



**SPARROW  
SOUND & PICTURE  
ARCHIVES FOR  
RESEARCH  
ON  
WOMEN**

Publication Number 58

Published by

Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women  
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Khatau Wadi, Goregaonkar Lane, Girgaum,  
Mumbai - 400 004  
Phone: 022 2387 1050

This occasional Newsletter is published with  
the support of Stichting de Zaaier, Utrecht

# SPARROW

## newsletter

SNL Number 15

November 2008

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SPARROW's first volume, the first in a series of five volumes, to be published with the works of eighty-seven writers from twenty-three languages, is out! This has taken a long time but we are happy with the outcome. It is a limited edition. So order your copies immediately.

Book details: *Hot is the Moon*,

No of pages: 310 / Price Rs. 350/-

## [Editor's Note]

This issue of SNL has taken up Karnataka and Tamilnadu regions for its coverage.

Bangalore Nagarathnamma was a legend in her own lifetime and Sriram V captures her life, her music and her vibrant personality in his book. K R Usha's book has won the recent Vodafone-Crossword award for the best English Language Fiction. Both the books have been reviewed in this issue. Two documentaries by Leena Manimekalai and Kutti Revathi, one, on extraordinary women who are survivors and another, on the rituals of the Irular tribe have received good notices. This SNL carries an article on the films. There is also a write-up on the SPARROW experience of making the film on transgenders called *Degham*.

The Right Livelihood award this year has gone to Krishanammal, the well-known Gandhian, of LAFTI (Land for Tillers' Freedom, India) who has dedicated her life to this effort and we celebrate it with a profile on her.

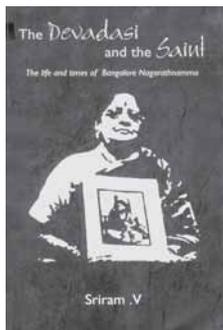
SPARROW has co-opted two more trustees. Dr. Usha Thakkar and Dr. Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh have been friends of SPARROW for many years now and we hope that as trustees they will help SPARROW to walk on untrodden roads. We also have a newly constituted Advisory Committee with experts from different fields to guide us and support us.

As usual, in our homage page, we pay respect to women who have done dedicated work in their lifetime and a young girl whose life was nipped in the bud.

Do visit our website [www.sparrowonline.org](http://www.sparrowonline.org) which we are trying to update and do write to us.

## THE DEVADASI *The Devadasi and the Saint*

by Sriram V



The first time this reviewer encountered the name of Bangalore Nagarathnamma was in the late 1980s; precisely, in Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's 'Introduction' to their seminal volume, *Women Writing in India: 600B.C. to the Present*. It was with a sense of excitement and deep respect that one read of a determined and accomplished woman who, in the 1930s, resurrected and reprinted *Radhika Santwanam*, a poetic work written by Muddupalani/Muddu Palani, an eighteenth-century woman artist in the Tanjavur court. Nagarathnamma's recovery of this voice, proscribed and silenced since the nineteenth century, was enacted in the face of severe opposition. To Tharu and Lalitha this is to be read as an "allegory" of the "enterprise of women's writing and the scope of feminist criticism in India." And to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, it is "a stunning example of critical sisterhood."

Sriram's biography of Nagarathnamma richly fills in the contours of what has remained a fascinating but tantalizingly indistinct figure to many of us. A particularly significant connection that Sriram makes between Muddu Palani and Nagarathnamma is their shared location within the devadasi tradition. Though separated by history, they were both proud practitioners of what was once a highly respected female profession. Sriram's 'Life and Times' approach embeds Nagarathnamma's life-narrative within the larger context of the gradual and tragic decline of a class of women who had long been the respected custodians and propagators of the arts.

The Nagarathnamma who is brought alive by Sriram is much more than just the feisty publisher of a proscribed work. She emerges as a woman who was far ahead of her times. She persistently fought for the cause of the devadasis at a time when newly configured notions of public and private morality were blurring the difference between the 'devadasi' and the 'prostitute' in the public imagination. But, most deliciously, this devadasi came to be revered for her devotion to the poet-composer, Tyagaraja, and as the prime architect of the saint's 'samadhi' in Tiruvayyaru. I am inclined to read this devadasi's appropriation of the saint—her dismantling of the binary of the putatively 'sacred' and the 'profane'—as nothing less than a radical feminist narrative of subversion in the early-twentieth-century climate of petrified (indigenous and colonial) standards of morality.

