetry is the street-beggar child, baby dead in the womb
my poetry is the hunger, famine, flood, ancient faquir's tomb*

*my poetry is the nude women's march, across Manipur state
my poetry is in the kitchen, grinding turmeric paste
ceasefire is my poetry, the young girl's bashful kiss
poetry is my tale of sorrow, first-year-of-marriage bliss
poetry is the memory of father, two lovers living apart
poetry is my defeated soul, my beloved son's heart
bats off to you all, tongueless Khanaa, Vyas, Valmiki, Dante
my poetry dances to the flicker of flame, adagio andante.*

From "In Search of Fire, My Poetry"

Nabaneeta Dev Sen

*my exile is over, mother,
no more living in the jungle for me
come, mother, underneath this matted beard
feel the familiar cheeks of your child
open up your breasts, mother, and watch how
the seven streams of milk
gush towards my parched tongue...*

*...now look at this chest where you planted
the sapling of a heart
in a soft green stretch of sun
in the hidden mesh of this dark jungle
impenetrable
has grown a hungry tree...
with toothy leaves and sharp claws
and fierce flowers
it chews on other hearts
a fine flesh-eater*

*my time in the jungle is over, mother,
now the jungle lives in me.*

From "The Jungle Story"

Excerpts from
some
BENGALI
POEMS
included in
*Being Carried
Far Away*,
the SECOND
BOOK in a
series of five
volumes

Homage

G V Malathamma: A Lifetime in Kannada Theatre



GV Malathamma, the daughter of Gubbi Veeranna, a pioneer who owned Gubbi theatre company whose name was known to anyone familiar with theatre in Karnataka, passed away on 30th December 2008. She was 84. Five years ago SPARROW made a film on her life and work in the theatre. She had gone blind

and was living with her daughter B Jayashree, the well-known theatre artiste. Often alone in the house, she had a faithful dog and her memories of a lifetime in the theatre for company. When we approached her she was willing to share her life and times with us without holding anything back. She recreated the splendour as well as the pain of being part of a theatre company even though it

was owned by her father. Through her narration we got to know about her mother who was sold to a theatre owner for a measure of rice and about the travails of being part of a travelling theatre company which performed throughout the year to an appreciative audience, but without status in the society. Malathamma relived those days for us in the film, laughing and crying and joking. When the film was screened in Bangalore she came to see it, rather listen to it, and when she heard herself talking about the death of her theatre actor husband who was always Rama when she was Sita, tears rolled down her cheeks as if it had happened only recently.

Around the last week of December 2008, we had organised a private screening of the film in an artist's house for a few friends who had wanted to see the film. Just two days later came the news of her death. The film was shown again to a group of students from America in TISS, Mumbai, and Malathamma became the topic of a lively discussion that followed. Artistes like Malathamma leave behind rich memories for us to understand the world of theatre and about relationships.

— C S Lakshmi

Krithika: A Visionary Gandhian



Krithika passed away quietly on the 13th of February. She was 93. Krithika, whose real name was Mathuram Bhoothalingam, began to write at the age of 35. Born into a progressive family that was involved with the freedom movement, Krithika was deeply influenced by Gandhi and his views on politics and the nation.

Her novels were in a way modern mythologies that reinterpreted mythological characters and situations in the contemporary times. She was of the view that a philosopher politician of the highest spiritual order could alone save the nation from corruption and debasement. She was firm in this view till the end for when one of her novels was reprinted in 2002, she wrote: "If the youth cannot link life with customs where else can they go looking for self-respect and a meaning for life? ...From this aesthetic movement will emerge the possibility of a new spiritual evolution and the symbol of an entirely new authority....We can once again begin our happy and sacred attempt to reach the real truth of human existence...." Those words belong to a generation of people who have given us a nation to build and cherish.

— C S Lakshmi

Sugandhi Subramaniam: A Life Interred

Poets are not by any right immortal. But when a poet dies before her time, one feels the pain deeply. Sugandhi's first poetry collection brought out two decades ago was called *Interred Life*. It received a lot of notice because it touched upon the complexities of living as a woman. I had contacted her then and we became friends. She shared many details of her life with me. A very strict grandmother had brought her up and Sugandhi had to endure a lot of physical punishments during her growing up years, some of them quite brutal. Violence later became very much a part of her life as she kept going into depression and coming out of it after her marriage. Her depression affected her two daughters but she could not help it. A second collection of poems was brought out a few years after the first one. She died on the 12th of February in her sleep. Her husband explained that continuous medication for her mental condition had weakened her heart. She was only 42. She had not kept in touch with anyone including me but has left behind a notebook filled with her poetic thoughts and other notes, some of which will be published soon.

— C S Lakshmi

Begum Para: A Lovable Vamp



When SPARROW was planning to organise several workshops in 1997, some of the first persons we contacted were Begum Para and Nadira in Mumbai and Lalita Pawar in Pune. We were thinking of a workshop with three of them and actress Pramila. The planned workshop never took place but I

occasionally visited Begum Para. She lived very close to our place in Versova and I had met her through a friend and had had some lively discussions with her on the cinema of her times. She was full of anecdotes and humour but one could sense a feeling of loss; one felt as if she still wanted to be in the world from which she had moved away. In photographs around we could see the world of her films like *Do Mastane*, *Aadmi*, *Lutera*, *Naya ghar*, *Suhag Raat*, *Ustad Pedro* and so on.