Born to a devadasi mother who was abandoned by her patron, Nagarathnamma lived through a difficult and impecunious childhood. Her rigorous education and training in the arts was overseen by her driven and sometimes ruthless mother, who seems to have wanted to avenge her own humiliation and abandonment through her daughter. Yet, Nagarathnamma remained a loyal and devoted daughter. Her hard training matched with an extraordinary talent contributed to her early success as a singer and dancer. But a poverty-stricken childhood left its traces in her life-long obsession with expensive jewellery in which she decked herself "from head to toe". And, yet again, there was little in her that was small or self-interested. Even at the height of her professional success, she

encouraged and mentored young artists, many of them female. Ever resourceful, she was a survivor in a time when the devadasi tradition was under siege. Nagarathnamma adroitly moved into newly emerging areas such as religious discourses by women, recording for gramophone companies, and radio broadcasting, but without ever forsaking the devadasi tradition that she was so rooted in.

A feminist, well before the term had even entered the general lexicon, it was not long before she was drawn into some of the most troubled causes of the time. Sriram devotes separate chapters to the several battles she fought. Chapter Three is a meticulously researched recounting of the entire Muddu Palani episode. Chapters Four and Eight are a detailed charting of her protracted struggle to build a samadhi for Tyagaraja at Tiruvayyaru. She dealt with the warring factions squabbling for control over the saint's legacy with remarkable astuteness. At the end, she not only revitalized Tyagaraja's musical/spiritual legacy but created a space where women artists, including devadasis, could perform. Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine track the emergence of the Devadasi Association, its struggle to secure the traditional entitlements of this class of performers, and the final collapse of the drive. Characteristically, Nagarathnamma was at the vanguard of this movement and was deeply saddened by its eventual failure. The particular tragedy of her life was to live to see the tradition she so loved be vilified and proscribed by a flurry of bills in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Sriram's book resists the temptation to make this an uncritical hagiography of Bangalore Nagarathnamma. He attempts to reconstruct a figure that was exceptional, certainly, but also deeply complex. For instance, Nagarathnamma's fierce campaigning for the rights of women performers was contradicted by her aversion to the emancipation of bourgeois women from domestic tyranny. "In her view," writes Sriram, "domestic women, as opposed to women in the public field such as herself, did not need liberation or autonomy." This comment provides us with a fascinating insight into the complex class antagonisms of the time, and the patriarchal arrangements that divide women.

The critic Kumkum Sangari has commented that feminist histories (with the biography constituting one genre of history writing) cannot simply set out "to recover a roster of independent or rebellious women and enter them into liberatory schemas." Instead, a feminist enterprise must seek to retrieve and approximate to the "sense of the struggle" of women at specific historical junctures as they engaged and negotiated with the power structures of their times. This is what *The Devadasi and the Saint* succeeds in doing to a significant extent.

— Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh

Book details:

*The Devadasi and the Saint:*

*The Life and Times of Bangalore Nagarathnamma*

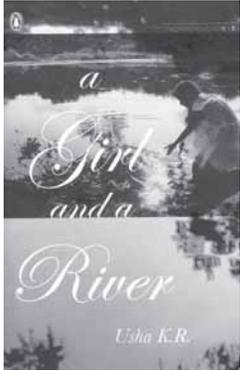
Publisher: East West Books, Madras, 2007.

Number of pages: 207

Price: Rs. 275/-

## A GIRL A Girl and a River

by K R Usha



This Crossword award winner historical novel deals with two different periods—one the 'present' time of 1987, and the other starting from 1933. This covers the Independence Movement, the Second World War and several years of post-Independence. The story is located in a small town in Mysore district and Bangalore, Karnataka.

The main character of the novel is Kaveri, the namesake of the book's title. A factor that runs through the novel is a search for Kaveri by her granddaughter who is also her niece, the narrator of the 'present' period. She had found an old, much marked copy of *David Copperfield*, a letter with no names, a torn poster of the movie *Hunterwali* along with old soap wrappings, in the attic of their house. In answer to her questions, her father Setu had casually told her that the book belonged to her grandmother. And she sets out to unravel the mystery of Kaveri. She could not get much information from her parents, as they were unwilling to talk. She had grown up in this silent home, silent in more than one sense.

It was a strange home. There were no framed photographs of parents or grandparents displayed. There were no reminiscences, no anecdotes of old times. The mother did not tell stories to her daughter. When she was twelve, she went to spend a summer vacation at a friend's house. She was surprised at how much noise the family made and how much they talked. She also discovered how terrible it was for one's grandparents to be dead.

The first paragraph of the book strikes the note of negatives and of absences—'But Poona is not our destination. My father is not driving. My mother is not with us .... hers is an absence I have got used to.' These remarks set the tone for the narrator's subsequent search for an absence, or rather the vague shadow of a presence.

At the opening of the book, Setu and his daughter, who narrates part of the story in the first person, are driving down to look at Setu's childhood home that he had sold. Some of the towns and villages they drive past were named after trees 'now no longer there' streams 'long dead' or hills 'flattened for their granite.'

These draw a poignant parallel to the story. Just as the places still bear the names of objects that are no more, the novel deals with a part of history that still has such a disastrous effect on the lives of the people portrayed, including that of the narrator. Some of the characters are sketched with bold, powerful strokes while others are painted with slow deliberate touches. The stiff, legalistic and domineering Setu is portrayed in a few lines in the first chapter. His own daughter finds it very hard to share her career decision with him as he is always preoccupied.

Setu had been moulded by his father Mylariah. The two men, father and son, represent the old world order, patriarchy, mental enslavement. They stand for convention and status quo. They are people of habit and not quite of the heart though they do good deeds out of conscience. Mylariah, however, seemed to have been a more decent person than his son Setu. He was gentle with his

wife Rukmini and gave her some freedom even though he married her when she was only a child. But Setu's wife lived in constant fear of his anger, though he was always polite to her.

One of the issues dealt with in the novel is child marriage. It still had the strong support of most of the characters. Mylariah, the lawyer who greatly admired the ways of the British, was still willing to get his daughter married at an early age. Narayana Rao, the town's hero and a staunch Gandhian, married off his own daughter while she was still a child. The marriage was approved by everyone except Rukmini.

Rukmini had loyally followed Gandhi's teachings. She was an active member of the Samaja, the women's wing. She faithfully spun khadi and worked tirelessly for the Movement. But she was sorely disappointed when Narayana Rao married off his child despite her attempt to stop him. She felt betrayed by this un-Gandhian act of the Gandhian leader.

Rukmini was intelligent, talented and capable. Had she been given a chance, she could have made a good doctor like Dr. King or become a lawyer like her husband. But she was married at the age of eight and Mylariah had brought her up, moulded her into the kind of wife he wanted. She had no choice about her career. Neither did she have any say when her sisters in law, whom she had brought up as her own daughters, were given in marriage to their own uncles. But the most bitterly ironic case was that of her own daughter Kaveri. For all the determination on Rukmini's part to give her a better life, she got caught in a hopeless marriage. She ended up much worse than herself.

Earlier, Kaveri had been infatuated by Shyam, a fiery freedom fighter. Shyam did not believe in non-violence. He was an admirer of Subhas Chandra Bose. Neither Mylariah nor Setu approved of him. Shyam was shot down by the police during a meeting. And it was Setu who had betrayed him and his sister.

The sad state of women's position in society and the stranglehold that custom, tradition, and superstition still have on seemingly enlightened people is brought out through the story. The novel also deals with incidents like Gandhi's visit and the publishing of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*.

This novel is a tragedy of betrayal, broken relationships and frustrated hopes. But a vivid picture of possibilities is suggested by the pipal sapling growing out of a discarded toilet bowl inside the broken down house near the lunatic asylum. The narrator comments that it was 'more perfect than any of my mother's elaborate flower arrangements.'

*A Girl and a River* is a complex, multi-layered novel. It is populated by many memorable characters and incidents. It is a masterly piece of work.