While at the peak of her career Begum Para married Dilip Kumar's brother Nasir Khan in 1958 and quit acting. She was considered bold for her times for she did not hesitate to play negative roles and often appeared as a vamp with backless blouses. In everyday life too she was bold and different. Unlike other actresses of her times who mixed whisky in colas she used to openly hold a whisky glass.

Playing grandmother to Sonam Kapoor in *Saawariya* must have brought back the charm of cinema again into her life but Begum Para did not live to act in more films. On December 9th 2008 she passed away in her sleep.

— C S Lakshmi

Vinod Meghani: Passion for Gujarati Literature

Vinodbhai Meghani, a professional editor and translator, passed away on 15th February 2009 at the age of 74. He was the son of Gujarati literary stalwart and freedom fighter, Shri Jhaverchand Meghani whom Gandhiji gave the title of Raashtrveeya Shayar (National Poet). His wife Himanshiben Shelat is also a well known Gujarati writer.

Early years of Vinodbhai's life were occupied with an altogether different work compared to the later years dedicated to Gujarati literature. He left home at the age of nineteen and worked as a radio operator on ships for almost forty years. Maybe surrounded with books in his small cabin in the midst of the vast ocean, he was inspired to take up translation work very seriously in the later years of his life and to popularise his father's works outside Gujarat. He was a perfectionist to the core and worked with single minded devotion to keep his deadlines. Apart from nearly 20 edited and translated works to his credit, his immense contribution lies in creating awareness regarding Gujarati periodicals by organising exhibitions in various parts of

Gujarat. One such exhibition of 200 Gujarati periodicals was also arranged in Mumbai for the benefit of Gujarati readers.

A great admirer of Vincent Van Gogh, he translated his life story *Lust for Life* by Irving Stone into Gujarati entitled *Salgtaan Soorajmukhi* in 1971 and in 1994 brought out an improved version of the same translation. Some of his translations in English include his father's classic works. He translated 31 stories of his father's book *Saurashtrane Rasdhar*. He also translated the works of other writers into Gujarati, including those of his own wife.

SPARROW would like to pay a special tribute to Vinodbhai by acknowledging his contribution as an editor of its two Gujarati volumes *Tejomayi* and *Kaladharee* translated from twelve English booklets of oral history recordings of women. He was a good friend of SPARROW. The Gujarati literary world will certainly miss a passionate litterateur like him. For SPARROW it is also a loss of a dear friend who always stood by us whenever we needed him.

— Divya Pandey

Ahilya Rangnekar: A Crusader Who Lost Her Eyesight But Not Her Vision



Ahilyatai Rangnekar was over 90 when she passed away on 19th April 2009. She knew that her innings was almost over. She was prepared to bid adieu ever since it was diagnosed that she had cancer. For the last ten years of her life she had no eyesight. It must have been a

great hurdle in her active political life but she carried on as if nothing was abnormal. She could overcome all such hazards, and remained as active as ever. Walking on the crowded streets of Bombay—the streets on which she walked all her life with a red flag in hand, leading a morcha—did not make her nervous at all. Somebody asked her: “How can you manage this?” Pat came her reply—“I have lost my eyesight, not my vision.” (*“Mazi drishti geli ahe pan drishtikon nahi.”*) A powerful orator, she was always considered an asset by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Sister of Comrade B T Randive, the great theoretician of the Communist movement in India, she spoke with authority and clarity with a perfect diction. No wonder the Party made her a representative speaker in large rallies and mass meetings. She was as popular as Comrade Dange or George Fenandes in the rallies at Shivaji Park, Dadar. She was elected to Parliament with a thumping majority in 1977 and was a Member of Parliament during the short regime of the Janata government. But she always said that what she liked most was working for the people. She found time to interact with

young people and appreciated new revolutionary songs (which I sang on occasions with my group) and new educational films made by Anjali Monteiro and Jayshankar.

The faith in the ideas and dreams nurtured by her generation, will not be forgotten by us. Fighters like Ahilyatai, Tara Reddy, Pramila Dandavate and Prema Oak are part of our everyday life. They are with us whenever we are dealing with people whether they be housemaids or unfamiliar fellow travellers on the train or bus.

— Neela Bhagwat

Shirin Kudchedkar: The Ultimate Organic Intellectual



Four years ago, SPARROW had profiled the brilliant academic, Prof. Shirin Kudchedkar. Little did we think then that the day would come, when we would be writing her obituary.

Shirin was guide, philosopher, and friend to myriads of people in myriads of ways. Her excellent teaching, her brilliant scholarship, her eclectic openness to ideas, and her commitment to so many causes have all left an indelible impression on our minds.

Shirin was no ivory tower scholar. Her grassroots activism made her reach out to people from varying social, economic, and political backgrounds. Her involvement with Awaaz-E-Niswan, her investment in lesbian and gay politics, her sympathies for the intellectual left, her absolute commitment to secularism, marked her range of progressive political vision.

What strikes many of us is the fact that here was a teacher of many years standing but one who was always eager to learn more. This remarkable ability has been the reason for the number of courses that she introduced at SNTD including the hitherto unknown area of Canadian Literature. Similarly, courses in Women's Studies and gendered teaching of texts brought radical change into the old syllabi.

Of Shirin it could be said, that she was the ultimate embodiment of the organic intellectual. She never believed in any institutionalised religion. Her religion was, as she once told me, her faith in humanity. It remained with her till the end of her days. There are many who mourn her death, but, as her friend remarked, let us celebrate her life as well.

— Roshan G Shahani

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