— Malsawmi Jacob

Book details:

*A Girl and a River*

Publisher: Penguin Books, India 2007

Number of pages: 324

Price: Rs. 295/-

## DEGHAM DEGHAM: A Digital Recording

In a previous SNL we have written about the film on transgenders called Degham. The film is now complete and ready to be screened and I would like to share the experience of making this film.

This film was part of HIVOS projects but took time to take shape as we were trying to include five transgenders in pursuit of different goals. The actual shooting of the project was scheduled for February 2007. Of the five participants I had already met Priya Babu, Aasha Bharathi and Narthaki Nataraj and spoken to them. Revathi, who was associated with Sangama, was someone I had spoken to but had not met. I had read her book

*Unarvum Uruvum* (Feelings and Personality) and had spoken to her several times over the phone. In fact, she had approached SPARROW to train her to talk to people but somehow the whole thing had not worked out because we could not find a convenient time to do it. Kalki, about whom Priya Babu and Aasha Bharathi had spoken, was also someone I had spoken to only over the phone. We were going to meet Revathi and

Kalki for the first time only during the shoot. There was some anxiety about this for Revathi was going to join us in Chennai for the shoot and we were going to Pondicherry to shoot Kalki in Auroville.

Revathi seemed a little hesitant about coming to Chennai. There was a bus strike on in Bangalore and she had not got any reservation in the train. She did come and we had booked her a room in old Woodlands Hotel where the entire unit was staying. We found the Manager of the hotel and the waiters being a little surprised seeing her but they were very polite and hospitable. Revathi later told me that travelling by bus or train was always a difficult proposition for very often it led to embarrassing situations or just plain harassment from passengers or conductors and drivers. She was happy she had survived one more journey. She was her usual cheerful self, ready to shoot anytime we were ready.

The problem we had already considered in terms of structuring the film was one of the space from which they will talk about their lives. Except for Narthaki and Priya Babu who had at least something they called a home, the others did not have a living space we could shoot in. We decided to place them in a neutral space they could speak from even if they did not belong to that space. In the case of Revathi we had chosen the main room of the house of Mangai, a

friend of SPARROW. Revathi was able to relax there and talk easily about her life and work. During the conversation I told her that she looked beautiful when she smiled. She immediately replied that she looked beautiful when she cried too! We took only a day to complete Revathi's portion. Next we went to Narthaki's house and the day after we had booked a hall in the Eyal, Isai Nataka Mandram to shoot Narthaki's performance and excerpts from two plays of Priya Babu's group, Kannadi Kalai Kuzhu. Just when we were about to go to Priya Babu's village near Chingelpet came the news of the death

of Alamelu, my mother. We rushed back and renewed the shooting two or three days later.

When we went to Priya Babu's village, her mother and a brother were already staying with her. We did part of the shooting there and another part in her office in Chingelpet. From there we rushed to Tambaram, to Aasha Bharathi's office in the evening. Aasha Bharathi runs a dormitory initially intended as a halfway home for HIV infected transgenders. Many transgenders live in the dormitory which is a

huge hall. They were all sleeping or lying around not bothered about the shooting at all. Aasha Bharathi sat amidst them and spoke about her life and work unperturbed by the atmosphere around her. At the end of the conversation she jokingly remarked that like the saint in one of the stories of Ramakrishna who got stung trying to help a scorpion from drowning and who remarked that he was doing what he had to and the scorpion was doing what it had to, she was also doing her duty towards other transgenders like her.

Pondicherry or Puduchery was our last stop. When Kalki came riding her scooter at the appointed spot I recognised her immediately. In a way shooting her last in Auroville worked out well for she said several times during the conversation that she did not want to be defined. What she was now was a kind of a gift which allowed her to cross all kinds of gender boundaries to reach a higher spiritual state.

We had shot some eighteen hours or a little more. It took us a while to make a film of two and a half hours from that. The film tells the story of dealing with a body one does not identify with and the travails and triumphs that follow when one tries to alter the biological body.

— C S Lakshmi



*Priya Babu with C S Lakshmi*



*A scene from the play Unfrozen Memories*



*Kalki*

தேகம்

*Narthaki Nataraj, C S Lakshmi & Kutti Revathi*



Leena Manimekai and Kutti Revathi are two well-known Tamil poets. They are also two persons who are trying to do many things in one life. Kutti Revathi is a trained Siddha doctor and is also a researcher who is working on the Irula tribals and their medicine system. She runs a feminist journal called *Panikkudam*, is a photographer and is also attempting to be a visual media communicator. Leena Manimekai is a poet who has for quite sometime been a filmmaker. She has worked with Tamil film directors and has also made documentary films of her own. Some of her films have been part of film festivals abroad and have received awards and good notices. She picks up issues and customs involving women and raises many questions regarding society, power and gender discrimination.

Two of their films are part of SPARROW collections this year. The first one is a film by Leena Manimekai called *Devadhaikal*. She calls it *Goddesses* in English. But these women are in some way angels of mercy whom life has forced to choose certain professions. The film is a documentation of the life of three women: Lakshmi is a singer of dirges, Sethurakka is a woman who goes into the deep sea looking for fish, shells and conches and Krishnaveni is a grave digger who digs graves for unclaimed bodies and buries them unceremoniously for a living. The film is stark in presentation and the women speak openly about their lives.

Lakshmi walks out of a violent marital home and her children are taken away. She decides to live independently and takes up all kinds of jobs including carrying fifty kilos of beef and walking miles to sell it in various villages. She finally becomes a singer of dirges, a Kali worshipper and a woman very much on her own, feeding monkeys and giving out money to beggars. Sethurakka thinks of the sea as something that belongs to the fisher folk and she began to go out on the sea when she found her husband quite useless to run the family. During the film her husband appears and he is drunk and swears he will never drink and she tells him the film will be shown in many countries and if he drinks again he cannot live in this country! Along with two other women she takes the boat to the sea to catch fish and says being bitten by a jelly fish means medical treatment for a month and talks of snakes that bite and of coral reefs that get destroyed by trawler boats and of disappearing fish. Krishnaveni



takes over the cart carrying dead bodies from her husband who is no more. When an unclaimed body, dog-bitten or run over or a smothered or drowned child is found by the police Krishnaveni is sent for. She takes them bleeding or reeking in her cart and digs a grave to bury the body. She is not afraid any more of the dead; in fact she says she is happy talking to them about herself and her life for they are great listeners.

Kutti Revathi's is a documentation of the Kannamman festival of the Irulars. She takes us through a series of rituals of food and animal sacrifice and of ritual and celebratory dancing. Women and men get possessed, blood flows, food is cooked and eaten and life goes on. The film is an anthropological exploration of the life of a snake-catching tribe and although there are some beautiful moments in the film of the burning fire, the film is made more as if it is a neutral observer watching everything that is going on.

Both the films are good additions to the SPARROW collection made with different points of view.

— C S Lakshmi

## Congratulations!



Chanda Asani has been given this year's Neerja Bhanot Award which, according to her, promotes the possibility of natural fearlessness, which is denied to most women. Chanda has been travelling across the Indian subcontinent which, she says, has increased her respect for people but raised unanswered questions about her Indian identity which she is in the process of documenting. In her acceptance speech she said that she was accepting this prestigious award on behalf of women who struggle overcoming odds on a day to day basis and reach out to support others...

Keep up the good work Chanda!

## AWARD Right Livelihood Award: Krishnammal



**K**rishnammal and Sankaralingam Jagannathan and their organisation LAFTI (Land for the Tillers' Freedom, India) have won the Right Livelihood Award for their lifetime work dedicated to the practice of the Gandhian vision of social justice and

sustainable human development.

Both husband and wife are lifelong activists. They have been working with people at the lowest rung of the social ladder, still carrying on the Gandhian legacy, serving the needs of Dalits, the landless and those threatened by the greed of landlords and multinational corporations.

Krishnammal was born in a landless Dalit family in 1926. Struggling through poverty and hardship, she managed to get a university level education, a remarkable achievement. As a young student, she worked with Gandhi and later with Vinoba Bhave to help untouchable bonded labourers.

Sankaralingam Jagannathan was born in 1912 to a rich family. At the age of 18, he left his college studies to join non-cooperation movement led by Gandhi. He joined the Quit India Movement in 1942 and served a jail term for three and a half years. At this time he was already a well known campaigner for the poor.

Krishnammal and Sankaralingam met through the Gandhian Sarvodaya Movement. They married in 1950, as they had decided to marry only in independent India. From early life, both of them were committed to the cause of building a Gandhian society. They believed that a key requirement for achieving this goal was empowering the rural poor.

Sankaralingam joined Vinoba Bhave in the Bhoodan (Land gift) movement in Northern India from 1950 to 1952. They went on Padayatra (Pilgrimage on foot), appealing to landlords to give one sixth of their land to the landless. Then he returned to Tamil Nadu to start the Bhoodan movement there. Through the movement, about four million acres of land were distributed to thousands of landless poor in many parts of India. In the next phase, Gramdan (Village gift) movement, Krishnammal and Sankaralingam continued to play an active role.

Much of the donated lands under these campaigns were infertile. In order to work at making them productive, Sankaralingam Jagannathan started the Association of Sarva Seva Farmers (ASSEFA) in 1968. The Association has become one of the best known and most effective Indian non-governmental development institutions. All the works undertaken by the Jagannathans are rooted in Gandhian philosophy. They meet practical problems head on and find down-to-earth solutions through planning and action.

The couple founded Land for the Tillers' Freedom, LAFTI in 1981. Its purpose was to bring landlords and the landless poor to the negotiating table, to get loans to enable the landless to buy land at a reasonable price, and to help them work in cooperation. By 2007, 13,000 acres of land have been distributed to about 13,000 families through social action and land purchase programme.

Apart from land re-distribution, LAFTI also runs village industries like mat weaving, rope making, carpentry, masonry, fishery and gives training to Dalit boys and girls. It also organises computer training for the underprivileged.

LAFTI has made significant contribution to the lives of poor villagers. It has constructed brick kilns and built many houses. Fish farming has been established on fairly large scale. The organisation was also involved in the famine relief programmes in 1987 and the reconstruction programme after the tsunami in the Nagapattinam coastal area.

Earlier, the landless labourers did not own even the site on which they lived. They were often evicted. But due to LAFTI's efforts, the government has passed a bill by which the labourers can legally possess the site on which their huts are located. Currently, the environmental friendly' house building project is helping about 5000 families.

Another big challenge is the prawn farms along the coast. The Jagannathans have been opposing this since 1992. Big industrialists occupy large areas of land for aquaculture in coastal areas, which convert fertile land to salty desert. It also causes sea water seepage into the groundwater in the area, depriving people of their drinking water resources. This further results in small farmers selling off their land to the companies and moving to the cities to join urban slums.

Sankaralingam Jagannathan organised LAFTI's movement to fight against this human and ecological degradation. Since 1993, villagers have protested through Satyagraha, rallies, fasts and demonstrations. The protesters have been beaten up by hired goons, their houses burned and LAFTI workers imprisoned with trumped up charges of looting and arson. Sankaralingam Jagannathan filed a 'public interest petition' in the Indian Supreme Court, and National Environmental Engineering Institute of India (NEERI) was asked to investigate. The report highlighted the environmental cost of the prawn farms.

The Supreme Court issued a ruling against farms in cultivable lands within 500 metres of the coastal area. But the order has not been implemented. The struggle continues.

The Jagannathans have established seven non-governmental institutions for the poor. Besides this, Krishnammal Jagannathan has also held several important posts with different Trusts and Committees.

The couple have won many well deserved prestigious Awards. In 1999 Krishnammal received the Summit Foundation Award of Switzerland and in 2008 the Opus Prize given by the University of Seattle.

Krishnammal Jagannathan says, "I sincerely believe that the social, economic and spiritual crisis we are facing today in the world can be overcome through universal sisterhood and science and spirituality coming together for the good of the entire humanity."

— Malsawmi Jacob

Sources: Websites of The Right Livelihood Award Institute for Policies Seattle University, Opus Prize.

## HOT IS THE MOON

Excerpts from *Hot is the Moon*, the first in a series of five volumes:

Tulasi Venugopal



My mother's name was Krishnamma.....

Now, when I reminisce about her I feel that she lived the life of a voiceless woman and that pains and upsets me. She wanted to go for teacher's training to become a teacher. But my father put his foot down saying that he will not marry a working girl. He had the same attitude where his daughters were concerned. He wanted us to be good homemakers. I obeyed but my

younger sister, Geeta, did not.... Now she is running her own computer centre in Mangalore....

Now I must tell you about KT Venugopal who later became my life partner..... Immediately after marriage, Venugopal presented me a note book and a pen. He insisted that I write down all my thoughts under the title *Navavadhuvina Dinachari* (Diary of a Bride). He said that I had an unusual style of writing. But I had to sharpen it. Daily I used to write a few pages. He was and is a merciless critic. He insists on *pramanika abhivyakti* (honest expression). Without any consideration he would hurt the ego of a newly wed bride by commenting on her writing!...

My first story was *Purushartha*. It was published in *Tushara* in 1979. L S Sheshagiri Rao, a renowned critic of Kannada literature, mentioned this story in one of his columns and selected it as the story of the month. That encouraged me to write more....

One of the nicest things that has happened to me is SPARROW.... At this juncture of my life—being more or less free of family responsibilities—I was like a boat in the deep sea without a compass, confused about which direction to go. Now with SPARROW, I can row my boat anywhere I wish (Laughs)....

## Homage

Vimala Murthy: Ambi's Granddaughter



With the sudden passing of Vimala Murthy on September 15, 2008, we have lost a chronicler of our times, a friend and gutsy advocate for woman's rights. Painstakingly piecing together the life of C Amba Bai, her grandmother (1889-1971), Vimala with the help of inputs from surviving members of her family, the book,

paints a vivid picture of the life of widows in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book which has been dubbed 'a classic entry for liberal feminism' is a rare glimpse into a Karnataka of bygone years and contains rare photographs more than a century old, and reproductions of Amba Bai's diaries, letters, accounts books and notations—a unique addition to any archive on women.

Malathy Maitri



Whirlpool

A brief lull after the rainstorm  
On the fallen branch of a drumstick tree.  
Down the street  
Sits a sparrow,  
Rearranging its drenched feathers

The river is in spate  
I remain, levees breached, inside my room.  
A flaming image inside my eye  
Which hoards the rain's coolness....  
No, no –  
I, suspended in the eye of her being  
Which is adrift in me;  
She, whirling within me; and  
We, who invade, flow into,  
Fill up and suffuse every space -  
Foaming, rising, flooding  
And brimming over  
Clueless as to how we may be rescued,  
The devil's dance of rain  
Begins again,  
Joining earth and sky

The room is floating away.

Translated by N Kalyan Raman from the original Tamil *Suzhal*.



With degrees in English Literature and education, Vimala, inspired by her grandmother, helped develop innovative methods for the teaching of the English language, especially to underprivileged youth attempting the public service examinations. A multi-faceted personality, Vimala was also deeply engaged in the theory and practice of yoga, which she learnt under Guru BKS Iyengar. Widely travelled in India and abroad, Vimala's lively travelogues have appeared in several mainstream newspapers and travel books. Keenly interested in classical music, she was also an avid player of contract bridge, taking part in state level and national tournaments with her partner and husband DBN Murthy. A feminist to the core, Vimala engaged herself in women's issues in the University Women's Association, Pune, and several other causes of women's rights in Bangalore. Her brave fight with recently diagnosed cancer and philosophical attitude to life and death will remain an inspiration to all who knew her. Survived by her husband, son and daughter, she is deeply mourned by a wide circle of relatives and friends.

— Laxmi Murthy

## Gowri Sukanya: Simple Desires in a Short Life



**G**owri Sukanya whom we called Sukku affectionately, died suddenly on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 2008. She was twenty-two. She had just completed her MA in Sociology from TISS in Mumbai and had joined the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai. She had hardly begun her course when death overtook her.

In her brief life she had managed to take a shy at many things that interested her—a bit of writing, some acting, a dab at painting and even music, though *besur!* She loved dogs and cats and had many four legged friends. She passionately engaged with the issues of children needing shelter and loved 'her' tribe, the Konda Reddys. Her friends who had gathered for her funeral put their hands on one another's shoulders and sang *Choti Si Aasha* for her. It was just the kind of song that would have made Sukku happy for she took pleasure in such small things in life laughing at its complexities and faced death with courage. Her parents Lalitha Iyer (who has been a friend of SPARROW for many years now and is currently on its Advisory Committee) and J B Iyer want to perpetuate her memory by reaching out to young people like her with dreams about social change and supporting them in their (ad)ventures .

— C S Lakshmi

## Rohini Bhate: A Life Dedicated to Dance



**R**ohini Bhate, a veteran Kathak dancer, teacher and scholar, expired on 12th October 2008. She was 84. She was among the senior most Kathak exponents of the country and a Fellow of Sangeet Natak Akademi.

She was well versed in Hindustani music and often composed the music for her dance creations. She also brought out several books in Marathi. Some of them are *Majhi Nrityasadhana*, *Kathak Darpana Deepika*, (an edited version of the Sanskrit manual *Abhinaya Darpana*) and a translation of the autobiography of Isadora Duncan *Mi Isadora*.

Known to be a dancer, teacher and scholar par excellence, Rohini Bhate performed widely for five decades and was held in high esteem by experts in the field. Her scholarship, her deep understanding of society and her innovations made her choreographic work stand out in a class by itself.

She received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1979. She had also been awarded the Kalidas Samman and the Maharashtra Gaurav Puraskar. Her work has been made into documentary films by eminent producers. She was made Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 2006.

For those who know the history of Kathak dance and Rohini's role in it her death will be an immense loss.

— Malsawmi Jacob

## Jayashree Gadkar: The One Who Conquered Marathi Viewers



**J**ayashree Gadkar, star actress of Marathi films of the sixties and seventies, passed away on 29<sup>th</sup> August 2008 at the age of 66.

Jayashree Gadkar made her debut in Marathi cinema in 1955, as a group dancer in V Shantaram's *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje*. After seeing photographs of her performance, director Dinkar Patil gave her a break as a solo dancer in *Dista Tasa Nasta*. Later, director Raja Paranjape cast her as a heroine in Bhalji Pendharkar's *Gath Padli Thaka Thaka*. Jayashree received a lot of success as a heroine in *tamasha* and *lavni* based movies, which was the trend at that time. As a result she was stamped as a rural, *Tamasha* artiste. But Jayashree Gadkar was much more than that, as was proved when she was cast as a heroine, playing a Brahmin woman in the film *Manini*. Her acting in this film erased all doubts of other skeptics and also won her the National Award.

She acted in more than 250 films including a few Hindi films like *Private Secretary*, *Bajarangbali*, *Saranga*, *Tulsi Vivaha*. She is particularly in the films *Aliya Bhogasi*, *Avaghachi Sansar*, *Manini*, *Rangpanchami*, *Shahir Parshuram*, *Mohityanchi Manjula*, *Sawal Maza Aika*, *Thamb Lakshmi Kunku Lavate*, *Pavanakathacha Dhondi*, *Sugandhi Katta*, *Pathrakhin*. One of her big hits, *Sangatey Aika* ran for 132 weeks in the theatres and many remember her for its famous *lavni* song *Bugdi mazi saandli ga jata Sataryala*. Another memorable role was that of Kaushalya in Ramanand Sagar's tele-epic *Ramayana* on Doordarshan in the early eighties. Her two directorial ventures were Marathi films *Saasar Maher* and *Ashi Asaavi Saasu*.

She won many awards including National Awards for the films *Sadhi Manasa*, *Manini*, *Vaijayanta*, *Sawal Maza Aika*, *Pavanakathacha Dhondi*. Maharashtra; State Awards for *Sadhi Manasa*, *Patlachi Soon*, *Thamb Lakshmi Kunku Lavate*, *Ghargangechya Kathi* and *Gharkul*. She was also felicitated with the State Government's V Shantaram Puraskar, Gadima Puraskar, P Savlaram Puraskar and many more. Recently she was felicitated with Chitrabhushan Puraskar by the Marathi Chitrapat Mahaamandal for having completed more than forty years in the cinematic field.

She married her co-star Bal Dhuri in 1975 and has a son. Her autobiography *Ashi Mee Jayashree* was released in 1986.

— Sharmila Sontakke

**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.**

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